
“As If It Were Based On Works”

ROMANS 9:30-33

FEBRUARY 11, 2024

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AT A GLANCE

Would you believe me if I said that in Christ, God’s love for you is perfect and unchanging? You’d likely *agree*, but would you *believe*? In this passage in Romans, Paul lays out the case that the reason Israel stumbled over Jesus was because they tried to come to God as if it were based on works. They thought they could curry God’s favor by doing the right things. That’s not how salvation works and it caused Israel to stumble. Sadly, I’m afraid it still causes religiously devout people to stumble today. We come before God in the righteousness of Christ alone. Listen to hear more about this amazing hope we have in Him!

INTRODUCTION

Paul stated in 9:1-3 that he sincerely mourned the fact that so many of his fellow Jews rejected the gospel and that he wished he could be cut off instead of them. However, it’s not as though the word of God has failed (9:6). It’s not as though God has changed His mind regarding the Jews. This led us to the previous time Paul asked this question, “What shall we say then?” Which prompted a follow-on question, “Is there injustice on God’s part?” And an emphatic, “By no means!” (9:14) This chapter reminds us to be slow to judge God and quick to remember who we really are. God is the potter, we are the clay. And incredibly, undeservedly, we are vessels of mercy prepared beforehand for glory.

Hosea prophesied that there would come a time in which those who were not God’s people would be called God’s people, sons of the living God. (9:25-26) And Isaiah prophesied that few of the Jews would be saved, only a remnant. (9:27-28).

What do we do with that? Or as Paul put it in **verse 30** **What shall we say, then?** What do we make of the reality that the Jews have in large part rejected the gospel and Gentiles have embraced it? Let’s read today’s passage and dive in.

Romans 9:30-33

What shall we say, then? That Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness have attained it, that is, a righteousness that is by faith; ³¹but that Israel who pursued a law that would lead to righteousness did not succeed in reaching that law. ³²Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as if it were based on works. They have stumbled over the stumbling stone, ³³as it is written, “Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.”

GENTILES ATTAINED WHAT THEY DID NOT EARN

Let’s break these first two verses into parts...**That Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness have attained it** – Though the Law and the prophets and the promises and patriarchs did not come

through the Gentiles, but through the Jews, though Gentiles did not even know to seek God, nor did they care to do so, though they did not **pursue righteousness**, they have **attained it, that is, a righteousness that is by faith**.

Unlike to the Jews, Gentiles attained righteousness because they pursued righteousness by faith. They were undeserving recipients of the mercy of a God they had never even heard of! And their only contribution to attaining righteousness was responding in faith.

The Gentiles were dead in sin, objects of God's wrath, and when they heard the gospel, they believed it and repented of their sin. That's how salvation works, and it doesn't work any other way, which is why Israel struggled.

ISRAEL ATTAINED NOT WHAT THEY THOUGHT THEY EARNED

Paul continues **but that Israel who pursued a law that would lead to righteousness did not succeed in reaching that law**. Israel thought they could attain righteousness by obeying the law but as the Old Testament depicts, they were unable to do so. They **did not succeed in reaching that law**.

Why? Paul asks in **verse 32**. Why could Israel not attain righteousness that the Gentiles attained? Israel tried so hard, and Gentiles didn't try at all! Which is exactly the point. Gentiles recognized their inability to attain righteousness on their own merit whereas Israel was convinced they could. In Luke 18, we read the parable of the Pharisee and tax collector. Luke records that Jesus told this story for the people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous!

The Pharisee in the parable approached God boldly in the temple thanking Him that he was not like other sinners, not like this tax collector. He boasted that he tithed on everything and fasted twice a week! The tax collector, on the other hand, couldn't bring himself to draw near or lift his eyes, but rather with a broken heart simply asked for mercy. Jesus said it was the tax collector and not the Pharisee who left right in God's eyes.

UNDER THE LAW, BLAMELESS

Like the fictional Pharisee, Paul says the Israelites failed to reach that law **Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as if it were based on works**. Paul is case in point. In Philippians 3 he lets us into the mind of the self-righteous Israelite saying, *"...If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless."* *Philippians 3:4-6*

"Righteousness under the law, blameless." This is undoubtedly how he thought before Jesus got ahold of him. He had truly believed that when it came to right standing with God, he was blameless. He admitted that he was a zealous persecutor of the church, filled with hatred in his heart, complicit in the murder of Christians, yet he felt blameless. This same Paul would describe himself after his conversion as "chief of all sinners," whereas before his conversion he considered himself blameless.

Paul's confidence before conversion was, as he says, "in the flesh." In other words, in his proven track record, in his performance, in his dedication, in his commitment, and in his hatred of those outside his camp. He would be the guy in the parable thanking God that he was not like the tax collector. He, like all good Israelites, pursued righteousness, or right standing with God, as **if it were based on works**.

The problem was not that the Jews pursued the law. The Law is holy and good. It is God's revealed will. The problem is that the Israelites pursued the Law of God rather than the God of the Law. Rather than honoring the Lord by seeking Him in faith, they tried to indebted the Lord by their works.

It was not the observance of the Law that Paul critiqued, but pursuing it as if it were based on works. If they had sought the Lord with all their hearts, they would have found Him in Christ. Sadly, that is not what they found in Him.

ROCK OF REFUGE AND STONE OF STUMBLING

Paul continues in **verses 32-33, They have stumbled over the stumbling stone,³³ as it is written, “Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.”** (Isaiah 28:16)

This stone was a rock of refuge for some and a stone of stumbling for others. And that’s exactly what Jesus was! He came in and turned the Jewish world upside down. He crushed their sense of virtue. He told parables like that of the Pharisee and tax collector, and of a priest and Levite, and a Samaritan, making the Samaritan “dog” the virtuous one.

And of a reckless, lustful, wasteful prodigal son and of a hard-working, never done anything wrong, always a good boy, older brother, who at the end of the story was left sulking outside while that no good “son of yours” was wining and dining in a fine robe with gold ring on his finger. Over and over again the religiously devout recognized they were the villains in each of these stories.

Jesus is the rock of refuge for those who believe, like the tax collector who all he could say was “Lord forgive me, a sinner” and the prodigal son who came to the father with his head hung low. But for everyone else, Jesus is a stone of stumbling.

He confronts our sense of pride. He demolishes our carefully constructed narrative of why we’re decent people; “sure we have our faults, but at the end of the day, we’re good, hard-working people who just want to do right.” He comes in like a wrecking ball to these walls of self-righteousness we’ve built up around us and leaves us standing exposed in a heap of rubble. The religious class of His day put Him on the cross for it.

He came to His own people who, of all people, should have observed in Him the qualities of God. They should have rejoiced that their long-awaited Messiah had come. They should have heralded the King! They should have recognized the cornerstone! Instead, they stumbled over Him, **a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense.**

NEVER BE PUT TO SHAME

But God promised, **whoever believes in Him will not be put to shame.** The Lord has always been full of mercy; even in judgment He promised hope of future salvation. *“You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel, and that I am the Lord your God and there is none else. And my people shall never again be put to shame.”* Joel 2:27

For those who believe in Him, the Lord promises sanctuary, safety, and refuge from His wrath; salvation from judgment forever. You will never be put to shame. But if you will not cling tightly to the rock of refuge, you will stumble over Him.

Jesus walked into a society of good, upstanding, morally clean and upright, law-abiding, deeply religious people and called them whitewashed tombs, a brood of vipers, empty rain clouds, and blind guides, among other things.

If Jesus had come in our day, these would be elders, deacons, senior saints, the old guy who knows every bible reference, the little old lady who taught kids Sunday school for 50 years, the theo-bro who thinks he can untangle every doctrinal knot in the church because he’s got a Master’s of Divinity, the family man who prides himself in his work ethic, his truck, and his tractor, and the mom whose kids “always” behave.

And He would say the same things to people who trust in their own righteousness today as He did then. He would tell them story after story about how preposterous it is to think that they're able to stand before a holy God on their own merit. And those people would do the same thing to Jesus as they did 2000 years ago.

STANDING IN THE RUBBLE OF SELF-RIGHTEOUS STONES

The reality is that many people are satisfied with the reputation of godliness, as opposed to godliness itself. Many people want it to look like they're morally upright because that becomes yet another stone in the wall of their self-righteousness.

Salvation comes, though, when a person's walls of self-righteousness lie in ruins all around them, when they see their life the way the Lord sees their life, when they come to that sober reality that the only stone that offers any salvation is not the stone of church attendance, nor the stone of not watching rated-R movies, nor the stone of kids being mild-mannered and cleanly clothed, nor the stone of voting pro-life, nor the stone of working sun up to sun down, nor the stone of attending multiple bible studies each week, nor the stone of what appears to be a perfect marriage, nor the stone of involvement in ministry, nor the stone of...I could go on and on.

Salvation is seeing all those stones laying in a heap of rubble all around you and rejoicing because now you finally see it as Paul described in Philippians 3: rubbish! And you count it all loss for the sake of gaining Christ and being found in Him. You rejoice because you finally see Christ as the rock of refuge and you cling tightly to Him, forsaking everything else in which you once sought refuge. And you don't stop clinging to the rock when you've been born again. I fear some people make the mistake the Galatians made. Paul rebuked them saying, *"Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?" Galatians 3:3*

Some people know that they couldn't do anything to save themselves at their conversion, but for some reason they think that they can do something now to save themselves in their sanctification. As Ben LaVicka put it, "It's thinking I'm justified by grace, but sanctified by works."

Ben and I talked about how many people we think might conceive of God as looking down on them with an angry scowl and a wagging finger and they think that if they can just figure out how to kick this habit, or if just fix their marriage, if they could straighten up, if they could stop looking at porn, put down the bottle, clean up their language, get their kids to finally listen, delete the gambling apps, replace bad habits with good ones, work hard and provide a decent life for the family, keep a tidy home, satisfy her husband, satisfy his wife, if they could just figure this out, God would smile on them.

This is where we need the rock of Christ to smash our walls of self-righteousness into pieces. We need to look to the cross of Christ and weep hot tears of relief, knowing it was there that the Lord paid our debt. It was there that the lamb of God took away our sin once and for all. It was there that the Son of God was stricken by God, cut off, and cursed so that we could become children of God, adopted into His family, and blessed beyond measure.

IT IS FINISHED

It was there that He was put to shame so that you would never be put to shame. Hear the words, "It is finished" and know it applies to you; to your striving after your own righteousness, to the debt you incurred by your sin, to the fear that God might one day cast you aside.

You're building those walls back up! You're putting those stones of self-righteousness which Jesus dismantled, back together. No, it is God who works in you. It is by abiding in Christ, seeking closeness to Him that you are transformed from the inside out.

You ought to rejoice in the dismantling of your walls of self-righteousness because only then can you finally understand that you once pursued righteousness as if it were based on works, but now you know you have been justified by faith and you are being sanctified by faith.

Ben suggested that if people would really get this, if they would truly admit that they have nothing to bring to God except sin, entire families would be transformed. Husbands who demand perfection in their home because they need that to feel a sense of worth as a man of God, wives who are cold, controlled by emotion and control through emotion because they simply must keep up appearances, kids who envision their Heavenly Father as a rigid, overbearing tyrant and legalistically obey the rules so as to never upset the apple cart, would all find release and redemption in Christ. Men who have convinced themselves that God helps those who help themselves and women who believe they're second-class citizens in the kingdom will alike find rest and peace in Him.

When Paul was saved, it became painfully obvious to him just how messed up his way of thinking really was, how impotent his vain efforts were at attaining righteousness, and how empty his hope of works-based salvation really was.

I, too, had a moment in my life in which all that mattered to me, all that I drew upon for a sense of worth, identity, achievement, and yes, arguably for salvation, fell on its face.

I pray that has happened for you, too. I pray the Lord has dismantled, and keeps them dismantled, those walls of self-righteousness behind which we are so prone to seek refuge. And I pray instead that we will pursue righteousness by faith, not as if it were based on works. I pray we will cling tightly to the rock of refuge, Christ our solid rock, because whoever believes in Him will never be put to shame.

“Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.” Colossians 2:6-7

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