



An Overview of Paul's Letter to the Romans

(10) Christ the End of the Law

Romans 10:1-9

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So, we've come to Romans 10 in our quick survey of the letter of Paul to the Romans. We are in the middle of a section that includes chapters 9-11 which deals with the question of why the majority of the people of Israel did not believe the gospel. They did not accept Jesus as the promised messiah. God had set this people apart to be his special people and through them he was going to bring blessing to the world and when the ultimate fulfillment of that purpose came, namely Jesus, the majority of the chosen people did not believe in him. In the time in which the New Testament was written, that was a very big issue. That is reflected in this letter which is sixteen chapters long and three of those chapters are focused on that very question while a few of the other chapters deal with it in a less sustained way.

Now it has been interesting for me to reflect on the fact that Paul wrote this letter to a regular congregation. As we have seen, it is a summary of the gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ and it was written to the congregation of Rome – which was just a regular congregation. This letter is not the text of a paper given to a society of biblical scholars. It was not written to be published in a theological journal. It was written to be read and heard and studied by people of different abilities and interests and occupations and inclinations.

The majority of them were of the lower classes. We know that the gospel originally attracted many from the lower classes of society. Paul himself teaches that among the first Christians there were not many who were "wise according to worldly standards, not many were

powerful, not many were of noble birth” (1 Corinthians 1:26). Paul wrote this letter to this kind of people. We have seen already that it is a rather meaty document. There is no fluff. There are some concepts that take a little effort to grasp. And he spends a lot of time dealing with the question of why so many Jews did not accept the gospel.

It is significant that Paul wrote this kind of letter to a regular congregation. Now I am sure that he did not expect everyone to thoroughly understand everything the first time through. There are things in this letter that the brightest theologians are still seeking to understand more deeply. And yet the basic outline of the good news is clear enough for anyone to understand.

That is the nature of the Bible in general. The main message is simple enough for anyone to understand. But at the same time, the church is still growing in its understanding of it after thousands of years of concentrated study. And that is a good thing. It is a good thing because there is always more for us to learn. It is a good thing because there is never reason for anyone to say that they are bored because they have mastered it and it has nothing more to teach them.

And that process of growing in the knowledge of the Word of God is an important part of the process of growing in love for God and delight in God and in what he has done in Christ. It is largely through the effort of growing in our understanding of God’s truth that we grow in our delight in God and his plan of salvation. This is the way that we are created. It is largely through the effort of accomplishing things that we experience the joy of living. A life without goals and attainments and accomplishments is empty and futile. So it is, with the Christian life and our delight in our relationship with God. And so it is as we seek to grow in our understanding of God and his revelation to us that our hearts are thrilled with the glory of God and his ways.

It is with this perspective in mind that I invite you to think through this passage with me. You might wonder, what the problem of the unbelief of the Jews has to do with your life. What it has to do with your life is that it is the subject matter through which God is teaching you more about himself and the way of salvation in Jesus Christ.

So, the overall theme is still this question of the unbelief of the majority of the Jews. Paul again expresses his intense desire for their salvation in verse 1. In verse 2, he brings up an important concept. "For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge."

In our day there are many who say that it does not matter what you believe as long as you are sincere. Paul here contradicts that sentiment. He affirmed that many of the Jews had a zeal for God, but he also insisted that that was not good enough. You can have a zeal for God and still go to hell if your zeal is not according to knowledge. There are all kinds of people who are zealous for God and yet hell-bound because they are wrong about fundamental aspects of the gospel. That does not mean that our knowledge must be perfect in order to be saved. If that were so no one would be saved. No one has perfect knowledge except God himself. But there are foundational truths that must be known and confessed.

In this case, the foundational truth that was not known was justification by faith and not by works. Verse 3, "For, being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness." People who are zealous for God, but who are seeking to establish their own righteousness are not among the saved. That is what Paul is saying in these verses.

That is pretty relevant for our lives. If you are ignorant of the righteousness of God and seeking to establish your own righteousness and not submitting to God's righteousness you are not saved, no matter how zealous for God that you are. You can be more zealous for God than anyone else, but if you think that God will accept you on the basis of how you are living your life, you are tragically mistaken. There is only one way to be right with God and that is through receiving the righteousness which God provides through Jesus and it is received by faith. The only way of salvation is through humbling ourselves before God, confessing our sins and embracing the promises of a full salvation in Jesus.

This is the point that Paul is making in verse 4. "For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes." The issue with

the Jews was, “What is the end of the law?” God had given his law to Israel. As we have been seeing the law is an important subject for our relationship with God. The law is God’s standard for us. The law is important in our relationship with God. Much of the biblical teaching about salvation and our relationship with God involves understanding the role of the law in our relationship with God.

This was the issue between the unbelieving Jews and the gospel. They were wrong about the end of the law. They were wrong about what the law was for in their relationship with God. They thought that they could be on good terms with God through keeping the law. But instead of that Paul says that “Christ is the end of the law....”

Now it is not immediately obvious what he means by that. The Greek word which is translated “end” is *telos* which can mean end-point or goal. The idea here is that the purpose of the law was to lead to Christ and that once Christ came the law was no longer in force in some sense. Clearly this does not mean that the law is completely abolished because Paul later on in this letter and elsewhere in his writings treats some of the Old Testament laws as still binding upon Christians.

The idea here is that the Old Testament body of laws that governed Israel as the Old Testament people of God had served their purpose once Christ came. Their purpose had been to lead to Christ. The most basic idea here is that the Old Testament law showed the need for Christ and the righteousness that he alone could provide. There are other facets to this idea, but this is not the place to try to be thorough. The basic idea is clear enough. Why did God give the law? As a way to earn righteousness? No! The law was given to demonstrate our need for Jesus Christ to come and keep the law and earn righteousness for us. The goal of the Old Testament law was to show that mankind could never keep it and so show the need for Christ. In the light of this we should be able to understand the verse – at least to some extent.

“For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.” Just remember that the purpose of the law is not that we might earn salvation by keeping it. One purpose of the law is to lead us to Christ by showing us how sinful we are and by showing us that there is no way that we can earn our salvation by impressing God with our law

keeping. That perspective is true for the purpose of the law in the history of salvation and it is true for the purpose of the law in our own lives. The law shows us our need of Christ. The law brings us to Christ and so Christ is the end of the law. He is the goal of the law. The law leads to Christ.

Now again let me emphasize that understanding the role of the law in our lives is important for our relationship with God and our relationship with God is the most important relationship in our lives. That is why Paul included this content in this letter to a congregation of ordinary believers. You can really get messed up in your relationship with God if you are not clear about how God's law is to function in your life. It is possible to be so wrong in this area that you are not even saved, but if you are somewhat wrong it can really affect your sense of peace with God and your sense of his love and your whole confidence in God's love for you. Those area really important things in your life.

Now this is not the only role of the law and it will be helpful if I just mention the other two purposes of God's law to put this whole matter into perspective. God also uses his law to restrain sin in society so that living together is possible. Even unsaved people have a conscience and a sense of right and wrong that does curb their sinful tendencies enough to make it possible for sinful people to live together in some sort of order. Another purpose of the law is to guide God's people in living lives that please God. The keeping the law is not the way to salvation, but it is the result of salvation so that the lives of God's people are guided by the law of God.

But what Paul is emphasizing here is the fact that one of the key purposes of God's law is to lead us to Christ and Paul expresses that here by saying that Christ is the end of the law. God's law shows us how sinful we are so that we will see that we need Christ's righteousness in order to be saved. And if we understand that clearly and we are trusting in Christ, we can sing, "It is well with my soul." That is a wonderful practical result of understanding the different ways the law is intended to function in the lives of believers.

OK. The next section in this chapter deals with the way of salvation as it was taught in the Old Testament. This is important for us because the

Old Testament is a huge part of the Bible and we need to understand it correctly in order for it to be food for our souls.

One of the things about the Old Testament that is puzzling when we interpret it in the light of the New Testament gospel is that it seems at places to teach salvation by law-keeping. There are lots of passages in which God says to his people they must keep his law in order to be in a right relationship with him. There are many passages which sound like salvation by works. These next few verses in Romans 10 help us to understand how we are to understand these passages. So, the practical application of this point as to do with how we are to understand the way of salvation in the Old Testament compared with the New Testament. This is a very important point for our understanding of the Old Testament and also for our understanding of what is new in the New Testament.

First Paul mentions a passage that seems to teach that righteousness comes from keeping the law. Verse 5 says, "For Moses writes about the righteousness that is based on the law, that the person who does the commandments shall live by them." Paul is referring to Leviticus 18:5 which says, "You shall therefore keep my statutes and my rules; if a person does them, he shall live by them: I am the LORD." That sounds a lot like salvation by law-keeping. It was because of verses like this, and there are many of them, that many of the Jews thought that they had to keep the law in order to be saved.

But notice what Paul says next. Verse 6 begins with the word "but." And what he is going to show after the "but" is that the Old Testament teaches that righteousness comes through faith. I will read verses 6-8, "6But the righteousness based on faith says, "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?' " (that is, to bring Christ down) 7"or 'Who will descend into the abyss?' " (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). 8But what does it say? "The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim);"

Now this is not a passage that many of us will be able to understand by just reading it. It is not that kind of a verse. So, we need to give it some thought.

Paul is showing that the idea that righteousness comes through faith is taught in the Old Testament. That is his point in these verses. He is quoting Deuteronomy 30:12-13 and the point of Deuteronomy 30:12-13 in its context is that it is possible for Israel to obey God's law because of God's grace. In an earlier verse in Deuteronomy 6, verse 6, Moses writes that a time is coming when God will change the hearts of his people so that they will be able to obey. This is a promise concerning the future. "And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live." That is a gospel promise in the Old Testament.

So, when Paul quotes the verses from Deuteronomy that say that obedience is not in heaven or beyond the sea, his point is that obedience is possible through grace. Obedience or righteousness is not out of reach because God promises to circumcise the hearts of those who trust in him. The context is God's promise to circumcise Israel's heart in the future. So, the Old Testament taught salvation by grace – God's promise to circumcise Israel's heart. Then in verse 8 Paul quotes from the next verse in Deuteronomy which says – "The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart," and he adds, "(that is, the word of faith that we proclaim.)"

The point of all of this is that if you read the Old Testament carefully, it teaches salvation by grace through faith and not salvation by works. The quotation from Deuteronomy 30, taken in its context, is a gospel promise and Paul interprets it to mean that righteousness does not come by works, but by faith.

Now that was pretty hard to understand and to follow. I'm sorry about that. Blame Paul. But because of that I'm not going to finish this chapter today. There is too much left to cover and what is left needs some time to understand and apply so what we will do instead in the rest of this sermon is reflect on what we have covered so far and how it applies to us.

In the section that we just covered, there are depths that theologians are still probing, but the basic idea is one that we can all understand. The basic idea is that the good news of a righteousness that is received

by faith was taught in the Old Testament, but also that there are a lot of passages in the Old Testament that seem to teach salvation through obedience to the law. I want to reflect with you on that idea for a moment because it helps us to see the wonder of the good news of salvation as we have received through the New Testament on the basis of Jesus Christ and what he has done.

For the Old Testament people of God, the gospel was not as clear as it is for us after the coming of Christ. It was there as Paul points out in this passage and other places, but it was not as clear and there was a lot more emphasis on the external obedience to the law. Back in chapter 7:6 Paul had made this distinction when he wrote that now, after Pentecost, “we serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code.” The gospel was there in essence, but it was not nearly as prominent nor as clear as it is in what we have covered so far in this letter to the Romans so that Paul can refer to the difference as the difference between the “new way of the Spirit” and “the old way of the written code.”

In 2 Corinthians 3, Paul speaks of this difference by comparing the old covenant with the new covenant. The old covenant was basically the way of salvation in the Old Testament and the new covenant is the way of salvation that we read about in the New Testament. In 2 Corinthians 3 Paul says that the old covenant was glorious, but he also calls it the ministry of condemnation. And he calls the new covenant the ministry of righteousness and he says that it far exceeds the old covenant in glory. So, the way of salvation in the Old Testament was glorious, but the way of salvation in the New Testament is far more glorious. And he even calls the gospel of the old covenant a ministry of condemnation. It was the way of salvation, but it was also a ministry of condemnation because there was so much emphasis on external law keeping and because the purpose of the Old Testament law was to expose sin and lead to Jesus Christ.

Our confession of faith expresses this difference in the following words in chapter 7:6. It says that in the New Testament the gospel “is held forth in more fulness, evidence and spiritual efficacy, to all nations, both Jews and Gentiles, and is called the New Testament.”

This contrast helps us to see and to appreciate the richness and the fullness of the gospel as we have reviewed it in the first part of this letter to the Romans. We have looked at justification by faith. We receive the perfect righteousness of Christ through believing in Jesus and not through law keeping. That was the way of salvation in the Old Testament as Paul has taught us when he covered that subject, but it is so much more clear in the New Testament revelation. We have looked at the idea of being united to Christ in his death and resurrection so that believers are dead to sin and alive to God. We have looked at the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in chapter 8 and the wonderful reality of adoption into the family of God. It was a wonderful thing to be a believer in Old Testament times, but Paul is teaching us that there is still an incredible contrast between the glory of the gospel in Old Testament times and the glory of the gospel after Christ has come and actually accomplished what the Old Testament promised.

Paul and the other writers of the New Testament are exuberant about the glory of the gospel of righteousness before God through faith in Jesus. And they are exuberant about the difference between the Old Testament gospel compared to the new. They make it clear that it is essentially the same gospel. They are always quoting Old Testament passages to make their points. But at the same time, they revel in the greater fullness and spiritual efficacy of the gospel as it is revealed through Jesus Christ and the apostles.

Listen to how Paul writes in Galatians 3:23-26. He is comparing the reality of Old Testament believers with the reality for Christians. "Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, [he is speaking about Old Testament believers before the coming of Christ], imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith."

Let us catch some of Paul's enthusiasm for this point. It was what he labored to convince the Jews of. But by us considering it we are helped to see the glory of the gospel by way of its contrast with the experience of believers before the coming of Christ. We have a clear understanding

of how we are righteous before God through faith in Jesus. We have a clear understanding of how we receive the Holy Spirit who writes God's law on our hearts and changes us from the inside out. We have a clear understanding of adoption. God is our Father. We are his children. Our relationship with God is at the heart of what it means to be truly alive and through the gospel we are on intimate terms with God – he loves us and we love him – and that in spite of the fact that we are sinners worthy of death. Let us revel in that gospel. And let us treasure the relationship with God that it makes possible.