

"THEOLOGY IN APPLICATION IN ROMANS 10"

(Romans 10:1-21)

(Frank Theilman)

This passage teaches that salvation from God's justified wrath against human sin is easy, involving merely trust in God and embracing what he has done for sinners through the gospel. Because salvation is not difficult, many different kinds of people can experience it, and sometimes the identity of those who respond to it is surprising. The irreligious may respond to it more readily than the religious, and there is a form of religious zeal that leads to rejection of the gospel.

The Effortlessness of Reconciliation with God

In 9:30-10:21, Paul emphasizes how easy it is to have a peaceful relationship with God. It is a matter of listening to God, and alongside others who have done the same, of accepting what one hears. The process is so easy that Paul does not even want to say one "does" it. The emphasis has to lie squarely on what God has done to put his people right with himself, not on their cleverness in finding out the gospel or their efforts in applying it. Christ died on the cross to atone for human sin, God raised him from the dead to break sin's stranglehold on humanity, and God sent the apostles to the ends of the earth with this beautiful message. God's people themselves simply stand in place together and receive this outpouring of God's love (cf. 5:5). The belief in one's heart and the confession of one's mouth that Paul describes in this passage refer to the sincere and open acceptance of what God has already graciously done for his people through the death and resurrection of Christ. As Calvin put it in his comments on 10:10, "We obtain righteousness by embracing the goodness of God offered to us in the Gospel . . . , by believing that God is gracious to us in Christ."

The Universal Outreach of the Gospel

Paul teases from the easy nature of reconciliation with God the crucial ancillary truth that the gospel is for everyone. The point is so important to him that he adds an "everyone" to his quotation of Isaiah 28:16 in 10:11 and explains in no uncertain terms what this means: "There is no distinction between Jew and Greek," he says, "for the same Lord is over all, being rich toward all who call upon him" (10:12). Being in a right relationship with God, then, is God's work, and since God accomplishes it, this work can benefit anyone: from mentally handicapped infants in whom God's Spirit can engender faith to the most celebrated scholars and athletes; from powerful elites in the world's most economically resourced countries to the illiterate poor in its most undeveloped societies; and from those deeply invested in the oldest and most sophisticated religious traditions to those who have never given God a second thought. As the Westminster Confession of Faith puts it, "the Spirit . . . worketh when, and where, and how he pleaseth" to form God's people (10.3).

The Gentiles' Surprising Response to God

Paul's concern in 9:30-10:21 is chiefly with this last contrast and the irony that in the race for righteousness, it was not Israel, despite all their theological privileges and zealous exertions, but a motley crew of clueless gentiles who attained the goal. The problem lay in Israel's stumbling over Christ and especially his attitude to the Mosaic law. The Jewish leadership of Christ's time disagreed with his loose approach to the law, and failed to recognize his authority to interpret it, and so they rejected him. They preferred instead to continue down the road of their own ideas about how people should keep the Mosaic law. They heard and understood the gospel, but they rejected it in favor of their own notion about what would lead to a right relationship with God. Their theological sophistication had hindered rather than helped them understand God and his word.

Paul certainly does not speak here of all unbelieving Israelites. Many



unbelieving Jews were appalled at the miscarriage of justice involved in the persecution of Christians by their more zealous compatriots (John 7:50-52; Acts 5:34-39; Josephus, *Ant.* 20.201). Paul is instead describing Jews who, like himself prior to his conversion, were so focused on protecting their vision of Jewish society that they were willing to kill people to accomplish their goals. The chief priests and the scribes who brought Jesus to Pilate accused him, among other things, of "misleading our nation" (Luke 23:2), a charge that also emerges in John's Gospel when the ruling elites who had decided that Jesus must die told Pilate, "We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die" (John 19:7). Some of these Jewish leaders may have thought they were serving God by sending Jesus to the cross. They were certainly careful to avoid ritual impurity so that they might keep the Passover even as they engaged in their miscarriage of justice (John 18:28; cf. 16:2).

A Warning against a Certain Form of Religious Zeal

There is a warning here for all religious people, and Paul is aware that Christians need it as much as anyone (11:17-21; 12:3; 14:4, 10-12). It is possible to become so entrenched in one's understanding of God that even God's word itself is not allowed to correct that understanding. The societal elites who engineered the death of Jesus were offended by his approach to the Mosaic law, but Paul insists in this passage that it is they who failed to understand that the law pointed to Christ by its indictment of sinful humanity. The Jewish leadership of Jesus's time refused to accept his correction of their approach to the law as the prophetic word of God and, instead, plotted his death.

In much the same way, Martin Luther was capable of turning his zeal for the truth of the gospel into an unbiblical animosity toward the Jewish people. Luther clearly knew what attitude toward the Jews a biblically informed Christian should adopt. In his second set of lectures on the Psalms (1519-1521) he condemned mistreatment of the Jews by "certain Christians (if they can be called Christians)" and urged the church to extend to the Jews all kindness, patience, prayers, and care," citing Paul's example of compassion in Romans 9:1 and his admonition to humility in Romans 11:18 and 20. In later years, however, Luther returned to the unbiblical notions and disgusting rhetoric that he had used of the Jews in his first lectures on the Psalms (1513-1515), just before working through Romans (1515-1516). His ill-informed paranoia about the small and heavily oppressed minority of Jews living in sixteenth-century Germany led him to call for the destruction of their homes, synagogues, and way of life. These publications made life even more difficult for the Jews in Luther's own time and later contributed significantly to the atmosphere that made possible the societal horrors of Germany under National Socialism.

The reasons for Luther's anti-Jewish rhetoric are complex, but one prominent motivation was the idea that Jews might lead Christians astray from the gospel and persuade them to become Jews. In a way that was puzzlingly inconsistent with his own deepest theological insights about the sovereignty and the grace of God, expressed not least in his comments on Romans 9:30-10:4, he advocated that human beings violently take the advancement of the gospel into their own hands. The result was disaster for countless human beings who were beloved of God (11:28) and to whom God continued to stretch out his hands of appeal (10:21).

Romans 9:30-10:21 calls upon all humanity, unbelievers as well as believers, to embrace the word of God in faith in its totality, to receive the mercy and grace of God offered there, and to recognize that the gospel is about human flourishing under God's mercy and grace. It does not advance any particular social or ethnic group within humanity over another. God's word in its totality is two-sided. It announces the disturbing news that every human being, even the religiously zealous person (including the person zealously committed to God's grace!), is profoundly affected by a tendency toward pride and fear and, as a consequence, rebellion against God. It also announces the joyful news that God has freely reconciled sinful human beings to himself through Christ and cut the chains of their bondage to sin through the power of the Holy Spirit. No social or ethnic group within humanity is less affected by the tendency to sin than any other group, and no group is excluded from the offer of God's love in Christ.