

THE ONLY WAY TO RIGHTEOUSNESS (RELINQUISH YOUR SWORD)

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Romans 10:1-21 (Luke 18:9-17)

Almighty God, you alone can order the unruly wills and passions of sinful men: grant that your people may love what you command and desire what you promise so that among the many and varied changes of this world our hearts may be firmly fixed where true joys are to be found through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN.

Admiral Horatio Nelson was an English navy hero who twice defeated Napoleon's army. After one of his victories, a defeated commander was brought on board Nelson's flagship. The commander quickly walked across the deck and stuck out his hand for the Admiral to shake. Nelson refused to shake his hand and said, "Hand over your sword first and then I'll shake your hand." As one commentator notes, "Only when the sword had been surrendered could there be fellowship" (Ash, p. 103). How could this scene highlight something about the Pharisee in *Luke 18:9-17*? Whether it be a defeated naval commander before an admiral or a self-righteous Pharisee before God, failure to humbly relinquish one's weak and helpless status before a greater authority can have dangerous consequences. Without surrendering one's sword or one's personal means of justice, mercy cannot be extended and there can be no right relationship between the truly powerful authority and the ignorant weaker vassal. Only just execution of judgment awaits. So, we must relinquish our feeble sword, recognize our own weakness, abandon our own self-justification before the Almighty God, so we may receive His mercy and be put in a right relationship with Him as our King. There is no other way to such a righteous status before God.

Paul distinguishes these two ways of pursuing righteousness. **Romans 9:30, 31 (READ)** One way is unsuccessful, and the other is surprisingly successful. One unsuccessfully pursues righteousness by

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attempting to meet God's standards with our own sense of justice and our puny swords in hand. The other successfully pursues righteousness by faith with complete dependency on God's mercy having relinquished our swords. Both ways depict human responses to God's Word. Only one attains righteousness. So, please consider how you respond to God's Word this morning.

1. Why the Wrong Response of Religious Works to God's Word Fails to Attain Righteousness – READ - (Romans 9:32-10:4)

- a. Verse 32 "As if" reveals the misunderstanding of "the Law" – "as if" law can be used to attain righteousness by works in conformity to its standards. It cannot be done. We are weak and incapable of it. This approach is like that of the defeated commander approaching admiral Nelson or that of the Pharisee praying before God. This approach attempts to carve out our own righteousness with our own little dull sword.
- b. Verse 1 Paul's Anguish in *Romans 9:1-5* now turns to Prayer. This is an appropriate response to God's sovereign mercy - prayer. As we will see, proclaiming the Gospel, preaching God's Word, is another appropriate, and essential, human response to God's sovereignty.
- c. Verse 2-3 *What was the problem?* While many Jews who rejected Jesus were zealous for God, their zeal was not based on knowledge. This is something the apostle Paul would understand as a Pharisee who previously persecuted the Church out of his own ignorant misunderstanding of the Law. Paul himself had once failed to understand, as *verse 4* states, that "Christ is the culmination of the law." How may we be ignorant in our religious zeal? Paul once thought he was doing God a favor by persecuting Christians. We learn in *verse 3* that religious ignorance is in relation to "the righteousness of God" by seeking to establish our own righteousness rather than submitting to God's righteousness.

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- i. Notice that this ignorance is culpable. **Verses 16-21 (READ)**. People are guilty for their ignorance that Christ is the culmination of the law; because, they heard God's Word about Christ. Here, in God's sovereign mercy, we see that those who did not seek God (us, Gentiles) have found Him in Jesus while the majority of the biological descendants of Israel, Jews since Paul's time, have rejected Him.
- ii. Nevertheless, how are you responding to God's Word about Christ right now? Do you consider yourself to be a relatively good person who deserves to go to heaven simply because you give God a little time in church like this morning? Do you pray more to yourself nostalgic self-soothing prayers rather than to God like the Pharisee in today's parable from Luke's Gospel? I press this so we may understand the truth that someone can call themselves a Christian and yet continue to stumble over Christ; because, they have not relinquished their self-righteous and self-centered swords. They fail to see God's righteousness in Christ, the culmination of the Law; because, they are too busy focused on themselves and their own works. Is that you?

2. Why the Right Response of Humility and Faith to God's Word Succeeds in Receiving God's Righteousness – READ - (Romans 10:4-13)

- a. Verse 4 is important for Paul's continued argument. The point here is that Christ is the end, or goal, or ultimate destination of the Law. Jesus fulfills all that the Law pointed to; therefore, to be hung up on 'doing the Law' or any type of religious externals is to miss the totality of Christ's accomplishment in relation to the Law and God's righteousness.

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- b. *Verses 5-13* *Verses 5-6* contrast 'righteousness that is by the law' with 'the righteousness that is by faith'. The contrast is between approaching righteousness with our own feeble sword in-hand or without it in humility seeking mercy. Paul quotes *Leviticus 18:5* and then *Deuteronomy 30:12-14* to clear up any religious ignorance one may have regarding the Law and obtaining righteousness. While some might take the partial truth in *Leviticus 18:5* and ignorantly think they could establish their own righteousness 'by works of the law', Paul adds what Moses also states in *Deuteronomy 30:12-14* and fills in the picture with Christ for a proper and informed understanding. There is truth to what is stated in *verse 5* for one who lives out of a loving loyalty to God; however, such living according to the law cannot be a means of obtaining righteousness before God. Such a life is not by our own sword but, rather, by the Sword of the Spirit. The truth is, we cannot live in a way that fully meets God's revealed righteous standards, but that doesn't change God's standards. What God has done in His sovereign mercy is meet His righteous standards FOR us by sending His Son, Jesus, who took on flesh to fulfill the Law's righteous requirements on our behalf and to endure the punishment of death we deserve for failing to meet God's righteous standards. God did this in Jesus, so we may have circumcised hearts of flesh that: 1) believe God's righteousness in Jesus so that we may be justified, and 2) live with a heart-desire to be obedient to God's righteous standards revealed in His Law, realizing that we cannot merit or sustain our own righteousness before God apart from His grace and mercy.
- i. You see, God does FOR us that which He commands of us; because, we cannot do it for ourselves. For example, in *Deuteronomy 10:16*, the command is given for hearts to be circumcised in obedience to God's Word. Yet, in *Deuteronomy 30:6*, the promise is given that God

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Himself will be the one to circumcise our hearts so that we may love Him. It is this circumcised heart by God's grace from which our loving obedience toward Him flows. Therefore, not only is there no boasting in our own works, but there is thanksgiving for God's sovereign mercy. The key is faith in God's Word that has come to us and is accessible to us, and this Word of God says that righteousness comes by faith in Jesus, not by any of our religious works.

- c. Again, how are you responding to God's Word? May we not be like most of the Jews of Paul's time who failed to recognize the fulfillment of the Law and of God's promises in the Person and work of Jesus. May we believe in our hearts and confess with our mouths that Jesus is Lord who is Risen, indeed! This is the Gospel we believe and proclaim.

A proper response to this Gospel compels us to preach it to others, so they, too, may receive God's mercy. ***Romans 10:14-15 (READ)*** The right way to righteousness comes by believing the preached word of Christ, and this is the only way to righteousness; because, in Christ, God does for us what He commands but we cannot do for ourselves. As one commentator helpfully articulates, "The saving righteousness of God comes only to those who will submit to the King, and never to those who think they can rule themselves" (Ash, p. 105). This principle goes all the way back to the Garden and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Either we live with God at the center of our lives and His Word ruling our hearts, or we live with ourselves at the center of our lives with the Evil One leading us in a cosmic rebellion against the King of kings and Lord of lords.

In Luke 18 regarding the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, we see the Pharisee, like so many religious self-righteous people, holding on to

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his own sword before God. However, the Tax Collector is humbly submissive before God. He surrendered his sword and begs for God's mercy knowing that he is a sinner. As long as any individual, whether a Jewish Pharisee at the time of Paul or a "Good Christian" during our own time, thinks that they can attain righteousness by good deeds, moral reasoning, special prayer practices or family lineage, they are holding on to their own sword and do not submit to King Jesus and the mercy of God offered through His death in our place. Only faith in God's righteousness revealed in the Cross of Christ for our sins will grant us the righteousness we need to escape God's just wrath, and this only comes to us by God's sovereign mercy.

We can only love what God commands; because, God mercifully gives us a circumcised heart of flesh indwelt by the Holy Spirit. We possess the Holy Spirit; because, Jesus, the God-man, fulfilled God's commands FOR us, so His Spirit may lead us in all righteousness. We desire Jesus; because, He is the fulfillment of all of God's promises. Therefore, our eyes are fixed on Him as our true Joy and not on our own weak works and false sense of righteousness. Jesus is King to whom we have surrendered our double-edged sword of an unruly will and sinful passions. We bow before Him with thanksgiving and praise for His mercy in enduring the punishment we deserve for our rebellion. We can either humbly bow the knee before Jesus as King now and accept His mercy, or we can face Him as Just Judge upon His Return. There is no other way.

AMEN