



“Misguided Zeal”¹

Romans 10:1-4

The 16th century was a major century in Christian history. In that century, God was opening more people’s eyes to the reality of how people can be reconciled to God. In those centuries, there was much teaching on God’s wrath and punishment, but many emphasized a need to appease God through your works. “Do enough, and maybe you’ll live with God – but you’ll have to go through purgatory first.”

One man who was forever changed in this time period was a monk by the name of Martin Luther. Luther was a teacher in the Roman Catholic church, and he was in constant turmoil. He’d spend up to 6 hours in the confessional. He sought to do *everything* right. He did extreme works of penance to appease God, but he never felt that God was satisfied with him. But then, one day, God opened his eyes. Luther writes of this experience, and I’m going to give you a paraphrase of what he said:

I had been captivated with zeal for understanding the book of Romans. There was one phrase in particular in chapter 1: In it the righteousness of God is revealed. That phrase got in my way. I hated the phrase “righteousness of God” because I had been taught that referred to God’s righteousness by which he punishes sinners.

I lived as an upstanding monk, but I always felt my sinfulness before God and my conscience was disturbed to the extreme because I knew my actions couldn’t appease God. So, I hated the righteous God who punished sinners. I even blasphemously murmured against him and was angry with him. Isn’t it enough that God would punish sinners forever? Then he adds a law that we can never attain so that we feel crushed every single day. The gospel to me then simply emphasized more of God’s wrath. So, I was angry with a fierce and troubled conscience.

Yet, I beat at the door of Paul, wanting to know what he meant by this phrase. Finally, after meditating day and night, seeking the context of the words, God opened my understanding. The righteousness of God is that gift given through faith so that people can live in grace. This isn’t our active works of righteousness. This is a righteousness received whereby God declares people righteous.

Now, listen to Luther’s words verbatim: “Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates. There a totally other face of the entire Scripture showed itself to me.” (direct quote and story comes from: <https://www.ligonier.org/blog/story-martin-luthers-conversion/>).

¹ This manuscript is still in the rough draft phase. I recommend you utilize these notes in conjunction to the sermon to gain greater insight and clarity.

Luther thought he understood righteousness and it led him to hate God. Now, I've found that there are generally two responses that people have when they study the Bible and learn about God's righteousness. They'll either respond like Luther with great despair, knowing they can't appease God. Or, they'll say, "Surely God isn't like that. He'll just take my best efforts and that'll be fine." But neither of these responses will work. God is more Holy than what we can perceive. He is just and punishes sinners and all thoughts and intentions of the heart that are sinful. So, neither of these responses could work. Yet, many humans almost simply think these are the *only* options so they live in these two. But what if there was a third way?

This is what the apostle Paul emphasizes throughout the book of Romans. He starts in chapter 1, and he expounds on it from chapter to chapter. Now, in Romans 9-11, Paul shows how many Israelites have misunderstood God's righteousness. They haven't embraced the third way; so, there are those stuck in despair and those who are arrogant in thinking they're good enough. In the text we're studying today, Paul reveals the distress in his own heart for his fellow Jews and expresses his prayer that their ignorance would be lifted and they would see the third way of righteousness. So, if you could turn in your Bibles to Romans 10, we'll read verses 1-4 together. Let me pray before we read. [Pray for Harriette Dekker; FBC of Zeeland; Gerths.]

10 Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved. ²For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. ³For, being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness. ⁴For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes. ²

These verses go hand-in-hand with the the passage we studied last week from the end of Romans 9. And, in building on what Paul wrote in Romans 9, Paul now shows his love for his fellow Jews in verse 1. His main point in these four verses is that he prays for his fellow Jew's salvation. Which, I think is the big idea for us: **Pray for the salvation of Jews (and the self-righteous)**. Now, you might be here today saying, "That's the point?! That's the application for me? What does this have to do with everyday life?" Well, if that's you, I hope you find the gold in these verses because in verse 2, 3, 4, Paul continues to build on *why* we should pray for their salvation. And, as a result, we see ripple effects to our own lives.

I was talking with Ben Jacques this past week about this passage, and I told him I love it when I read a passage and at first think, "Well, this doesn't have much in it," and then upon studying it, I think, "I'm not going to have enough time!" There's so much richness here. These four verses are a 5-star buffet, providing spiritual sustenance to starving souls and to those who want to rejoice even more in God's great grace! So, if you want to rejoice in God and find hope, listen up!

Let's continue by reading verse 1 again. This verse is the big idea: Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved.³ There are a few things I want you to notice in this one verse. First, notice here the word "**brother**." This reminds me of Romans 9:3 where Paul writes, "³For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen

² [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ro 10.

³ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ro 10.

according to the flesh.”⁴ In that verse, Paul is talking about fellow Israelites and calls them “brothers,” but he qualifies it. He says they are brothers according to the flesh. He’s part of the same bloodline. Yet here in Romans 10, Paul is not only talking to fellow Jews. The term “brother” has a broader idea here. He’s talking to the church in Rome, which consists of Jews and Gentiles. These are people who turned from their sinfulness and turned to Christ for reconciliation with God. Therefore, this term “brother” here is indicating a spiritual family – not merely a physical bloodline.

Ventura, I want us to understand the importance of this. I know our elder Jim Hemmes has made this comment many times in the past to me. He’s said something like, “I have my physical family, but I may end up spending more time in eternity with my spiritual one than my physical one.” Now, Jim doesn’t say that to then say his family here doesn’t matter, but it does put things into a perspective. Sometimes Christians de-prioritize the spiritual family and over-emphasize the physical. But that’s not the example we have from the Scriptures, and even here with Paul. Paul is writing to his spiritual family and in doing so, he’s expressing his great concern for the physical Jews. And, this is the second point I want you to see here. His **heart’s desire** is that they would be saved. This word for “desire” refers to having a wish for something that would be beneficial for others. Paul’s concern is for them. And he wants them to be saved.

The word “saved” can have various meanings in the Bible. And sometimes, we can use a word so much that we don’t even realize what it means. I remember when I came to faith in Jesus, and I had a passion for him and I wanted my friends to trust Jesus. One time, I was talking with a friend and I said, “Do you want to be saved?” And, being unchurched, he said, “saved from what?” That question challenged me. It’s not that I didn’t know the answer if I had been pressed, but I was using a word without thinking about the definition. The word “saved” here is speaking of being saved from God’s just punishment for sin and then being brought into God’s loving, accepting arms! In the context of these verses, Paul is highlighting the word “righteousness,” which refers to having a right standing with God. A right standing is one of complete acceptance. So, Paul desires that the Jews would experience this.

But, Paul doesn’t simply stick with a desire in his heart and do nothing with this. The third thing I want you to see in this verse is Paul’s **prayerfulness** for the Jews. He has a desire for their salvation and therefore prays for them. Here’s something I need to state emphatically. You could read Romans 9, and then when you read about Paul’s desire for the Jew’s salvation, you could say, “Paul, that’s just a pipe dream. God has his vessels of mercy; so, pray for other things.” I love what a man named Douglas Moo said, **“We violate the order of human thought and trespass the boundary between God’s prerogative and man’s when the truth of God’s sovereign counsel constrains despair or abandonment of concern for the eternal interests of men”** (Moo, p. 632). What is he saying? We sin against God if we use God’s sovereignty as an excuse to be uncaring for people’s salvation or if we use God’s sovereignty as a means to be hopeless and think humans are just unthinking robots.

Prayer is not a contradiction to God’s sovereignty. Instead, the Scriptures often put God’s sovereign control with prayer. While we can’t understand completely, God’s sovereignty should humble us to think we are small and don’t understand the Infinite One. As a result, in our humility and weakness, we should pray to the One who has all power because he has ordained to work our prayers into his will.

Therefore, Paul is greatly burdened for his fellow Jews and he prays for them. Ventura, this truth hit me all the more even this past week as I finished watching the interview between Pastor Alastair Begg and

⁴ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ro 9:2–3.

the Jewish commentator, Dennis Prager. At another point in the interview, Dennis said that a man once called into his radio program and mocked Christianity. Prager responded and said something like, “What’s so wrong with a message that declares that God sent his Son to come into this world and suffer with humanity?” Prager was pointing out that Christianity is a beautiful message – even though he disagrees with it.

I had a brief conversation with someone about the interview, who also watched it, and I said that this reminds me of Paul’s words in Romans 2, when Paul says that God’s kindness is meant to lead to repentance. God’s kindness is meant to lead us to see our need for God and to not live for the stuff around us. But then Paul goes on, in talking to the Jews, saying that because of their hard hearts they’re storing up wrath for themselves. When I heard how many conversations Prager has had with Christians and how much he knows about the Christian message, I’m burdened for his soul. I’m also fearful for him. He has, and continues to, store up wrath for himself because he *knows*, but he rejects. And, in some ways, this is why Paul is so concerned. In the next few verses, Paul explains *why* his concern is so great for ethnic Jews. So, let’s go to verse 2 to discover the first reason why he prays for them.

1. They have ignorant zeal (v. 2).

Read verse 2 with me: ²For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge.⁵

The word “For” starts verse 2, 3 and 4. That means that Paul is building an argument here. He prays for them, why? Then verse 3 answers another question and 4 goes to the culmination. Verse 2 is answer *why* he prays. Verse 3 answers what it means that they’re ignorant (which also is part of the reason why he prays). Verse 4 answers why this is all concerning to him.

So, verse 2 is the main answer. Paul says that he bears witness for the Jewish people. It’s like Paul is willing to enter into a court room and testify on the Jewish people’s behalf. Now, verse 2 cannot be construed to say that all Jewish people throughout all time fall under this category of great zeal for God. There are many Jewish people in our day who are self-ascribed secular Jews. But in Paul’s first century culture, the common theme among Jews would be a zeal. And, obviously, Paul could have said that about himself as a practicing Jew.

Now, notice something very important here. Paul does not put down zeal. Zeal is a good thing. It’s an admirable quality. I bring this up because I think as we think about our neighbors and friends who don’t believe Jesus, we should acknowledge the relative “good” traits that they may subscribe to. We don’t do this in order to puff them up, but instead to recognize God’s kindness in their life that should lead them to turn to the Lord.

Paul also adds that they have a zeal for God. In one sense, they are concerned about God’s name. God is holy. God is perfect. God should be served. God should be honored in the ways he prescribes. So, even Paul, when he was persecuting the church, he did it out of a zeal for God – even though majorly misguided and sinful. He thought he was doing service to the Lord. This is what burdens Paul for his fellow Jews. He was right where they still here.

⁵ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ro 10:2.

The Jews have a zeal that is misguided. He actually says they have a zeal, but not according to knowledge. In our day, it seems like all we care about is zeal. As long as you're zealous, then it doesn't really matter what you believe. Or, let me put it this way, sometimes we say of very passionate people, "Well, at least they're sincere." So, we think that because someone is sincere that they're ok and that we shouldn't approach their errors?

I hope we can all agree that every human being can be sincerely wrong. If we believe sincerity is a test of genuineness and truthfulness, then our world will be in chaos (which, look around. There's a lot of chaos today). But I know in my own life I've had many scenarios where I've been passionate, but passionately wrong. There's a great danger in having a zeal without knowledge. You can be self-deceived and you can deceive others.

Years ago, I remember a trip I was taking with Tracy where we were driving to Illinois from South Carolina and we were in Indiana. As we were going north, we drove over a unique bridge. We saw an outlet mall on our left. And then, around lunch we were probably ten minutes from Indianapolis and we stopped for lunch. Then we got back on the highway, and about 20-30 minutes in, we saw another outlet mall, but this time on our right side. Then I started thinking, "Wait a second, wasn't Indy only 10 minutes away?" Tracy, at one point, commented on how interesting it is that we're seeing similar things but on the other side of the road. Then we saw the bridge, and I said, "We're going the wrong way!" Thankfully I was willing to admit my ineptness with direction and then I turned around.

It wouldn't make any sense for me to say, "I can't be going the wrong way. I have a car. I'm focused on my driving. I'm doing a good job not hitting cars and also staying within the speed limit. I also have a plan to make it to Illinois." None of those good intentions matter if I'm going the wrong way. My lack of knowledge negates the zeal. But zeal without knowledge can also be more dangerous. Think of someone like Hitler. He was passionate and his knowledge was based in lies. And yet, many people followed him and were deceived.

Jesus speaks this way to the religious people in his day. Some were followers, but the leaders were not simply misinformed. They were zealous for their way – and thus rejected Jesus. So, Jesus says of them, **"But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. For you neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in."**⁶ The religious Jews can't make it to God's presence and say, "Yes, we rejected Jesus, but we were zealous!" Why? Because they were like a car without brakes, driving through the mountains. They had a zeal that is not in accordance with knowledge.

But what's the knowledge that they were missing? Well, that's what verse 3 explains. Paul begins with the word "for," meaning that he's explaining the knowledge they lack – which adds to his concern for the Jew's souls.

2. They have self-attaining righteousness (v. 3).

Verse 3 says, ³"For, being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness."⁷

⁶ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Mt 23:13.

⁷ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ro 10:3.

The knowledge they lack is the knowledge about the righteousness of God. Paul says they were ignorant of the righteousness of God. Now, please keep in mind, Paul is not saying that *all* Jews are ignorant of the righteousness of God. Paul himself was a Jew and he knows it. We can go back to Abraham and Moses, and Paul speaks of them knowing the righteousness. So, Paul is generalizing here. There are those who reject Jesus – and those who reject Jesus clearly are ignorant of the righteousness of God.

For the sake of clarification, I want to ensure we are all on the same page regarding the righteousness of God. This takes us back to what I said earlier about Martin Luther. At one point in time, he thought the “righteousness of God” simply meant God’s punishment of sinners. But there’s another sense to this. It’s the righteousness that God gives to all who trust Jesus.

So, this “righteousness” is a right standing with God. The reality is all humans are rebels against God and we need to be forgiven by God himself. This message gets twisted through the ages. Some speak of God’s salvation merely in terms of God assisting us and giving us what we want. So, some people say, “Well, I trusted Jesus, but he didn’t help me.” What did you trust him for? Did you confess your sinfulness and need for God alone or did you go to God so that he’d give you something else. God’s not a genie. God is GOD! We were made for him and yet we’ve all worshipped and valued all other things other than God. That’s why we experience so many problems in this world. We choose to put supreme value in all other things.

Yet, with so many of us, we think the answer to the problem is that we can simply do moral turnarounds. We’ll change our behavior and we’ll be good. And God will be impressed by our behavior and give us a good life that we want. This is not the answer. But the Jewish people, and so many around the globe, think that’s the answer. But this is simply self-righteousness. We try hard, we work. We attain to certain levels we’re satisfied with, and we think God must be content with that. But as I said last week, what kind of relationship is that? Do you simply relate to people by saying, “Look what I’ve done. I did this and that! Now you’ll love me, right?” That view makes no room for relationship. God doesn’t want that. He wants our hearts. He wants us! So, the question for you is, “Do you want God or do you just want his stuff?” Do you relate to God on a works-based scale of acceptance?

If so, Paul would say that you’re just as ignorant as the Jews in the first century. Now, as I say that, you might be thinking, “Ouch! That’s rude!” I’m not trying to be rude. But I do hope that it calls you to question your view. Some here look at the word “ignorant,” and you could say, “Why are people judged because they’re ignorant. If they’re ignorant, they didn’t know any better, right?” Wrong.

Look at the grammar of this text. Their lack of knowledge is due to ignorance and also to active seeking to establish their own righteousness. So, they don’t think about the righteousness of God. They’re focus is on the righteousness of themselves. When they looked at and read the Mosaic Law, they said, “Alright, what must we do?” And their answer was not, “turn to God for him to give us a right standing.” They didn’t say with the psalmist, “if you should mark iniquities, O LORD, who could stand” (see Ps. 130). Instead, they say, “We’ll do it!” When you put the word “ignorance” and “seeking” you get this idea that they lived on mission. And, ignorance doesn’t have to mean that they didn’t know about Jesus, but they simply did not see Jesus as accomplishing what they believed to be true.

So, they had a zeal, but not according to knowledge. One commentator I studied, wrote this, “. . . Israel stays ignorant not because the information is unavailable, but because it suits them to stay ignorant” (Keller, p. 76). They have their belief, and no matter how much that belief is challenged and proven false, they’re going to believe it.

I remember listening to a conversation between a pastor with other people with various religious backgrounds. They were asking him questions about Christianity, and they would deny what the pastor believed, but at one point, one man had his questions answered, but his response was, "Well, actually that sounds really good. . . . If it were true." If you had watched the conversation, you would have known that many of his objections were answered, even regarding the truthfulness; but in the end it simply seemed like he didn't want to believe. He seemed to have admitted that the message of the gospel was good news, but he still rejected.

Now, many Jews who rejected Jesus probably didn't see it as beautiful, but instead, they simply didn't believe it fit their system. And, I think that's true for many Jews and non-Jewish people today. We love our money. We love our systems of thinking. We like not admitting our guilt or shame. We like to live for ourselves and have people think we're great. But Jesus confronts all of this. He doesn't come to be a nice addition to your life. He presents himself as the Savior you need and the Lord you must submit to.

When you recognize this, that'll change how you speak of Jesus with those who reject him. You won't simply say, "Will you accept Jesus?" Jesus doesn't need your acceptance. Instead, we say, "Will you submit to him? Will you trust him? Will you turn from your sinful ways, admit it and turn to Jesus alone to be your rescuer?" Only Jesus can do this and only Jesus can give us right standing with God.

So, what do you turn to in order to make life right? Security, people, money, family, spouse, boyfriend, girlfriend, children? Or, do you turn to Christ?

The last phrase of verse 3 says, "they do not submit to God's righteousness." What's interesting is that this is in the passive. That means that because they're focused on self-righteousness, they miss God's righteousness completely. This takes us back to what I said earlier, "What are you looking for in life, and in God?" If you think life is about you being vindicated and people thinking you're great, you're not looking to God. If you think life is about making God approve of you through your good deeds, you'll always be disappointed.

What we need is a complete change of mindset. And this can only happen by the Spirit of God. In Romans 8, Paul says that the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's Law, and it cannot. If you are stuck not thinking a right standing with God is *not* the most important need, I pray the Spirit grips your heart. I am burdened with Paul that there are so many people who do not see that being right with God as they're most urgent need! If that's you today, I beg of you to pray that God would change your heart!

But even as I say this, Ventura, I want to remind us that Paul is making an argument here specifically regarding the Jewish people – and I think these verses should give us a great burden to pray for the Jewish people in particular. God does have a plan to bring in the fullness of the remnant of national Jews until he returns! We ought to have a concern for the Jewish people. And, if you think, "Why?" If for anything, the greatest reason is because God is glorified in keeping his promises, and the Jewish people have been given great kindness that we pray would not lead to their greater demise but their greater hope in Jesus.

Our prayer should be that they stop running the legalistic spiritual Ironman and that they would run to Jesus. After all, Jesus is the righteousness of God. Paul goes on in verse 4 and says, “⁴For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.”⁸

The word “for” builds off of verse 3 and so the “for” is saying that **the righteousness of God is Christ for all who believe**. To summarize the logic of Paul from all of Romans: Jesus is God the Son. Jesus therefore possesses the righteousness of God. Jesus also came in human flesh and obeyed God perfectly with a perfect heart. And, he did it as a new representative for humanity, unlike Adam. Then, on the cross, he took the curse that humanity deserved. On the cross, God punished Jesus for our sins. And all who turn to Jesus for life are made right with God. Jesus is the righteousness of God! This is tremendous news!

When I was a younger youth pastor, I went through a season of immense guilt and shame over my past sins. I felt so much like Martin Luther. I knew God was holy and that Christians should follow the Lord every day, but I always felt like I was lazy. I fell short of God’s glory. I could never do enough to feel like I was *right* with God because I always saw my failure to God’s standard. I would have conversations with the lead pastor, and sometimes I’d confess all sorts of off-the-wall things. I’d feel guilty about this or that – and sometimes he’d think they weren’t even sins. Other things may have been sinful, but I didn’t need to confess to him. As a result of our conversations, he dubbed me his “little Luther.” I was dogged by the holiness of God. But, in a similar way as Luther, I was on a resolute pursuit to understand how I could be right with God. I mean, I grew up in the church and knew it was through faith, but I didn’t understand how I could have assurance of my salvation.

I began listening to a radio program that would talk over and over again about God declaring people righteous through faith in Jesus – and that even our faith isn’t a work. Listening, over and over again, finally God opened my mind and I was overjoyed. I understood that God was most glorified not in my attainments, but in Jesus’ attainment on my behalf. I was *free*. This, I believe is what Paul is saying here in verse 4. Christ is the end of the law for righteousness. Some people interpret this as, “Christ abolishes all laws. We don’t need to obey.” But the “law” here is referencing the Mosaic law and its placement in redemptive history. Jesus did not come to take us back to Moses. No! Moses points to Jesus! This is the idea of the word “end” here. Jesus ended the Mosaic covenant, and also, this means that Jesus is the culmination.

So, as Jesus said in Matthew 5:17, he didn’t come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it. Therefore, Jesus is all the fulfillment we need. You could say, “Well, Jesus is good, but I also need good health” or “I also need to have my messy life cleaned up,” but God says you *need* rightness with God – and all the other things that God deems right and good for your life will come in his timing. But even greater than this, being reconciled to God means that we are accepted by the Creator. We are dearly loved and someday, we will enter into his arms and be with him for all eternity – not because of our works, but because of Jesus and his works!

You could say, “Well, this is too good to be true.” It does sound like that, doesn’t it? But Paul says that Jesus gives righteousness to everyone who believes. I want you to hear that wording. He doesn’t simply say to *anyone* but to *everyone*. The emphasis is that God doesn’t reject *anyone* who comes to depend on him and entrust themselves completely to him. God would never reject because his purpose in sending Jesus was to rescue! And Jesus, at great cost to himself did rescue all who would believe on him!

⁸ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ro 10:4.

Will you trust him? And, for those who trust him, I hope that you will pray for those who don't believe – from the Jews and the Gentiles. Pray that people would have eyes to see their need for God's righteousness and that they would submit to Christ and find eternal life.

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