**Pursuing Righteousness By Faith**

**Romans 9:27-33 (ESV)**

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***27*** *And Isaiah cries out concerning Israel: “Though the number of the sons of Israel be as the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will be saved,* ***28*** *for the Lord will carry out his sentence upon the earth fully and without delay.”* ***29*** *And as Isaiah predicted, “If the Lord of hosts had not left us offspring, we would have been like Sodom and become like Gomorrah.”* ***30*** *What shall we say, then? That Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness have attained it, that is, a righteousness that is by faith;* ***31*** *but that Israel who pursued a law that would lead to righteousness did not succeed in reaching that law.* ***32*** *Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as if it were based on works. 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.”*

In 2005, sociologists Christian Smith and Melinda Denton wrote a significant book entitled *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers.* From interviews with approximately 3,000 teens, these sociologists coined a term to describe what they perceive to be the common religious beliefs of our nation’s teenagers. That term that they coined is “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.” I know that term is a bit of a mouthful, but I believe it’s significantly descriptive.

The belief system of America’s teens is “Moralistic” because it teaches that central to living a happy life is being a good and moral person. Being a good person means that we’re nice and kind. We’re respectful of others and we’re working to improve ourselves, to be successful, to contribute to society.

This system is “Therapeutic” because it focuses upon the healthy benefits such faith offers to the individual who lives by these beliefs. Central as a goal is to attain a subjective well-being, being able to resolve problems, and getting along amiably with other people. So it’s therapeutic.

And then it is “Deism” because it does affirm a god who exists, who created the world and who defines sort of a general moral order in the world, but not a god who is particularly personally involved in one’s affairs–especially if those affairs are private and the person prefers for God not to be involved in those affairs. Most of the time, the God of this faith keeps a safe distance. He respects our privacy. This is a god who is not sovereign over all or who cares much about doctrine or who judges sin harshly. But this god is sort of the cool parent; not strict and not condemning.

The authors’ explain that this god is “something like a combination Divine Butler and Cosmic Therapist: he’s always on call, takes care of any problems that arise, professionally helps his people to feel better about themselves and does not become too personally involved in the process.”

Now keep in mind that most of the teens interviewed identify themselves as Christians, and yet their beliefs are not Christian. Where are these teens receiving their theology, their spiritual beliefs?Perhaps it’s the entertainment media of music or TV or movies. Perhaps it’s the education system where moral relativism is taught and social conformity is demanded. Perhaps it’s social media groups where group think is just energizing what they believe. Yes! All these things underscore the beliefs of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. Yet, studies show that the main source of indoctrination into Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is the Christian church. These teenagers are learning it from us. They’re learning it in Christian homes and they’re learning it in their Youth Groups. Many youth leaders have erased the distinctives of the Gospel of Jesus and have devolved into this generic teaching about God that encourages teenagers to be nice and fair to one another,to look to God when you really need Him and to excel in personal growth goals like education and just being a good contributor to the system that operates in the world.

In 2010 another author, Kenda Dean writes in her book, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers is Telling the American Church*, "The problem does not seem to be that churches are teaching young people badly, but that we are doing an exceedingly good job of teaching youth what we really believe, namely, that Christianity is not a big deal, that God requires little, and the church is a helpful social institution filled with nice people…" She goes on to say, "If churches practice Moralistic Therapeutic Deism in the name of Christianity, then getting teenagers to church more often is not the solution (conceivably it could make matters worse). A more faithful church is the solution…. Maybe the issue is simply that the emperor has no clothes." In other words, there’s nothing really transforming about the church.

Did you catch what this author said? If churches practice and teach Moralistic Therapeutic Deism in the name of Christianity, then churches actually harm the souls of kids. I would argue that that’s true of the Christian home as well. And that’s a travesty! In a rush to get teenagers to come to church, Christian families and churches often abandon the Gospel that is offensive, for a popular gospel that appeals to self-will and self-love. And yes, we have experienced some of this thinking in our own church, where parents often just simply want their teenagers to be good kids and to like coming to church. That’s their main goal. And if you are such a parent, I don’t castigate you or condemn you so much as to try to get you to think about what your goal really needs to be in order to be an eternal blessing to yourself as well as to your children and to the cause of Christ, for the glory of God.

Now thankfully, our youth leaders are resolute to understand, to live out and to teach the true Gospel of Jesus Christ. They understand that Christianity is about the life of God in the soul of man and that God offers that life freely through Jesus and through Jesus alone, and that each of us need such a life. They understand that teenagers can be good people and can like church and like Youth Group, and yet be eternally lost, have a spiritual tragedy take place in their life.How different the Gospel of Jesus is from Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. We could hardly have two systems of belief that are more in contrast. I would urge you to pray for the youth leaders and Sunday School teachers of this church. Pray that God would help us to clearly teach and communicate the Gospel. It is the true Gospel that is the power of God unto salvation to everyone who believes it, to the Jew first and also to the Gentiles. (Romans 1:16)

Now, I do not think that this particular belief system, Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, began with our teenagers, nor does it end with our teenagers. I believe that this belief system is a driving influence among adults as well in the Christian church in the United States. In short, the problem is that many testifying believers in the church have lost hold of the Gospel of Jesus. And that’s why we need a letter like Paul’s letter to the church at Rome. It reorients us to everything that’s true, everything that’s right, everything that’s transformative, everything that is God-centered, everything that truly exalts God and grants life to those who would believe.It is God’s gospel that rescues us from a moralism that keeps us away from true righteousness. This is the problem of the Israelites. They had a moralism. They had a view of God. They had a religious passion. But it was their moralism that kept them from true righteousness. It kept them from a reconciled relationship with God. It kept them from eternal life.

In the passage before us, Paul continues to discuss his burden for his own people, the Jews. He highlights the reasons why Jews are being left out of God’s eternal blessings. The reason is not that God has abandoned them, that He’s failed them, that He’s been faithless. The reason is that they have rejected God’s path of righteousness in exchange for a path that appeals to human pride, but that nonetheless leaves us in our sins. And that is the path of moralism.In this passage, God teaches us that there is a right way to come to God and a wrong way to come to God, and we must know the difference.

The main idea behind this entire section that we’re studying today is simply this: If we come to God through our own efforts to be righteous, we will stumble over Jesus Christ and be ruined forever. So we must not do that! If we come to God through faith, we will have Jesus as our cornerstone, the very center of our existence, and we will receive righteousness and life in Him. The difference between these two paths, a path of trying to attain righteousness through self-effort and then trying to obtain righteousness through Christ, couldn’t be more opposite, more in contrast. One brings us into a condition of utter lostness. The other brings us into a condition of utter and absolute, eternal blessing. There are four central truths of salvation that are taught in this passage.

**Truth #1: Because every person is unrighteous, grace is the reason anyone is saved. (9:27-29)**

So if anyone is saved from condemnation, from the punishment of God, the wrath of God against their sin, it is only because of grace.

***27*** *And Isaiah cries out concerning Israel: “Though the number of the sons of Israel be as the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will be saved,* ***28*** *for the Lord will carry out his sentence upon the earth fully and without delay.”* ***29*** *And as Isaiah predicted, “If the Lord of hosts had not left us offspring, we would have been like Sodom and become like Gomorrah.”*

God has fulfilled that promise in verse 27 out of one man, Abraham, making a nation of many, many people.

Paul has already covered the ground of man’s depravity and responsibility before God in the earlier chapters. In chapter1, He said that man is without excuse because God gives natural revelation of His power and glory through His Creation. He’s given that revelation to every person. So every person who doesn’t fall before Him and worship him is without excuse. And He says that man doesn’t fall before Him and worship Him. Instead, man falls before himself and before creation and exchanges the glory of the Creator for that which is of creation. (Romans 1:18-25) God is not at fault for this. It is man who decides to exchange the truth of God for a lie.

In chapter 2, Paul then says that Jews in particular are without excuse. They have the Law, they teach the Law, and yet they don’t obey the Law of God. (Romans 2:17-24) So in chapter 3, Paul summarizes the lost condition of both Jew and Gentile by saying that all have sinned and every one of us has fallen short of God’s glory. And that there’s not one person who is righteous, no not even one person. Together we have become worthless. There is not one that has done good, not even one. In fact, no one seeks after God because we all are seeking after our own way. (Romans 3:9-18) That’s who we are by nature.

In Romans 9 then, some are listening to Paul describe the lostness of the Jewish people as a whole and they ask, “Well, if the Israelites are lost, then God has failed in His promises because He promised that Israel would be saved. And so God has failed in His promises. He is not faithful.”Paul answers this accusation by saying that God never promises every individual Israelite would be saved. In fact, he says, “Let me quote some Scripture to tell you that God promised from the beginning that it’s only going to be a small portion of the whole of the Israelites who would be saved.” God has made a way for every person in Israel, indeed every person in the Gentile world, to receive mercy. And if people do not come to God in humility and faith to receive mercy and grace as a free gift, it’s not God who fails them, it is they who fail God. The responsibility for our destruction rests with us every time.

So in verses 27-29, Paul quotes first from Isaiah 10 and then from Isaiah 1. In Isaiah 10:22, Paul quotes,“Though the number of the sons of Israel be as the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will be saved…” Now the key word there is “remnant.” Circle that if you’re prone to writing in your Bibles, which I think is actually a good practice. This is a word that’s often used in the Old Testament by the prophets to refer to those who are within Israel, who would experience conversion, and then would benefit from God’s covenantal blessings. It’s a remnant. It’s a small number out of the larger number of the whole. It’s a remnant who is going to be saved. Isaiah said, through the inspiration of God, that this is exactly what’s going to happen. Why are people now in the time of Christ confused about this? God has been talking about this all through His Book. For instance, in Micah 7 also, this word “remnant” appears.

**Micah 7:18-19** Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression for the remnant of his inheritance? He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in steadfast love. He will again have compassion on us; he will tread our iniquities underfoot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea.

It’s not for all of Israel, but for the remnant of His inheritance. What a privilege to be part of the remnant! God announces prior to the Messiah’s coming into the world, that only a small number would receive the Messiah and receive the blessings of the Covenant that the Messiah offers them. God’s Word does not fail! That’s Paul’s point.

How is it then that individuals become part of God’s remnant? That’s the question and that’s what he’s been talking about prior to this. But if you jump ahead to Romans 11, he gives a very definitive answer on how a person becomes part of the remnant. Who wants to be part of the remnant if only the remnant is saved? The answer is, I do. I trust you do as well. So look at Romans 11.

**Romans 11:5** So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace.

How does this remnant become the remnant? They are chosen by grace. The point is that God is right to judge His own people, the Jews, if they rebel against Him. He’s not at fault for His condemnation of rebellious sinners. The responsibility lies upon the people who are acting in resistance to God’s glory and in rebellion of God’s authority. Yet the remnant, if we are a remnant, we have no room to boast. We don’t say, “Well, I’m not like those guys who rebel and resist God.” If we are part of the remnant we can fall upon our knees and say, “thank you Lord that you would choose me by your grace.” It’s only God’s work of grace in my own heart that enables me to be part of this remnant who would look up to God and receive His favor through Jesus. So here’s the point. No one wins their position as a recipient of God’s blessings by their own will or their own doing or their own efforts. It’s all of God’s grace. We are a part of God’s remnant only because of God’s mercy, because we are “chosen by grace.”

This quotation from Isaiah 10:22 ends with a statement about the certainty of God’s judgment upon all those who remain resistant to God, who don’t bow the knee to God’s Messiah. He says, “…for the Lord will carry out his sentence upon the earth fully and without delay.” I like the New International Version here. It says, “with speed and finality.” God is patient, but when He decides to bring His judgment against those who resist Him, that day will be like the day of the flood in Noah’s time. It will comewith speed and with finality. For 100 years Noah preached that a flood was going to come. For 100 years, it didn’t come. “Aww, don’t listen to Noah. It’s not going to happen. It never will happen.” But when it came, Boom! It was a storm that hit suddenly with speed and with finality. The door of the ark was shut. There was no opportunity once the rain began to fall.

It will be like the fire from heaven in Lot’s day. Again, God warning the people and yet, “No, God’s not going to judge us.” And yet, when the hail of fire began to rain down upon those cities, it came withspeed and with finality. It will be like the stone hitting Goliath in David’s day, with speed and finality. Friends, let us not think that God is lying. Flee to His mercy while he withholds His hand, while He is yet patient. “…for the Lord will carry out his sentence upon the earth fully and without delay.”

Paul then quotes from Isaiah 1:9. He says

***29*** *And as Isaiah predicted, “If the Lord of hosts had not left us offspring, we would have been like Sodom and become like Gomorrah.”*

This passage moves us from contemplating the certainty and swiftness of God’s judgment by adding that those who are part of this remnant who receive mercy, we should not be proud of ourselves for having escaped God’s wrath**.** Because if the Lord of hosts had not acted in grace, we would exactly be like the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. You see, apart from God’s mercy, we would painfully perish as individuals and as people. How often we have to remind ourselves of God’s grace in our life so that we would humble ourselves before Him, so that we would rejoice. It’s quite a word picture that Paul is painting, and I wonder if we remind ourselves often enough of this truth. When we read the Sodom and Gomorrah story do we say, “I would be one of those people if the Lord hadn’t set His mercy upon my life? I deserve to be treated by God like that.” That’s the overwhelming truth that causes the good news to be so good! That God, in love, made a way for us who deserve to be treated like Sodom and Gomorrah to escape from this terrible, terrible judgment.

Some applications to consider:

1. Not every person is saved from terrible judgment. Only a remnant is rescued.

There is a damning doctrine that is popular even among those who profess faith in Christ, that proclaims that God is so loving that He would not, indeed could not, judge us for our sins, especially with eternal judgment. No doctrine, I believe, is more deadly nor more wrong, nor more contrary to the true Gospel of Jesus than that. God did execute His wrath upon Sodom and Gomorrah and He promises He will with speed and finality, just as certainly, exercise His wrath upon all those who are outside of Christ. So friends, we must abandon the notion that God will not condemn us in our sins. Abandon the notion that our sins are light and easily looked past. We must abandon that for ourselves and for our friends and our relatives. We must not shut this truth away from our eyes, first for our own soul, but also as we consider those that we care about and those we love. If we are not in Jesus Christ, what could possibly give us any hope that we will escape from God’s righteous justice? We’re guilty!

2. We are right to fear the Lord and stand in awe of Him since God is not mocked by anyone.

It is the fear of the Lord that leads us to His sufficient provision for all our needs. So, if we trifle with God, if we treat Him casually, if we live as though He doesn’t care about our being selfish and willful and disobedient, we will be completely lost. So it’s right to fear the Lord, to tremble before Him. But also, the third application:

3. We are right to love the Lord and draw near to Him since He has had mercy upon us.

This fearing the Lord is not contrary to loving the Lord and drawing near to Him. We can approach God confidently and boldly since Jesus has taken our punishment for us. The name of the Lord is a strong tower and the righteous, those who are in Christ, can run into Him and be absolutely safe! We love God because He first loved us and when He sets His love upon us, He makes us His children. He adopts us into His family.

**Truth #2: Righteousness is never attained by good works; righteousness can only be obtained through faith. (9:30-32a)**

***30*** *What shall we say, then? That Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness have attained it, that is, a righteousness that is by faith;*

Here are these people who didn’t give a thought to God. All they thought about was their own pleasures and their own desires. And that’s how they lived all their lives. They weren’t pursuing righteousness. They weren’t concerned with “Am I living a good enough life to be accepted by God when I die?” That’s not what they were thinking at all. But from among these people, there are those who attain that righteousness, where they have right status with God. And they attain it by faith, the text says.

***31*** *but that Israel who pursued a law that would lead to righteousness did not succeed in reaching that law.*

Israel said, “Here’s the Law. It’s righteous and holy and good. If we just work hard to live up to it, then we will be right before the Lord.” But they didn’t succeed in reaching that law. They didn’t fulfill its demands though all the efforts, all the zeal that they placed in pursuing it.

***32*** *Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as if it were based on works.*

Every successful blessing of God is received by faith. But they pursued it as if it were based on works. The responsibility for the unbelief of the Jews cannot be laid at God’s door. We cannot say, “Well, if only the elect believe and are saved, then my unbelief is God’s fault.” God’s sovereignty in having mercy upon whom He has mercy and hardening those whom He hardens cannot be an excusefor those who reject Jesus, the free offer of Savior and Lord.God doesn’t ever condemn pure and innocent people. That’s why we can’t work for our salvation. We’ve already messed up and we’re too weak, even if we hadn’t messed up in the past, we’re too weak to fulfill the Law’s demands even now. Our heart is too corrupt. But in view of God’s election, which this whole chapter is speaking, if we don’t believe in Jesus, if we don’t have faith, it’s because we willfully resist Christ. And here for the Jews, they willfully resist Christ because they hold onto this notion that they can do something in order to gain God’s favor.

Keep in mind that the doctrine of election does not teach that we are like puppets mechanically doing what the person pulling the strings decides we will do. God created us as responsible beings who are held accountable by God for our resistance to Him. That’s the point of verses 30-32. Paul describes the condition of the Gentiles whom God has rescued and then he describes the condition of the Israelites who remain in their sins.

He says the Gentiles were not seeking a right standing with God, and yet they received adoption into God’s family. How did that happen? How could He have a people who weren’t even conscious of thinking about “I need a right relationship with God” enter into such a wonderful relationship? The answer is God’s grace, God’s mercy, His sovereignty. But what about these people who pursued it with such zeal, with such effort? Their whole life was centered around the performance of the law. What about them? They didn’t succeed in reaching the righteousness that God requires through the Law because they were powerless to do so.

I like the New International Version of verses 30-31. Let me read it because it uses two different words that I think are really important for us.

**Romans 9:30-31 (NIV)** What then shall we say? That the Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have obtained it, a righteousness that is by faith; but Israel, who pursued a law of righteousness, has not attained it.

So he uses the words “obtained” and “attained.” People, through the Gospel, obtain the Gospel. It’s a gift! People who try to attain righteousness never do, because we can never fulfill the Law’s demands. We can never achieve it. The good news is that while we cannot attain this righteousness by our works, we can obtain it through faith as we receive it as our inheritance from God through Jesus Christ. Now, here’s the problem though. The Israelites continued to believe that they could attain righteousness. That if they just simply worked harder, then they’d finally succeed. And that’s where Moralistic Therapeutic Deism falls in. “If we just try to live a good life, God’s going to be fine with us.” And nothing could be more surprisingly, shockingly wrong on the Day of Judgment than that belief!

I’ll give you a little illustration. I remember when I was at Moody Bible Institute, some of my friends and I went to the Grand Opening of McDonald’s there. They were selling hamburgers at 1950 prices, so we were interested. And there was a magician there that came around from table to table. He came to our table and he said, “I’m offering you a free meal if you’re right about something.” Okay, what is that? So he placed a quarter in my friend’s hand. He said, “I want you to hold onto it. If you have the quarter in your hand by the end of my time with you, I’ll buy everyone a free lunch.” And so he put that quarter in my friend’s hand and my friend held on the whole time. That’s all he was thinking about, was holding onto that quarter. When he got done the guy acted like he was just going to leave the table. My friend said, “No, No! Remember? You promised that if I still have the quarter…” The guy said, “Okay. Show me the quarter.” And my friend was so confident and so sure that we all were going to have a free meal he goes {Pastor Ritch opened his clenched fist with a flourish}, and there was nothing in my friend’s hand. And my friend looked {Pastor Ritch gave a look of shock, with mouth opened}. He was just dumbfounded. He was startled! He was shocked beyond belief!

And that’s the way it’s going to be for everyone who thinks “If I just live a good life, when I stand before God on the Day of Judgment, I’ve got what God requires.” And they’re going to be so happy. They’re going to say, “I’m ready for this!” {Pastor Ritch opened his hand} And there’s nothing there. And then there’s only terror! The application is let us stop trusting in ourselves. Our hearts are too deceitful and wicked to produce this righteousness. Look to Jesus Christ. He is our only path to the righteousness we need in order to be reconciled to God and accepted into His kingdom.

**Truth #3: Because man’s pride demands to earn righteousness, Jesus is a stumbling stone for many. (9:32b-33a)**

***32****…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;*

Paul again dips into the Old Testament to prove his teaching. He combines two passages from Isaiah.

**Isaiah 28:16** therefore thus says the Lord God, “Behold, I am the one who has laid as a foundation in Zion, a stone, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, of a sure foundation: ‘Whoever believes will not be in haste.’

**Isaiah 8:14-15** And he will become a sanctuary and a stone of offense and a rock of stumbling to both houses of Israel, a trap and a snare to the inhabitants of Jerusalem. And many shall stumble on it. They shall fall and be broken; they shall be snared and taken.”

So Paul takes this first passage that has to do with this cornerstone upon which everyone who believes on Him will build this secure building successfully. But then he says that very same stone that is a cornerstone for some, becomes a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense. The very same stone has two totally different effects upon people. Some build their lives upon Him and find joy, prosperity, strength, security. Others stumble right over Him. And that stone of course, is Jesus Christ. Peter preached this in Acts 4 in his early sermon in Jerusalem.

**Acts 4:11-12** This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.”

If God sent Jesus to be the Cornerstone of our lives, why is it that people stumble over Him? And here’s the answer. People stumble over Jesus because Jesus overthrows our pride and Jesus undermines our self-righteousness. That’s it! Jesus calls us to repent of building our lives upon the foundation of self. We love ourselves too much to deny ourselves and follow Jesus. We believe in ourselves too much to humble ourselves and to turn from our own way. So we cannot bear to come to God naked, helpless, empty-handed and impoverished, but that’s how we must come to God. So Jesus stands and tells us to come to God naked, helpless, empty-handed, impoverished. And when we don’t want to do that, we scrape our knees and we fall. And great is the fall of our destruction. Because man’s pride demands to earn righteousness, Jesus is a stumbling stone for many.

**Truth #4: Because God is merciful, Jesus is the cornerstone for those who believe. (9:33b)**

***33****…and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.”*

Jesus is a strong cornerstone, sufficient upon which to build our lives securely, successfully, joyfully. I want to read from one commentator because I think he writes so descriptively and so well. His name is Donald Barnhouse.

“Men look for something big. God put Christ into this world as a low-lying stone, hidden away among the long grass of a distant Roman province. Men held their eyes too high and walked across the world, not seeing Christ as God’s only answer to their problems, and they tripped over him and stumbled when they came upon him suddenly. They were offended by a scheme of salvation which brings man to nothingness, and they refused God’s way. But there are others who have accepted Christ. They have come through the tangled grass of this world with their eyes low upon their own bleeding feet, scarred with their walk on the road of sin. When they have come to this stone, they have been willing to stand on it and ask for nothing further. They have believed God’s word about the Lord Jesus Christ as being the only way of salvation. They have abandoned their goal, their road, their strength, their pride, and have taken their stand squarely on the Lord Jesus Christ. To them comes the trumpeted promise from the God of the universe: ‘Whoever believeth on him shall not be ashamed.’”

What’s going to happen in our lives when we stand before Him? Will we be crushed underneath the shame of our own sin? Will we be liberated to rejoice in His presence forever? The answer to that question depends upon where our feet are standing. Are our feet still standing upon that ground which is sifting sand of our own self-reliance? Or are we standing upon the rock, the cornerstone, Jesus Christ Himself? Who is Jesus to you? I urge you friends, let us trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, and in Jesus Christ alone. And as we do so, He promises us that you will never ever be ashamed.