

Sermon for Sunday, September 12, 2010

Romans 9:30-10:4

Looking without Finding and Finding without Looking

Religion can get in the way of faith

There is something in organized religion that can stifle true faith. Jesus told a parable about it: Two men go to the temple to pray. One is as religious as can be – a Pharisee who keeps all the rules, and a tax collector who betrays his own people collaborating with Roman oppressors, in order to get rich. Both are doing something religious, but the story doesn't unfold as expected.

Both men pray. The Pharisee thanks God that he keeps the law. He deprives himself by fasting; he faithfully tithes at the temple. Above all, he is grateful that he isn't "like the rest of men" – grasping, unjust, adulterous and immoral – like that sorry tax collector over there. He probably wonders, "How did that *sinner* get in here anyway? We need to keep that element out of here. We should start doing background checks. I'll have to suggest that at the next council." Overall, the Pharisee is pleased that he is so good, and more pleased that the other man is bad – far worse than he. Religion attracts the Pharisee because it makes him feel good about himself. In the temple, the Pharisee enjoys a smug sort of peace.

The temple attracts the tax man too, but for very different reasons. He is the opposite of the Pharisee.

- Pharisees have a high self-opinion. The tax man is near despair. He knows he's corrupt, a sinner! He has betrayed people and feels terrible about it.
- Pharisees work hard, go to temple and synagogue regularly and become leaders. The tax man probably doesn't go much and he hides when he does.
- Pharisees keep the law, most of the time, and cover it up the rest of the time. Everyone knows about the sins of the tax man.

Question: Which of these men is more religious? Pharisee? Which is closer to God? Which one is right with God? The tax man, pleads, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner." Jesus says that the tax man went home justified. He was right with God, he had God's righteousness.

This parable makes the same point, in story form that Paul makes, in historical and doctrinal form. Romans 9-11, you will recall, describes a surprising turn of events. The Gentiles, who were once "not a people" with any special relationship with God, are now becoming the people of God. But Israel, called to God and privileged by God, largely failed to claim a relationship by trusting Jesus, their Messiah and Redeemer (Rom 9). This is the result of a dual agency. God certainly planned to gather the Gentiles to himself. He also foresaw the apathy and disbelief of Israel, yet the failure of Israel is very much her choice.

This outcome can't be a surprise. Long ago, God said not all Israel will be saved. Old Testament history is a tale of sin, rebellion, unfaithfulness and violations of God's covenant. Long ago, God also said he would call the Gentiles and they would become God's people.

So it's been predicted, but it still hurts Paul, who is a Jew. He loves his people, prays for them, would give his life for them if he could (9:3). When tragedy befalls someone we love, it grieves us and it puzzles us. How could this happen? How could God let this happen to people I love? So Paul wrestles with an emotional and theological question. His answers tell us how people do, and do not, find God. They return to the gospel Paul explored in Romans 3-4. That is, when Paul talks about people righteousness, he means the righteousness of the gospel.

The Gentiles find righteousness without seeking it

The question: How did the Gentiles find righteousness and life without seeking it while Israel cannot find righteousness even though they sought it?

First, it is entirely possible to find something without looking for it. When I first went skiing, I was seeking the thrill of speed, the fluid and rushing motion. I found that I enjoyed the scenery more than the skiing. I liked standing on the slopes more than I liked skiing! Much more, God prepared something beautiful for the Gentiles, something they didn't seek.

When Paul says "the Gentiles did not pursue righteousness" he doesn't mean, "The Gentiles didn't pursue morality." Many Romans cared a great deal about justice and duty. When Paul says they "did not pursue righteousness" he means they did not pursue a right standing *with God*, which lets them stand before God without fear (Psa. 15). By "righteousness" Paul doesn't mean obedience or moral living. He means "the righteousness that [comes] by faith" (9:30). In 10:3 Paul contrasts "the righteousness of God" with "their own" righteousness.

Many Romans sought to be moral, but none were seeking God or the gift He gives, so that we can be righteous and right with Him by faith, because God gave them his righteousness. Nonetheless, they found it, they obtained it.

Even today, people find what they do not seek. They read a book, listen to a song; somehow it sets them on the path toward God. They go to a wedding, a funeral, a baptism, and behold. God found them and they received righteousness by faith. Others have the opposite experience. They seek, but do not find, because they pursue righteousness the wrong way. Calvin said that "the first step to attaining righteousness is to renounce our own righteousness" (10:3).

The Jews cannot find righteousness because they seek it the wrong way

Israel pursued righteousness the wrong way. Martin Luther illustrates how that can happen. When Luther first shows up on the grid, he is twenty-one years old and a monk in an Augustinian monastery in Erfurt, Germany. He has just given up a promising career in law, not to serve others, but to save his own soul. He intended to do this in the way the church approved:

Learn the truth – Bible and doctrine. Live in the right way. Find life. Find the truth, live the way, gain or obtain (or earn) life.

Luther did everything he could to live the right way: He fasted, prayed, performed menial, humbling tasks. He took a pilgrimage to Rome and crawled up the steps to St Peter's on his knees. He confessed his sins; he confessed for hours a day, until he wore out his confessors. One told him to go away until he did something worth confessing. He said (quote) "You fart and you think it's a sin."

We think: Martin, you are a priest and you don't know better? You pray that God will forgive sins of the people. In communion, you present the sacrifice of Christ for sins. How can you not see what's before your eyes every day?

Israel was similar. If they read their history, heard their prophets, they had to know: No one is good enough to earn God's favor. If the priests would stop and think: In the temple we offer sacrifices daily to cover sins. Why do we need these sacrifices, if we can simply keep the law? Yet they didn't see it. Are they blind?

Yes! But you and I are blind, too. I confess: Although I know the gospel, I'm quite capable of forgetting it. As you know, day after day, time without number, my father told me I was helpless,

worthless, useless, and always would be. I resisted by telling myself "He's wrong and I will prove it." That's OK as survival strategy, but not as a way of life.

My parents moved a lot, often to small, insular towns, where I was "the new kid," so I had to prove myself in each place. Proving myself became a lens for life.

By age eighteen, I began to see that was a fool's game. I would never be able to prove myself. The gospel says we should abandon the attempt, because God accepts us as we are, when we trust him. But it's easy to revert to old patterns. I still catch myself trying to prove my worth, justify my existence, to friends and new acquaintances, to this church, even my family – work hard, hone your skills, do things. I know it is nonsense, but I still do it.

I don't tell you this so you will think about me. I say it because I want you to realize that pastors can forget, even if we preach the gospel weekly. I believe most everyone can forget, even if our experience is quite different. We can strive to justify ourselves for all sorts of reasons – varying from person to person:

- Perhaps you have wonderful parents and you want to be like them, live up to their standards and so prove yourself.
- Perhaps you have a friend, brother or sister, even a spouse whom you admire. You want to live as well as they do, be worthy of their love or admiration.
- Perhaps you want to prove that you deserve your job. Your boss may push you, impose goals, so you constantly feel that your life depends on your performance. I have to prove I belong, I'm good enough.
- Maybe you have a strong moral compass, an intense notion of justice. If you meet your own standards, you can justify yourself.
- Maybe a teacher or leader inspires you live up to your potential. Or people praise you constantly and you feel you have to live up to it! There are many forms.

Paul addresses this in 9:30-31. Notice the contrast: 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 (9:31). Why not? It is because "they pursued a *law of righteousness*." "Law" means the law of Moses. So Israel pursued righteousness by law-keeping and it didn't work.

Let me ask you to observe Paul's two verbs. Because they are humble verbs and sound similar we could miss them and the difference between them. The Gentiles did not pursue righteousness, but *obtained* it, while Israel pursued their own righteousness but did not *attain* it.

The Gentiles did not seek salvation, but they obtained it, received it as a gift. But those who seek righteousness by works never attain it. "Attain" means achieve, or literally, arrive at something. They started a journey, traveling toward righteousness, but they never arrived. They did not attain what they sought, "Because they pursued it not by faith but as if it were by works" (9:31). No one who tries to earn salvation will attain it. But we can obtain salvation.

Worse, it will skew our entire spiritual vision and lead us to reject Jesus himself: As a result "they stumbled over the stumbling stone" (9:32). That sounds obscure, but it's actually a reference to some of Jesus' teaching and a theme found in Isaiah 28, Psalm 118. They say: God has laid a stone in Zion. It is costly, chosen by him as a sure foundation. No one who trusts that stone, "will be put to shame." Jesus is the foundation stone for knowing God, being right with him. Yet people reject him, then stumble and fall over him (Matt. 21:42, Ps. 118:22-23).

Let's play out the metaphor. Stone masons search through a pile of stones, looking for the right ones for the foundation and the capstone of their building. They examine stones and discard them one by one. The masons represent the priests, Pharisees of Israel. They come upon Jesus, look him over carefully and reject him. Why? Because Jesus himself is not bent toward law and the righteousness people try to earn.

He didn't care about their rules. In fact, he criticized them and told others not to keep them. He didn't promote righteousness as they understood it, so they rejected him. Of course, envy of Jesus' popularity made them more angry. But they were right about this: Jesus did *not* tell people to pursue legal righteousness by *their* labor. He offered righteousness by grace (9:33).

But Jesus *is* the foundation stone, so that those who reject him must stumble and fall (Matt 21:44). Indeed, Jesus told those who rejected him, "The kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit" (21:43). And everyone who follows Jesus, Jew or Gentile, will receive that fruit. As God told Abraham: "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you...and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Gen. 12:2-3).

Here is a forgotten fact: God called Abraham when he was middle-aged, recorded in Genesis 12, and gave Abraham his first written command twenty-four years later (Gen. 17).

Religious passion needs proper direction

As Romans 10 begins, Paul restates his love for his people, Israel. He prays "that they may be saved" (10:1). But there is a problem. The Israelites have a zeal for God, but it is misguided (10:2). They are trying to earn their salvation, their righteousness, by works. But no one gets right with God by keeping the law (9:31).

No one can establish his or her own righteousness. Paul's theme

Some are proud of their heritage, that they have put up a wall between themselves and the Gentiles by following distinct laws and customs. But "formal membership in the covenant body does not save anyone."¹

We can get lost in laws. Consider: Two young men are happy to find jobs working for a company that has a "no facial hair" policy. The first man shaves carefully every day, thinking, "This will please the boss." He also arrives at 7:55 and leaves at 5:00 daily, and files his reports. He keeps all the rules.

The second man reads the company's foundational documents. He looks up interviews of the founder. He scans old photographs and notices that the founder has a mustache in several! He works hard, takes initiative, and presents himself professionally. He also grows a very short beard over Christmas. In July, he grows a mustache on vacation and keeps it a few days – no meetings. He invites the founder, recently retired, out for lunch and asks about his original vision. Sometimes he works till well past 7:00.

One man keeps the rules, one knows the founder. Both men have zeal. The second man has a zeal that is based on knowledge. They both know *the fact*: There is a law that says "No facial hair" but only one has insight (10:2).

Ignorance is not Israel's only problem. Paul says "Since they did not know the righteousness that comes from God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness" (10:3). Because they are proud of their efforts, they refuse to receive righteousness and salvation as a gift. Back to 9:31, because they want to *attain* righteousness, they cannot *obtain* righteousness.

Human efforts fail because we don't see that God is perfectly righteous, and always will be, while our righteousness will always be partial. "Ignorance on this point [implies] ignorance of the character of God, of the requirements of the law," and of human nature. Those who err essentially here, err fatally; and those who are right here, cannot be wrong [on] other necessary truths."

¹ Boice, p. 1129

We may avoid gross sins, do some good, live in basic peace and faithfulness and still fall far short of God's standards. This is what drove Luther to all his confessions. As an Augustinian monk, he knew that beyond his particular sins, he was corrupt, and prone to sin. He knew his efforts to be righteous were bound to fail. Then he embarked on another effort – to confess every last sin.

Luther's mentor told him to study Romans and the Psalms. There he read that God offers "a righteousness that is by faith from first to last" (Rom. 1:17). If we reject this righteousness, we are on our own. Certain problems usually follow:

First, we will be satisfied with our own righteousness: our volunteerism, our gifts to charity, our standing in our neighborhood.

Second, we will look down on others. If we refuse to look up, to God's righteousness, shining like the sun, we will boast about our own: "My seventy-five watt bulb is brighter than your fifty watt bulb." Imagine two people listening to a symphony on the radio. A trumpet fanfare blasts. One of them tries to make trumpet blast sounds with his lips. He doesn't come close. His friend says, "No, no! It sounds like this." OK, his sound was a little better. And he is so pleased with himself. Silly!

Third problem, we will misunderstand righteousness. Remember how Paul described his early adult self-confidence: "circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee. As for legalistic righteousness [I was] faultless." He looks at it again and says "I consider it all "defenestrate". *Trash!* What a superficial list: His birth, religious tradition, affiliation, and external morality. But Paul met Christ one day, in his dazzling glory. Then he said he no longer wants "a righteousness of my own that comes from the law." He wants "the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith" in Christ (3:9).

Christ is the end of the law

Paul's comment in last verse of passage is mysterious: Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes" (10:4). "Law" means the law of Moses. But in what sense is Christ the end of the law?

The word "end" in English and the Greek word for "end" - *tevlo* - can have three meanings that make sense here.

- End can mean **termination**: "the show has ended" when the actors bow.
- End can mean the **result**: "She did not see the *end* of her actions.
- End can mean the **goal**: The *end* of government is the good of the people.

What then does Paul mean: termination, result or goal? (The question matters.) Certainly, Christ is not the end of the law in the sense that it now has no authority. Jesus himself said, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them" (Matt 5:17, cf. 19:8-9). Paul also reaffirms the law (Rom. 13:8-10). The law still tells how we should treat each other.

I want to suggest a double meaning. Jesus is both the termination of the law in one sense, and its goal in another. Consider: The finish line is the *end* of the race. The finish line is the *goal* of the race: we run planning to reach the finish line. And it is the *termination* of the race; when we reach it, the race is over. This seems to fit Paul's message in Romans very well.

First, when Jesus came, the era when believers concentrate on the law came to an end. No one was ever saved by the law of Moses, but law – and violations for disobedience - did loom large for years in Israel. Now Jesus looms large – his life, death, resurrection, grace, his example, his Spirit giving us a new heart that longs for God's goodness. (John 1:17 "The law was given thru Moses; grace and truth came thru Jesus Christ).

But second, Jesus is the culmination, the goal of everything in the law.

- The law labels human sin, so that we will long for God's mercy – which reaches its culmination in Jesus.
- The law calls for obedience, and Jesus obeyed.
- The temple *represented* the presence of God, but Jesus *is* the presence of God.
- The priests in the temple *presents* sacrifices to God; but Jesus *is* the sacrifice that reconciles us to God. So Jesus is the culmination of everything in the law.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said, "Christianity conceals within itself a germ [that is] hostile to the church." Christianity takes outward form as a religion, an institution, and institutions can get in the way of true faith. Bonhoeffer saw this. He saw the German church blind to Hitler's evils, looking the other way, getting along with Hitler to preserve itself.

What about you? Do you have religion or do you have Jesus? Are you looking at religion and morality and finding nothing? Or did Jesus find you so you received what you could never earn – righteousness. A righteousness that is by faith for all who believe in Jesus:

The end of the law because he fulfilled it. The end of the temple, because the Spirit of Christ now dwells in you, and we can worship anywhere. The end of efforts to prove yourself – efforts that make us tense and defeated one minute, proud and judgmental the next. May God have mercy on us, sinners, and when he does, may we find his righteousness.