

Sermon for Sunday, September 19, 2010

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Jesus is Lord

Romans 10:5-13

It rained a lot in Colorado this summer, so streams ran high. One day we were hiking to a mountain lake. To reach the top we had to traverse a large mountain stream that crossed our path several times. There is a ford near the trailhead. Years ago, someone dropped a long plank across so people can cross without getting wet. This year the water had buried plank. It was snow run-off, very cold and moving fast. The men crossed it a couple times to be sure it was safe, which it was. But Debbie did not want to cross it. Yet if we didn't cross it, we couldn't reach the lake. I offered to carry her across the stream.

Would she do it? Yes, if she had faith in me, if she trusted me. She had to hear my offer, understand the need, and she had to believe that I am willing and able to do it. There was no mathematical certainty, but there was evidence that she should trust me. She also had to hop on my back if we wanted to reach our goal, the lake. It wasn't a given – the water was swift and the rocks uneven. But if she had faith in me, she just might make it to that lake, with dry feet.

Faith, the kind of faith that gives life, is Paul's great concern in Romans 9-10. As you know, Romans is Paul's summary of the Christian faith. Romans addresses the prime spiritual issues: What is the place of law and attempts to do good? How is faith related to law? Given that we cannot see God, what is true faith? Paul says there are two principal kinds of faith, two religions. Life-giving faith has these marks: It believes Jesus is Lord, confesses it, lives it, and gains life as a result.

1. Two Kinds of Faith

If we exclude the religions that have no real interest in God, religions that merely support moral order, there are two kinds of religion among men. There are two kinds of faith that seek God. The first religion pursues God and a right relationship with him, by works, by obedience to law. This kind of religion can evoke substantial zeal, “but their zeal is not insightful” (Rom. 10:2).

Those who strive to reach the righteous God by works do not and cannot attain their goal, for no one can succeed in fulfilling the law (9:30, Gal 3:10-12). As Paul says in Romans 10:4, “Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.”

Jesus is the end of the law in two senses. First, because Christ has come, it's no time to concentrate on the law as a way to please God. No one was ever saved by obeying the law and no one ever will be. People should always know this, but it is especially clear since the life of Christ. Second, Jesus is also culmination of the law. The law always pointed to him. The law always labels sin. It drives people to seek God's mercy, a mercy we find in Jesus. He shows what true legal righteousness is and he gives that righteousness to all who believe in him. He also grants us the graces to move toward the maturity we lost by our sins, a maturity we still desire. Romans 10 explores the principal “Christ is the end of the law.”

In Romans 10:5, Paul says it is *theoretically possible* to attain righteousness and gain God's blessing by obeying the law. Moses did say, “The man who does these things [in the law] will live by them.” But no one *actually* obeyed the entire law and found righteousness by works. The first religion does not work.

Biblical religion is different. Here people *obtain* righteousness, a right relationship with God, by faith in Christ, rather than law. Paul assures us that this righteousness is quite accessible – it's near at hand.

Don't think, as Paul says, that you must do some great thing: "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?'" (that is, to bring Christ down) "or 'Who will descend into the deep?'" (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead 10:6-8).

There is no need to scale the heights of heaven, for Jesus came down to us. There is no need to go to the depths of the earth and search caves or mines or the deep oceans. We do not need to dig down to raise Jesus from the dead. God the Father already raised him up for us. We need do nothing heroic to come to faith.

The righteousness that is by faith says, "The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart" (10:8). Salvation is close at hand. No one needed to do anything to bring the Messiah and we need not act to bring Jesus today.

The quotation marks show that Paul is quoting something – Deuteronomy 30. If we read it, we find something intriguing: When Moses says "the word is near you" he spoke of the law. He says "this commandment... is not too hard for you... the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it" (30:11-14).

If Moses meant the Law when he said "the word is near you" is Paul misquoting, even contradicting the Bible? No, because Moses puts the law in the context of faith. When Moses presents the law, "the command that gives life" he says, "I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. For I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in his ways, and to keep his commands. [Then] the LORD your God will bless you" (30:11, 14-16, New International Version).

As we know, it is good to keep God's law. God's law *works*. As Moses says in Leviticus 18 and Deuteronomy 30, we find life when we obey the commands. But note well: We don't earn life by obeying, rather we find blessing when we keep the law within the parameters of the covenant.

Law and grace agree in this. The law says "Love the Lord with heart soul, mind, and strength" and "You shall have no other gods - no other loves - before me." In short, the first *command* of God, rightly understood, perfectly agrees with the gospel. Both call us to love God and for the same reason – he redeemed us. For the law begins "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me" (Exod. 20:2-3). Thus God can promise us life and blessing when we "walk in his ways." "Blessed are all who fear the LORD, who walk in his ways" (Psalm 128:1).

There is a vast difference between obeying God's law *in order to get right with God* and *obeying because you are right with God*. A man doesn't bring coffee and crumpets to his wife in the morning to move her to love him; he does it because they love each other. So, too, it is between God and mankind.

For a believer, inside the covenant, trusting in God, law and gospel are good friends. The gospel says God loves us. It invites us to love God and neighbor and the law shows how to do that. This is Moses' message. Paul agrees; that is why he restates the law, as the guide for a Christian, just a bit later in Romans 13.

But at this moment, Paul's mind is not on the right use of the law, but the wrong use. For an unbeliever the law can be a foe, if someone strives to gain salvation by it. But the law is a friend, if it lets the unbeliever see his sin, and drives him to seek God's grace.

So then, the righteousness that is by faith is available and near at hand. No one need climb the heights or plumb the depths for Christ has come to us and "Everyone who calls on [him, or "trusts in him"] will be saved" (10:11, 13). But what is the nature of this faith? Above all it is faith in Jesus, from the heart.

2. Marks of Faith

It believes the basics, with the heart (10:9-10)

To believe in Jesus is to trust him. Remember Debbie and the stream? She saw her need, heard my offer, believed I was able to complete it, and, to reach the top, she had to climb on my back – which she did. The person with true faith sees their need, hears God's offer of salvation, believes he has the ability to do it and trusts him enough to stop working at righteousness and climb on his back.

Romans 10:9 says we must confess "Jesus is Lord" and believe in the heart "that God raised him from the dead." We need to define "faith" and belief since the terms appear five times here. And misconceptions abound.

Many secular people see faith as the opposite of knowledge. We say, "I don't know, but I *believe* she was born in L.A." Here we say we believe when we don't *know*. Some speak of faith when knowledge is impossible, when we cannot know. Mark Twain once said faith is believing what you know isn't so. "He has a lot of faith" can mean – "His hope is blind and irrational."

A second popular concept is closer to Scripture. Here "faith" is confidence in a person or a cause. We say, "I have faith in John or Jennifer." I have faith in my family, friends, leaders, and co-workers if I trust them. Both have less than math certainty

The Bible doesn't define true faith, it describes it. The Bible teaches us to believe that certain things are true: God speaks (Exod. 4:5), Jesus is the Christ (John 8:24, 20:31, cf. Mark 9:28). Hebrews 11:6 says, "Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him." We believe that he "rewards" those who seek him, giving them eternal life (John 20:31, Rom. 6:8, Heb. 11:6).

The Bible also tells us to believe in God (Rom. 4:24, Num. 14:11, John 12:44, Acts 16:31) and to call on God in faith (10:13). Real faith both believes *what the Bible says* and believes in God. We should believe *that* God rewards his people, and we should believe in God, that he will do what he says.

Christians often define faith as knowledge, assent and trust: Believers know the basic content of the Christian faith. They agree, they give their assent to those doctrines, and we trust God, whom the doctrines describe. We believe certain ideas, but more, we "believe in" God as a person who speaks and acts. We have to believe that God can lead us across the stream from death to life. Then we must climb on his back so he can carry us from sin and death to life.

Paul says we must confess that "Jesus is Lord." Lord is the Old Testament's principal name for the Almighty God. The Bible says Jesus is Lord; he has the same pre-existent goodness, knowledge, wisdom, and power as God the Father. He is creator and sustainer, the ever-present truth-teller and lawgiver, the master of life and death. But LORD is also a personal term. To believe in Jesus is to take him as master of your ethics, your relationships, your career. You are not your own any more. You cannot do whatever you please – you must please him.

We believe in Jesus with the heart. We typically think of the heart as the seat of emotions. But in the Bible, it's the core of our being. Proverbs 4:23 says, "Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life."

Paul means, with the core of your being you must believe that *God raised Jesus from the dead*. There is no more foundational truth. God brought the drama of redemption to its proper conclusion. Jesus lived flawlessly, died unjustly and arose victoriously. He conquered sin and death. Death could not hold him.

It confesses Jesus as Lord, with the mouth (Rom. 10:9-10)

Notice the verbs of Romans 10:9-10. We just talked about faith, but notice that “confess” is the first and the last verb (forming a chiasm or A B B A structure). We must confess that Jesus is Lord. When we confess, we will be saved. Why this emphasis on confession, given that belief comes first? Given that confession without faith is dangerous!

I became a believer in college. But I falsely professed faith in Jesus as a child. Why? The rest of my third grade Sunday School class was doing it. I did not believe and I knew it. The hypocrisy filled me with all the dread an eight year-old can feel. Confession without faith brings great spiritual danger. And it certainly doesn't fool God. Nonetheless, Paul puts confession first. Indeed, it is essential.

Augustine's story about a man named Victorinus makes the point. Victorinus was about the most revered thinker and teacher of mid-fourth century Rome. An expert in all the liberal arts, he had read and assessed the leading philosophers. He tutored numerous Roman senators. He received his society's supreme honor: a statue of him was placed in the Roman forum while he lived. For most of his life, Victorinus worshipped idols. Indeed, he had defended the cults of the gods for many years with a voice that terrified his opponents.

Because he investigated everything, Victorinus read scripture and Christian literature with great care. Slowly, they persuaded him. A notable Christian named Simplicianus was among his friends. In private, he told Simplicianus, "Did you know that I am already a Christian?"

Simplicianus replied: "I shall not believe that or count you a Christian unless I see you in the Church of Christ." Victorinus laughed: "Do walls make a Christian?" In fact, Victorinus was afraid to offend Rome's idolaters. He feared the hostility of the pagan if they knew he had converted. Yet, as he read, he drank in courage. He learned what Jesus said, "Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven" (Matt. 10:32-33).

He also thought: "I publicly defended idolatry, how can I remain silent about Christ?" Finally he told Simplicianus: "Let us go to the Church; I want to become a Christian." Explanation: He did not mean that going to church would make him a Christian. Rather, he would verify and seal his faith by proclaiming it publicly.

As today, the ancient church set times, places, and forms for the public profession of faith. Occasionally the church let people confess Christ in private. The church offered Victorinus such a private confession, for it was still dangerous for a leading citizen to become a Christian. Perhaps Victorinus feared the wrath of advocates of paganism. No! He had taught rhetoric in public, had defended Roman gods in public, now he had to confess Christ in public, even "before crowds of frenzied pagans." Augustine concludes:

When he mounted the steps to affirm the confession of faith, there was a murmur of delighted talk as all the people who knew him spoke his name to one another. And who there did not know him? A suppressed sound came from the lips of all... 'Victorinus, Victorinus!... He proclaimed his faith with ringing assurance. All of them wanted to clasp him to their hearts.')Confessions of St. Augustine 8.2-8.3)

You see the benefits of public profession of faith. It was good for Victorinus to stand for Christ as he had stood for false gods. It blessed the church, to see the gospel claiming this great man. Consider the public impact, for Victorinus professed Christ just one year after they placed his statue in the forum. Even more consider the impact of his life every day after he took his stand. The same holds today: It is good for us to profess our faith too – once and then again every day we live. Again, Paul puts confession first and

last in Rom. 10:9-10. So let us confess the Lord daily. You ask, "But how can I confess Christ day by day? Here are seven or eight ways:

- We confess Christ in public worship by coming, singing, and reading.
- We confess Christ when we take the sacraments, when we present ourselves or our children for baptism. It is most obvious when we come forward to take communion. To rise and partake is to profess faith.
- We confess Christ by spending time with God's people, we confess by reading good books, godly books, and the Bible alone or together.
- We confess Christ when we invite a friend to church or a Christian group.
- We confess Christ when we conduct ourselves with integrity, especially in times of testing and trouble, in pressure and temptation.
- We confess Christ when, as believers, we show love, justice, and seek the good of others at work.
- We confess Christ in the hour of our death, when we are ready to meet our Lord, and when we say we are ready.

I spoke to a businessman recently about his pressures at work: the need to perform, to defend yourself and your reputation, to advance your program, your credibility. We end up confessing ourselves. Yet people know who follows Jesus.

Review: Real faith believes in Jesus, confesses him, and receives justification and salvation as a result (Rom. 10:10)

Paul says "With your heart you believe and are justified" (10:10). We remember that God is the judge. As judge, he looks on those who trust and says, "Cleared of all charges." The Westminster Catechism: Justification is an act of God's free grace, whereby he pardons all our sins, and accepts us as righteous in His sight, because of the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone. Thus we are saved – saved from God's wrath toward sin.

In the news, some police officers who shot two robbers were *justified*. The pair had robbed a bank and fleeing at 100 mph, down a busy city street, shooting as they went. Their bullets hit two officers. Therefore, the police were *justified* in shooting back. Legally, they were vindicated, declared righteous.

We too are justified when God declares us not guilty, acquitted. The difference is that, unlike the police, we didn't just do things that seem wrong; we did things that are wrong. We had no good reason for our actions. In this case, Jesus bore the judgment we deserved and pardoned us, because his sacrifice gave him the right to forgive his people.

This is no mere fiat. We belong to him. He is our leader and his traits are ascribed to us. Apparently today is national "talk like a pirate" day. If I succumbed to the messages urging me talk like a pirate, just once, then you all would seem a little silly, not just me, because we are united – Aye, me hearties? – If you and I are united, how much more, Jesus and his people.

3. The Benefits of this Faith, offered to all (10:11-13)

As a result "Anyone who trusts will never be put to shame." Why does he stress the absence of shame? To be ashamed is to be disappointed, let down by someone we trust. Jesus never disappoints us.

- We are ashamed if our sin is exposed. But Jesus covers our sin.
- We're ashamed if we're publicly humiliated. But Jesus gives us honor, his name.
- It's true that we may now endure some ridicule or scorn, but we will bear no shame if we stand with God forever. Will you be free from shame, forever?

Paul offers this freedom from shame to “anyone.” In Rom. 10:12 he specifies Jew and Gentile, insiders and outsiders. Elsewhere he mentions male and female, slave and free (Gal. 3:38). Rich and poor, every nation, language, ethnicity. Of course, distinctions between people remain. God wants us to defend the weak, respect our leaders, etc., all according to the nature of our relationship. But with regard to our relationship with Jesus, everyone is just the same. A needy sinner, helpless and guilty, calling on Jesus. He is "Lord, is Lord of all, and richly blesses all who call on him" (10:12).

Paul concludes, "For 'everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved'" (11:13). You are saved from guilt and shame now. You are blessed now. You are delivered from God's judgment now and always.

Take this blessing that the Lord offers you. Lay aside any works, any righteousness of your own. Know Jesus, believe in Jesus, confess him, and receive justification and salvation which you enjoy now and forever.