

In religious communities the most natural heresy is legalism, an error that is an offense both the truth and against the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

“The Fatal and Most Natural Heresy”

Romans 9:30-10:13

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Paul finished his discussion of God’s sovereign grace by noting that the church was, at that moment, witnessing the discriminating nature of that grace. The Jewish people were being hardened, as Pharaoh had been many centuries before, and the Gentiles, relatively few of whom had been saved in the previous two thousand years, were being called to eternal life in large numbers. Having considered this problem from the vantage point of divine grace, he now tackles the same problem from the vantage point of human responsibility. Nothing can adequately explain Israel’s failure to believe or the Gentiles’ enthusiasm to believe but God’s discriminating love and his power over human hearts. But there is another explanation of great importance.

So Paul now makes a turn and explains in a very different way the same phenomenon: why the Jews were not being saved and the why the Gentiles were. If Romans 9:1-29 can be titled “God’s Sovereign Choice,” (as it is in the ESV) Romans 9:30 through 10:21 can be titled “Man’s responsibility.” And, as is typical in the Bible, no effort is made to reconcile the two emphases or to explain precisely how we are to harmonize these two dimensions of reality. My English pastor friend and mentor, Ian Tait, used to say that we don’t have to reconcile divine sovereignty with human responsibility, an absolutely sovereign God and an absolutely accountable and responsible man, because you only have to reconcile enemies; you don’t have to reconcile friends and these two doctrines, living side by side and harmoniously as they do in the Bible, are obviously friends, not enemies!

Text Comment

- v.31 That is, the requirements of the law were not met by those who sought to use the law to obtain righteousness before God. They not only didn’t obtain righteousness before God, they didn’t really even keep God’s commandments. The thought is the same as Romans 8:4: those who believe in Christ and those only can truly obey the law of God.
- v.32 The reason the Jews did not find the righteousness before God that they were looking for is that they looked for it in the wrong place and sought it in the wrong way. They thought they could obtain that righteousness by their efforts at keeping God’s law. The Gentiles realized that this righteousness could only be a gift and so were ready to receive it by faith.
- v.33 The reason the Jews were so little inclined to embrace the doctrine of justification by faith was that it effectively meant that the Gentiles had as much access to God as the Jews did and that all the privileges of the Jews mattered comparatively little. The way of righteousness was open as much to the Gentiles as it was to them and that was a great

offense to a people so proud of their special status and their religious heritage as the ancient people of God.

The citation you find in v. 33 is a compilation of two texts from Isaiah found together elsewhere in the New Testament as well. They are in their various NT uses taken to be a prophecy of the Lord Jesus. The problem with the Jews is that their theory did not require a redeemer. By the time of the NT Judaism had become a religion of self-salvation; it had no place for a redeemer who would die for the sins of the world. Having no place for such a Savior they rejected him. The Gentiles, on the other hand, had come to understand their need for redemption and were welcoming the Redeemer everywhere the Gospel was preached.

- 10:2 Remember, when Paul speaks of the Jews of his day, when he describes their state of mind, he speaks from personal experience. “Zeal without knowledge” is precisely how he would have described *his own* situation before he met the risen Christ. He too had stumbled over the stone that was Jesus Christ, until his eyes had been opened.
- v.3 There is the nub: a righteousness of one’s *own*. It is your accomplishment on this theory, your achievement. In Phil. 3:9 Paul again contrasts the two theories of righteousness in these same terms: “that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness *of my own* that comes from my obedience to the law, but that which is through faith in Christ.”
- v.4 The statement that Christ is “the end of the law” has been the cause of a great deal of debate. Some take it to mean that Christ put an end to the authority of God’s law over God’s people so that we don’t any longer have to live by obedience to the commandments of God. But such an interpretation would seem directly to contradict the Lord’s own statement that he had not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it and contradict Paul’s remark earlier in Romans to the effect that his teaching about justification by faith in no way nullifies the law but rather establishes it. Others take it to mean that Christ abolished the old order of the law, as if the religion of Moses were somehow more legal and less gracious than the new religion established by Christ and his apostles. That too is an interpretation that runs afoul of the plain-speaking of the New Testament. Almost certainly the phrase means either that Christ, puts an end to the law as a way of acquiring righteousness before God – which is what Paul happens to be talking about – only, of course, for those who believe in him, as Paul is careful to say, *or* that the purpose of the law, its aim, its object, its goal was nothing *other* than faith in Jesus Christ. The Greek word, here translated “end” is *telos*, which means either end in the sense of termination or end in the sense of purpose or goal or purpose. You have both meanings frequently in the NT in its use of that word. The Jews who were so eagerly devoting themselves to the law of God failed to realize what the law was *for*, that its great message all along *was* that the means of acquiring righteousness before God had to be through God’s gift of righteousness to hopeless sinners. As you know this is a point Paul rings the changes on elsewhere in his writings, especially in the Letter to the Galatians.

Now the two ways of acquiring righteousness – the false way of the law and the true way of faith – are now contrasted and illustrated by citations from the Pentateuch.

- v.5 The citation of Lev. 18:5 is a complication. Paul is clearly illustrating the one way of acquiring righteousness, the Jewish way, the way of keeping God’s commandments, which, he has already said, is the wrong way, the futile way. The problem is that in context Lev. 18:5 isn’t about justification by obedience to the law. The statement concerns the godly life of an already saved man. What is more, if Paul took Lev. 18:5 to mean that even in the OT it was taught that a man might earn his way to heaven, how could that be reconciled with his statements in his letters elsewhere to the effect that the law never had been nor ever could have been a means of obtaining justifying righteousness before God. Take Paul, for example, in Gal. 3:21:

“Is the Law then contrary to the promises of God? May it never be! For if a law had been given which was able to impart life, then righteousness would indeed have been based on law.”

Or consider his comment earlier in Romans, in 3:19-20:

“Now we know that whatever the law says, it speaks to those who are under the law, that every mouth may be closed, and all the world may become accountable to God; because by the works of the law no flesh will be justified in his sight; for through the law comes the knowledge of sin.”

There was no such law, there never was. In other words, Paul teaches clearly that the law was never intended to be used as a means of acquiring merit before God. That has led a great many very reliable commentators to the conclusion that Paul is employing Lev. 18:5 *ex hypothesi*, that is to say he is reading it as the rabbis read it, he is reading it as his theological opponents are reading it, he is letting it speak to their theory of righteousness by letting it serve as a statement of *their* viewpoint, to be understood *according to their premises*. This is his approach in Galatians. If you wish to be justified by keeping the law, he says, then you’ve got to keep it, all of it, perfectly. But no one does; no one can, so if that is your theory you are in trouble. Such an interpretation is akin to Paul’s familiar use of the phrase “works of the law,” by which he means not true obedience to the law, but the imagined obedience of legalists who think they can earn their way to heaven. They are not true works of the law, but that is what the Jews *think* they are.

- v.8 The contrary principle is illustrated from Deut. 30:11-14. Interestingly, this text too is used to make a somewhat different point than it makes in its original context. For example, in Deuteronomy the last phrase of the last verse Paul quotes is “the word is in your mouth and in your heart *so you may obey it*.” It is about the righteous and obedient life of a believing man or woman Paul leaves that “so you may obey it” phrase out because that would not serve his purpose. But it is not an improper interpretation for Paul sees in the law of Moses the message of Christ. He has already said that Christ is the end or *telos* of the law. He is using this text to illustrate the principle that God does not ask the impossible and that his righteousness is there for the having if only people will

receive it as the gift it is. You don't have to earn your way to heaven by the perfect obedience of your life – which you couldn't do anyway – you have only to receive God's gift which he has offered you. That was always the message of God's law. You don't have to do some great thing. You don't have to do what Christ did, obeying the law perfectly. You don't have to go up to heaven – what an exploit that would be – or down to hell – what an exploit that would be. The word is here, the Lord has given it to you and you have only to believe it and confess it. Christ has already done the work – he has come from heaven and returned to heaven – we have but to trust in him.

- v.13 Paul wraps up this point by making explicit what the message is that is to be believed by which men might be saved and reminding his readers that the way of salvation has always been the way of faith not works by citing several statements to that effect from the OT.

There are many paths to hell. For many in the world their path to hell is the worship of false gods, which is to say that they invest their hope of salvation in what proves to be nothing at all. For others the path to hell is either the refusal to believe in God at all or to accept that he exists but nevertheless to believe that he doesn't care whether they live a righteous or unrighteous life, whether they love and trust God or spend their lives ignoring him. That last position, known as antinomianism, a sort of casual universalism – a confidence that somehow everything will turn out alright – is the faith of many millions in our secular culture of the West. Or, a person can embrace the Christian gospel of the forgiveness of sins through faith in Christ, claim to believe it, but then refuse to live a faithful life, perhaps imagining that a bare assent to the gospel will protect them from the judgment of God. The Lord Jesus spoke of this fatal error and this pathway to hell in his Sermon on the Mount. One can find his or her way to hell in all these ways.

But in Holy Scripture, the supreme error to which people are prone regarding God and salvation, the most insidious and persistently fatal mistake they make is that of legalism, the idea that one can earn his or her way to heaven. I think this is because the Bible uniformly addresses a religious audience. Legalism flourishes in a religious environment. The more secular any environment, the more distant to people's minds the idea of God the less true legalism there will be. Legalism is a religious idea and a religious practice. It requires a real sense of God and of God's judgment. It requires the belief that God has a law that he expects people to live by; that he has standards he expects people to meet; that there is a judgment coming at which God will weigh our lives. Secularists are more likely to be antinomians, that is, they are less likely to care about keeping commandments and attempting to please God with their efforts because they don't imagine that God cares what kind of life they live. They have very little sense of God at all. Most of the people you rub shoulders with day by day are not legalists, they are antinomians. But legalism is the form of unbelief that is found in highly religious environments, such as those environments that predominated in the time and place in which the Bible was written.

Legalism, of course, appears in a welter of forms. In the ancient Near East, what we call legalism usually took the form of ritualism. It was ritual obedience more than an ethical obedience that people sought to offer God. ANE idolatry was little preoccupied with ethics. The gods were not thought to care much about how people lived their lives, how husbands treated their wives, how they raised their children, how honest they were in their business dealings. The gods themselves

weren't that ethical to begin with so it is not surprising that they were not thought to care much about how ethical their worshippers were. Nevertheless, ANE idolatry proved a persistent temptation to Israel in its history.

She was always being tempted to think about Yahweh the way the peoples around her thought about their gods. They were tempted to believe that his favor could be earned or bought by their gifts at the temple and they succumbed to that temptation times without number. Again and again they began to come with their sacrifices not to offer the thanksgiving of a believing people who knew that their salvation was the gift of God's grace but in hopes that their gifts would buy God's favor. The prophets of the OT were constantly protesting Israel's ritualism, which is simply a form of legalism. She had forgotten the grace of God and was thinking in terms of tit for tat. Her principle of salvation was not faith in God's saving grace and power but of buying God's favor.

Ritualism was finally exterminated from the Jewish mind by the Babylonian captivity. Ever after the Jews would show no propensity for idolatry of the ANE type. But, by the first century, ethical legalism, simply another form of the same religious principle – what Paul describes here in 9:32 as pursuing righteousness by works – was firmly established as the character or principle of Jewish soteriology, of Jewish thinking about salvation. You have only to read the rabbis to see how blatantly they taught that salvation was the product of the accumulation of merits and merits were accumulated through obedience to God's commandments.

And ever since the religious life of Christendom has been blighted by legalism of both the ritual and the ethical variety. Following upon the history of Judaism, Christianity was cured of the cruder forms of ritualism. There was and is no bowing down to idols. But the notion that rituals in and of themselves, by the very fact of their being performed earn points with God has insinuated itself into the Christian church again and again. Any Christian minister who has served for any length of time has faced the problem of a young couple, otherwise unknown to the pastor and otherwise indifferent to the Christian faith and life, appearing in the church office asking if he would baptize their baby. What is baptism in their minds but some form of fire insurance? They must believe – their behavior is otherwise inexplicable – that performing the rite somehow disposes God to find favor with them or with their child. That is ritualism of a pure type and legalism of the ritual type. Do something and win points with God. And ethical legalism has always, alas, flourished as well. This is why so many people in our country who would call themselves Christians, when asked why they think they should go to heaven, will reply that they have been good people, have paid their taxes, have abided by the law, and so on. They imagine themselves to have been accumulating points by their living and it never occurs to them – though they claim to be Christians – even to mention the name of Jesus Christ, or his cross, or his resurrection in explaining their own salvation. In their mind it is not God's gift but their achievement, or, as Paul puts it, *their own* righteousness.

Now, it is true, that there are many doors through which men and women, boys and girls, enter the kingdom of God. For Paul himself it was the realization forced upon him that Jesus was indeed the Messiah and the Son of God. Jesus himself, in the Gospels, offered life in *this* way: "Come unto me all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." And a great many have answered that invitation. They have come to Christ for relief and for rest and for help when

they felt overwhelmed with the burdens of life. Others have come to Christ because of their spiritual impotence and they realized that only he could enable them to live as men and women should live. Others have come to Christ because they want to live on after death and Christ is the only one who has proved that he has the power to bestow eternal life. But more often than not people are invited to come to Christ in Holy Scripture and have come to Christ in the ages since because only in him can we find the righteousness before God that we need to be right with God and to stand in his judgment. Only in Christ can we find the righteousness that, once ours through faith, will enable God to be our friend instead of our enemy.

And if one comes to Christ for other reasons in the first place, it is not long before this conviction settles in the mind and heart. Only in Christ can I be right with God. Only in Christ, with the gift of his righteousness, can I stand before God in the confidence that he will not condemn me or reject me. Only in Christ can I become God's friend and God's child because an infinitely holy God will not bring into communion with himself anyone who is not righteous. This is the typical way Paul preached the gospel to his congregations apparently, especially his Jewish congregations. For example, we read in Acts 13:39 Paul concluding a sermon to Jews in the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch by saying:

“I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. Through him everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses.”

And Paul himself says later to the Roman governor Felix that the great themes of his preaching were “righteousness, self-control, and the judgment,” or, in other words, how to be righteous and how to stand in the judgment of God. [Acts 24:25] You can't get far in the Christian faith without reckoning with these central affirmations: that men are unrighteous and guilty before God, that they are incapable of solving this problem, and that God has solved it for them in offering to them the righteousness of his Son as a free gift. If men go to hell because they are judged to be unrighteous before God and if in Christ it is possible for them to become righteous, well, obviously this is key to the entire message of Christianity and this *is* the gospel, or, at least, the heart of the gospel, the good news.

But the entire experience of the church in the world proves how persistent legalism is, how attractive it is to the sinful heart, and how much it remains the default position of the religious human mind. And for that reason I suspect there are those here today who are, if the truth be told, legalists. You are the very people Paul is talking about when he speaks of those who are seeking to establish their own righteousness. Search your heart and see if this might be so. Ask yourself why God should open the gates of heaven to you and if it immediately occurs to you to think that you are a pretty good person and have done pretty good things, confess the fact: *you are a legalist*.

And if you find the legalistic impulse in your heart and mind, if you must admit that you have thought yourself to be good enough for God, then hear again the fatal error in that point of view, that mindset. In the Bible legalism is proved false, it is exposed as a charade in typically three different ways.

First, legalism is inevitably dishonest. It requires you to believe that you are better than you are. It forces you to ignore the full extent of your moral and ethical failure. You imagine yourself to be piling up merits when, in fact, you are simply digging a deeper hole.

I used to go out to McNeil Island when it was a state penitentiary. I led a Bible study there one evening a week. I remember once committing a huge gaffe. I found myself explaining the gospel and unthinkingly used the explanation I typically used. Even ministers get used to explaining the Gospel in one way. But I forgot where I was and to whom I was speaking. I said that people think they are good enough for God and for heaven. They think “I’ve paid my taxes, I’ve been a law-abiding citizen, I haven’t killed anyone. I’m a good person.” Of course, my congregation that evening was composed of men who probably had never once paid the taxes they owed. Never killed anyone? One of them, from an Alaska Native American reservation, had murdered his father and his mother with a hatchet. Law abiding? If they had been, they wouldn’t have been in my Bible study!

But it is the repeated emphasis of Holy Scripture and of the Apostle Paul in Romans 2 and 3 that we are, morally considered, more like the men in that penitentiary Bible study than we are like the people we imagine ourselves to be. When we judge ourselves by God’s standards instead of by our own, when we measure ourselves by the attitudes and inclinations of our hearts instead of only by the outward behavior we govern so carefully for the sake of our reputations, when we consider our omissions instead of simply our commissions, well the penitentiary is the place for us and, of course, that is what hell is: life without parole in the prison of God!

Second, legalism is invariably a cheap form of religious life and thought. Men are deeply sinful, proud, and selfish so in order for them to imagine that they are, in fact, righteous and keeping the commandments of God they *have to* redefine those commandments. And that is what all legalists do. They make the commandments easier to keep so they can indulge the illusion that they are keeping them. That is what the Jews did. They took all the real difficulty out of the law of God by defining obedience in superficial and outward ways. You no longer had to offer your heart to God; you simply had to follow a set of regulations. You no longer had genuinely to love your neighbor; you had only to meet some outward social requirements. You no longer had to subject your inner life to the rule of God but only keep your outward behavior within bounds, and that was not so hard to do. That is how and only how so many Jews of Jesus’ day imagined that they had kept the commandments of God so well that they had earned a place in heaven. They spoke with all seriousness of people who had kept the commandments of God from A-Z. They had eviscerated the commandments of their true requirements: that they love God with all their heart and their neighbor as much as they loved themselves. No legalist imagines that he has to do *that* to go to heaven!

And third, legalism is the categorical denial of the history of the life and saving work of Jesus Christ. Why did the Jews reject him? Because their legalistic theory did not require him; did not require his death on the cross; did not require his resurrection from the grave. If one can save himself by keeping the commandments of God, it is not necessary for God the Son to come into the world as a man and die on the cross in the place of sinners. Paul makes this argument explicitly: “if a law had been given that could impart life, then righteousness would certainly have come by law.” God is not going to subject his beloved Son to ignominy and the cruelest

form of suffering and death if it was *unnecessary*. The Jews thought that there was a law that had been given that could impart life. But the appearance of the Son of God in the world was the proof that there was no such law and no such possibility. Salvation was going to require God's extraordinary intervention in the life of mankind.

People will sometimes say, "But what about the good people? How can God condemn them?" Well, we have already said that there are no such people. What we mean when we speak of someone as a good person is that he meets the general and quite superficial standards of ethical life that men have set for themselves, a bar set so low hardly anyone can fail to stumble over the top. We certainly cannot mean that he or she has lived as God requires his creatures to live before him, that these people in fact love God with all their heart, soul, strength and mind and they love their neighbors as much as they love themselves. Just say the words and you know you are not meaning *that* when you talk about somebody as good person. You don't mean anything like that. Someone who speaks of human beings being good in that sense knowing nothing of the exquisite holiness of God! But, still more, what are we saying when we wonder aloud about the divine judgment of good people? We are saying that they do not need the incarnation of God the Son. They do not need his death on the cross. They do not need his triumph over death in the resurrection. They do not need the Holy Spirit's heart and life changing ministry. And we cannot say that! No, the life and ministry of Jesus Christ are the proof, the unmistakable demonstration that legalism is a fraud, always a fraud. There would have been no Christmas, no Good Friday, and no Easter if it were really possible for men and women to earn their way to heaven!

So let me sum up by asking this question? Who and what is a Christian? Well he or she is someone who believes in God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; believes that God is the creator of heaven and earth; believes that man is a sinner before God, guilty and by nature bent to sin; believes that Jesus Christ is God the Son, who came into the world to live and die for the salvation of his people; that he bore the guilt or punishment of our sins on the cross and rose in victory over death on the third day; who believes that Jesus will return to judge the living and the dead. A person who believes those things is a Christian. But there is one thing more. Because all of *that* is true, the Christian also believes that there is but one way to be right with God and to stand accepted in God's judgment: and that is the way of faith: receiving with gratitude God's gift of righteousness, the gift that Christ bought with his own blood so that his Father could give it one by one to his children.

That is why there is so much gratitude and love and joy in the Christian faith. It is all about a great gift given to the undeserving. At its heart is this wonderful fact: that God did for us what we couldn't do for ourselves so that we might live with him forever.

Different messages require different responses. Legalism requires dishonesty, superficiality, and the denial of history. The Christian gospel requires love, and gratitude, and a joyful receiving of an impossibly great gift, which is what Paul means by *faith*! You be sure, this morning, that you have received that gift. Don't rest until you are sure that you know why you need what God alone can give you and until you are sure you have taken hold of the salvation God is offering to you, the gift he is extending to *you* with his own hand.