

*However surprising, coming as it does immediately after the argument of Romans 9, Paul lays the responsibility for anyone's salvation on the person's willingness to believe and the church's faithfulness in proclaiming the good news.*

### **“The Evangelistic Imperative”**

**Romans 10:14-21**

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Paul has just concluded a section in which he has contrasted the two approaches to acquiring righteousness before God: the way of self-effort and the way of faith in Christ. And he concluded that section by quoting Joel: “whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” But, if that is the case, then it makes it essential that people hear the gospel, that they know that salvation comes to those who call upon the Lord, and that they hear of this Lord upon whose name they are to call.

### **Text Comment**

- v.15 In these beautiful verses Paul magnifies the office of the evangelist; not the ordained churchman only but all who share the gospel with those who need to hear it. We see the church's ministry – particularly the apostles – doing this work in the New Testament, but we witness ordinary believers doing it as well. Paul's point is “that the saving relation to Christ [that comes from calling on his name] is not something that can occur in a vacuum; it occurs only in a context created by the proclamation of the gospel...” [Murray, ii, 58]

There is an important question of Greek grammar in v. 14. Both the NIV and the ESV read “how can they believe in the one *of whom* they have not heard?” That is certainly a possible translation. But the more natural, straightforward reading of Paul's Greek is “how can they believe *whom they have not heard*,” the idea being that it is Christ himself and his voice and his word that the person hears who listens to the gospel being preached by Christ's ambassadors.

The sentence from Isaiah at the end of v. 15 was originally spoken of those who carried home to Jerusalem the good news that the days of exile were over and the time for the restoration of the Jews to the Promised Land had come. But in the NT that history is treated as a foreshadowing of the greater deliverance accomplished by Jesus Christ.

- v.16 But even among those who hear the word of Christ not all receive it. The message is designed to produce faith in its hearers, but it does not always achieve this result. All Paul can say is that this has always been the case. It was the case in Isaiah's day as it is in ours. The unbelief of Israel is corroborated by Holy Scripture.
- v.18 Verse 17 sums up what has been said so far. Faith is produced by hearing the gospel preached and explained. And now Paul returns to the problem of Jewish unbelief. Had the Jews not heard the message they might have had some excuse, but they had heard it. Paul

uses the lovely text from Psalm 19 to say simply that the message was given to them everywhere they were. The message, after all, he has already said, was plainly, emphatically, repeatedly published in the ancient Scriptures which every Jew knew and claimed to believe. What is more, in Paul's own life he had seen the gospel of Jesus Christ make its way outward toward the four corners of the earth and he knew it would continue to do so.

- v.21 Well, if they heard, perhaps they didn't understand. No, Paul says, they understood well enough, they simply refused to believe. They had been often excoriated in Holy Scripture for their unbelief; they had often been warned that if they remained hard of heart the Lord would turn elsewhere and leave them to their just deserts. But all of this fell on deaf ears. Now they were seeing with their own eyes the Gentiles accepting the message about their own Messiah and it only made them angry, a result that was also prophesied long ago.

The notion of Israel being provoked to jealousy by the influx of the Gentile world into the people of God will come up again in chapter 11.

The first thing to say about Paul's argument in the second half of chapter 10 is that it makes a striking departure from the argument he made in chapter 9. Reading chapter 9 we are prepared to hear Paul say as he discusses Israel's unbelief, her rejection of the Messiah, her seeking to obtain a righteousness of her own so that she would not have to stoop to accept Christ's righteousness, I say we are prepared to hear Paul say that all of this is the result of God's sovereign choice. We might well have expected him to explain Israel's indifference and then her haughty rejection of the Gospel as an instance of the outworking of the divine will: "God has mercy on whomever he wills and he hardens whomever wills." Is this not what Paul said in 9:18? And if someone should argue that Israel can scarcely be blamed for her unbelief if ultimately God's will stands behind anyone's faith or unbelief, wouldn't Paul simply have replied, as he did in chapter 9, "Who are you O man to answer back to God?"

After all, chapter 9 is explicitly an explanation of why Israel *did not believe*; why she rejected the Son of God, her own Messiah, when he came among them. But in chapter 10 this is not the explanation offered. Rather Israel's judgment is due to her obstinate unbelief and her willing refusal to hear the good news that God brought to her first by his own Son and then by Christ's apostles and people. In what might seem at first glance striking indifference to the argument Paul made in chapter 9, in chapter 10 the Lord is represented not as the one who determines the destiny of every human being, the one who decides who will believe and who will not, but as holding out his hand in frustration to a disobedient and obstinate people; he wanting to give them salvation, they refusing to take it.

In the same way, the salvation of the world is suspended in chapter 10 not on the divine will to save his elect, as in chapter 9, but on the faithfulness of the church to proclaim the gospel far and wide. What are we to say about this? How are we to reconcile these two very different explanations of the same phenomenon? Well we are not to explain; that is certain!

This juxtaposition of these two emphases – the absolute sovereignty of God and the absolute accountability, responsibility, and freedom of man – is found everywhere in the Bible and often,

as here, side by side. At no point does Holy Scripture attempt to resolve the tension thus created, at no point are we instructed in how to reconcile these very different emphases, in very few cases do the writers of Holy Scripture even seem aware of the problem, though Paul clearly *was* aware and addressed typical objections in chapter 9. But then he went right on and wrote chapter 10 as if there were no chapter 9!

We are left where readers of the Bible have always been left: to believe two separate truths. We are to believe that God wishes the salvation of all *and* that it was not his will to save all. We are to believe that the will of God is the explanation of all things and, in particular, of the salvation of any human life *and* that every human being is responsible to respond in faith to the gospel and has no one to blame but himself or herself for a failure to do so. We are to believe that God does all and that man does all.

These are not contradictions, to be sure, but they are statements of reality beyond our capacity fully to understand or to synthesize into a simple harmony of truth. Just as light is both particle and wave, though no one is sure precisely how it is so, so God is sovereign and man is free. They are a single truth in the divine mind, but in our small heads they must be broken up into two. That is as much as we can say; that is all the wisest thinkers of Christendom have thought it possible to say; that is what the great preachers of the Bible have always said. We give all glory to God for our salvation, indeed for the salvation of anyone; but if a man refuses to believe he has no one to blame but himself! A preacher is absolutely faithful to Holy Scripture who summons men and women to faith in Christ, laying upon them the responsibility to believe and warning them that their eternal destiny lies in the issue. And that preacher is absolutely faithful to Holy Scripture who tells the convert to rejoice that the Lord opened his or her heart to respond to the gospel message.

So much for relating chapter 10 to chapter 9. But now it is ours to hear what Paul has said to us in this last part of chapter 10. What is this text, after all, but a stirring summons to proclaim the salvation of God in Jesus Christ to anyone and everyone, no matter that some will not believe. And is that not our problem?

I take it that most all of you have absolutely no quibble with the Apostle Paul here. You know very well that you ought to be an evangelist. There are a number of perfectly obvious reasons why and the weight of each one is felt in your conscience.

1. Like the lepers outside of Samaria in 2 Kings 7, the men who first discovered that Israel's enemies had been scattered, the men who in their excitement had begun to loot the Aramean's camp – grabbing valuables for themselves and thinking only of themselves – but whose consciences brought them up short; I say, you know very well that this is a day of good news and it would not be right to keep that good news to yourself. You have a sacred duty not to be selfish and keeping the news of eternal life from other human beings is certainly selfish.
2. What is more, there is the obligation to honor Christ and to declare his great salvation; an obligation not of some merely dutiful kind, but the purest and truest of all obligations, the obligation of love.

I've given some of you before my favorite illustration of this principle, but not most of you. It comes from the boyhood and young adulthood of Winston Churchill. If you have read a biography of Churchill you know that he was born to parents who had little interest in raising their child. They were preoccupied with the pleasures of English upper class life, with illicit sexual escapades, and with Randolph Churchill's political career. Pathetic letters survive from Winston as a boy asking his parents to come to see him in a school play or athletic contest but they were usually to no avail. He craved the attention and affection of his parents but rarely got it.

Churchill was raised by his nanny, a Mrs. Everest, whom he called from his earliest childhood "Woom." She was the one who gave him his sense of worth, who provided both the love and stability of love that he did not get from his own mother and father. But then it came time for Winston to go off to boarding school, to Harrow. Here is William Manchester's account:

"Public-school boys then were ashamed of their nannies. They would no sooner have invited one to Harrow than an upper-class American boy today would bring his teddy bear to his boarding school. Winston not only asked Woom to come; he paraded his old nurse, immensely fat and all smiles, down High Street, and then unashamedly kissed her in full view of his schoolmates. One of them was Seely, who later became a cabinet colleague of Winston's and won the DSO [in action in France during the First World War]. Seely called that kiss 'one of the bravest acts I have ever seen.'" [*The Last Lion*, 156-157]

He owed her too much to be ashamed of her; and he owed her so much he felt it right and necessary to declare his love and gratitude openly, publicly, before the people whose opinion he cared about the most at that time in his life. Well, *that* too is evangelism, the sharing of the good news with those who need to hear it. It is a matter of kissing Jesus Christ in the High Street and every Christian knows it. We cannot receive so much from our Savior and not be willing to demonstrate our loyalty to him before others. We cannot bask in the sunshine of our Savior's love, receive the key to the eternal city from his hand, see him on the cross for our sins, and then hide our relationship to him. No, that would be terribly wrong. We all know that and feel that as we should.

3. But there is further this reason why all Christians should be speaking of Christ and life in him to others: other people are in desperate need of life and unless they hear the message, as Paul says plainly here, they cannot believe it and be saved. Like it or not, we have been made the essential connection between Christ and those who need his salvation. It is surely this reason that accounts for the history of apostolic Christianity. The Lord had told his disciples before his ascension to heaven that they would be his witnesses to the ends of the earth and so they became and so multitudes of others after them. The world had to hear what had happened in Galilee and Judea in those thirty-some fateful years and so they spread out to tell the good news. And the church has been doing so ever since and is doing so today in greater numbers than ever before. The church of Jesus Christ is today and has always been a missionary church. In Victorian England more people became foreign missionaries than became accountants or architects and a great many more were at work at home in some form of evangelism or another. Today those already impressive

numbers are being duplicated or surpassed in many countries of the world. Why?  
Because we have been given this work to do and the salvation of the lost depends upon it.

So, we have reasons enough to be speaking to others about the good news. That is not our problem. Our problem is precisely the problem Paul raises here in Romans 10: viz. that so many people who hear the message don't believe it. It's discouraging and frustrating. And, of course, it creates the inevitable impression – true enough in most cases – that the people we are talking to about Jesus wish we would leave them alone. A recent survey confirmed this. Most people in the United States have been witnessed to by a Christian and most of them found it an unpleasant experience. No one wants to be thought a pest or a bore and we fear that the people we try to speak to about Christ will think that is precisely what we are.

I think that is part of the reason why Paul brought this up as he did. He has larger issues in mind, of course. He is going on in the next chapter to discuss Jewish unbelief and what we are to think about that. But it is certainly a help for us to hear of our responsibility to spread the good news in the context of determined unbelief on the part of those who hear the message.

After all, this was often the experience of the apostles. Even in their day it was hardly the case that everyone who heard them believed. Indeed usually most did not and many got angry. Paul's gospel messages were often greeted with scorn or even stones. And so it has been every since. But, finally, so what? The truth of vv. 14-15 remain unchanged and unaffected by the unbelief of many. It continues to be the case that those who are to be saved must receive the good news and the way they will receive it in one way or another depends upon our publishing it.

The other day, after preaching in its chapel, I was in the bookstore of Northwest Baptist Seminary. I came across Christopher Parkening's autobiography; a book I hadn't known existed. I am always fascinated by the story of a Christian life and so I bought the book and read it over a few delightful hours last week. It is charming and instructive on many levels. Parkening as many of you know is one of the greatest of the world's classical guitarists. Indeed, since the invention of the classical guitar, or better classical music for the guitar, is so recent, Parkening is one of the greatest classical guitarists ever to have played the instrument. He was a disciple and friend of Andrés Segovia, universally regarded as the master of the classical guitar, if not the creative genius who brought it into being. Parkening came from a gifted family. His aunt was the famous Hollywood singer, dancer, and actress Ginger Rogers.

The book is the story of a boy who was put under terrific pressure by his father, also a musician, to excel at his instrument. When still just a boy he was required to practice for an hour and half in the morning before school. He was at his guitar from 5:30 every morning and was required to practice strictly according to the daily instructions written out by his father. Then another hour and a half in the afternoon, no matter that the other boys were playing outside, no matter that it meant no sports, though he loved sports.

All of that practice paid off and by the time he was a teenager he had debuted on television, was playing concerts with famous orchestras, and had landed a recording contract. He has many interesting things to say about the craft of playing an instrument, of practicing, performing, and

recording. All of that makes for a compelling story. Give a copy of the book to some young instrumentalist you know, especially if he or she is not a Christian. But there is more.

Parkening's autobiography is also the story of a fly fisherman, who, as a boy, was a prodigy in the sport, as he was in the music world. Parkening's other great passion in life was fishing, a passion he also shared with his father. The book is full of anecdotes of large fish, both those he landed and those that got away, and of fishing competitions, some of which he won, including the one in Florida known as the "Wimbledon of fly-fishing." Give the book to your unbelieving friends who like to fish!

Parkening's autobiography is also the story of a man in the middle of a very successful life finding himself bereft of meaning, unable to supply answers to the questions he had about himself and his life and then finding the answer to those questions in Jesus Christ. His meteoric rise to fame and success as a very young man made it possible to retire at 30 years of age, a goal he had set for himself years before. He bought a ranch in Montana with a fishing stream, got into buying and training horses, and thought he had it made. But, as Augustine observed long ago, the human soul has been created for God and is restless until it finds its rest in him. Parkening had grown up in the church, had been baptized as an adolescent, knew the basic facts of the gospel story, but was, like multitudes of others, indifferent to it. He had no idea that Christ was the answer to his questions and the solution to the unhappiness of his life.

And then over the backyard fence in Southern California a neighbor recommended a church to him and he attended. It made an impression but not a lasting one. But sometime later he returned and took some sermon tapes away to take with him to Montana and before long the gospel had taken root in his heart and his life had been changed and he had been given a new and far better purpose for his life and his art. The rest of the story is the intriguing tale of how the Christian faith, a newfound joy in the Lord, and the higher purposes that Christ gives to those who trust in him led him to return to the guitar and came to dominate the life of a great musician.

It is a wonderful read because it is a story of the greatest thing that ever happens in the world: a human being calling on the name of the Lord and being saved. But, take note, it happened, as Paul said it would happen, because the gospel was communicated to Christopher Parkening, in his case in a variety of different ways. Take Paul's words to heart, as we are intended to, that series of four rhetorical questions in vv. 14-15: had the gospel not been communicated, Parkening would not have heard Christ's voice summoning him and would not have believed and would not have been saved. Can the words be read in any other way?

We have work to do that we should be eager and willing to do to the best of our ability. That many will not receive the message gladly should only make us more determined to ensure that the message is communicated as well as we are able. And, believe me, it only takes a few to respond in faith to make it all worthwhile.

Lord, lay some soul upon my heart  
 And love that soul through me;  
 And may I bravely do my part  
 To win that soul for Thee.

And when I come to the beautiful city,  
And the saved all around me appear,  
I want to hear somebody tell me  
“It was you who invited me here.”