

Join us for

Wednesday Night Bible Study



Berea Christian Church

Our Teacher

Pastor Rob Stovall

Wednesday - May 20, 2020

"Confession unto Salvation"

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(Romans 10:1-13)

The Apostle Paul once famously encouraged his young lieutenant in the faith, Timothy, to “do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15). The principle being emphasized here has to do with the necessity for interpreters of Scripture, like Timothy, to be flexible in the reading and understanding of critical biblical language, being properly sensitive to the Scriptural context.

For example, “salvation” always means “deliverance,” but it does not always mean deliverance from the same thing in the same way. Observe part of the “Song of Moses” in Exodus 15:2, where Moses announces, “The LORD is my strength and my defense; he has become my salvation.” In context, Moses is celebrating the temporal deliverance that the children of Israel enjoyed through the destruction of Egypt’s military under the watery depths of the Red Sea; he is not referencing deliverance from the power and penalty of sin through the substitutionary atonement of Jesus Christ. The vocabulary is similar, but the context makes clear that the reference is to temporal salvation rather than heaven and immortal glory. Jonah’s confession in Jonah 2:9 – “Salvation comes from the LORD” – aptly illustrates the same principle. The prophet is delivered from death-by-drowning through the intervention of a specially prepared fish; his song of praise reflects his gratitude to the God who miraculously saved him from temporal destruction, rather than to eternal life through the shed-blood of Christ. The biblical vocabulary of salvation should not always be flatly and woodenly read as referring to spiritual deliverance from Hell to Heaven; in every case, context will be the determining factor.

Romans 10:1-13, because of the language of salvation that so thoroughly permeates the passage, is often employed as a proof-text for “gospel regeneration.” According to this misreading, Paul desperately wishes that ethnic Israel would “get saved” by believing the Gospel. Because they are ignorant of that Gospel, pursuing law-keeping rather than simply trusting in Jesus, Israel is doomed to eternal separation from the very God that they are so vigorously attempting to please through their good works. If only the Apostle’s kinsmen-according-to-the-flesh would believe the Gospel and pray the “sinner’s prayer,” because, as Paul pens in this passage, “if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved” (v. 9, NKJV).

Is this truly Paul’s concern in these verses? Israel certainly needs the Gospel to be saved, but what sort of salvation does the Apostle have in mind – temporal or eternal deliverance? A close consideration of the context will provide clarity here.

Our passage begins with Paul’s anguished desire that Israel might be saved, but saved from what? From Hell? From their sin (in general)? From what do they need deliverance? The following verses clarify the problem: they have “a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge” (v. 2). As a result of this ignorance, they vainly attempt to establish (through law-keeping) their own righteousness (or “correct-ness” in their approach to God), all the while missing out (because of this lack of understanding) on God’s righteousness (that is, God’s “correct-ness” regarding how He is to be properly approached (v. 3). Paul then concludes this

opening paragraph with the observation that “Christ *is* the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes” (v. 4, NKJV). Here is a major Gospel principle in Paul’s mind, that trusting Jesus invariably results in an abandonment of law-keeping (i.e., “Christ *is* the end of the law...”), because that act of trust involves a simultaneous recognition of *both* the vanity of trusting in good works in our approach to God, *and* the “correct-ness” or righteousness of trusting in Christ alone.

Notice here that Paul acknowledges their “zeal for God.” Israel has a head-problem, not a heart-problem. In their hearts, these ethnic Jews are passionate about pleasing God, but, tragically, because of their ignorance, they are missing out on the very intimacy that they are so zealously pursuing. This does not sound like the definition on those who are “dead in trespasses and sins” (Eph. 2:1), who have no interest in seeking God (cf., Psalm 14:2-3). The problem with these Israelites lay in the fact that they are seeking God on their terms, ignorant of God’s terms as they are explained in the Gospel. This is why Israel needs the Gospel; they need to be delivered from the pointlessness and inevitable disappointment that will result from pursuing God outside of faith in Christ.

Notice also that Paul intercedes for these individuals from the heart. Would the Apostle intercede for the non-elect, for those who are not children of God? If Jesus refuses to pray for anyone other than those whom the Father had given to Christ out of the world (cf., John 17:6-9), can we rightly conceive of the Apostle Paul’s “heart’s desire and prayer to God” being for members of any group outside of those for who Jesus died as a substitute? These ethnic Jews, therefore, are those who possess a “zeal for God” as a result of regeneration but remain ignorant because they have not experienced conversion. Here, Paul fervently prays for their subsequent conversion.

So, then, since their problem is not one of an absence of regeneration but the absence of conversion, what does this teach us about the place of the Gospel in the spiritual nurture of the child of God? First, it is not the principle instrument whereby new life in Christ becomes a reality. Passages like John 3:1-8 make clear, regeneration is a sovereign, supernatural work of the Spirit, performed unilaterally without assistance from any human agency. As Paul asserts in Titus 3:6, “[God] saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.” We, as objects of the Triune God’s work of redemption, are entirely passive in that process.

What, then, is the purpose of the Gospel? In 2 Timothy 1:9-10, the Apostle speaks of God “who saved us and called us to a holy life – not because of anything we have done but because of His own purpose and grace. This grace was given to us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who destroyed death and *has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.*” The Gospel does not create life and immortality; it makes it visible, enlightening the understanding of those who have been gracious recipients of spiritual life. The Gospel teaches the head about the prior work that God has performed upon the heart.

Israel, returning to Romans 10:1-13, needs the Gospel to be saved from destruction caused by misdirected zeal. They need to be instructed by the Gospel so that they might confess Jesus with the mouth and believe upon Him with the heart, and, thusly, be saved – saved in time rather than eternity. The Greek verb “to confess” translates literally as “to say the same thing,” or “to agree.” A confession is an agreement,

and, in the case of confessing Jesus, the converted child of God becomes a believer when he or she “says the same thing” or agrees with the Gospel about who Jesus is and what he has already done for them. The act of agreeing does not make it a reality; agreeing simply acknowledges what is in fact true, to the glory of God.

