

Sermon 110: Romans 10:2-4: Religion that cannot save

OUTLINE

Zeal
Knowledge
Righteousness

INTRODUCTION

In the west we are becoming less religious and more religious at the same time. Christianity is on the decline and atheism on the increase, but ironically as Christianity is cast off other religious worldviews are rushing in to take their place. This growth in religion can be put down to many different things. Our increasing knowledge of the world has turned the many isolated countries into a single global village where we have been confronted with others cultures and faiths, this has caused many to re-evaluate their own Christian heritage in the West and opt for an alternative spirituality. The late 20th century saw many countries casting off their colonial pasts and declaring independence forcing them to define themselves apart from the Colonial/Christian heritage of those who had annexed their lands. This has led to many casting back to the pre-Christian roots and religion as a new way to define themselves in a post-Colonial world. Many religious perspectives are shaped in reaction to reigning influences. With the rise in secularism and the drawing away of millions of children from the culture and beliefs of the parents to MTV, western dress, music, the English language and many other media spread exports, there has been a resurgence in various forms of fundamentalism as a force of preservation, and a return to a pure practice of earlier beliefs. Another reactionary trend is towards alternative and minority beliefs as a protest to the corruption and monopolising and monocultural nature of the former generation. The media and the development of a consumeristic culture where every person individualises their choice has led to a syncretism of beliefs never heard before where there are nearly as many religions as people because we all make up our own beliefs according to our own fancy. Although many have pronounced religion to be dead we cannot escape our spiritual and worshipping natures, religion is here to stay. And this brings us to the politically incorrect question, but which is the right way?

Paul's words in Romans 10:2-4 are very important for us to understand as we engage this question of religion. The Jews were some of the most religious people in the world, they had zeal, knowledge, righteousness and various ceremonies, yet we will see that for all of their religion they were going to hell. Paul helps us to see the type of religion that does not save and our only hope for salvation.

Zeal

Paul begins by telling us that the Jews are not lost because they are religious hypocrites who are playing but who are zealous for God, v2, 'For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge.' This is a very politically incorrect statement.

It tells us that sincerity is not enough to save. We live in a day where tolerance is more important than truth. That a person does not save themselves by trying to be as sincere as possible, this would amount to salvation by works, the works of heart, will and motivation. The Jews were full of zeal. When the word of God was copied some Jewish scribes would wash every time before they wrote the divine name and use a new pen. Their zeal for the name of God led first century Jews to stop pronouncing it as a way of not breaking the third commandment. But Paul is telling us that this sacrificial zeal cannot save anyone. Paul would have been an excellent specimen of non-saving zeal. He was a Pharisee, blameless in legalistic observance, a persecutor of the church who would force Christians to try and renounce the faith. But all of this zeal he counts as loss for the sake of knowing Christ and the righteousness that comes by faith not religious zeal. Phil. 3:7-9, 'But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. 8 Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ 9 and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith---.' An example you could identify with would be John Wesley. He attempted to establish his own righteousness while studying at Oxford. So he started the holy club, and as part of this club he would visit the prisoners speaking to them and preaching to them. But he could not find peace with God and crossed the Atlantic as a missionary to secure his own righteousness giving up all his opportunities to do so. But in all this he was still not yet saved. It was in encountering some Moravians who had peace in the face of death in a storm at sea that he realised his own spiritual condition and it was while reading a commentary by Luther that he realised that all his zeal had been in vain and it was only Christ's righteousness not his own that could save him. Luther himself wore himself out in religious zeal attempting through fasting and confession and vigils and all the good deeds of monkery to save himself and make himself righteous. The Reformation began with his grasp that it is not the righteousness that he offers to God but the free gift of righteousness received by faith that makes one truly righteous and saved.

What we need to appreciate is that Paul is disqualifying the Jews, he is not even talking about the Muslims, the Buddhists, the Confuciansists, the Bahai, etc. Paul is talking about those who were in the orthodox faith, who had the truth, not those who were altogether deceived and worshipping an idol. The implication is clear, if Jews who have the truth cannot get saved by their religious sincerity because they refuse to see themselves as needing Christ, then there is no hope for those of other religions who likewise are very zealous but do not have the knowledge of Christ. I say this not to be contentious but to make the gospel clear. When we see people on TV whose religious devotion puts our lukewarm western devotion to shame, if it is not for Christ it is filthy rags. Many of us are persuaded by conviction, confidence and the willingness to suffer for ones beliefs, but it is possible to have all this and be committed to an error and die and go to hell. Religious fervour cannot save.

Knowledge

We will notice that it was not their lack of zeal but their lack of knowledge that was the problem. Paul tells us that they had a real but misdirected zeal, 'but not according to knowledge.' Paul is telling us that zeal is good and right but it must be in accordance with the truth. Likewise in v3 he says, 'For, being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness.' Once again Paul is affirming the politically incorrect thing, the importance of knowledge. Today you will hear things like, 'doctrine divides.' We live in an age where there are many differing beliefs and everyone just wants some peace because of all the wars and division and denominations established because of a difference of opinions. But Paul tells us that knowledge is what makes or breaks our salvation.

Today's preference for a 'no information religion' is at various with Paul. Today it is all about having a power encounter. We live in an age where Christianity is losing its influence and many feel that what we need is more miracles, people need to feel and experience the power of the Spirit. The trouble is this is the exact same response to the rising sciences after the enlightenment. Science was coming into its own and religion was being marginalised, so it was a liberal who tried to save religion by evacuating it of its beliefs and speaking about an experience of utter dependence as the heart of religion. They felt they could not defend Christianity against the wave of criticism so they ran from all intellectual content to experience to try and defend the faith. This has laid the foundation for those pluralists who see all religions being united by a common mystical experience of faith. It has robbed Christianity of its content and settles for relationship not doctrine. The trouble is who are you having a relationship with if there is no knowledge. There is a tendency to offset theology against worship, but how can you worship someone who you have no information about? Some have abandoned all experience and knowledge for activism, so that today some will speak not of orthodoxy but orthopraxy. Their concern is to bring Christianity out of our heads-knowledge and hearts-experience and have a practical Christianity which meets people's needs. But for all of this we need to take Paul's point. Knowledge, doctrine, points of belief they are not merely intellectual curiosities, the preoccupation of the pedantic. No, they are vital for salvation. One cannot be saved without the right knowledge.

The Jews were not practicing a no knowledge religion but a wrong knowledge religion. They had knowledge, and rightly emphasized knowledge. They had creeds and confessions. They would have studied who God is knowing that He is eternal, that He is holy, that He is the only God. They would have known and believed in creation not evolution, they would have held to the doctrine of angels and demons, that we are body and soul, that there is heaven and hell and final judgement for all people. They would have had the same OT as us yet for all of these similarities there are differences in the most important areas. Paul tells us that they were ignorant of the righteousness of God and sought to establish their own.

There are matters of knowledge that are saving and matters of knowledge that are not. For example, the mode of baptism, or the form of church government, one can differ on such things as these and still be saved. The Jews however were wrong on saving things. Firstly, they were ignorant of the righteousness of God Paul tells us in v3. What does he mean here by God's righteousness? Some have suggested that it is a reference to God's being righteous in Himself and therefore being ignorant of His perfect standards of righteousness and being satisfied with a legalistic and redefined righteousness. I do not think that this is what Paul means here. For even if the Jews had a perfect knowledge of God's attribute of righteousness that would not save them. No, a better interpretation is to see the righteousness of God as the gift of righteousness that God offers because we cannot make ourselves righteous. The contrast is between a righteousness that comes from God and one that came from the Jews. They rejected God's gift of righteousness for the attempts of their own hands. Paul says, 'They did not submit to God's righteousness.'

Why not? The Jews were deceived about their own goodness and ability as well as the nature of what God required. They were content to practice a religion that the Gentiles did not thinking that the practicing of the various ceremonies like circumcision, sacrifices and washings would be adequate to save them. They failed to realise that God is holy and His holy character is the basis for the perfection that He demands of His creatures. He is not a God who randomly gives us religious tasks to do, He gave them the law as a reflection of the perfection without which they could not be saved. They overestimated their own goodness and ability to keep the law, they failed to see the reality that a true heart obedience to the law was impossible and so they did not look for a righteousness that God would provide through Christ. They saw no need for God's righteousness because they were confident in their own. This is the opposite of what Christ describes as poor in spirit. We have in the beatitudes in the Sermon on the mount a list of what a true believer looks like, and the first thing on the list is this peculiar statement, 'O how happy are the poor in spirit!' No one would think the poor to be happy, so the statement stands out for scrutiny and then there is the idea of being poor in spirit, what does this mean? It means that the one who sees himself as spiritually bankrupt and having no righteousness of his own to offer to God, if this one will come as a beggar does, asking for mercy, begging instead of trying to make a deposit, then God will bless this person. The Jews were rich in spirit, they thought themselves well and in no need of a doctor, they thought themselves dressed and not naked. They refused to submit to God's cure, to God's provision, they refused to receive His diagnosis and self-diagnosed themselves as fine when they were terminal. This blindness to our own predicament, and our confidence in our own analysis is not a Jewish problem but a human one. Do you know this saving knowledge, that you are sinner incapable of saving yourself, of making yourself as righteous as is required to satisfy God's requirements? Will you see that you cannot give anything to God that He should receive it and declare you righteous but that He has to provide the righteousness, and He does this in His Son.

Righteousness

We want to look now at verse 4, 'For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness for everyone who believes.' Here is the answer to the failure of the Jews and all attempts of

any use of religion to try and make oneself acceptable to a holy God. In any of our own attempts to make ourselves righteous, it is always the law that exposes our inadequacy. If we are able to clean up our external actions it is the law which reveals that our hearts are a never ending spring of sin that we cannot plug. Any attempts feel like a man standing before a massive dam wall that is full of cracks, the water is coming out everywhere and if we plug one hole there are other places the water will come out of. If we do not commit adultery the law reveals that we are adulterers in heart, if we do not murder the law reveals our hatred and anger as murder, if we do not steal the law exposes our covetousness. And if we break the law the law requires our death. You cannot fulfil the law, the Jews could not fulfil the law, but here Paul is telling us that Christ can and does on behalf of everyone who believes in Him.

The notion of the law coming to an end has confused many people, it does not mean that we are no longer obliged to obey the 10 commandments. The law is a reflection of God's character and was written by the Spirit and is the same law written on our hearts. Paul does not mean that Christ has done away with all of God's rules. This is a complex statement which means many things. Just as we can say we are saved by grace and we are referring to election, regeneration, the provision of the atonement, justification, sanctification, glorification etc. Likewise this statement has various shades of meaning. Firstly, it does mean that Christ has fulfilled the various types and shadows of the law. The various institutions and ceremonies, the promises and prophecies Christ is the one who fulfils all of that expectation.

Secondly, it is also true that since Christ has fulfilled the purpose of the Mosaic administration that the Old Covenant is concluded with Christ who establishes the New Covenant.

But the main meaning that Paul seems to be stressing is related to the question of the law for righteousness and punishment. The NT makes clear that the only way in which any of us can enter into an eternal relationship with God is if we are perfect as He is perfect. He cannot abide sin in His presence. Paul tells us that the law hypothetically promised that if you could keep it you would live. The Jews tried and failed, and instead of then turning to the provided means of atonement they deceived themselves thinking that they were in fact fulfilling the law perfectly. But Christ was able. The law demanded perfection for salvation but if you failed it demanded your death. Hypothetically this door has been open for every human since Adam, he failed to enter in and so have we all. God provided salvation through faith in Christ in shadow in the OT but technically the law door was always there for any who could do it. The trouble is that the Jews fooled themselves into thinking that they could keep the law and so never turned to God's provision for atonement and rejected their Messiah. Any attempt through any religion to try and earn our way into heaven is a feeble and failing attempt to go through the law door, they will all inevitably fail.

Now what is important is that Christ was also the Second or Last Adam, he came in a representative capacity. This means that He was on a mission not for Himself but on behalf of others. And as our representative He fulfilled all that the law required of us. In the garden of Eden the law only demanded perfection from Adam and Eve that they might be confirmed in righteousness. But since the fall the law now requires two things from every

sinner, and every sinner must pay. It demands that we perfectly keep all of its requirements, and it requires that we die in payment for our sin. Can you offer a perfect life to fulfil its commands, and offer a pure offering in death to satisfy its demands? None of us can, none but Christ. Where Adam and every child of Adam has failed to render perfect obedience and receive the prize Christ has finally succeeded. In theology we call this double aspect of Christ's fulfilling of the law the active and passive obedience of Christ. He actively fulfilled every command, and the word passive comes from the word for passion which refers to His suffering and death by which he fulfilled all that the law required for our sins.

Ok, you might be thinking to yourself, I can see that Jesus fulfilled every requirement of the law but how does that help me? The rest of the verse is our answer. Anyone who believes is made righteous by what Christ has done. Believing is an act of receiving not giving, it is an act of trusting in what Christ has done not what we have done. It is an action of begging for God's mercy because He promises to give it to those who take Christ as their sacrifice and as their new Lord. This is what the Jew failed to do. The Jew would not trust to Christ but trusted in themselves. They would not come with empty hands to God but attempted to offer their own obedience for their salvation. And when we cling to Christ and not our own god works God does something. God credits Christ obedience and Christ's death to us and by this all the demands of the law, both positive and negative, are fulfilled. The law cannot require your death if Christ's death is yours. All religion will fail because it is wrought by our hands, it is only Christ who can truly satisfy the law and His obedience and death are given to any who will forsake sin and trust in Him. Augustus Toplady put it so well:

'Not the labour of my hands
Can fulfil Thy laws demands
Could my zeal no respite know
Could my tears forever flow
All for sin could not atone
Thou must save and Thou alone.

Nothing in my hand I bring
Simply to Thy cross I cling
Naked come to Thee for dress
Helpless look to Thee for grace
Foul I to the fountain fly
Wash me saviour or I die.'