

The Zeal of the Righteous One
Romans 9:17-10:4

Can you think of a time when you felt sure that you were right – in fact, you were so convinced that you defended your position with passion, only to later realize that your zeal (your passion) was not rooted in the truth?

You realized you were wrong; your zeal had been misguided.

In today's passage, Paul says that the Jews had misguided zeal. Look again at ch.10, v.2 again. He says they had *"a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge."* What was the source of their misguided zeal? Verse 3, *"For, being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness."*

They were passionate about being justified in God's sight. They were zealous about being acceptable to God. And yet they remained unjustified, unacceptable, because they were preoccupied with a different righteousness. They were zealous for self-righteousness.

The Scriptures of the OT and NT teach that, in one form or another, so are we. We are naturally zealous for a righteousness that we establish.

For example, in our society today, we see so much zeal as people express their belief in what appears to be a new morality, a new version of right and wrong. And in some cases, if you disagree, you're seen not just as having an alternate opinion – you're immoral.

But this isn't true only for those with some new ideology. All people, even true Christians who believe God's Word and reject this "new morality," naturally seek to establish righteousness apart from God.

Think about it: who among us has never felt self-righteously smug? Who has never considered themselves better than someone else or one reason or another? We love being right, and we enjoy the satisfaction of being proven right. And certainly there are things that are truly right and truly wrong in the world. There are good rules to follow and principles we should live by.

But here in Romans 9, Paul is clear that none of it makes a person right with God. And self-righteousness doesn't only fail to justify us before God. It condemns us. It leaves us guilty before God. That is Paul's point.

And yet he's adamant that there is hope for self-righteous sinners. God saves through the person and work of Jesus Christ. When the OT prophet Isaiah describes the Savior who would come into the world, he makes a comforting statement. He writes, *"The zeal of the LORD will do this."*

You see, God is zealous as well. He is zealous for true righteousness – for His own – and we should be also. We should abandon self-righteousness and be zealous for the righteousness of God.

But how does this happen in us, when we are so naturally self-righteous?

Well, it's a work of God, but here in Romans 9 God guides away from self-righteousness and toward His own. Notice the outline on pages 6-7 in the WG. God calls us to: Respect His right in each choice He has made (9:17-29), and Receive His grace through the Stone He has laid (9:30-10:4).

We began Romans 9 last week. The late pastor and scholar Dr. James Montgomery Boice gives a good introduction to what is being addressed here. He writes, *"In this chapter, Paul is writing of God's righteous judgment on those who consider themselves to be better than other people but who actually do the same things and are guilty of the same sins."*

The Jews generally thought that they were morally superior to the Gentiles, when in reality both groups had always been sinners in need of God's grace. But so many Jews wrongly believed that salvation was rightfully theirs by birth.

And here a certain question is addressed. If the Israelites/Hebrews/Jews were God's chosen people, then how could so many find themselves separated from God? His answer is simple. Paul said, *"not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel."*

This is important for our upcoming sermons on the NT book of Revelation. Revelation is often wrongly interpreted based on the misunderstanding that there are two ways of salvation, two peoples of God and two futures for these two peoples of God. Paul explained that all the privileges Israel enjoyed as members of the covenant community did not save them. Being ethnic Hebrews did not save them. And their attempts to keep the law of God did not save them. Rather, he says that salvation is according to *"God's purpose in election."* God's choice.

And then he anticipates a question of God's fairness in this. Is God unjust? He says, *"By no means! For [God] says to Moses, 'I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.' So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy."* Forgiveness of sins and peace with God doesn't depend on any work that a person performs.

And Paul continues his explanation in today's passage. Look at verse [17] again. *"For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, 'For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.'"* Paul recognizes God as the ultimate author of the Bible. *"The Scripture says."*

This is a quote from Exodus 9. Pharaoh held the Israelites in slavery during the life of Moses. And God sent plague after plague on Egypt, warning Pharaoh to let the people go. With every plague, and every rejected opportunity to humble himself, the heart of Pharaoh grew harder.

No one made Pharaoh harden his heart. He did so willingly. And as He did so, God allowed that hardening. Scripture even describes it as God hardening the Pharaoh. God could have destroyed Pharaoh immediately. The Israelites could've walked out of Egypt with no trouble. And yet God allowed Pharaoh to continue in his stubbornness for a reason: that God's power would be shown and His name proclaimed in all the earth.

Look verse [18], *"So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills."* God was not unjust to let the Pharaoh carry on. He was not required to override the Pharaoh's stubborn will. God may leave a person in their hard-hearted state if He so chooses.

And now Paul anticipates another question, verse [19], *"You will say to me then, 'Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?'"* In other words, *"Why then does God hold a person's sins against them, if, in the end, they cannot turn to Him unless He shows them mercy? Look at Paul's answer, verse [20], 'But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, 'Why have you made me like this?'"* [21] *Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use?"*

The logic seems simple enough, doesn't it? God is within His rights as the Creator of all things. This echoes God's response to Job in the OT when Job boldly questioned the wisdom of God. God begins by saying to Job, *"Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements—surely you know!"* God invites our questions, but not our accusations.

Now this next section presents some challenges. In fact, it might seem easier to explain in a sermon if you didn't even have verses 22-29. But the meaning here is essential. Without these verses, you might see God as simply harsh and uncaring, putting arrogant sinners in their place with His words of correction. But Paul does not see God in that way. Rather, he sees God as very patient.

He was patient with the stubborn Pharaoh.

He was patient with the rebellious Israelites.

And God is patient with us.

Why does God endure so much evil in the world? Verse [22] *What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, [23] in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of*

mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory—[24] even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles?”

The ‘what if’ is not there because this might or might not be true. Paul says it this way because how can we object that God is unjust when obviously He is showing mercy to so many as well. What objection can we rightfully make?

I think that to understand this, the children’s catechism might be helpful. The second question of the catechism which our little ones learn says, *“Why did God make you and all things? The answer? For His own glory.”* All of creation exists to show the greatness of the one true God. Everything that plays out in history displays His wrath and power, and also, His patience and mercy.

Think about what we’re seeing in the world today. God endures many people and their evil deeds that are paving their own way to eternal destruction. But at the same time, their evil magnifies the mercy of God toward those that He is preparing for eternity with Him.

And what’s more – no one knows who among those who appear to be getting prepared for eternal destruction will, before the end, be shown mercy by God, called to salvation. God has the right to be patient with a sinner as long as He wants. But He also has the right to cease with patience and to punish sins. The sovereignty of God in all things is clearly in view here for Paul.

If we are to ever develop a passion for God’s righteousness, we need to cease with the self-righteous questioning of God’s motives and actions and respect His right in each choice that He makes. Jumping to conclusions about God’s fairness and justice demonstrates that we think we know better than God. But God is merciful and patient toward, and He has always been intent on showing mercy to those who did not deserve it; because, in fact, no one deserves it.

Now, to further emphasize God’s mercy toward those who are undeserving, Paul quotes two Israelite prophets, Hosea and Isaiah. Verse [25], *As indeed he says in Hosea, “Those who were not my people I will call ‘my people,’ and her who was not beloved I will call ‘beloved.’” [26] “And in the very place where it was said to them, ‘You are not my people,’ there they will be called ‘sons of the living God.’*” What Hosea describes is Jews and Gentiles being placed on level ground with God. The Jews had turned from God, and they lost their special status. Verses 25-26 describe mercy being shown to those deemed by the Israelites as unworthy.

And then Isaiah, verse [27] *And Isaiah cries out concerning Israel: “Though the number of the sons of Israel be as the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will be saved.”* Practically the whole nation of Israel had turned away, but there would still be a portion of the Israelites who would turn to God in faith. God would see to it. And yet, for the rest, verse [28] *the Lord will carry out his sentence upon the earth fully and without delay.*” For anyone at all to be saved, God’s grace was necessary.

And then another statement from Isaiah, verse [29] *And as Isaiah predicted, "If the Lord of hosts had not left us offspring, we would have been like Sodom and become like Gomorrah."* "Sodom and Gomorrah" was a reference to those who are most depraved in the world, devoid of morals and steeped in sin. We can think of similar examples in the world today. What was the difference between Israel and these people? The grace of God. Where would any of us be without God's exhaustive and undeserved love?

Now, let's look at the next section. Verse 30. *"What shall we say, then? That Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness have attained it, that is, a righteousness that is by faith; [31] but that Israel who pursued a law that would lead to righteousness did not succeed in reaching that law."* The law of God was a good thing. God gave Israel His law when He formed them into a people. But they wrongly came to believe that through the law they could justify themselves. And yet they were not justified, verse [32] *"Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as if it were based on works."*

This is why, when Christ came into the world, the gospel seemed to make no sense to them. Why did they need a Savior, if they could save themselves through keeping God's law?

And this is why Jesus was not a rock of refuge, but rather, a rock of stumbling. Verse 32, *"They have stumbled over the stumbling stone, [33] as it is written, "Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame."* This is another quote from Isaiah. "Zion" refers to Jerusalem, the city of God. The coming of the Son of God into the world would expose Israel's self-righteous approach to God's law.

The world is an uncertain place. There are many dangers. This was just as true in the ancient world. OT Israel was called by God to trust only in Him and follow His ways. But this was difficult in a dangerous world. And so they trusted, instead, in other nations, aligning themselves with idol worshippers, and turning away from the one true God. They wanted these nations to be their rock.

They wanted security they could see. But only God could provide the security they wanted. Only God could provide a sure rock on which to stand. And when God sent that Rock into the world, because He did not arrive in power and majesty as the Jews expected and as they desired, He was largely rejected. Therefore, they stumbled over the Rock – who is Christ the Lord. *"Why? Verse 32, "Because they did not pursue it (the law) by faith, but as if it were based on works."* They tripped over their own self-righteousness.

However, you see there, the *Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness have attained it, that is, a righteousness that is by faith.* And some would call this unfair as well! They did not pursue it! Then how did they receive it? God showed grace through Christ. To develop a passion that mirrors this passion of God for His righteousness, we also must receive God's grace through the Stone He has laid.

Are you getting tripped up by self-righteousness, or are you being held up by Christ's righteousness?

That is the summary of what Paul concludes with here. Look at these final verses. He says, [1] *Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them* (that is, His Jewish brothers and sisters who have rejected Jesus) *is that they may be saved.* [2] *For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge.* Remember, they had a misguided passion. Verse [3] *For, being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness.*

Now, Paul adds one more statement, which is a tremendous one, and it's a fitting conclusion. He says, verse [4] *For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.* What does this mean?

Well, first of all, Jesus Christ is the goal of God's law. All of Scripture points to Him. All of it leads to Him. Christ truly is "our life." This is why every sermon should point ultimately to His person and work. And every worship service, and every time of private devotion (or "quiet time"), every time of Bible reading and prayer – we must find our way to Christ, otherwise, we will veer into self-righteousness. We will take even the good things of God and use them to establish a righteousness apart from Him. We do this without even thinking. It comes so naturally. Christ is the goal of the law.

But second of all, Jesus is the end of the law in that He is the fulfillment of the law. He fulfilled or completely all of God's law in His earthly life. He perfectly performed all of it in the place of those He came to save. This is why He is "*the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.*" We must believe in Him. We must trust in Him. We should not depend on our own righteousness; but only on the Righteous One. And you see, He also demonstrated great zeal – great passion. Zeal for the glory of God and zeal for those He came to save.

Abandon your self-righteousness today. Renew your trust in the Righteous One He is zealous to receive you into His arms. He is zealous to welcome you home.

And if you have never come to Him in faith, may today be the day. Admit to God that you are a self-righteous sinner, and submit to the Righteous One, who is Christ the Lord.

Let's bow in prayer.