

Rev. Lex DeLong / General Adult

Romans Road to Recovery / Romans 9:30–33; Romans 10:1–4

Notes

02/22 Romans 9:30-10:4, "The Pursuit of Righteousness," Subtitle: Why Good Works Fail Where Faith Succeeds Scripture Reading: Philippians 3:7-11 (This sermon bridges the end of Chapter 9 and the beginning of Chapter 10, a transition to contrast cultural efforts with biblical solutions. The companion reading from Philippians 3 aligns with and illustrates the "source" of a believer's standing before God)

Subtitle: *The Stumbling Stone of Works vs. The Gift of Faith*

Scripture Text: Romans 9:30 – 10:4

The Introduction: The Case of the Exhausted Runner

In the 18th century, the great hymnist William Cowper lived much of his life under a crushing weight. He understood the sovereignty of God—the topic we've been tracing through Romans 9—but he understood it only as a distant, terrifying Judge. Cowper spent years "sprinting" on a treadmill of religious anxiety, trying to climb a mountain of moral perfection to prove he was worthy of grace. He was a man running a race with no finish line, exhausted by the "mountain of things" he felt he had to do to be saved.

His breakthrough came only when he looked up from his own tracks in the dirt and saw the Person of Christ. He realized that the same God who is Sovereign is also the God who provides the Sacrifice, the means by which worthiness is given from God rather than earned from man. This led him to write those famous lines: *"There is a fountain filled with blood, drawn from Immanuel's veins; and sinners plunged beneath that flood lose all their guilty stains."*

Cowper stopped trying to **achieve** and finally **received**.

Cowper's struggle is our struggle. We often get lost in the "how" and the "what" of religion, missing the "Who" that it's all about. This brings us to the heartbeat of our text today:

Main Idea: "Righteousness is not a mountain of 'things' (neuter/plural) to be achieved through human effort, but the Person (singular/masculine) of Christ to be received through faith."

We all live in this physical world, running the race of life—school, career, providing, accomplishing, and loving. Yet, God has woven something deeper into our DNA. As Ecclesiastes 3:11 tells us,

Ecclesiastes 3:11 NASB95

¹¹ He has made everything appropriate in its time. He has also set eternity in their heart, yet so that man will not find out the work which God has done from the beginning even to the end.

There is a "tug" within us that tells us the physical world isn't enough.

We feel that tug and we try to answer it. We strive to be "good people." We try to be kind, to serve others, and to find profit in things that aren't just financial. Yet, no matter how much we do, the spiritual goal remains elusive—like trying to grasp a handful of mist or catch running water. We find ourselves getting involved in "spiritual pursuits"—nature, self-improvement, even religious services—but the finish line keeps moving. We keep running, but we keep coming up short.

The Bible, however, tells a different story. It tells the story of **The One** who ran the race *for* us. He knew we could never maintain the pace; He knew we could never resolve the distance.

So, we are faced with two races:

- One we run, and one that was run for us.
- One we could never win, and one that has already been won.
- One that leaves us exhausted, and another that offers us rest.

When it comes to deciding which race we are truly in...

I. We must first consider which race we are running (9:30–31)

The world just finished the 2026 Olympics. Imagine a cross-country skier trying to race on the speed-skating ice ring, or the bobsled team trying to race down the ski slopes of the ski jump. As absurd as that is to imagine, humanity does that very thing in our spiritual lives.

A. We can run with all our might and still be on the wrong track (v. 31)

- Like many of us today, Israel was sprinting toward a "mountain of things"—the **613 Mitzvot**. They were exhausted from managing 248 "do's" and 365 "don'ts," believing that if they just checked off enough boxes, they would finally arrive.
- The Greek reveals they weren't just following a law; they were trapped in a "**works-principle**" where every step was measured by their own performance.

- For Israel, the race they were running was like the hamster wheel, always running, but never getting to a destination, never quite getting there.
- Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "Life is a journey, not a destination."
- Confucius said, "Roads were made for journeys, not destinations."
- Although they both recognized the endless journey, they tried to suggest contentment in the endless pursuit was the prize, rather than the destination. But humanity and life itself drives us to seek more, yet we can't quite lay our hands on it.

That's the beautiful part, that's where the gospel of Jesus Christ comes into view in the Bible.

B. The grace of the Gospel is that those who weren't even running the race towards God found Him first (v. 30)

- The Gentiles didn't find the finish line; the finish line found them.
- The Greek word for "attained" (*katelaben*) here in verse 30, implies they were **intercepted by grace**.
- While they weren't even running the right race and some of them not running any race at all, the gift of faith literally ran into them and overtook them.
- Instead of the prize being something they attained through their own running, there was a faith that swelled up within them to accept the prize won by another, Jesus Christ. They were trying to run up a mountain they could not climb until there was a hand right in their face, reaching out to lift them up to the top.

C. Look for the hand, the gift of faith, rather than trying to climb the mountain of works

- Are we exhausted from trying to manage a list of "do's" and "don'ts" to be acceptable to God?
- Paul shows that the "winners" are only those who stopped trying to climb the mountain of their own effort and instead started receiving the gift of faith.
- We must all avoid the trap of trying to climb that mountain and instead be sure to receive the gift of faith.

While running this race of life, look for the one that stands on your path. He wants you to see Him there with His hand reaching out to you to lift you up.

II. Be careful not to overlook the Savior

standing in the path (9:32–33)

- God doesn't just put His hand in the face of the climber, He literally chooses to stand in the path of the runner
- God wants us to look ahead as we run and see that He is standing right there in front of us.

A. When we spend our lives looking at our own feet, we can become blind to what is right in front of us (v. 32)

- Israel missed the Messiah because they were too busy counting their own steps. They sought righteousness "as if" it were a tally of their deeds.
- In the original text, Paul leaves out the word "the" before "works." Some translations here say, "by the works of righteousness." If you have the NASB, you see it more like Paul wrote it—showing it wasn't just the Law they loved, but the actual **mechanics of earning it**. That love for the mechanics or earning, distracted them from the Savior.

B. The very Stone (Jesus) meant to be our foundation will ruin us if we try to step over it (v. 33)

- This is our **Balaam moment**, like in Numbers 22. Like the prophet beating his donkey because he couldn't see the Angel of the Lord in the way, we often fight against the "Stone" of Christ because He stands in the way of our pride.
- With Balaam, the Angel of the Lord (Christ: a Christophany in the O.T.) was standing there to slay him in judgment for not looking for God in what he was planning to do. But Jesus isn't standing in our way to slay us; He is now standing there to save us.

"He who seeks to establish his own righteousness does not know what righteousness is... but if he knew it, he would know that it is Christ alone who is our righteousness." — *John Calvin*

C. We must not let our religious effort become a blindfold

- If we are only looking at our own performance, we will always collide with the Cross. Will Christ be the Rock we build on, or the Stone we are broken on?

Instead...

III. We must look for, find, and rest in the One who is there to be our finish line (10:1–4)

No matter how sincere we are at being good, we will always bear all the moments when we weren't, always unable to shed the weight, the burden of them on our shoulders.

A. Sincerity is a terrible savior to build a foundation on (vv. 1–3)

- We can have "zeal for God" and still be completely lost.
- Israel was working hard to "establish" their own monument of goodness.
- Paul says they refused to **submit** (*hypetagēsan*), they refused to "subject themselves to"—this is a military term for a soldier finally stopping his own agenda and taking his rightful place in the rank.

B. Our futile and never ending pursuit ends only in the moment we reach the Person of Jesus Christ (v. 4)

- In the Greek, Paul shouts the word "**End**" (*Telos*) at the very beginning of the sentence.
- Paul places this word at the very beginning of the sentence for maximum emphasis: "***Telos gar nomou Christos...***" (For the **end** of the law is Christ...). By doing this, he forces the reader to hit the "Stop Sign" before they even get to the subject of the sentence.
- In the first century, *telos* didn't just mean a chronological "stop" (like the end of a movie). It carried two distinct but related meanings:
 - **Termination:** The conclusion of a thing. It is the point where something ceases to be in effect. (e.g., the end of a contract).
 - **Consummation/Goal:** The "purpose" or "target" toward which something was aiming. (e.g., the "end" of an education is a degree).
- Paul wants us to see the "Stop Sign" first. Christ is the finish line. The Law was the map that pointed us to the destination; now that we have arrived at Christ, the map has done its job.
- Unlike Ralf Waldo Emerson and Confucius, the journey cannot even be taken until we see the destination by faith. Only then will the journey even make sense and have meaning. The meaning of the journey is only found in the knowledge and purpose of the destination.

"If you want to know what the Law was for, it was for this: to lead you by the

hand to Christ. The Law is the schoolmaster; Christ is the end of the school." —
Charles Spurgeon

- To follow our illustration, the Law is the path that is meant, not for our personal discovery of self, but our personal discovery of Christ. Jesus is the only purpose of the path, which is to keep us heading in the direction that leads us to Him.

C. Submission is simply admitting that the race is over because we see Jesus in the path

- **It is the voluntary yielding of our effort to His achievement**
- The "mountain" of Law ends at the Person of Christ. We can stop building now; the Finish Line has come to us.
- We can finally rest.

The Conclusion: Setting Down the Stones

- We have spent this morning looking at the difference between a **mountain of things** and the **Work and Person of Christ**.
- We've seen that we can be the most sincere runners on the track, like Israel, and still be running away from the goal.
- We've seen that we can be so distracted by the "mechanics" of our own goodness that we trip over the very Savior God sent to be our Foundation.
- We can either stay in the race that makes us feel good at the moment, but never gets us to our intended destination, or we can accept the race that was run by Jesus that makes us be good through His righteousness, rather than our own.

The beauty of Romans 9 and 10 is that our race doesn't have to end in exhaustion. It ends in a Person.

If we take one thing home today, let it be this:

Righteousness is not a mountain of "things" to be achieved through our effort, but the Person of Christ to be received through our faith.

It is not a righteousness that we must create through our own efforts, but God's righteousness offered to us through God's plan to redeem us.

The Final Pastoral Plea

Paul's passionate plea this morning is simple:

Stop building on our own foundation

- Many of us came in here today carrying a heavy backpack full of "Mitzvot"—a list of

"shoulds" and "musts" that we hope will finally make us acceptable to God. We are tired. We are looking at our feet, worried about our next step, terrified of stumbling.

- Let us look up together.
- The "Stone" in our path isn't a hurdle to get over; He is a Rock to rest upon.
- Submission isn't a heavy work; it is the relief of a soldier who finally realizes the war is won, he can put his heavy gear down, and he can take his place in the victory parade.
- We don't have to establish our own monument of righteousness. Christ is the *Telos*. He is the Finish Line. And He has walked back from that finish line to meet us right where we are stumbling.

Let us accept the gift.

Let us stop the sprint.

Let us enter the rest.

The Transition to the Deacon Series

Here is the secret of the Christian life:

Resting in Christ doesn't lead us to inactivity; it leads us to a new kind of energy

When we realize we aren't working *for* our salvation, we are finally free to work *from* our salvation. Because Christ is the finish line of our pursuit for righteousness, we don't serve in this church to "finish the race" or to earn a status. We serve because the race is already won and we are secure.

Over the next few Sundays, we move into a study of the **Biblical Deacon**. We are going to look at what it means to be a "servant-leader." We aren't going to look for ways to "achieve" more for God, to be better Christians; we are going to see how God has gifted specific people to support this body — His church, so that we can all flourish in the security of what Christ has already done and help others do the same.

We are going to move from the "Mountain of Works" to the "Basin of Service"—that is where we are headed.

We can only do and be that if we are resting in God's righteousness through Christ rather than our own.