How to Be Righteous
Scripture: Romans 10:5-13

Introduction

Children are interesting creatures. They are born with an insatiable desire to learn. They also desire to do what they want and when they want to do it. Parents have the God given responsibility to train these young people to do good. How do you tell a child to be good? You may tell them do this or that or else they are going to get it. You may give them a list of things to do and hold them accountable to doing them. After all is said and done, you may as well pray that they will do good, because with all your instruction, your children will still decide to do whatever they want. My dad used to tell me, “Son, do as I say, not as I do.” Children have a choice to follow their parents’ instructions, or to do whatever they want to do. Adults have the same choice. They can decide to obey their boss, the law, their wives…or they can decide to do what ever they want to do. But there are consequences for the wrong choice. Isn’t that right, men?

Paul began Romans chapter ten by reminding us of his intense desire to see others, particularly his fellow Israelites, to do good. He defined this good he wanted them to do as being righteous. He mentioned that his fellow Israelites were passionate about being righteous, but they were wrong in how they pursued it. We know that it is possible to be passionate about something and to be passionately wrong about it. Likewise, it is possible to be zealous for God and for righteousness and still not be righteous. Many Israelites were ignorant and pursued the wrong things to be righteous. Many do the same today. In this passage, Paul referred to two ways people try to be right with God. They either try to do it themselves, thinking that they can work hard enough, obey well enough, or do enough good things to be right. The other way is to put all of that aside and trust someone else to do it for you. Do it yourself or trust someone else to do it for you. Which way actually works? Let’s look at the text.

Way to Righteousness by the Law

The first way to righteousness that Paul mentioned in this passage was a righteousness based on following the Law of God. Look at verse five.

*Romans 10:5*  
For Moses writes about the righteousness that is based on the law, that the person who does the commandments shall live by them.

God gave His righteous Law to the Israelites. We would expect this to be a good thing. If you want to know how to be a good citizen, you will be careful to follow the law of the land. God was leading His people into a land He had promised them and He wanted His people to live well and do well while they were there. He gave them the Law to teach them to be good citizens in His land. The Israelites had carried that meaning further and tried to find righteousness with God by following the demands of the Law. The Israelites saw the Law as a way to lift themselves up to God. Doing it this way, you just need to keep working at it until you finally get it. Is this the way it ought to be?

Scripture quoted from the English Standard Version (ESV) unless otherwise noted.
Moses told Israel that they were to keep God’s Law and live by it. What are we to make of the statement that they “shall live by it”? Does it mean that if you pursue righteousness by following the Law you will have eternal life? Does it mean that if you pursue righteousness by the following the Law you must live by each and every commandment? Well, it is true that if you choose to follow the Law for righteousness, you must follow all of it. If you break one commandment, you may as well break all of them. If you try to become righteous by your own efforts, though, you will fail. People try to do it by themselves. They do all sorts of things in a foolish pursuit to earn God’s favor. They say, “If only I try a little harder, or if I give a little more, or if I read the Bible more, or if I pray harder, I will earn God’s favor. The problem is that you cannot earn His favor.

The Israelites, those who Paul passionately desired to see right with God, sought to establish their own righteousness. (Romans 10:3) In doing so, they missed the Savior to whom the Law was intended to point God’s people. They missed the goal of the Law. God gave His Law to His people as a tutor to lead the Jewish nation to Someone else. The Law and the Old Testament sacrificial system were intended to show our guilt and point us to a Savior Who could remove that guilt. Basically, the goal of the Law was to point people to Jesus Christ. He is the fulfillment of the Law and He is our righteousness. To pursue righteousness by following the Law is a futile effort and misses the point of the Law of God. In Christ, the righteousness of God is perfected.

Way to Righteousness by Faith

If the way to righteousness is not by following the commands of the Law, what is it then? How are we to be righteous? Paul interpreted what God said in the Old Testament Law to point to what God did through a Savior. The other way to become righteous is through faith. This does not mean that we believe in just anything or anyone, but we must have a faith that actually works. For this we turn to verses six through eight.

Romans 10:6–8 6 But the righteousness based on faith says, “Do not say in your heart, ‘Who will ascend into heaven?’ (that is, to bring Christ down) 7 or ‘Who will descend into the abyss?’ (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). 8 But what does it say? “The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart” (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim);

In this passage, Paul quoted Deuteronomy 30:12–14 to show the contrast between a righteousness based on faith and a righteousness based on the Law. The faith Paul had in mind was a faith in Jesus Christ. Where Moses used commandment, Paul used Christ, since Jesus is the end of the Law. The righteousness based on faith sees God’s Law now fulfilled in Christ. God has sent His one and only Son to do what no one else could — that is perfectly follow the demands of the Law. In what may be a confusing statement, Paul essentially stated that there is no need to travel to heaven to bring Christ to earth, for God has already sent Him to the world for our salvation. Nor should anyone think they must bring Christ up from the dead, for God has already done that, too. The Father raised His Son from the dead. What God requires is not superhuman effort in following the Law or reaching God, but a supernatural faith in Jesus Christ.
God is saying to the world, “Stop trying to do what my Son has already done for you. Believe in Him.” God has brought righteousness and salvation near to us. Moses pointed out that God’s revelation was accessible, and Paul quoted Moses to show that Christ is now accessible. At the right time, God the Father sent His one and only Son, Jesus Christ, to be the ultimate sacrifice and the righteousness of everyone who will believe in Him. We do not have to work our way toward Heaven to reach Christ. We also do not have to go to the grave to find Him. We must simply have faith in Him. But, the righteousness that is based upon faith begins by submitting to God. The problem with the Israelites was that they did not submit to the righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ. They rejected God’s Son and the righteousness He gives us. Have you put aside your efforts to be right and are instead trusting solely in the atoning work of Jesus Christ? It is the only way which works.

Two Steps to Righteousness (Confession and Belief)

In his book titled “What Jesus Demands from the World”, John Piper lists the number one demand of Jesus is for people to be born again. Jesus demands that the world be born again, or born from above. As we have gone through Paul’s letter to the Romans, he has vigorously defended the sovereignty of God and His calling in the process of rebirth. But what about our human responsibility? Is it just God electing and calling people to Himself? That is one way to look at it. When Charles Spurgeon was asked how he reconciles God’s sovereignty and human responsibility, he responded, “I never reconcile two friends, never. These two doctrines are friends with one another; for they are both in God’s Word, and I shall not attempt to reconcile them.” In chapters eight and nine, Paul explained God’s sovereign work in our salvation. Here in chapter ten, we see the other side of the coin. Paul explains our part in pursuing a righteousness based on faith.

Romans 10:9–10

9 ...if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. 10 For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.

People have a way of complicating the matter of salvation when it is really quiet simple. It is so simple, a child can understand it. There are two basic parts listed in these verses that describe our responsibility in becoming righteous. They are confession and belief and these two go together. We confess something and we believe something.

Confessing with your mouth does not mean that your words are a “work”. A true confession gives outward evidence of an inward faith. It also does not mean that merely speaking anything saves you, such as confessing a particular sin or fact. What is the confession of faith? It is “Jesus is Lord”. What does it mean to you for Jesus to be Lord? What it should mean is that you are acknowledging that Jesus Christ is the supreme authority of your life. When we confess Jesus as Lord, we are submitting to Him and pledging our obedience and worship to Him. We are relinquishing all our material possessions and placing our lives under His divine protection. Essentially, we believe that Jesus is God Himself. He is Emmanuel. He is God with us. He is God in the flesh. How does that impact your life? Is He Lord of your life?

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Confession is not enough. In fact, true confession originates from the heart. It is born from something that has already happened within us. If you have not believed, then whatever confession you make is full of empty words. Saving faith is not mere intellectual agreement with something God has said. It is agreeing with God, but it is also a deep inward trust in Jesus Christ at the core of your being. Notice that the belief we are to have is in something very particular. Paul did not tell us to just believe in Jesus Christ. He told us to believe God raised Jesus from the dead. This shows the importance of the resurrection. It was not enough for Jesus to be born in a manger or to die on a cross, but He had to be raised from the dead. The cross is essential to our faith, but without the resurrection, our faith would be useless and we would still be in our sins. (1 Corinthians 15:17) To be a Christian is to believe in your heart the resurrection of Christ and to confess with your mouth that Jesus is God.

If you have accepted Christ, think about what that was like. Was it an intellectual choice or did you really believe it with your whole being? Was it just an affirmation by reciting some prayer someone else taught you, or did you really, truly believe with your whole heart that Jesus Christ is not just your Savior, but He is your Lord? Do you really believe that Jesus was born, has died, and was raised from the grave? Do you believe that by trusting in Him you have forgiveness of sin and eternal life with God? Are you trusting in that for your salvation, for your righteousness? This is the belief and confession that anyone can make in order to be righteous. This is the only way to righteousness and the only way to eternal life. Are you righteous? If not, you can be!

Conclusion

If you have ever wondered how to be right with God or how to become a Christian, God’s Word tells us that salvation is as close as your own mouth and heart. People want to make it complicated, but it is as simple as believing that Jesus died and was resurrected for your sins and then confessing Him as Lord of your life. Which way are you trying to pursue righteousness? Are you trying to do various things to reach Heaven or are you trusting in a Savior who came from Heaven for you and has already done everything necessary for you to be righteous? Do you rely upon your name, your reputation, your name on a church roll, what you have done in the past, how much money you have given to make you right with God? If so, you may find yourself standing before God’s throne and He tell you, “Depart from me, I never knew you.”

The way to righteousness is through faith in Jesus Christ. All you have to do is trust in Him. This promise is also for anyone who will come to Christ. Anyone who comes to Christ in faith will be saved. It does not matter who you are, what your background is, what color your skin is, how wealthy or how poor you are, if you put your trust in Jesus Christ as your salvation and your righteousness, you will be saved. If you have not done that, will you today? Will you come to Him and trust in Him? If you have trusted in Jesus Christ, but maybe you are still holding on to your “sovereignty” or to your “lordship”, As the famous Disney song so rightly says, let it go. Jesus is either Lord of your whole life, or Lord of none of it. Trust in Him as your Lord and Savior and you will receive His righteousness. Thanks be to God. Amen!