

**“Why Are So Many Unsaved?”**  
**Romans 9:30-10:4**  
**April 30, 2023**

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**INTRODUCTION:**

The question posed by our sermon title is the very same question Paul asks in our passage, though he is asking the question about his fellow Jews. Paul’s “why” question is introduced with the irony of verses 30-31. **“Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness have attained it, that is, a righteousness that is by faith; but that Israel who pursued a law that would lead to righteousness did not succeed in reaching that law. Why?** At one level it doesn’t seem fair. It is like the person who lives a completely unhealthy lifestyle, but lives into his 90’s. His diet is terrible, he never gets any exercise, and he just sits around watching television most of the day. Another person is careful in all the ways that we are told are important for good health, yet falls over dead from a heart attack at age fifty. At one level, the Gentiles were like the person with the unhealthy lifestyle while the Jews were like the other person who dies young despite healthy living.

Jewish rejection of Jesus as Messiah was a very significant issue for the church in its early days. Why were most of the churches largely Gentile in their makeup, with only a smattering of Jews? Jews and not Gentiles were the experts on the Jewish Messiah. Why had the experts largely concluded that Jesus was not the Messiah described so frequently in the Old Testament? Paul gives two answers to this question. In chapter 9, he views things from the divine side and says that God has a purpose in election. There are not more Jews in the church because of God’s gracious choice of Gentiles. In chapter 10, he views things from the human side and says that it’s because they’ve not believed the gospel.

Why do people, whether Jews in Paul’s day or people in our own, not believe this good news? After all, the gospel is good news of a great future that comes as a gift from God. Most of us have loved ones who have made the choice not to receive this gift of eternal life. It is helpful for us to understand why they’ve made such a choice, if for no other reason than knowing how to pray for them. Three reasons are offered in today’s passage.

**I. The Offense of Jesus – 9:30-33**

The last verses of chapter 9 are dominated by a construction metaphor. Paul likens Jesus to a stone that is rejected by the stone mason. The mason is looking through his pile of stones for the perfect cornerstone for the building he is erecting. The cornerstone is crucial to the erection of a solid and stable wall,

so he wants to be careful in his selection. He comes upon one that would actually be perfect for the building that he should want to build, but it doesn't suit him. So he throws it on the discard pile. The problem isn't that the stone was unsuitable, but rather that his vision for the kind of building he was to build was deficient.

His rejection of the perfect stone turns out to have a negative consequence for him. It becomes a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense. The spiritual truth taught by this metaphor is that a person's life falls apart when Jesus is not given his proper, foundational place in the building of our lives. That happens when someone is offended by Jesus. Paul is talking here about Jewish unbelievers, and he tells us in verse 32 why they are offended by Jesus. They did not succeed in their pursuit of righteousness **"because they did not pursue it by faith, but as if it were based on works."** The cross of Christ and the good news of the gospel undermines our self-righteousness. It is an offense to our pride.

There are a couple of important lessons we learn from these verses. First, Jesus is the only foundation upon which a successful life can be built. If you don't see it that way, then you are building the wrong kind of life. You are building a life that will fall apart at the end rather than one that will endure. That's why this quote from Isaiah ends the way it does. **"And whoever believes in him will not be put to shame."** A person is put to shame when he or she has committed to building a life on something that turns out to let them down and disappoint them. This person has spent an entire lifetime climbing the ladder of success only to discover that the ladder is leaning against the wrong wall.

A second lesson we learn is the importance of submitting to the kind of life God wants to build in us. It is a life of faith, not works. It is a life, as I've stated repeatedly in our study of Romans, that is dominated by the verb "receive," not the verb "achieve." It is a life of dependence on God rather than independence from him. If we don't keep in mind this vision of learning the life of faith and dependence on God, then we will usually miss the things God is doing. Living a life dominated by the verb "achieve" results in constant striving for something "out there." As a result, we will miss the thing that God is doing right now in our lives to bless us with dependence on him. We will miss the glorious story God is writing with our lives and devote ourselves instead to a false story that we want written.

To be part of this glorious thing God is building with our lives and which is built on the foundation of Jesus, it is usually required that we have to give up on the story we want written. Let me give an illustration from a small story about our own church. For years, we recognized our need for an expanded parking lot and thought we knew what God had in mind for this. There was a horse farm right behind us, and we calculated that we needed less than two

acres of it to properly expand our parking lot. We prayed, and we approached the owners of the land on multiple occasions to ask if they would sell us some of the land. We were turned down every time. Then, right after the housing crash of 2008, the bank had to foreclose on the property across the street from us where a developer was attempting to sell seven residential lots. For months, it sat there with a “For-Sale” sign on it and no interest from any buyer. It finally occurred to us that maybe this was the answer to our parking lot needs, and we eventually were able to purchase, for a very good price, what is now Altadena Park.

So open your eyes to the way God is building in you a life of faith and dependence. The first reason there are so many unsaved is that they are envisioning a life of self-dependence and of works achievement. To fit Jesus into such a life is like the proverbial square peg in a round hole.

## **II. Zeal Without Knowledge – 10:1-2**

Before getting to the second answer to our question of why there are so many unsaved people in the world, we need to pause and consider the appropriate attitude toward the unsaved. Paul has already talked about that back in the early part of the previous chapter. He spoke there about the great sorrow it caused him, going so far as to say that he would be willing to be cursed and go to hell in their place (9:2-3). In today’s passage, he says that his heart’s desire is for their salvation. He took no pleasure in the thought that those responsible for so much of his suffering would perish in hell. Rather, his desire and his prayer was for their salvation.

Perhaps part of this desire for their salvation was that Paul saw in them a reflection of himself prior to his conversion. **“For I bear witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge”** (v. 2). Zeal for God or for many other things can be a good thing. The opposite of zeal is apathy or cynicism. But a zealous person is motivated and is willing to work hard to accomplish what he believes in. But what happens when zeal is severed from truth? It just means that you go down the wrong path with greater speed, which only serves to take you further from where you need to be.

We live in an era that doesn’t value truth. Many would even deny that there is such a thing as truth. But the lack of truth takes a good thing like zeal and turns it into a bad thing. One of the common forms of this today is to claim that sincerity is the main thing that counts. It doesn’t really matter what you believe as long as you are sincere about it. Whether you believe that Jesus is God or Allah is God is not so important, as long as you are sincere in your belief. After all, these are just names for God, and it doesn’t amount to anything more than whether a child calls his father “Daddy” or “Papa.” That wasn’t Paul’s view, and it is not the view of the Bible.

The belief that sincerity is enough is a convenient belief, because it makes unnecessary the hard work of seeking truth. But sincerity is not enough. Every other area of life demonstrates this truth. Would you want a surgeon who believed that sincerity was enough when it came to treating your condition? “It’s okay that I took out your kidney instead of your appendix, because I sincerely thought that your kidney was the problem. Remember, it doesn’t matter what you believe as long as you are sincere.” Not only is the elevation of sincerity over truth something that is inadequate, it is also cruel. Imagine telling someone trying to pull out into traffic in their car that it doesn’t matter what you believe about traffic laws and the speed of cars on the highway. What’s important, you say, is that when you get to an intersection, you must carry on sincerely as you cross the busy highway. The Bible teaches here and everywhere else that sincerity is not enough. There is a truth that must be understood and embraced.

### **III. Self-Righteousness – 10:3-4**

The third reason there are so many unsaved is self-righteousness. Paul says it like this when speaking of his fellow Jews: **“being ignorant of the righteousness that comes from God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God’s righteousness”** (v. 3). The effort to establish one’s righteousness is called “self-righteousness,” and it is a universal trait of all who have not learned to live out of the righteousness that comes to us as a gift from God. It is also something Christians continue to battle as well.

Let’s begin by defining self-righteousness. I agree with Martin Luther that it is more than just a religious category. Luther said that every person in the world who is outside of Christ, even the most irreligious, seeks righteousness. What did he mean by that? The righteousness that is universally sought is the feeling that things are okay with us after all. It seeks to address the deep suspicion that lies within us all that perhaps things are not what they should be in our lives. So self-righteousness is the attempt by our own efforts to gain a sense that things are okay with us.

Self-righteousness is as old as sin. After Adam and Eve’s first sin, they experienced for the first time a deep sense that things were not okay with them. Three names are given to that in Genesis 3: fear, hiding, and shame. These are all strong, even unbearable emotions that must be remedied in some way. So Adam and Eve seek to remedy them in a way that is completely inadequate. They look around for something that can be used to cover their nakedness, and their eyes fix on some leaves of a fig tree. Fig leaves are among the largest of leaves, typically anywhere from 5-10 inches in length and 4-6 in width. But their ability to hold stitching would not be great, even when green, and completely inadequate when they begin to dry out after a day or two. That

is the way it is with our self-righteous efforts. They may hold some promise initially, but in short order they prove themselves to be wholly inadequate.

I've referred before to a scene from the first *Rocky* movie that I find to be a perfect illustration of this. On the night before his boxing match with the heavyweight champion of the world, Rocky's girlfriend, Adrienne, asks him why he is going through with this. She is concerned that he could be seriously injured. Rocky replies, "I just have to go fifteen rounds tomorrow, so I'll know I'm not a bum." The reality is that we all live with a sense of encroaching "bumness" in our lives. It is part of our fallen condition. The question is what do you plan to do about it. Self-righteousness is simply some version of Rocky's going fifteen rounds. What is your version of going fifteen rounds? For most of us, it's some form of being right and looking good. To come to faith in Christ requires the difficult step of seeing the thing that you thought was an asset, an accomplishment, as something you need to repent of.

To be saved is both difficult and easy. It is difficult to see and repent of our self-righteousness, but it is incredibly easy to get the kind of righteousness we need because it comes as a gift. **"For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes."** What does that mean? The word "end" in English, just as in Greek, could mean goal or termination. It could be the end as in the end of the story, or it could be end as in the goal. Perhaps it is intentionally ambiguous and means both. In any case, Jesus is the end of the struggle for all who believe. He is the end of the struggle to deal with our encroaching bumness by something we would do. In Christ, we are provided a righteousness from God that we simply receive by faith.

Reflecting on Adam and Eve's failed fig leaf effort, Paul Miller writes, "In the face of Adam and Eve's evil, God takes up needle and thread and patiently sews fine leather clothing for them (see Genesis 3:21). He covers their divided, hiding selves with love. The same God permits his Son to be stripped naked so we could be clothed. God is not cynical in the face of evil. He loves." (*A Praying Life*, p. 91)

## **CONCLUSION:**

When I was choosing our closing hymn for today's service, I thought this Horatius Bonar hymn, "Not What My Hands Have Done," would be perfect. But I don't like to choose unfamiliar hymns as our closing hymns. So I asked Wendy if she thought many people knew this hymn. Her response reflected my thoughts exactly. She said, "If they don't know it, they should." This hymn speaks the exact opposite of why there are so many unsaved. If you can sing these words and own them as your own, then you have crossed from the many who are unsaved into the family of God.