

Romans 10:5-17      Saved By Faith, Not Obedience to the Law

If we were to undertake a careful examination of the various religions of the world we would find that obedience to the law is the only way to heaven for those who do not believe in Jesus Christ as their Savior. This is also tends to be true among those who claim to be "spiritual" but don't want anything to do with organized religion. For all of these, their god is a demanding, often vengeful and angry, god who must be appeased by their efforts to obey his or her laws. The law is laid out and described in any number of ways throughout this vast array of world religions, but it always comes down to the this: be a good person as your god defines it, and do the best you can to obey the dictates, commands, and precepts of the god, or gods, you believe in.

An interesting fact about these various religions is that all their commandments and laws are derived from the Law the one true God gave to Moses. That's because God's Law is written on our hearts and sears the conscience, even of the unbeliever. Therefore, in all religions, except for true Christianity, the means of salvation can be summarized as follows: "If you keep the law, your god will be pleased with you and you will be saved."

In today's Epistle lesson St. Paul does say that keeping the Law, which includes the Ten Commandments and all the rest of God's commands and directives, is one way to obtain righteousness before God and be saved. But there's a catch. If this is how you hope to get into heaven, then you must keep the Law perfectly -- all the time. You can never, I repeat NEVER, break ANY of God's laws and commandments. You can't even bend them a little if the situation seems to call for it. You can never have an impure thought. You can never hold a grudge. You can't tell any little white lies. You can never back talk your parents or mutter under your breath. You can never be disrespectful to your boss or any another authority, which includes breaking the speed limit. You can never gossip about anyone, or withhold part of the truth. You can't steal a paperclip from work. You must love your neighbor as yourself. You can't short-change God in the offering plate claiming you don't have anything to give, when you just spent \$500 or more so your child can be part of a traveling sports team. And you definitely can't skip weekly worship for your convenience. God has set the Sabbath Day apart from all other days as a holy day for worship, and rest from the things of the world. It is not optional, even though many people seem to think so.

In the 5<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew's gospel Jesus shows us just how unyielding the demands of the Law truly are. Concerning the 6<sup>th</sup> Commandment Jesus says, "Everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Mt 5:28). Concerning the 5<sup>th</sup> Commandment He says, "You have heard it said, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' But I say to you, that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment" (Mt 5:22). And for those who are feeling secure in their holiness before God, Jesus warns, "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 5:20).

So, for anyone who likes to compare themselves to others and think, “I’m not as bad as so-and-so,” be warned. The righteousness that is based on the Law requires that you keep all the Law, all the time. There is no middle ground or wiggle room. And failure to perfectly keep the Law has eternal consequences, as St. Paul writes, “The wages of sin is death” (Rom 6:23a); by which he means the death of the body and death of the soul. That is the price God demands for sin, even one sin.

Salvation by keeping the Law is an all or nothing proposition. You either keep the Law fully and perfectly, never straying to the left or the right, but always walking the straight and narrow path that leads to righteousness and salvation -- or you don’t. One false step, at any time in your life, and you are done for. There’s no second chance. Here’s the bottom line when it comes to the Law -- treat others as you would have them treat you, and keep God’s Law and His Commandments; all of them, all the time, and you will be saved. That is the way of salvation that is based on the Law.

By the way, God doesn’t give bonus points for effort or good intentions. And He doesn’t pass out participation trophies for going through the motions as a Christian. God’s Law is always perfect and holy, and those who think they can be saved by obedience to the Law must also be perfect and holy.

That being said, you should know that Jesus does say in Luke chapter 10 that if you do keep God’s Law perfectly, you will have eternal life in heaven. In response to the lawyer who came to test Him concerning salvation by obedience to the Law, Jesus replied “Do this (love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself) and you will live” (Lk 10:28). This is a personal guarantee from Jesus that if you do keep God’s Law in its entirety, never failing to observe all that the Lord your God has commanded you, you will have eternal life in heaven.

But where is the comfort in THAT? Where is the hope of God’s grace and mercy and forgiveness for your sins, and salvation for your soul, if you do happen to mess up once in a while? There isn’t any! When it comes to being saved by keeping the Law, here is the cold hard truth -- no matter how hard you try, no matter how much you want to do what is good and pleasing in God’s sight, there simply isn’t any way you can do everything that God’s Law demands.

So, if trying to keep the Law and being a “good” person does not give us the assurance and hope of salvation, what does? St. Paul provides the answer in verses 8 and 9 of our text. “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” (Rom 10:8-9).

There you have it. Believe in Jesus Christ as your Savior from God’s wrath and eternal punishment for your sins, and you will be saved. Jesus, Himself, assures us that “whoever believes in Me, even though he dies, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die” (John 11:25).

God's Word is plain and easy to understand. The salvation of your soul is obtained only by believing in Jesus Christ as your Savior. It's that simple.

And how do you to obtain such saving faith? It comes from God. You see, faith does not come from within ourselves. It comes from outside ourselves. In fact, it is God's gift to you. As we learn from Luther's Small Catechism in the explanation of the Third Article of the Apostles' Creed, "the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the truth faith."

Contrary to what many people believe, the Scriptures plainly teach that faith in Jesus Christ is not something you do. In fact, the Scriptures teach that because we are sinners, by our very nature we don't want anything to with God. Because He is holy, and we are not, we would rather run and hide from Him, as Adam and Eve did, rather than turn and come to Him.

Therefore, faith cannot be about your decision for Jesus. Rather, faith is about His decision to choose you for salvation. Faith is also not about you turning your life over to Jesus or inviting Him into your heart by praying the "Believer's Prayer." The fact of the matter is that, apart from the Holy Spirit working faith in your heart, you can never pray the "Believer's Prayer" or any other prayer for that matter.

As St. Paul writes in his letter to the Ephesians, until the Holy Spirit enlivens faith in our hearts, we "are dead in our trespasses and sins" (Eph 2:1). And as you know, that which is dead is incapable of doing anything for itself. It's dead. Therefore, the soul that is dead in its trespasses and sins has no power in it, no life in it, and must be enlivened by something outside itself. And that "something" is the Holy Spirit who breathes faith and life into our cold dead hearts through the Word of God.

Just as Adam, who laid lifelessly on the ground before God, was brought to life when God breathed the breath of life into him, so the soul that is dead in its trespasses and sins must brought to life by the power of the Holy Spirit breathing the breath of life into it, working in and through the saving message of Jesus Christ. For in the breathing out of the Gospel, the Holy Spirit quickens your soul to life and gives you the gift of saving faith. Thus St. Paul writes, "The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart, that is the word of faith that we proclaim" and "faith comes by hearing and hearing through the word of Christ" (Rom 10:17).

Thus, it is clear, that faith in Jesus Christ as your Savior is a gift from God to you, and a work of God in you. And because God is the One who gives this faith, it is a perfect gift that bestows all the faith you will ever need to confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, and be saved (Rom 10:9). In His grace and mercy God has given us His Word that we may hear of His mercy and forgiveness for sinners through His Son, Jesus Christ. And He sends forth faithful pastors to proclaim the Gospel that you may hear and believe the Good News of salvation that Christ has won for you on the cross.

Just as it was faith in God's word of promise to send the Messiah that saved Abraham, so it was faith that saved Peter, who when asked by our Lord who he believed Jesus to be, boldly confessed "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." To which Jesus replied, "Upon this rock (this confession of faith) I will build My church" (Mt 16:18). And because Christ has built His Church upon the rock of faith, rather than upon our good works or our efforts to keep the Law, St. Paul writes "everyone who believes in Him will not be put to shame" (v11).

This, my friends, is the Good News of salvation, the word of hope, that our gracious and merciful Lord proclaims to you, and to every soul that is wearied and burdened by the tyranny and oppression of obedience to the Law. Therefore, he who has ears let him hear and believe the Goods News that, for Jesus' sake, all of your failed attempts to keep God's Commandments, all of your transgressions against His Law, in fact, all of your sins have been forgiven.

God has heard your plea for mercy, just as He heard Peter's cry "Lord, save me!" as he began to sink beneath the waves. And knowing that there was nothing you could do to save yourself, He reached out in love and compassion, and sent His Son to pay the price for your sins by shedding His blood and giving His life on the cross.

For your sake, and for your salvation, He took upon Himself the full fury of God's anger and punishment for sin by enduring the torment of hell in your place. And He rose again to life and ascending into heaven, so that you may have eternal life in heaven by believing in Him. For God has promised that "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (v13).

And that includes you.

Amen.