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HOW TO GET RIGHT WITH GOD

Romans 10:9-10

By

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Special Easter Message

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Romans 10:9, 10

A couple of years ago when we stopped by Zion National Park on our family vacation, we rented tubes for the kids to float down the Virgin River. It was great fun for them. Since I had sprained my ankle the day before, I sat on the bank with my ankle in the cold water, watching them float by. They finally prevailed on me to give it a try, and since it looked kind of fun, I limped upstream and launched off. What I didn't realize is that some of the rapids could be kind of tricky to navigate, and I ended up getting dumped in the swift current a couple of times, which didn't do my ankle any good!

I'd like each of you to picture yourself floating down a river. Some of you are in inner tubes, floating lazily along in the calm parts, enjoying the excitement of the rapids when you get to them. Others of you are going in more comfort, in a boat. Back at the place where you rented your tube or boat, there was an ominous warning sign that read, "WARNING! All who go down this river face the risk of going over a fatal waterfall, often without immediate notice. The company assumes no liability." That sounded kind of scary, but since so many others were renting tubes and boats and having so much fun, you shrugged it off by thinking, "That's probably just a disclaimer so the company won't get sued." So you launched off.

The river I'm speaking of is the river of life. Every one of us is floating down it, some just with the basics, some in style. The trip is generally enjoyable. Some get dumped in the rapids, but come up sputtering for air and get back on board. But every once in a while you see someone who hits the rapids, goes under, and never comes up. It troubles you for a while, but you figure, "I'm still floating and enjoying the ride." So you put it out of your mind and keep cruising along. Once in a while you remember that warning sign back at the start and wonder what hidden dangers might be lurking around the next bend, but usually you shake the thought and keep floating along.

Suddenly you notice that the current has gotten much stronger. You're moving quite rapidly downstream. And, you notice a noise that keeps getting louder and louder, until you can't hear anything else. You see some who are trying desperately to paddle upstream, but it's not doing them any good. Some others are simply yelling, "Help! Save me!" But you've heard from some others who were floating down the river that going over the falls is not all that bad. It's just part of the natural cycle of things, and no one really knows what's on the other side. So just accept it.

When it comes to floating down the river of life and facing the inevitability of death and of standing before God, the best advice you can get isn't the philosophy of someone else heading downstream, who thinks that the falls aren't all that bad. Nor is it best to follow the example of those who are rowing for all they're worth to try to escape the inevitable or to deal with it in their own strength. Rather, what you need is someone who has already experienced the falls, who knows for sure what is on the other side, who can tell you how to get ready for it. You need someone with a sure word on how you can be ready to face God.

Jesus Christ is uniquely qualified to tell us what to expect in death and when we face God. He claimed to have come to this earth as one sent by God the Father. He died and was raised from the dead, and was seen in His resurrection by many reliable witnesses. He spoke authoritatively about how we can get ready to face the falls that surely lie ahead on the river of life.

One of those witnesses who saw the risen Lord Jesus was a man who formerly had been bitterly opposed to Him. After his encounter with the risen Christ, the apostle Paul later wrote that the entire Christian faith hangs on the truth of the bodily resurrection of Jesus. He said, "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins" (1 Cor. 15:17). That statement implies that our sins are a problem that need to be dealt with before God, and that they are in fact dealt with in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In the text before us (Rom. 10:9, 10), that same apostle tells us how believing in the risen Lord Jesus gets us right with God.

We get right with God by believing and confessing that Jesus is the risen Lord.

In the context, Paul is talking about his deeply felt concern for his fellow Jews who needed to be right with God, but who in fact were mistaken on this most crucial matter. When Paul says that his prayer to God is for their salvation (10:1), we need to understand what that word *salvation* means. It is not a mild term. It does not mean that folks need to change their course slightly or that they need a little boost from God to help them cope. The only people who need to be *saved* are those who are hopelessly lost or in grave danger, who cannot deliver themselves. So when the Bible talks about the need for salvation, it is referring to a desperate situation where, if God does not intervene, those needing salvation will be eternally lost.

As Paul has shown earlier in the Book of Romans (chap. 3), every person, from the raw pagan to the most religious person on earth, is under God's just condemnation for his sin and is desperately in need of God's salvation. The pagan may not even realize the trouble he's in. He's just floating through life, enjoying the trip, not thinking too much about the falls ahead. The religious person may realize the impending problem, but he's confident that by his own good works and efforts, he can solve it. But Paul has shown that both types are in big trouble, because they have sinned against a holy God.

In the case of the religious type, Paul acknowledges that they have a zeal for God, but it's not according to knowledge (10:2). Contrary to popular opinion, it *does* matter *what* you believe. You can be as sincere as the day is long in believing that your car will fly you across the Grand Canyon. You believe it so sincerely that you drive your car toward the rim at 90 miles per hour. Your sincere belief will plunge you to your death, because it is not based on the truth. You can sincerely believe that because you're a good person, you will get into heaven, but if that is not the truth, you will plunge into destruction.

The Jews were sincere in thinking that their good deeds along with their Jewish birthright (after all, they were God's chosen people) would make them right with God. The fallacy in their thinking was, they didn't understand God's righteousness, nor did they submit to it (10:3). That is precisely the error of many "good" peo-

ple in our day: They underestimate the absolute righteousness of God. They fail to see that God is so holy that even the most righteous person on earth would be consumed if he stood before Him, just as a spaceship would be consumed if it attempted to land on the sun. They overestimate their own righteousness by mistakenly thinking that their good deeds can qualify them for heaven. So Paul wrote these verses to show how people who think they're pretty good, but who really are heading for the falls, can get right with God--get saved. (It also applies to those who know they're in big trouble, who know they need to be saved.)

1. To get right with God, you must recognize that you're wrong before God.

The Apostle Paul formerly thought that he was right with God. He was zealous in his practice of the Jewish faith. As a Pharisee, he was meticulous in keeping the Jewish rituals and ceremonies. He says he was "... a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness of the Law, found blameless" (Phil. 3:5, 6).

But like many who are religious, Paul mistakenly thought that righteousness is an outward matter of keeping a bunch of rules and regulations. He took great pride in his ability to do all these things. But in reality, God's law is a matter of our hearts before Him. His holy standards, rather than justifying us, actually condemn us. The very first commandment, "You shall have no other gods before Me" (Exod. 20:3) convicts us all, because none of us have always put the living and true God in His rightful place in our hearts. The entire law, summed up in the two great commandments, to love God with all our being, and to love our neighbor as we do in fact love ourselves, does not exonerate us. It condemns us by revealing how far we fall short of God's perfect standard.

So God's law reveals His own perfect righteousness as well as the extent of our sin. It tells us of God's judgment that we face because of our sin. Until this dawns on us, we won't recognize our need of salvation. We'll just cruise down the river thinking that things are fine, not recognizing the falls ahead. So the first step in getting right with God is to realize that, even if you're a good person, a religious person, you're wrong before Him.

2. To get right with God, you must recognize that you can never get right with Him by your own efforts.

This was the problem with the Jews of whom Paul is writing in these verses. They thought they could get right with God by keeping His law. In 10:5, Paul quotes Moses to show, "If you want to be right with God by keeping the law, then you've got to keep it perfectly. You've got to live by it entirely."

The problem is, no one, not even the most religious person on earth, can do that. God's law isn't just an external matter. Even if it were, it would be virtually impossible to keep. But it's a matter of the heart, and no one can do it. We've all pushed God aside and done what we've wanted to do. We've all had selfish, hateful, greedy, and lustful thoughts. And no amount of self-reformation can cure the problem or balance out the scales of God's justice, because God has decreed that the wages of our sin is death. We're all in that swift current, heading toward destruction, and it's impossible by our own good works to row against it. Unless God intervenes, we will face His just condemnation for our sins. So if we realize that we are wrong before God and that we can never get right with Him by our own efforts, then we must look elsewhere for an answer. That answer is what Paul calls, "The righteousness based on faith" (10:6).

3. To get right with God, you must recognize that Christ has done for you what you could never do for yourself.

Jesus Christ perfectly fulfilled God's holy law and satisfied, in His death, the penalty of the law that we all deserve. Thus, "Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes" (10:4). This verse means that when you stand before God someday, either you must present to Him the righteousness of Jesus Christ, in whom you are trusting for right standing before God; or, you can present your own "righteousness," which isn't going to cut it!

Verses 6-8 are a bit confusing. Without going into detail, Paul is quoting somewhat loosely from Deuteronomy 30:12-14 to show that even under the law, salvation by grace through faith was readily available to the Jews. Since no one, not even Moses, could perfectly keep the law, God has always graciously offered to justify the person who has faith in God's provision for his sins. As Moses

wrote of Abraham, the father of the Jewish nation, "He believed in the Lord, and He reckoned it to him as righteousness" (Gen. 15:6).

Thus, to get right with God you must first realize that you're wrong before God. Second, you must realize that you can never get right with God by your own works. Then, you must realize that Jesus Christ has done for you what you could not do for yourself, namely, He has made His perfect righteousness available to you by faith. How do we lay hold of Christ's righteousness on our behalf, so that we can be saved?

4. To get right with God, you must believe and confess that Jesus is the risen Lord.

In verses 9 & 10 Paul explains how we can avail ourselves of the righteousness based on faith. Verse 9 states the principle, following the order of the quote from Deuteronomy in verse 8 (mouth, heart); verse 10 explains verse 9 in its logical order (believing first, then confession).

- A. You must *believe* that Jesus is the risen Lord.

To get right with God, you must *believe* in your heart that God has *raised Jesus from the dead*. This encompasses, of course, the fact that Jesus died and the purpose for which He died. As Paul states (1 Cor. 15:3), "Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures." He was the fulfillment of what the Jewish sacrificial system pictured and pointed toward, namely, that for sins to be forgiven, there must be the shedding of blood, and that God accepts the blood of a proper substitute. Thus Jesus is the Lamb of God who shed His blood as the necessary payment to satisfy God's justice. You must believe in this crucified and risen Jesus.

God put His stamp of approval on Jesus' substitutionary death when He *raised Him from the dead* (Rom. 1:4). If He had not been raised, He could not save anyone from their sins. Thus Paul here mentions the resurrection, not to the exclusion of Jesus' death, but because it includes His death and proves that it was acceptable to God as the just penalty for our sins.

Paul says that you must *believe* this *truth* of the resurrection. Faith is not some vague, nice notion that "for every drop of rain that falls, a flower grows." *Faith* has *specific content* regarding what God has revealed about Jesus' death and resurrection. At the same

time, faith is rooted not just in some religious ideas, divorced from verifiable history. Rather, biblical faith is rooted in the *historical fact* of Jesus' bodily resurrection. So, the kind of faith that results in "righteousness" (right standing with God) and "salvation" (being delivered from God's judgment) is based on a well-established historical fact, not on religious speculation.

To be saved, you must *believe* this truth *in your heart*. Biblically, the heart is not just the seat of the emotions, but refers to our whole person--intellect, emotions, and will. Thus biblical faith is more than just intellectual assent, although it includes that. It involves committing your total person, indeed, your eternal destiny, to the crucified, risen Lord Jesus as your only hope of right standing before God.

A lot of people believe in Jesus as the risen Savior in the same way they believe that seat belts in their car save lives. They believe in the concept, that it's true; but they never buckle up. That kind of belief in seat belts doesn't save you in the crunch. And mere agreement with the notion that Jesus is the risen Savior doesn't save you from God's judgment. You must personally avail yourself of what Jesus did for you when He died on the cross and was raised from the dead, so that you are counting everything in this life and in eternity on Jesus' sacrifice (and it alone) being sufficient to put you in right standing before God. That's what it means to believe in your heart that God raised Jesus from the dead.

B. You must *confess* that Jesus is the risen Lord.

Maybe you're thinking, "Wait a minute! I thought that we are saved by grace through faith plus nothing. Isn't confession adding something to faith?" But those who argue in this manner do not understand the nature of genuine faith. We are saved by grace through faith apart from works, but *faith that saves always results in works* that give evidence of the authenticity of the faith. Thus Jesus promised that everyone who confesses Him before men, He will also confess before the Father in heaven, but whoever denies Him before men, He will deny that person before the Father in heaven (Matt. 10:33).

What is it that we are to confess? That "*Jesus is Lord.*" This means that the man (Jesus) is Yahweh, God (Lord). The word

"Lord" points to His *absolute sovereignty* as the rightful ruler of this universe. It includes the personal aspect as well, that He is *my* Lord or Sovereign, with the right to rule my life. The idea that you can accept Jesus as your Savior without accepting Him as your Lord is absurd. To confess Jesus as Lord is to confess Him as your Lord.

One of the first ways a person should confess Jesus as Lord is by being *baptized*. The act of baptism is a public confession that a person has believed in Christ as Savior and Lord and pictures being identified with Jesus in His death, burial, and resurrection. Then we go on confessing Jesus as Lord by living a life pleasing unto Him and by bearing verbal witness as we have opportunity (1 Pet. 3:15).

In verse 9, Paul says that the result of confessing and believing in the risen Lord Jesus is, "You shall be saved." But in verse 10, he distinguishes the results by saying that we believe, resulting in righteousness, and we confess, resulting in salvation. He is looking at the fact that confession, both initially and ongoing, verifies and confirms the inner faith we have in Christ, and he is focusing on the future aspect of salvation, especially, as mentioned by Christ, our future deliverance from God's judgment when He confesses us before the Father because we have confessed Him on this earth (see 1 Pet. 1:9; Matt. 10:32-33).

Conclusion

Some people were touring a mint where coins are made. They came into the room where cauldrons were filled with molten metal. The tour guide told them that if a person were to dip his hand into water and then have someone pour the hot, liquid metal over his hand, he would not feel any pain or suffer injury. Then, turning to a couple, he suggested that perhaps they would like to prove the truthfulness of what he had just said. The husband quickly replied, "No, thanks, I'll just take your word for it." But his wife eagerly said, "Sure, I'll give it a try!" She thrust her hand into a bucket of water and then held it out as the molten metal was poured over it. Just as the guide had said, it harmlessly rolled off. The guide turned to the husband and said, "Sir, you claimed to believe what I said, but your wife truly believed."

Do you claim to believe that Jesus is the risen Lord, or do you truly believe, as evidenced by the fact that in your heart you are

trusting in Christ alone to deliver you from God's judgment? Is your faith revealed in a life that confesses that Jesus is Lord? If so, then you are right with God and need not fear facing Him some day.

Discussion Questions

1. How can we help a person who senses no need for salvation to see his true condition?
2. Someone says, "I believe God is loving and wouldn't judge any sincere, good person." How would you respond?
3. Why is the belief that people are basically good and that their good deeds will save them so offensively wrong before God?
4. What verses show that the idea that "Jesus is my Savior but He's not my Lord" is dangerously flawed? (Try 1 Cor. 6:9-10; Eph. 5:5-6 for starters.)

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