

Confessing, Believing, and Following

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[0 : 00] Over the last decade, are we here? Are we working? Can you hear me? Oh, great. Over the last decade, there have been increasing articles and statistics about what is being referred to as the rise of the nuns.

This story of many people, vast numbers of people leaving organized religion. The nuns refers to people who are not affiliated with any official organized religion. And along with these statistics, I think a lot of people sort of develop this way of imagining our society as being divided into two kinds of people.

There are the religious people, and then there are the irreligious people, and that the religious people, that number is going down, and that the number of irreligious people is going up. That's not actually entirely accurate.

And what we're going to see this morning is a couple of things. First of all, that religious people and irreligious people have a lot more in common than we may think.

And the second thing we'll see is that being a religious person doesn't necessarily mean you are any closer to God than an irreligious person.

[1 : 10] And in fact, it could mean entirely the opposite. So we're going to look at Romans chapter 10 and verse 4. Paul gives us this amazing life-shaping truth.

It's the kind of truth that once you hear it, it begins to change everything. And then the rest of the passage gives us two implications of that truth. So we're going to look at the truth and then the two implications that flow out of it.

Let's pray. Our Lord and Heavenly Father, we thank you for this gathering this morning, the freedom to gather and to worship you. And we thank you for the beginning of this season, this Lenten journey.

And Lord, we pray that wherever we are coming from this morning, whatever distractions may be tugging at the edges of our mind, that you would give us the grace to attend to your word. That you would bless us with a focus and an openness and a receptiveness to what you have to say. Because we know that you have the ability to speak to each one of us. And that whatever we think we most need right now, the thing that we most need is you. And we pray that you would respond in power through your word.

[2 : 16] We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. So first of all, let's open up this truth that Paul gives us. It's worth admitting that at first, when you look at a passage like this, it doesn't seem very relevant to most of us.

Because the Apostle Paul is talking about concepts such as sin and righteousness. Things that most people don't talk about these days in casual conversation. And he's aiming this at a bunch of first century Jews.

Feels pretty far removed from most of us. And yet as we begin to dive into this, we begin to see that this is in fact very profound. And it actually does speak to all of us here in a place like D.C. in 2025, even though it might not seem like it at first.

And it speaks to all of us regardless of whether we consider ourselves to be religious or irreligious. The Jews thought of themselves as God's chosen people. They believed that they were the good guys in the story.

And that the rest of the world is essentially made up of the bad guys or the not as good guys. The Gentiles. The pagans. Those outside of God's covenant.

[3 : 25] The debauched people who live contrary to God's will. And in the chapters leading up to this, remind, you know, just remember we're dropping into chapter 10. So there's been a lot that has come before this.

In the chapters leading up to this, Paul essentially demolishes that binary way of thinking. Of we're the good guys and everybody else is the bad guys. And he's been building this case that these highly religious, highly moralistic people are actually more enslaved to sin than the pagan Gentiles. And I just want to be clear. If you met some of these first century Jews, you would probably immediately be struck by the fact that they are far better than you are. These are probably some of the best people you will ever meet in terms of the way they live.

Their morality is very high. Their conscientiousness is very high. Right? They're very worried about and stress a lot about living well. And so you would meet these people and you would say, man, this is the kind of person I want teaching my kids and coaching, you know, sports and teaching Sunday school.

They're amazing. And Paul's saying they're actually more enslaved to sin than the pagan Gentiles. And the reason goes all the way back to something that Paul says in the very first chapter of Romans. He makes this point.

[4 : 39] The fundamental problem for human beings is not sin. Sin is a symptom. It's downstream of something. The core problem with humanity is not sin.

It's idolatry. He says human beings have essentially exchanged the worship of God for the worship of ourselves and the things that God has made.

We've inverted the order that we were intended to have. Instead of putting God first, we put ourselves and other things that God has made before God. And he says, so instead of living for God, we begin to live for ourselves.

And we live for our work and our career. And we live for our romantic relationships and for material goods. We've reversed the original intended order. And so idolatry is the reason we sin.

So, you know, it's tax filing season. Imagine somebody, I know nobody here would do this, but imagine somebody cheats on their income tax form. Why did they do that?

[5 : 42] I guarantee you it's not because they woke up that morning and thought, you know, I want to find a creative way to sin today. I'm going to lie on my income tax income form. No, they did that because in that moment, or maybe as a pattern in their life, things like money, material possessions, and the safety and security and status those things bring, those are actually more important than God's desire that they be truthful.

They're putting those things first, and that's why they do it. Sin is essentially building your life and meaning on anything other than God, and it could be a very good thing.

It's just not God. And this is why this passage is actually relevant for all of us because I don't care where you're coming from. If you just wandered in here off the street, this is the first time you've ever thought about this.

You don't consider yourself to be religious at all. I guarantee you if you plumb the depths of your heart and look at the patterns in your life, you will discover that you have indeed built your life and meaning on something.

Even if you've never thought about it before, go deep enough into your heart, spend some time introspecting, journaling, reflecting, looking at the patterns, the way you spend your time and money, where you invest, what you prioritize.

[6 : 59] You have built your life and meaning on something. And this is the real difference, I would suggest, between people. It's not about whether you consider yourself to be religious or irreligious.

The real question is, do you build your life and meaning on God, or do you build your life and meaning on something else? It's either God or it's something that God has made.

Some people have overtly rejected God. And they say, I'm going to live how I want. I'm going to do as I please. Nobody can tell me what to do. You know, the pagans, the atheists, the irreligious people.

But here is Paul's point to the Jews. He's saying to them, you are doing the exact same thing. You're doing the exact same thing that the pagan Gentiles have been doing.

And in fact, arguably, you're worse because you know better. Verses 2 and 3, he says, you know, I commend you.

[8 : 03] You're so zealous for God. And yet in all of your zeal and passion, you've completely misunderstood the heart of God. You've missed what was right there all along in the Scriptures.

You think that by keeping all of God's laws, you can somehow climb up this ladder into heaven. You can climb your way up to God. And he says, you're trying to be your own Savior.

You're ultimately trusting in yourself more than you trust in God. And friends, that's idolatry. He says, you're building your life and your meaning on yourself and on your morality. And this is what leads to the life-shaping truth that Paul shares in verse 4. He says, don't you understand? Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes. *Christos telos nomos*. It actually doesn't even say Christ is the end of the law. It says, Christ is the end of law. And that word *telos* doesn't mean just something coming to completion. [9:15] It means a purpose. Christ is the purpose of the law. Christ is that to which the law points. In other words, Paul is saying, here's the whole point of the law.

You're not supposed to be able to keep it on your own. That's why God gave it to you. This is the point that Jesus makes in the Sermon on the Mount. You've heard it said, do not commit adultery. But I say to you, anyone who looks at someone lustfully has already committed adultery. You've heard it said, do not murder. But I say to you, everyone who is angry with his brother or insults his brother is guilty of murder.

What's he saying? God doesn't just care about the external appearance of righteousness. God's definition of righteousness is a heart level definition.

God cares about your heart. It's not just about conforming to an external standard. God wants your heart to be transformed. God wants your heart to be transformed. God wants your heart to be transformed.

[10:16] God wants your heart to be transformed. So the law is there, this is Paul's argument, to convince us beyond the shadow of a doubt that we need a Savior. And he says, if you think the law is a means through which you can save yourself, you've completely missed the point.

It's meant to point you to a Savior. Christ is the *telos* of the law. The law is meant to drive us into the arms of Christ.

You know, John Newton wrote this famous hymn. We sing it from time to time in our church. I ask the Lord that I might grow in faith and love and every grace. Might more of his salvation know and seek more earnestly his face.

I'm sure some of us have prayed that. God, I want to know you more. I want to believe in you more. I want my faith to be strengthened. I want to be more like Jesus. He says, I hoped that in some favored hour at once he'd answer my request.

And by his love's constraining power, subdue my sins and give me rest. God, do it, do it now. Make me more like Jesus. Stop me from sinning and do it all right now.

[11:25] You know, hoping for kind of like an immediate answer, you know. But look what happens. Instead of this, he made me feel the hidden evils of my heart and let the angry powers of hell assault my soul in every part.

He let the angry powers of hell assault my soul. So he says, Lord, why is this? I trembling cried. Wilt thou pursue thy worm to death?

Tis in this way, the Lord replied, I answer prayer for grace and faith. God says, I'm answering your prayer. These inward trials I employ from self and pride to set thee free.

Break the schemes of earthly joy that thou mayst find thy all in me. I'm going to allow you to experience this misery and affliction until it drives you to such a point of desperation that you have no option left but to cry out to me.

Because that is the only way I can set you free. God allows us to face temptation. He allows us to experience affliction in order to set us free so that we will come to the point where we see clearly why we need His grace, why we can't do it on our own, why we can only cry out for mercy.

[12:58] See, this is extremely important when you're in a room with all due respect speaking to a bunch of incredibly good and competent people. We are all such good people.

And that is very spiritually dangerous. See, many people are under the illusion, when they look at their lives, they think they're pretty good, decent people on balance.

And many people live under the illusion that we are free to do as we please. And they say, you know, my life's good, I'm a pretty good person, and right now I'm free to do as I please, and I hear this all the time. Why would I ever want to become a Christian?

There are so many rules I'm going to have to follow. There are so many things I'm then going to have to worry about, things I can do and things I can't do. Why would I ever want to do that?

With all due respect, you are not nearly as free as you think you are. C.S. Lewis writes, no man knows how bad he is until he has tried very hard to be good.

[14:02] Only those who try to resist temptation know how strong it is. We never find the strength of the evil impulse inside us until we try to fight it.

If you jump into a river and you let that river carry you downstream, you feel free. And if the river is wide enough and you can't see the banks on either side, it doesn't even seem like the water is moving.

If you have no point of reference, it seems like the water is standing still. And you feel free to swim in whatever direction you want. It's the same no matter what direction you swim in.

Same level of resistance. So you feel very free. It feels like there's no current. It feels like you can do what you want. God gives us the law as a map.

And the map shows us where the banks of the river are. And the map shows us where we are relative to where God is. And all at once, our perspective shifts.

[15:09] And you begin to realize that the current of sin is drawing you rapidly away from the presence of God. You are rushing downstream.

And God is over here. And sin is driving you further and further away. And you might think you know how strong that current is.

But the only way to truly know how strong that current is, is to try to swim upstream. And see how far you get and see how long you last.

Just to apply this before we move on. This is the first Sunday of Lent. And if you are fasting or in some way observing Lent through a discipline of fasting, I would encourage you, whatever you have decided to fast from, or if you're still kind of trying to figure that out, fast from something that will require you to swim upstream.

Find something that will require you to swim upstream against that river of temptation. To take a stand and a posture in your life against something that up to this point, you have allowed to carry you along.

[16:29] Maybe something that is carrying you away from the presence of God. So maybe you have no idea how strong of a hold alcohol has on you until you try to give it up for 40 days.

Maybe you don't think of yourself as a complainer. Try giving up complaining. How's that going to go?

Maybe you don't think of yourself as someone who gossips. But try giving that up. Figuring out how to make conversation when you can't talk about the latest drama in the community.

Maybe you're holding on to resentment and anger, and you've just allowed that to carry you. Try giving that up. Maybe it's envy. Maybe it's defensiveness.

Here's an exercise you can do. The next time somebody comes at you with a criticism or a complaint or an accusation, it doesn't matter if it's true or untrue. And in fact, I think this works better if it's not true, if it's a false accusation.

[17:36] Don't say anything. Just sit and listen. And then pay attention to what happens inside you. That kind of like righteous anger that rises up in you and the lawyers, your little inner law team that goes to work formulating a defensive strategy.

And all the things that you want to say to prove them wrong, say nothing. See how strong that temptation is to defend and justify yourself.

What's that doing to your spiritual life? Because here's the thing. Even if they're wrong about that particular sin, there's a whole lot of other things they might not even know about. And if we can't quiet that inner voice, that inner law team enough to hear somebody when they come to us with sin that they want us to pay attention to in our lives, how are we ever going to hear when people come to us and speak truth?

If we're so busy formulating our defense, we can't even listen. How are we ever going to be open to receiving truth? And here's the thing. If we can't hear truth from other people, what makes us think we can hear it from God?

Try giving up something that calls you to swim upstream. So this is the profound truth that Paul gives us. Christ is the end or the purpose of the law in our lives. It's meant to drive us into his arms.

[19:06] This flows out into two implications. Number one, because Christ is the end of the law, Paul says salvation is simple to attain.

It is easy and simple and readily available. In verses six and seven, he uses a figure of speech, and he's quoting, by the way, from Deuteronomy chapter nine and then Deuteronomy chapter 30, and this is an incredibly artful, subversive rhetorical move that he does where he's essentially showing

how Deuteronomy is pointing us to this.

And the general point he wants to make is this. Through Christ's being brought down to earth, his incarnation, his life, his death on the cross to atone for sin, through Christ being brought down to earth and his being brought up from the dead, verse seven, God has made righteousness readily available.

And he's like, it was there all along. The whole Old Testament was pointing to the fact that one day God was gonna do this. Through Christ being brought down to earth, his incarnation, his life, his death, and through him being raised from death, salvation and righteousness are available to everyone.

So we have this image that we just used of humanity sort of being swept away from the presence of God by this river of temptation and sin. And then Paul is saying, the good news is you can't swim upstream.

[20 : 36] But when you cry out to Jesus because of what he has done, he's willing to plunge into that water and imagine that water, it's speeding toward this waterfall that leads to judgment and condemnation.

And he pulls you out of the water, he sets you on solid ground, and he takes your place in the water. He goes over that waterfall. He says, this is your only hope to get out of that river.

And he says, all you have to do, all you have to do, you don't have to climb up to heaven to find this, you don't have to plumb the depths of the earth to find this.

All you have to do is respond in faith to the gospel as it is preached. Verse nine, 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.

Not you will likely be saved, you will be saved. I do want you to notice that he's calling for something a little more than intellectual assent.

[21 : 36] I was at a conference, the pastoral team was at a conference a couple of weeks ago in Kansas City, and I heard a guy sharing his life story, and he shared about the moment when his life changed.

And he used this language. He said, you know, that was the moment, and this guy's done a lot of good in the world, and he's done, you know, he's an amazing guy with an amazing story.

But he said, you know, the moment my entire life changed is the moment when I went from being a believer in Jesus to being a follower of Jesus. So it wasn't the story of his conversion to belief in Jesus.

It was the story of the moment when after he had been going into church for a very long time, he went from being just a believer to actually being a follower. And that was a vector point in his life. See, Satan is a believer in Jesus. Right? We're not called to believe only. We're called to follow. And that's why it's important that Paul says that we confess with our mouth that Jesus is Lord.

[22 : 46] We don't confess that Jesus is real, that Jesus is most likely existed because of the historical evidence, although that's true. It's about confessing that Jesus is Lord.

We give our lives to him, our allegiance to him. Now, does that mean that you have to get your whole life together before you become a Christian? And the answer is an emphatic no.

That's kind of like saying you need to clean yourself off so that you can go take a shower or get healthy so that you can go to the hospital. That's not the way it works. This beautiful place, Jesus says, come to me, all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

You know, he's saying, come as you are. You're weary, heavy laden, longing. Come, I'll give you rest. And then he says, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

He says, come to me, I'll give you rest. And then out of that place of rest and acceptance and love, I'm gonna invite you into a new way of living.

[23 : 50] But it's gonna be a life lived with me. It's gonna be a life lived in participation with the life of God. And then, and you, once that relationship is established in your life, then the two of you are gonna work out all of the details of your life.

Then in that relationship, you're gonna ask Jesus about your relationships. And you're gonna ask him about the conflict in your life. And you're gonna ask him about your struggles. And you're gonna ask him about the areas of temptation. And you're gonna ask him about your material possessions. And you're gonna ask him to help you sort it all out. And you're gonna do that together with him. And understand that all of that's gonna take the rest of your life to sort out. But his yoke is easy and

his burden is light.

Because he's there with you. He's bearing the yoke alongside you. So salvation, because of this great truth that Paul lays out, salvation is simple to attain.

It's right here, all we have to do is ask. The second implication is this. Because Christ is the end of the law, salvation is open to everyone. Everyone, Paul says, who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

[24 : 57] He's quoting the Old Testament prophets. He's quoting Isaiah. He's quoting Joel. He's saying it was always there. It wasn't just about the Jews. It was always God's plan to open salvation up to everyone.

That was his plan from the beginning. So it doesn't matter, friends, if you think of yourself as a religious person or an irreligious person. Everybody builds their life on something. And it's either going to be God or it's going to be something else. You may be irreligious and you never thought about God or what it means to have a relationship with God. Or you may be religious, but you've built your life on your own morality or your devotion or your commitment or the degree to which you're willing to sacrifice for God rather than on God's grace.

No matter what your story may be, God is saying he will save you and all you need to do is ask. So to come back to this image of a river one last time, on our own, the truth is, friends, we are all caught in the current of this river of sin and temptation.

And if we do nothing, right? If we do nothing, that does not mean we are in a neutral place. That river is pulling us rapidly away from the presence of God, further and further away.

[26 : 26] Other religions offer swimming lessons. They teach you how to swim harder, faster, for longer. I want to be very clear on this.

The Christian life is lived in an entirely different place. The Christian life is lived not in the river of sin, but in the waters of baptism.

And while the river of sin carries us further away from the presence of God, the waters of baptism flow uphill.

They flow always in one direction, further up and further in to the presence of God. So even though we continue to struggle with sin in those waters, that struggle becomes a place of intimacy with God, where we experience His grace more and more.

This is Paul writing in 2 Corinthians, the places where I have most failed, where I feel most weak, where I most struggle, those are the places where the power of Christ is made perfect in my life.

[27 : 35] Those are the places where I experience my fellowship with Him. the most. Our baptism gives us assurance that no matter how much we struggle, we belong to God, not because of any righteousness we have earned, but through the gift of His grace in Jesus Christ.

Let's pray. Lord, we all need this gift. The ground is level at the foot of the cross. No one here has a right to anything that you have promised.

Give us the grace, give us the humility, give us the courage, Lord, to hold out our hands and ask for that which we do not deserve, which we have not earned, which we can never repay, but nevertheless, that which is ours, not because of what we've done, but because what you have done for us.

Give us the grace to open our hands and our hearts to receive this gift, and Lord, use that gift to transform us from the inside out for our good and chiefly for your glory.

In Jesus' name, amen.