

Stumbling Stones to Salvation

Romans 9:30 - 10:4

August 12, 2018

Introduction:

One of the things I like to do on vacations is go hiking if the opportunity presents itself. For example, a few years back our family took a big trip out West and had the chance to hike in a number of national parks, including Bryce Canyon in Utah and the Grand Canyon in Arizona. Now if you've ever hiked on any of them, then you know the trails in those parks aren't nice, smooth, paved trails you can easily bike or rollerblade upon: they're more like rugged dirt paths that can be uneven and rocky. In fact, you need to be especially careful when hiking on them due to the occasional large stones that can jut out, causing you to stumble. I was especially concerned about such a possibility as we hiked down narrow paths adjacent to steep drop-offs: stumbling over a large unseen stone on the path could have serious consequences.

But far worse than physical stumbling stones lying across a path in the Grand Canyon are the spiritual stumbling stones along the path of salvation. This morning we are going to consider a number of different spiritual stumbling stones that tripped up the Jews and as a result, caused them to misunderstand and ultimately reject the gospel. And what tripped them up then are still causing people to stumble today. The stumbling stones which Paul identifies still remain a real danger for those wishing to trek upon the road of salvation.

So let's consider what these dangerous stumbling stones are by opening your Bibles with me to the ninth chapter of the book of Romans. Our passage today will begin at the very top of page 946 of the pew Bibles should you be using one of those for following along. I will read through the entire passage we'll be covering today first and then I'll circle back around as we carefully work our way through it. So please follow along in your Bibles as I read, starting in Romans 9:30. **“What shall we say, then? That 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? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as if it were based on works. They have stumbled over the stumbling stone, as it is written,**

‘Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.’

Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved. For I bear witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For, being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.”

Before we get to identifying the stumbling stones to salvation, we need to begin by first considering the surprising situation Paul address in v. 30-31 that sets off this discussion. So our first heading to think through as we work through this passage concerns this...

The surprising situation: Gentiles were obtaining salvation while the Jews were not.

Paul lays out the situation for us in v. 30-31, saying, **“What shall we say, then? That 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.”**

Paul is contrasting the current situation of the Jews with that of the Gentiles. So let’s think about each of them for a moment. First Paul says that the Gentiles **“did not pursue righteousness.”** Now Paul knows full well the Gentiles were diligent in pursuing moral righteousness in that there were many who sought to live upright and virtuous lives. In fact, I’m certain we all readily recognize there are many unbelievers today who often live lives that are morally respectable. So what Paul means here by saying they **“did not pursue righteousness”** is that they weren’t trying to gain a right standing with God. For example, atheists can be kind, generous, and outwardly virtuous people who nevertheless aren’t trying to please God or earn his favor. They aren’t pursuing salvation because they don’t believe there’s a heaven to be gained.

But in spite of them not pursuing a right standing with God, the Gentiles have **“attained it, that is, a righteousness that is by faith.”** In other words, Gentiles were being saved. The gospel was being proclaimed to them and many were responding in faith. Undoubtedly Paul wants us to see this as a vivid example of what he spent the majority of Romans 9 explaining, that salvation doesn’t depend on “human will or exertion, but on God who has mercy” (9:16). The fact that the Gentiles who weren’t looking for salvation nevertheless received it is case in point that salvation is a gift of divine grace. In fact, it reminds me of my own salvation in that I wasn’t pursuing God when God saved me. I was neither seeking him nor did I make any kind of decision to turn to him in faith. God simply caused me to be born again and from that moment forward I believed and was saved.

But the situation with the Jews was just the opposite. He goes on to say in v. 31 that **“Israel who pursued a law that would lead to righteousness did not succeed in reaching that law.”** The Jews had been given the Law and provided they perfectly obeyed that Law, they would have achieved righteousness, that is, they would have gained a right standing with God. In spite of that, they had failed to achieve the righteousness they sought. The vast majority of Jews were rejecting the gospel. Even though they had the Mosaic Law and the prophets and a long history of God working through them as a nation, they remained under the wrath of God while the Gentiles were being saved in droves.

Why? What was the reason for this unexpected turn of events?

So given that surprising situation, it raises the question of “Why?” which Paul asks at the beginning of v. 32. **“Why?”** Why has this happened? What’s the reason for this unexpected turn of events that the Gentiles should achieve a salvation they did not seek while the Jews failed to gain that which they so diligently pursued? To answer this, Paul now turns to the side of human responsibility when it comes to salvation. Now I’ve said this before but it’s worth saying again: there’s an asymmetrical relationship between salvation and damnation in terms of responsibility. The reason people are saved is solely because of

God and his grace. That's the emphasis throughout chapter 9. But the reason people reject the gospel is not because of God; it's because their sin. That's the emphasis in Romans 10. The Jews are responsible for their rejection of God. It rests on their shoulders.

I like how Martin Lloyd-Jones puts it,

"In v. 6-29 [of Romans 9], Paul explains why anyone is saved – it is the sovereign election of God. In these verses, v. 30-33, he is showing us why anyone is lost, and the explanation of that is their own responsibility... So this is what the Bible teaches. Election alone counts for the saved, but non-election does not account for the lost... No one would be saved were it not that God in a sovereign manner has chosen him, as we have seen abundantly in v. 6-29. It is God's action alone that saves a man. So why is anybody lost? Is it because they are not elected? No! What accounts for the lost is their rejection of the gospel... We are responsible for our rejection of the gospel, but we are not responsible for our acceptance of it." (as quoted in Keller, 74)

So then, to answer this question of **"Why?"** in v. 32, Paul is going to lay out four stumbling stones that he holds Israel responsible for tripping over. And these four stones are still with us today. They are very real and present dangers that still cause men to stumble when it comes to salvation. So let's work through these starting with the first one...

1. Stumbling stone #1 – They pursued righteousness by works rather than faith

Look back in your Bibles now at v. 32 once again. **"Why [did they fail to achieve the righteousness they were after]? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as if it were based on works. They have stumbled over the stumbling stone."**

So here's the problem: it's not that the Jews were wrong in striving to obey the Law. God gave them the Mosaic Law with all its sacrifices and offerings and commandments because he expected them to obey it. But they should have obeyed the Law as an expression of their faith, as a response to God's grace; instead, they viewed their obedience as the means by which they would be accepted by God. They thought they could earn the favor of God by obeying the Law, not recognizing they could never fulfill the righteous requirements of the Law perfectly. So because they pursued the law as if righteousness could be earned by their obedience instead of pursuing it by faith as a response to God's grace, they failed.

This is still a significant stumbling stone for people today, and not just for Jews. If you ask someone, "If you were to die today and God asked you why he should let you into heaven, what would you say?" the most common answer you would receive is that they were a good person and didn't do anything terribly bad. In other words, "I've earned the right to be in heaven because of my good works." I see ample evidence of this on Facebook when someone dies, whether it's a celebrity or an old high school friend. In no time tributes will come in about how the deceased was such a nice, kind, good and generous individual who's now in a better place. It is simply assumed without question that if you're a generally good and decent person, you'll go to heaven when you die.

My friends, this a dangerous stumbling stone made more dangerous by the fact that most people don't even recognize it as the grave error that it is. It's reinforced over and over again on television and movies and on social media so that it eventually becomes universally assumed as true, but it is absolutely wrong. If you're pursuing salvation on the basis of your good works, if you think God will swing open the gates of heaven to you because you were a good guy, then you're in for a dreadful surprise once you die. Salvation cannot come by your good works. The Jews tried to pursue it by obedience to the Law and they failed, and it will be no different for any of us, no matter how nice you are or who you vote for or how much you give to charities or how squeaky-clean your driving record is. If you want to gain heaven by your good works then God says that you need to obey all his commandments, all the time, all your life, and neither you, nor I, nor anyone else has done it.

So we as Christians have a responsibility to do what we can to remove this stumbling stone from the path and that means we need to speak up and challenge this view that salvation can be earned by our good deeds. In other words, we need to proclaim the gospel, a gospel that tells us we haven't been good enough to earn our way to heaven. The only thing we've earned from our deeds is the wrath of God. Salvation is received as a gift of grace through Christ, who alone lived the sinless life we should have lived and suffered the punishment we deserve. Because if we don't speak up and challenge this widely held cultural assumption that good people go to heaven, then people will only continue to blindly stumble over this erroneous belief to their eternal doom.

But that's only one of the potential stumbling stones we face. I'm going to skip ahead just a little bit now to move on to the second stumbling stone that the Jews had that caused them to miss the righteousness of God and that is...

2. Stumbling stone #2 – They had zeal without knowledge

Follow along as I read v. 1-2 of chapter 10. **“Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved. For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge.”**

Paul reiterates his desire for the Jews to be saved, much like he did at the beginning of chapter 9. But they aren't being saved because they're tripping on stumbling stones and the second one he identifies here is that they have **“a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge.”**

Now zeal for God is a good thing. The dictionary defines zeal as “great energy or enthusiasm in pursuit of a cause or an objective.” That's something you would certainly want to have for God. God doesn't like people who are half-hearted about him. Jesus scolded the church in Revelation because they were lukewarm rather than being either hot or cold. God wants people who are eager and passionate about him.

And certainly there were quite a number of Jews who were extremely zealous for God. One thing you could not accuse the Pharisees of was being wishy-washy when it came to God's Word. They took obedience to the Law extremely seriously. They came up

with hundreds of specific applications of the Law to cover every aspect of life in order to be certain they were being obedient to it. And they didn't tolerate those who tried to undermine the Law or speak against it. Paul himself was once a Pharisee who ruthlessly pursued Jewish Christians because he saw their teaching as blasphemy. So zeal for God was not a problem for the Jews of Paul's day.

The problem was they had zeal without knowledge. They were zealously pursuing God, but were doing so out of ignorance. They thought in their eagerness to obey the Law that they were earning God's favor by their good works. But their knowledge of what the true purpose of the law was turned out to be deficient. The law was given to show them their sin and make them realize their need of a savior. It was never meant to be used as a self-help project so they could climb up the ladder of good works into paradise. They were like a person driving down the interstate, excited to get to their destination, but has read the map wrong and is actually driving in the opposite direction!

This stumbling block is still very much in existence today. There are zealous religious people of all stripes, some of which would put the majority of us to shame. For example, Mormons are extremely committed to practicing their faith and living righteous lives. But, like the Jews, they're trying to earn salvation by their good works and so while their zeal for God is commendable, they don't have the proper knowledge to go with it and so their zeal is of no benefit to them.

Or let's consider Muslims. Practicing Muslims are diligent to practice daily prayers and observe holy days and do all that their religion requires of them. And Muslim extremists go even further; they're willing to sacrifice their lives for Allah through terrorist attacks and jihad, holy war. One thing you can't accuse al-Qaeda or ISIS of is lacking in zeal. But they are zealous for something that is false. Flying airplanes into buildings won't earn them a paradise of full of virgins. Their zeal is without knowledge of Christ and therefore it is of no benefit to them.

Just because someone sincerely and passionately believes something doesn't mean it's automatically right. General Custard was zealous in his desire to kill Indians but his lack of knowledge regarding how many he was going up against that fateful day of his famous "last stand" cost him his life. There are many people who are zealous about their religion but that doesn't help them if what they're zealous about is false. We dare not mistake zeal with truth. Hell will be filled with many sincerely zealous people who passionately and eagerly sought to gain salvation by their works.

But in addition to zeal, Paul identifies yet another stumbling stone the Jews tripped over in v. 3 that we also need to watch out for. So our third point is concerns...

3. Stumbling stone #3 – They were unwilling to submit to God

Paul goes on to say this in v. 3. **“For, being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness.”** In their pursuit of works-righteousness through obedience to the Law, the Jews missed the true nature and purpose of the Law. The **“righteousness of God”** they were

ignorant of was the fact that the righteousness that saves doesn't come through our works but rather by faith. They had forgotten that their forefather Abraham "believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness." But they were so convinced they needed to earn their salvation by what they did that when Jesus came and confronted them about it, they rejected him and his message. They wouldn't submit themselves to what Jesus had to say because of their self-righteous pride.

Once again, this is a stumbling stone that's still with us today. People don't want to submit to what God's Word has to say about salvation or much of anything else for that matter. If people are pursuing salvation as a self-help project that they are zealously convinced they will achieve because they're good people at heart, then they won't take kindly to anyone pointing out to them that they're wrong. Have you been on Facebook ever and tried to challenge someone's mistaken view? How did that go for you? And the more passionate they are about whatever it is they believe, the more strongly they resist any kind of correction or information that would contradict them.

Not to mention, there's always the old stand-by, "Well, that's just your interpretation." I've tried to quote Scripture to people and tried to explain what God's Word has to say about a number of topics, and often I get dismissed with a wave of the hand and a simple, "That's just your opinion." With many people, there's no willingness to take seriously the possibility that they might in fact be mistaken, even when a pastor who went to seminary is telling them they are.

So the prideful, stubborn refusal to listen to others, to re-evaluate your view in light of the Word of God and submit yourself to what it says is as real and present danger for us today as it was when Jesus was rubbing shoulders with the Pharisees. We want to believe we're right and everyone else is wrong and the last thing we want to do is to submit ourselves to God's Word, even when it flatly contradicts what we believe. But there is one more stumbling stone in the path that is the biggest one of all, the single greatest cause of the Jews' failure to enter into the kingdom of God. So our fourth and final stumbling stone is this...

4. **Stumbling stone #4 – They rejected Christ, the only source of true righteousness**

Paul gets to the real heart of the problem in v. 4. Look there with me. **"For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes."** Ultimately, the problem boils down to a rejection of Christ. The Jews believed they could earn God's favor by their works, and so they zealously pursued that and refused to submit to the way God established how righteousness was to be gained: not by works but by faith in Christ. The first three stumbling stones have at their root cause a refusal to accept that faith in Christ is the only way to be made righteous in God's sight.

Paul says Christ is **"the end of the law for righteousness"** meaning first that Christ is the goal of the Law. It was all pointing ahead to him and was fulfilled by him. Only Christ perfectly obeyed the law. Only he could be the true spotless lamb who suffered God's wrath for our sins. Furthermore, as a result, Christ was the **"end of the law"** in that he brought the necessity of the law to an end. He terminated the old covenant

because it's role as a teacher pointing the Jews to their need of a Messiah had come to an end with Christ's life, death, and resurrection. So by trying to gain righteousness by obedience to the Law, the Jews were using an outdated system that had been superseded by Christ and ultimately misusing it because they believed they could achieve righteousness for themselves by obeying it.

This goes along with what Paul was also saying in v. 33. I skipped that before but let's go back to it for a moment. In Romans 9:33 Paul says, **"As it is written, 'Behold, I'm laying in Zion a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.'"** This quotation is meant to demonstrate that God had predicted this situation back in the OT. For those who believed in Christ, they would not be put to shame at the final judgment; but for others, Christ was a **"stone of stumbling and a rock of offense."** What was happening with the Jews was not a surprise: God knew this would happen. Because the Jews specifically and people generally would rather pursue righteousness by works than by faith, Christ would be an offense. Thus the Jews had stumbled over the biggest stumbling stone of all: over Christ, in whom alone can we hope to be declared righteous in God's sight.

And as with the other three stumbling stones, Christ is still a stumbling stone for many today. There are those who like Jesus as a moral teacher (especially when they can pick and choose which moral teachings they like), but refuse to see him as the Lord who they need to surrender their lives to. There are others who refuse to believe his claims about himself, like Muslims who will regard him as a great prophet but not believe that he was the divine Son of God. Then there are those who don't believe he even existed: that he's just some myth or legend. For many, the idea that Jesus is the only way to God, that he alone lived a righteous life and suffered God's wrath for us on the cross, that we need to respond to him and repentance and faith in order to receive by God the forgiveness of sins, is a massive stumbling block that they trip over. What was true for the Jews in Paul's day is still true in ours: Christ is the cornerstone of God's plan for those who believe, but he remains a stone of stumbling for those who refuse to believe.

Conclusion

So as we close, we need to recognize that these stumbling stones exist. People will be tripped up by Christ because they don't believe his claims about who he is and what he's done. Most people will refuse to give up their self-help, save-yourself-by-your-good-works project. It strikes at their pride to hear they aren't good enough for God, that God actually stands against them in his wrath for their sins. We prefer to think that we are in control, to think that what happens to me after I die is all in my hands, that I'm the captain of my fate because it's all up to me to be good and earn God's pleasure. But that's what happens when sin has enslaved a person: they adamantly refuse to accept the grace of God that can save them and would rather cling to their filthy rags of righteousness instead. The only solution to this is for us to be faithful to proclaim the gospel. This is exactly what Paul calls us to later on in Romans 10, because that's the only way the lost can be made to see Christ for what he is: not a stumbling stone but a Savior. God in his sovereign

grace has to work in the hearts of the lost so they can recognize the futility of trying to earn God's favor and behold Christ as their perfect righteousness. So while we have understood the problem, we must then strive to present to a lost and dying world the only solution: proclaiming clearly and faithfully the good news of the gospel, that in Christ alone our hope is found for he alone is the righteousness of God available to all who believe.

Please join me now as we come to him in prayer. Let's pray.

Endnotes

Keller, Timothy. Romans 8-16 For You. The Good Book Company: USA, 2015.

This sermon was addressed originally to the people at Grace Fellowship of Waterloo, IA by Pastor Rob Borkowitz. Copyright 2018.