

Hiking the Salvation Trail

Romans 10:5-13

August 19, 2018

Introduction:

Back in June our family went with some friends to the Smoky Mountains. We got a cabin together and spent a number of days doing all kinds of fun things such as white-water rafting, visiting the tourist shops in Gatlinburg, and we even spent a day riding the various roller-coasters at Dollywood. In addition to all that, we had the opportunity to do a little hiking in the mountains as well. We decided to take one particular trail that led to a gorgeous waterfall. The trail wasn't too long – only about a mile and a half – and while it did go up in elevation, it wasn't too terribly steep (a fact my legs were very thankful for!).

The trail we hiked on was just one of dozens of trails throughout the Smoky Mountains, but not every trail was made for the casual hiker. The trail we took was rated as “easy” in the park guides, but there were a number of trails rated as “moderate” as well as “difficult.” Some of the more challenging ones were many miles in length and ascended a few thousand feet during the trek. Needless to say, as novice hikers we avoided those.

This morning I want to use the idea of hiking as a metaphor for what we'll be talking about in Romans 10. The apostle Paul is going to present two ways of salvation: two “trails” as it were by which one can reach heaven. And just as with the trails in the Smoky Mountains, not every trail is created equal in terms of what it demands of those who would hike upon it. So let's take a look at what Paul has to say by opening your Bibles with me to Romans 10, which is found on pg. 946 of the hardcover pew Bibles, should you be following along in one of those. I will first read our entire passage, v. 5-13, and then we'll spend the rest of our time working our way back through it. So then, please follow along as I read. Paul writes, **“For Moses writes about the righteousness that is based on the law, that the person who does the commandments shall live by them. But the righteousness based on faith says, ‘Do not say in your heart, “Who will ascend into heaven?” (that is, to bring Christ down) or “Who will descend into the abyss?” (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead).’ But what does it say? ‘The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart” (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because, 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. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. For the Scripture says, ‘Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame.’ For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. For ‘everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’”**

So Paul is comparing two paths of salvation: he calls the first **“the righteousness that is based on the law”** and the second, **“the righteousness based on faith.”** Each of these trails lead to the same destination – heaven – but one is not at all like the other. So let's put our hiking boots and grab our walking stick and explore each of these paths set out before us. So we want to begin with our first point which concerns...

1. Hiking the salvation trail of the law (v. 5)

Paul begins in v. 5 saying, **“For Moses writes about the righteousness that is based on the law, that the person who does the commandments shall live by them.”** This is a quote from Leviticus 18:5 that required those who wished to please God by keeping the commandments to live by them, meaning they needed to obey all of them throughout his or her life. This means you don’t get to pick and chose which ones you like and disregard the rest. Nor does it mean you’re graded on a curve, such that provided you obeyed the majority of the commandments or happened to be more obedient than most people that you get to squeak by. It means that you have to live according to them perfectly, without fail, from the cradle to the grave.

Consider for a moment James 2:10. It says, *“For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it.”* So let’s say you never murdered anyone or took something that didn’t belong to you and you never spoke an unkind word your whole life, but back when you were a teenager there was this one time when you lied to your parents about why you were out so late. Even if that was the only lie you ever told, that lie would be enough to condemn you to hell because, as James 2:10 says, if you break even one commandment one time, you’re guilty of all of it. God’s standard is *“Be holy as I am holy,”* and therefore even one sin makes you guilty because that falls short of the perfect righteous obedience God demands of us.

So is the righteousness that comes from the law a legitimate salvation trail? Yes, it is. If you can hike this trail, instead of reaching a waterfall at the end you’ll reach heaven, but it’s a rather steep trail, isn’t it? You have to walk it perfectly, from beginning to end, without any stumble into sin at any point. But unlike the difficult trails in the Smoky Mountains that experienced healthy hikers can take and make it successfully to the end, none of us are spiritually fit to ascend this path. Paul told us back in Romans 3 the bad news that *“all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”* We’ve already stumbled on the path and fallen from it. We aren’t spiritually healthy enough to climb this trail successfully because we’ve enslaved in sin. We can never make it.

I cannot say this often enough: you cannot earn salvation by your good deeds. If you want to achieve righteousness through obedience to the law, then you must live a life of perfect obedience. Have you come anywhere remotely close to that? Can any of you claim you’ve never sinned? Never said an insulting word? Never took something that wasn’t yours? Never looked at someone lustfully? Never had a negative thought or a selfish attitude? I can’t make any such claim and if you’re honest, neither can you. But that means then any notion that God will let you into heaven because you were good guy or good girl is false.

I know most of you here know this already but I don’t know who might be a visitor this morning who needs to hear this truth stated clearly and unambiguously. Our culture hammers in to us this idea that good people go to heaven and bad people go to hell but that’s absolutely incorrect because if we want to earn our way into heaven, God’s standard isn’t *mostly* good and *slightly* bad; it’s *always* good and *never* bad. No sin whatsoever. Zero. Zip. Zilch. Even the slightest misstep from the path of works

righteousness has us falling off into the abyss of hell. You possess neither the strength of character nor endurance to live the perfectly righteous, sinless life God demands.

So then, this first trail is a genuine trial that will lead to heaven if you hike on it, but none of us are spiritually fit to do so. You won't make it. The Jews tried and failed. They had the mistaken belief they could merit God's favor by their good works but they forgot that their obedience had to be flawless for God to accept them. And so it is for us today. You will never reach heaven by your good works because you haven't been good enough. If you've sinned even once, then God's wrath rests upon you.

But there is another option. While the salvation trail of works is difficult for us because of our sin, Paul wants to call our attention to a better, far easier trail that leads to heaven, a trail that is not by works but is instead by faith. So our second point this morning is...

2. Hiking the salvation trail of faith (v. 6-10)

Look at how Paul describes this alternate trail for us by first looking back in your Bibles at just v. 6-8. He says starting in v. 6, **“But the righteousness based on faith says, ‘Do not say in your heart, “Who will ascend into heaven?”’ (that is, to bring Christ down) or “Who will descend into the abyss?”’ (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? ‘The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart’ (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim);”** Let's stop there.

We need to unpack this for a moment. Paul is quoting once again from the Pentateuch, and this time he's snatching little snippets of Scripture from Deut. 30. You don't need to turn there, but just listen to the passage in Deuteronomy and pick out the echoes of this passage there. Moses writes this in Deut. 30:11-14,

“For this commandment that I command you today is not too hard for you, neither is it far off. It is not in heaven, that you should say, ‘Who will ascend to heaven for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?’ Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, ‘Who will go over the sea for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?’ But the word is very near you. It is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it.”

Now obviously Paul is modifying the original passage and making it apply to Christ. The passage in Deuteronomy is meant to prevent the Israelites from evading responsibility for obeying the law by claiming they don't know it. Moses reminds them that they do indeed know it because God has brought it near to them through Moses. There is no need for them to make any special, herculean effort to discover what God expects of them because it's all spelled out for them in the law.

But Paul sees this passage as being fulfilled in Christ. As one commentator put it, “As God brought his word near to Israel so they might know and obey him, so now God brings his word ‘near’ to both Jews and Gentiles that they might know him through his Son Jesus Christ and respond in faith and obedience. Because Christ, rather than the

law, is now the focus of God's revelatory word, Paul can 'replace' the commandment of Deuteronomy 30 with Christ." (Moo 653).

So what Paul's communicating here is that righteousness based on faith doesn't depend on works in that it doesn't need to say, **"Who will ascend into heaven?"** You don't need to work toward gaining heaven by your own efforts because heaven has come to us in Christ. He became one of us and lived the perfect, sinless life we should have lived. You don't need to pull yourself up by your own bootstraps and earn heaven because Christ has already done it for you.

Furthermore, you don't need to say, **"Who will descend into the abyss?"** such that you have to fear suffering the wrath of God for your sins in hell. Why is that unnecessary? Because Christ suffered the wrath of God for sinners on the cross. He died and was raised up from the dead on your behalf. You don't need to do that.

Do you see how these two questions undercut any need for us to imagine we need to do something to gain salvation? We neither need to gain righteousness by our own efforts nor fear suffering in hell for our sins because Christ already did those for us. He lived righteously on our behalf and suffered God's holy wrath for us so that there's nothing left for us to do. So because Christ has done this for us, we can mark this trail as "easy." There is no effort involved because Christ has already leveled the path for us. We need not struggle by our own efforts to scale the heights or plumb the depths because Christ has already hiked it for us.

It reminds me of how we were hiking in the Smoky Mountains and occasionally came across parents of young children who were hiking with their toddlers on their back. The little child made it to the waterfall at the end of the trail, just as we did, but not by their efforts. Mom or dad did all the work for them. They made it to the waterfall on the basis of the work of another, namely, their parents. That's a good metaphor for what Christ has done for us. Christ does all the work for us; we just need to let him carry us there.

And how do we do that? We do it by faith. By believing in him, trusting in who he is and what he has done for us. Look back in your Bibles now starting at v. 8. **"But what does [the righteousness based on faith] say? 'The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart' (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because, 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. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved."** Let's stop there.

Going off the wording used in Deuteronomy 30, Paul tells us that the word of faith is **"near you, in your mouth and in your heart."** You don't need to travel far to find out what you need to do to be saved. You don't need to scale the mountains or descend into the valleys of works to find it. It's as close as your mouth and your heart. You need simply **"confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead."**

Now let me say Paul is not adding an extra requirement to salvation such that you need to both *believe* and *confess* with your mouth, which would mean mute people couldn't be saved or something silly like that. He's simply making a parallel with the passage in Deuteronomy and stating what normally comes with those who believe – they make a confession of their faith. It's like passages that speak of the need to believe and be baptized: baptism isn't being added to faith as a requirement to be saved, but because it so often accompanies faith, it can be stated as part of the whole process of coming to faith. As another commentator put it, "These are not separate activities but two aspects of the one expression of faith in Jesus as Lord. Believing with the heart without confession with the mouth is not true faith. Confession with the mouth without belief in the heart would be hypocrisy." (Kruse 410).

Paul lays out what the content of our faith is to be in v. 9. First, we need to confess that "**Jesus is Lord.**" The Greek word Paul uses for "Lord" is the word used in the Greek translations of the Old Testament for God's name. So for someone to call Jesus "**Lord**" is to recognize Jesus as being divine. It's a claim to deity, that Jesus wasn't a mere man but was in fact the incarnate Son of God who is the sovereign Lord over all.

Second, we need to believe that "**God raised him from the dead.**" Whereas to confess that Jesus is Lord is to make a statement about his *person*, this second aspect concerns his *work*. What is it that Jesus did for us? We need to believe in the resurrection and by implication, we need to believe that he died in order to be raised from the dead. In other words, we need to believe Christ suffered, died, and was raised to atone for our sins.

So then, our faith has content. We aren't saved by believing in our belief or having a vague belief in the existence of God. Saving faith is a trust in the person of Jesus Christ and in what he claims he did for us – lived the righteous life we should have while also suffering the punishment we deserve for our sins.

But there's one more thing we need to say about the salvation trail of faith and that then brings us to our third and final point, which is...

3. Hiking the salvation trail of faith is open to everyone (v. 11-13)

Please look back in your Bibles again at v. 11-13 and I read it, notice all the words Paul uses to show that salvation is now available to anyone who believes. He says, "**For the Scripture says, 'Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame.' For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. For 'everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.'**"

Even though salvation is mostly coming to the Gentiles, it is not exclusively for the Gentiles. Jesus is the "**Lord of all**" and so he died for the sins of those who are Jews and those who are Gentiles. There's no distinction between them, such that Gentiles are relegated to a second-class place in salvation whereas the Jews are elevated to a higher status. The riches of salvation are available to anyone – Jew or Gentile - who will call on Christ in faith

Paul is echoing back to what he said earlier in the letter. Hold your place here for a moment and turn a few pages back to Romans 3. I want you see how Paul's words here in Romans 10:12 parallels what he said way back in Romans 3. Let me start at v. 21 and read through v. 24.

"But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it - the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus..."

Just as there's no distinction between Jews and Gentiles in their sin, so also is there no distinction when it comes to their salvation. *All* have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God and God will bestow his riches on *all* who call on him.

To go back to my hiking metaphor, the salvation trail by faith is available to all people. Not just the spiritually fit. Not just those who have their act together. Not just for those who regard themselves as strong in good deeds. It's for everyone: Jew and Gentile, men and women, young and old, rich and poor, educated and uneducated, the morally good and the morally bad. You don't have to be some amazing virtuous person to hike this trail because Jesus has already done it for you. All you need to do is climb on his back in faith and trust that he'll get you to your final destination at the end of the trail.

Conclusion

So in light of all this, I need to ask, "Which trail are you hiking on?" You only have two options, two salvation trails that will lead you to heaven. There's the trail that's labeled "difficult" and that's the salvation trail of works. Plenty of people try to hike that trail and mistakenly believe they can muster up enough good works to pull them through into heaven but the reality is, you can't make it. You've already fallen short because you've sinned: not once or twice but countless times in your lifetime. The only way to complete that trail is to be without sin and none of us have come remotely close to achieving that goal. Only one person has successfully hiked that trail and that's Jesus Christ. Only he obeyed God perfectly and never once sinned. Only he has completed that hike of perfect righteousness on behalf of us who are too weak in our sinfulness to complete it.

But there's a better salvation trail available to us and that's the one that is traveled by faith. The path is marked as "easy" because Jesus carries us on his back all the way through. We rest upon his efforts, his work of atonement on the cross to see to it that we make it to the end of the trail. Jesus said, *"Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light"* (Matthew 11:28-30). The salvation trail of faith is easy because Jesus has carried the burden of sin for you.

Maybe there's someone here this morning that's been hiking on the difficult trail of works, trying to gain God's favor by your efforts, always trying to be good enough in hopes that

God will accept you. My friend, aren't you tired? Tired of striving, tired of trying to be good enough but all the while knowing deep down inside that you really aren't? Are you wearying of trying to advance on the salvation trail of works only to find your feet slip back into sin and instead of one step forward you've taken two steps back?

Maybe its time for you to take a different road. Christ invites all who wish to come to him in faith to join him on the easy path. You need only believe in your heart that he died and was raised again to atone for your sins and then confess with your mouth that he is indeed Lord and Savior, and indeed *your* Lord and Savior. That's all there is to it. He will carry you to your eternal home if you simply rest from your strivings by turning from sin and entrusting yourself to him in faith.

And that's as easy as coming to him in prayer. You can do that right now, right this moment, right where you are. The path to salvation can't get any easier than this. Jesus lived the righteous life you tried to live and died the death you should have died so that anyone who would call on him in faith would be saved. If you're exhausted from the climb, why don't you join me in prayer as we close our time together and take the better path, the salvation trail that comes not by works but by faith in Christ alone.

Please bow your heads with me. Let's pray.

Endnotes

Kruse, Colin G. Paul's Letter to the Romans. Wm. B. Eerdmanns Publishing Co.: Cambridge, 2012.

Moo, Douglas J. The Epistle to the Romans. Wm. B. Eerdmanns Publishing Co: Grand Rapids, 1996.

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