

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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HOW TO BE SAVED

Romans 10:1-13

Does theology matter? Is doctrine important? Does it really matter what a person believes about God, about Jesus, about the Bible or salvation?

If doctrinal orthodoxy – right belief – isn't really important, then what Americans, and even evangelical Christians, believe is of little or no concern. If theology *does* matter, we've got a problem. A serious problem.

LifeWay Research recently conducted a survey of 3,000 Americans on behalf of Ligonier Ministries, the ministry of theologian and Bible teacher R. C. Sproul. The survey asked participants a set of 47 questions about basic Christian beliefs. The results reveal considerable confusion, in some cases even contradictory and incompatible beliefs, in a country where still more than 75 percent of us identify ourselves as Christians.

For example, 54 percent of Americans believe that only those who trust in Jesus Christ alone as their Savior receive God's free gift of salvation and will go to heaven. Yet 60 percent believe heaven is a place where all people will ultimately be reunited with their loved ones. Do you see the contradiction there?

Another example: 69 percent agree that there is only one true God in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – God in three persons, blessed Trinity. Yet only 61 percent say that Jesus is both human and divine, and 52 percent – more than half – say that Jesus is the first and greatest being created by God, rather than existing eternally. In other words, they believe the ancient Arian heresy that “there was a time when he (Jesus) was not,” which directly contradicts the opening words of John's Gospel, where it says: “In the beginning was the Word” – referring to Jesus, the eternal Son of God – “and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning” (John 1:1-2). He was with God because He was and is God.

Still more puzzling is the finding that while 69 percent say there is only one God, almost the same number – 64 percent – believe God accepts the worship of all religions, even those that deny the Trinity, reject the deity of Christ, and worship other gods.

Of the 3,000 respondents to the survey, LifeWay identified 586 as evangelicals – you know, people who, among other things, say the Bible is their highest authority and believe that trusting in Jesus and His death on the cross is the only way to salvation. In other words, people like us.

Despite believing that trust in Jesus is the only way to salvation, two-thirds of the evangelicals in the survey – more than Americans as a whole – say that heaven is a place where all people

will eventually be reunited with their loved ones. It is a nice thought, I suppose, but it does not track with what the Bible teaches.

You may think: This is all very interesting (or not), but what difference, really, does it make? Does our theology affect the way we live? Do our beliefs about God, about ourselves, about life and death and what happens after death, really impact our lives?

The apostle Paul would say: “Of course theology matters!” His systematic explanation of the gospel in Romans shows how convinced he is of the importance of right doctrine. He would not have gone to the trouble of writing the Letter to the Romans if theology were not of paramount importance. Your theology affects the way you live, whether you’re aware of it or not. And your theology has eternal consequences.

That it matters, and how much it matters to Paul, is evident in Romans 10:1 as he expresses the deep desire of his heart for the salvation of his people, the Jews. He longs for them to embrace the gospel and trust in Jesus Christ. Their rejection of Jesus has caused him “great sorrow and unceasing anguish in (his) heart” (Romans 9:1). It wouldn’t be a big deal to him if it didn’t really matter what you believe. But it *is* a big deal. Because it *does* matter.

As paraphrased by J. B. Phillips, Paul says: “My brothers, from the bottom of my heart I long and pray that Israel may be saved” (10:1). What is preventing them from being saved? Simply put, wrong belief. They wrongly believed that salvation, or a right relationship with God, was to be attained through works – specifically, through obedience to the law of Moses – rather than by faith.

Paul affirms the Jews for their zeal, for the passion and dedication with which they pursue God’s approval through their obedience to the law. In verse 2 he says: “I can testify about them that they are zealous for God.” He commends them for their zeal, for their sincere desire to fulfill the law and thereby to please God. But Paul doesn’t stop there. There is a “but” attached to his words of affirmation. He says: “But their zeal is not based on knowledge” (10:2).

Paul understands their zeal. He gets it. After all, he was just like them in his devotion to the law prior to his conversion on the road to Damascus. He had tried to do exactly what so many of his fellow Jews were trying to do. He was at the head of the class. He has been there, done that. He knows the futility of sincere zeal disconnected from accurate knowledge of the truth. As a follower of Christ, Paul knows they have gotten it wrong. Their zeal is misguided, because it is not based on accurate knowledge of God and what He really wants from His people.

Zeal without knowledge can be dangerous. Passion without understanding can get you – and others – in deep trouble. Terrorism is one extreme example. As sincere as the Jews were in their beliefs and efforts to win God’s approval through their obedience, their sincerity could not save them. Sincerity – being real about who you are and what you believe – is a desirable and admirable trait. But sincerity will never save you, if you’re wrong in what you believe, because you can be sincerely wrong. I may sincerely believe that I can take a flying leap from

the highest point on the roof of the church and hit the ground without any injury to myself. But, unless the Lord chooses to intervene in a miraculous way, all the sincerity in the world won't keep me from being injured. Or worse.

Sincerity is not enough. Zeal for God is not enough. It has to be connected to knowledge that is true and accurate. The problem with the Jews was not that they were not sincere, but that they could never attain “the righteousness that comes from God” (10:3) through their tireless efforts to fulfill all the rules and regulations and duties and responsibilities contained in the law.

They failed to see, or refused to believe, what Paul declares in verse 4, which is that “Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.” Righteousness for whom? Not for those who fulfill all the requirements of the law, but for “everyone who believes.” Everyone who trusts in Jesus Christ as the Son of God and Savior of sinners. Everyone who believes in Jesus and the efficacy of His saving work on the cross, to take away our sins and make us right with God. Which is something we could never do, no matter how long or how hard we tried.

When Paul says that “Christ is the end of the law,” the word he uses for “end” is the Greek word *telos*, which can have a number of shades of meaning. Paul may be saying that Jesus is the *fulfillment* or the *completion* of the law, since Jesus did perfectly fulfill the requirements of God's law without ever sinning. Or Paul may mean that Jesus, in His accomplishment of our salvation through His suffering, death, and resurrection, is the *termination* or the *conclusion* of the law, so that we are no longer under law, but under grace (Romans 6:14). I think both are true. Jesus has done what the law could not do. Which is to bring us to God. To reconcile us to the Father. To save us from our sins. To give to us a righteousness, a right-standing before God, that is not our own.

The law can make us aware that there is something wrong with us. It can reveal our sinfulness. It can show us our need for a Savior. But it cannot cure us of what ails us. Only Jesus can.

To drive this truth home, in verse 5, Paul quotes Moses from Leviticus 18:5, where, concerning the law, Moses says: “The one who does these things will live by them.” In other words, all you have to do to attain righteousness and earn God's favor is to keep the law. Perfectly. It is as simple as that. There is just one problem (and Moses knew it): Nobody can do it. Jesus could and did. But nobody else can even come close. So, you see, salvation by works or obedience to the law may be possible in theory, but for natural-born sinners like us it is impossible in practice.

As Paul looks at Israel, his people, he recognizes that all their attempts to make themselves acceptable to God by their good works are futile, and unless they accept the gospel – unless they embrace Jesus as Messiah and Savior and Lord – they will not be saved. You see, theology matters.

It all comes down to Jesus. In verses 6-8, Paul quotes Moses again, this time from Deuteronomy 30, to show that the righteousness that comes by faith in Christ (unlike the law) is not unattainable or inaccessible or unavailable. You don't have to climb a stairway to heaven, you don't have to travel to the far end of the ocean or go down to the deepest part of the sea, in order to find it. Why? Because Jesus Himself has come and has made salvation available to us all.

The "word of faith" to which Paul refers in verse 8 is the gospel message – the message of salvation by grace through trusting faith in Jesus Christ, who did for us what we could never do for ourselves through His incarnation, sinless life, vicarious suffering, atoning death on the cross, and triumphant resurrection from the dead. He did it all for us, and all for the glory of God.

So, what must we do to be saved? What must we do to receive this righteousness that we are utterly incapable of attaining on our own? Here is another place where theology matters. Paul says it is a matter of believing and confessing. Believing what? That Jesus rose from the dead (10:9). The resurrection of Jesus is not the only essential doctrine of the Christian faith, but it is central and essential to what we believe. Paul does not list all the essentials of the faith, but the resurrection presupposes another essential, the death of Christ on the cross for us. Salvation involves believing Jesus is who He claimed to be – the Son of God and Savior of the world – and in the efficacy of what He did for us, especially His death and resurrection. This believing is more than an intellectual agreement with certain facts or truths. It is a conviction of the heart as well as the mind that leads to trust in and commitment to the person of Jesus Christ.

Salvation also involves confessing with your mouth that "Jesus is Lord" (10:9). Don't misunderstand: You aren't saved by saying the words. You can say the words without meaning them. But if you have been saved, if you are saved, then you need to acknowledge publicly that Jesus Christ is Lord. In the 1st-century church, at the time of Paul, to publicly confess that Jesus is Lord was to identify oneself with other believers in the church as a follower of Jesus. Which sometimes got people into trouble with either the Romans or the Jews or both. You didn't say, "Jesus is Lord," unless you meant it.

Let me ask you: Do you believe with your heart that Jesus is who He said He is, and that God raised Him from the dead in triumph over the power of sin and death? Have you openly, honestly, publicly confessed that "Jesus is Lord?" Have you told *anyone* that you have put your trust in Christ as Savior and Lord of your life? If you have, and you meant it, I say to you on the authority of the Bible as the Word of God that you have been saved. If you have put your trust in Christ but you have never told anyone, you need to do it. It is time to let the secret out. Tell someone today. Tell me! I will gladly rejoice in it with you.

Here is the wonderful thing about the gospel. (Actually, it is just one of innumerable wonderful things about the gospel.) It is for anyone and everyone. It is not just for a certain group of people. It is not limited to certain demographics or a particular denomination. It is not reserved only for people from certain nations, or who speak certain languages, have a certain ancestry, or support a certain political party. The gospel is for everyone.

Just as we saw in Romans 8 that there is *no condemnation* for those who are in Christ Jesus (8:1), and *no separation* from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord (8:38-39), here we see that there is *no distinction* on the basis of race or ethnicity, for, as it says in verses 12 and 13, “there is no difference between Jew and Gentile” when it comes to salvation – “the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on Him, for, ‘everyone who calls on the name of the Lord’” in trusting faith ““will be saved.””

The gospel of salvation is available to everyone. It is available to Nabeel Qureshi, the devout Muslim young man I told you about last Sunday. It is available to the most godless, seemingly irredeemable person you know. It is available to Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton and Vladimir Putin. It is available to prodigal sons and daughters of Christian parents. It is available to all the morally upstanding people you know who, like the Jews for whom Paul’s heart grieved, somehow think or hope that their “morally upstanding-ness” will get them in good with God.

It won’t. That is the bad news. But the good news is that whoever calls on the name of the Lord, trusting in Jesus, will be saved. Which includes you and me. Don’t miss out on it.

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.