

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, September 9, 2012**

## **GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY AND HUMAN RESPONSIBILITY**

### **Romans 10:1-13**

Near the end of my sermon two weeks ago, I told you what Charles Spurgeon said when someone asked him how to reconcile the seemingly contradictory doctrines of God's sovereignty in salvation and humankind's exercise of free will. Spurgeon's reply, you may recall, was: "I wouldn't try (to reconcile them). I never reconcile friends."

Hmmm. That is probably not the way it seems to us. "Friends" is not the way we are inclined to characterize the relationship between these two doctrines. How can they possibly be friends when they seem to utterly contradict each other, when to affirm one seems to deny the other?

J. I. Packer addresses this in his classic book, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*, which I wholeheartedly commend to you (and which is still in print and available from Amazon.com). Packer writes: "This is the point we have to grasp. In the Bible, divine sovereignty and human responsibility are not enemies. They are not uneasy neighbors; they are not in an endless state of cold war with each other. They are *friends*, and they work together."

In Romans 9, Paul has made the case for God's sovereignty in salvation. He has given examples to show how the doctrine of election is rooted entirely in God's sovereign grace, in God's sovereign authority and freedom to show mercy and compassion to whomever He chooses. Now, in Romans 10, Paul looks at the other side of the coin, which is our freedom as responsible moral agents created in the image of God to respond personally to the message of the gospel, and our responsibility or accountability before God for our response to the gospel. The tension between God's sovereignty in salvation and our personal responsibility for the response we make to the gospel may never be fully resolved. Not this side of heaven, anyway. But it is clear that Paul affirms both. As do the Scriptures as a whole from Genesis to Revelation.

### **CONCERN FOR THE LOST**

When you look at these verses in Romans 10, the first thing you see is Paul's passionate concern for the spiritual welfare of the Jewish people, his longing and desire for them to be saved. Right at the beginning, in verse 1, he speaks of his "heart's desire and prayer to God" for their salvation. It is an echo of what he has already said in the opening verses of chapter 9, where he speaks of the "great sorrow and unceasing anguish" in his heart over the spiritual lostness of so many of his Jewish brothers (9:2-3). You can tell that Paul did not approach the theological question about the relationship between God's sovereignty and human responsibility as a disinterested academician. No way! Paul was all in, out of his deep affection for his fellow Jews. No way was he willing to write them off, even though the way they were going about the pursuit of a right relationship with God was all wrong. Paul was not willing to write them off, because it was clear to him that God had not written them off.

From the bottom of his heart, Paul continued to long and pray for the salvation of his fellow Jews.

I wonder how often today we write off people God has not written off. I wonder how many of us care about our unbelieving friends, or neighbors, or co-workers, or even our own family members who are estranged from God, as much as Paul cared about his Jewish brothers and sisters. I wonder how many of us are concerned enough about the spiritual health and vitality of the church in America and around the world, including right here in northern Virginia, to pray for it faithfully and fervently, and to offer ourselves, our time, our energy, our financial resources, our gifts and abilities, to serve God's purposes in and through the church, to go wherever God calls us to go, and to do whatever he asks us to do in His name. I wonder.

I wonder these things about myself. You can be assured that I'm talking to me as much as I'm talking to all of you. I wonder, too, how many of us really care enough about the welfare of our nation in every respect, not just politically or economically, but also about the institutions of marriage and the family as God designed and established them, and about the spiritual health of our fellow Americans, to pray with passion and perseverance, with patient hope and godly perspective for a new era of true and lasting revival, for a moral, spiritual, economic, and political reformation and renewal. I wonder how different life in America would be if we and our fellow Christians were truly to devote ourselves to prayer – passionate, persistent prayer – for our leaders and for the direction of our nation. I wonder about all these things. And I am indicted by my own words. The Holy Spirit leaves me in no doubt about my own failure and guilt in these matters.

May God have mercy on me, on all of us, and give us the same kind of passion, the same devoted love, the same persistence in prayer and witness, the same zeal and longing for the salvation of unbelievers in our world today that Paul had for his fellow Jews.

### **MISGUIDED ZEAL**

The second thing that jumps out in this passage is Paul's assessment of his fellow Israelites. They are full of zeal for God, he says in verse 2, but their zeal is not based on knowledge. There is no lack of enthusiasm or effort on their part. In their attempt to earn the approval and favor of God by their rigorous adherence to God's law, they are all in. Paul lauds them for their zeal and devotion. But their zeal, he says, is misguided. It is based on faulty assumptions. With deep sadness, Paul sees in his fellow Jews an illustration of the wisdom of Solomon in Proverbs 19:2, which says:

It is not good to have zeal without knowledge,  
nor to be hasty and miss the way.

Zeal without knowledge is not good. And because his fellow Jews did not combine their zeal with knowledge and understanding, they missed the way. In their misinformed, misguided pursuit of God's righteousness, they missed God's way, the way of true righteousness and life.

Paul expresses no doubts about the sincerity of his fellow Israelites. Their zeal for God and His law was real, but it was based on a misunderstanding of how to be rightly related to God. They were sincere, yes. But they were sincerely wrong. They went about it in the wrong way, as Paul points out in verse 3: “Since they did not know the (true) righteousness that comes from God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God’s righteousness.” In other words, they tried to do it their own way. Either they just failed to come to grips with God’s way of getting right with Him revealed in the gospel, or they decided their way was better. Whatever the case, they rejected God’s way and tried to do it their own way – which is a sure-fire recipe for failure, and illustrates a lesson you can apply to any area of life. If you reject God’s way, if you say no to the way God has instructed you to take, and you insist on doing whatever it is your own way, it is not going to turn out well. In the short-run it may sometimes seem like you out-smarted God. But remember this, my friends: “Do not be deceived. God cannot be mocked. You will reap what you sow” (Galatians 6:7). It will not turn out well.

### **SINCERELY WRONG**

Understand this, too: In the same way that Paul didn’t doubt the sincerity and true devotion of his fellow Jews, there is no reason for us to doubt the sincerity of devout Mormons or Muslims or Hindus or Scientologists, or any other non-Christian or quasi-Christian group. Many Mormons, Muslims, Jews, and adherents of other religions are way out ahead of a lot of us in their fervor and devotion to their religion and its teachings. If the message of the Bible is true, however – and I truly believe it is; if the gospel of Jesus Christ is true – and I am persuaded by God the Holy Spirit that it is; then our Mormon and Muslim and Hindu neighbors, as well as our Jewish neighbors who reject Jesus as the promised Messiah and true Son of God, are sincerely wrong, no matter how passionate and sincere they may be in their religious devotion. They may be full of zeal for their religion. They may be passionate in their religious beliefs and practice. But their zeal is misguided. And, like the Jewish people for whom Paul had such great sorrow and unceasing anguish in his heart, they are estranged from God and spiritually lost apart from Christ.

Sadly, the same thing is true among some who profess to be Christians and believe themselves to be followers of Christ, though in reality, like the Jews Paul cared about so deeply, they are trusting not in Christ but in their own earnest efforts, hoping and trying to make it to heaven by doing good and being good. They have misunderstood the gospel and replaced grace with works. They have replaced the “Done” of Christ’s saving work for us on the cross with all the “Do’s and Don’ts” of life on the religious treadmill.

### **THE RELIGIOUS TREADMILL**

If you know someone who is on that religious treadmill, urge them to get off it today – without wasting another hour or even another minute on it. If you yourself are on the religious treadmill, get off it right now. Say good-bye to the never-ending requirement to do more or to do better. To paraphrase Paul in verse 4, Jesus came to put an end to the religious treadmill. Jesus is in fact the end – the completion and fulfillment – of all the requirements, all the do’s and don’ts, of the law. He put an end to the law as the means to a right

relationship with God. And He established, once and for all, the way of being made right with God by faith – really, by grace, which comes free of charge to people who don't deserve it and never will. People like me. Like you. Like all of us. We are made right with God by grace received through faith in Jesus Christ and what He did for us on the cross.

Say good-bye to the religious treadmill. Say good-bye to a performance-driven life. Say hello to the holy and wholly-undeserved blessing of a brand new relationship of peace with God and unrestricted access to His throne of grace, which is the privilege of every person – Jew, Gentile, male, female, young, old, rich, poor, strong, weak, Democrat, Republican, Independent, liberal, conservative, moderate, everyone – who calls on the name of the Lord in faith.

The promise in Joel 2:32, repeated by Paul in verse 13, the “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord (in faith) will be saved,” is meant for you. It is meant for us all. All you have to do is to turn to Him in a spirit of repentance, and call on Him in trusting faith to save you from your sins, as only Jesus can do. Moses can't do it, Mohammed can't. The Dalai Lama can't. Joseph Smith can't. The Pope can't. Nor can any mega-church pastor or TV preacher. Only Jesus can.

You don't have to fly to the moon and back in order to find the Savior. You don't have to climb the highest heights of moral virtue to reach God. You don't have to journey to the center of the earth to look for God there. Paul says in verses 9 and 10 that it is as simple as this: “If you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved.”

Salvation is a matter of both your heart and your mouth. Believe in your heart and confess with your mouth. Believe what? Believe the gospel. Believe in the person and work of Jesus Christ on your behalf. Believe in the sufficiency of His saving work for you. Confess what? That Jesus is Lord in the fullness of what that means. I may not fully understand what it means to say “Jesus is Lord,” but I know this much: If Jesus is Lord, then I am not. If Jesus is Lord, then He deserves my highest allegiance, my total trust, my wholehearted service. If Jesus is Lord, then the question from which none of us can escape is this: What are you going to do with Jesus?

### **RESPONSE REQUIRED**

You may be wondering to yourself. What does all this have to do with understanding the relationship between God's sovereignty in salvation and our responsibility, yours and mine? It has everything to do with it! Paul unapologetically affirms God's sovereignty in election, while at the very same time he longs and prays for the salvation of his fellow Jews. He teaches the sovereignty of God in salvation and, at the same time, calls upon everyone who has ears to hear to do something in response to the gospel message: to call on the name of the Lord in trusting faith (10:13); to believe in Jesus and His saving work on our behalf, and to confess before others that Jesus is Lord (10:9-10). It is a response that each of us must make – personally – in order to be saved. In order to be made right with God.

## **THE ANTINOMY: GOD’S SOVEREIGNTY AND OUR RESPONSIBILITY**

Exactly how the sovereignty of God works with our free will and responsibility is a mystery. But Spurgeon and Packer, following Paul, are right. God’s sovereignty and our responsibility are not enemies. They are friends. They are not adversaries. Not opposites, as they may seem to us, but complementary truths. Packer calls this an *antinomy*, which he describes as “an apparent incompatibility between two apparent truths. An antinomy exists,” he says, “when a pair of principles stand side by side, seemingly irreconcilable, yet both undeniable” (*Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*, p. 18). That pretty well describes the situation with the doctrines of God’s sovereignty and human responsibility, doesn’t it? God is sovereign, yet we are responsible. We cannot see how they can both be true, and yet the Scriptures teach both.

Packer gives an example of an antinomy from the field of physics, concerning the study of light. Does light consist of waves traveling through space? Or is it a stream of tiny particles? Waves or particles – which is it? When tested as a wave, light proves to be a wave. When tested as a particle, light proves to be a particle. It must be one or the other. It cannot be both. At least it seemed that way to dueling scientists, until an undistinguished young patent examiner in Germany published an article in a leading scientific journal in 1905, showing that light is both a wave *and* a particle. His theory made no sense to the brilliant scientific minds of the day, but the calculations by this young man in his 20s – his name was Albert Einstein – proved to be true, and his discovery rocked the scientific world, which had long believed that light could not be both.

To our minds, the doctrine of God’s sovereignty in election and salvation, on the one hand, and the doctrine of humankind’s free will and responsibility, on the other, often seem incompatible, irreconcilable, and unexplainable. Not unlike the nature of light. Yet, the truth of each one is inescapable, for both divine sovereignty and human responsibility are taught side by side in the Bible.

What can we do about it? What *should* we do about it? As Packer suggests, we can simply accept it for what it is, and learn to live with it (Packer, p. 21). Accept it by faith, and continue to stand in awe before God, whose thoughts are not our thoughts, and whose ways are higher than our ways (Isaiah 55:8-9). Rejoice and take comfort in the truth that God is not only sovereign but gracious. And do not fail to call on Him in faith. For no one who trusts in Him will ever be put to shame (Isaiah 28:16; Romans 10:11).

Lord, let it be so in us, to the glory of Your name. Amen.