

Full Speed . . . in the Wrong Direction

How to Get to Heaven from Earth – Part II

Romans 10:2-3

Introduction

In our last discussion, I informed you that my wife, Marsha, and I would be taking our twin boys to college that afternoon. Our two daughters had to stay home because of school. After a few hours on the road, I received a call on my cell phone. Now let me insert that our last study was on “leaving a suitcase in Israel” – referring to leaving emotional ties and roots someplace. On the phone was our ten year old daughter. She asked me if I would give a message to the guys. I said, “Sure.”

She said, “Tell them to make sure they leave a suitcase in my room.”

I said, “Huh? They left a suitcase in your room?”

“No, Daddy, tell them to leave a suitcase in my room.”

“Oh! . . . Sweetie I don’t remember what I preached.”

After a couple of days in Pennsylvania, Marsha and I headed toward home. It took longer than usual, with one reason being that, at one point, I got turned around. That is a nice way of saying, “I was lost.”

Marsha had climbed into the back of the van to take a nap. That was dangerous, since she is my compass when we travel.

I was on Interstate 81 looking for Interstate 83. I was in the vicinity, but assumed I had somehow passed it. I knew we were lost, so I immediately pulled off to ask for directions. Well, I did not immediately pull off – I eventually pulled off.

Marsha woke up and asked, “What’s wrong?”

“Oh nothing . . . just need to check the tires.”

A man in the parking lot said, “Yea, you missed it . . . go back that way.”

So, I headed back, and still, no Interstate 83 South exit. I was using Map Quest for directions; the book of maps was in the back of the van under the suitcases.

I stopped again at another gas station and was told to go back the other way. I did, and just beyond where I had first pulled off, in fact, one exit further, was Interstate 83 South. It was one of those moments when you ask the Lord, “What was that all about?!”

We finally made it home.

Imagine for a moment that Marsha had awakened while we were traveling along the interstate, and I had said, “Honey, we’re lost. But don’t worry, I have the solution!”

“What’s that?”

“I’m gonna drive faster!”

In other words, “We’re lost, but don’t worry. I think we can get there if I can just drive with a little more confidence and determination and passion. I believe we’ll find that exit.”

She would say, “Honey, it’s time to switch places . . . you need the nap more than I do!”

The truth is, speed is not the solution. Going full speed ahead in the wrong direction does not fix the problem. When you are headed in the wrong direction, driving faster will only take you further away from home. In fact, no driver who is lost, will arrive at their destination just because they are determined.

You are aware of the fact, I am sure, that all roads do not lead to this town. No matter how good a driver you are; no matter how much gas you have in your tank; no matter how good your tires are; no matter how smooth the road is, all roads do not lead home.

Neither do all roads lead to God. That which is true in the physical world is true in the spiritual world.

There are well intentioned millions today who are driving their spiritual SUV's, believing that no matter what road they are on, it will take them home to God. And do not miss this – they are determined and passionate travelers! They are driving at full throttle, but they are headed in the wrong direction.

This is not a new problem, by the way. The apostle Paul addressed this very issue in Romans, chapter 10. He is writing about passionate, disciplined, dedicated people who were convinced that their road led to God.

In verse 1 of Romans, chapter 10, Paul shared his burden for these lost travelers; his kinsman; the Jewish people. Notice verse 1.

Brethren, my heart's desire and my prayer to God for them is for their salvation.

Paul goes on to add, in verses 2 and 3,

For I testify about them that they have a zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge. For not knowing about God's righteousness and seeking to establish their own, they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God.

This text, by the way, provides insight, not only into the Jewish world that rejected the gospel, but into the world at large today that refuses to trust anyone but themselves. They trust their good works; their morality; their determined opinions; their four good tires; the gasoline in their tank; their ability to handle traffic.

Characteristics of Those Who Refuse Christ as Their Messiah

Let me give four characteristics. These are certainly illustrated in the nation Israel, but are true of Jew and Gentile alike, who refuse Christ as their personal Messiah.

They are unwavering in their religious passion

1. First, they are unwavering in their religious passion.

Go back to verse 2 and notice their solid conviction. Paul writes,

... they have a zeal for God...

They are defenders of the God of Moses and Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

You need to understand that to say “they were zealous for God,” is a wonderful attribute for anyone. Could we not be more zealous for God?

The word “zealos” (ζηλος) in the Greek language means, “passionate commitment, enthusiasm”.¹

The word was used to refer to a fanatical group of Jews who believed the only way to handle the Romans was to cut their throats. They became known as “Zealots,” from the same word. They were zealous for God, for the law, for their country, and for their people to the point of laying down their lives.

However, they turned God into someone He was not; they turned the law into something it was never intended to be. Adding regulation upon regulation; tradition upon tradition, they made the law a wearisome burden that no one could follow.

Paul said the law was to teach mankind that they were sinners who needed saving. He wrote to the Galatian believers, in chapter 3, verse 24,

Therefore the Law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ, so that we may be justified by faith.

Do you want to know how zealous they were for the way they believed keeping the law would bring them eternal life? Barclay provides an historical incident about a Jewish priest named Eleazar.

Eleazar was brought before Antiochus Epiphanes whose aim was to stamp out Judaism. This second century Adolph Hitler hated the Jews and wanted to exterminate them. He put a statue of Zeus in the Temple and forbade any worship to Yahweh. When Eleazar, the priest, was brought before Antiochus, he was ordered to eat a piece of pork – strictly forbidden in the Old Testament dietary prohibitions. The old priest refused and said, “If you were to pluck out my eyes, we who live under divine law, will die rather than violate it.” He went on to say that if he was put to death, his fathers would receive him “holy and pure”. He was ordered to be beaten and, history records, “his flesh was torn off by the whips and he streamed down with blood; he fell and soldiers kicked him.” However, in the end, the soldiers so

pitied him that they brought him dressed meat, which was not pork, and told him to eat it and say that he had eaten pork. He refused, and as he was finally killed, he said, "I am dying for the sake of the law."ⁱⁱⁱ

If you were carefully listening, you might have caught Eleazar's comment that by not violating the law, he believed he would be received into eternity as a holy and pure individual.

They had great zeal, but for the wrong thing. They went full throttle along the highway of religion, but full speed . . . in the wrong direction.

That is, in fact, Paul's very next statement as he adds to his comment about the zeal of the unbeliever. Not only are many unbelievers unwavering in their religious passion, but he gives us a second characteristic.

They are un-teachable in their spiritual position

2. Secondly, they are un-teachable in their spiritual position.

Notice verses 2 through 3a again.

For I testify about them that they have a zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge. For not knowing about God's righteousness . . .

In other words, they had zeal for their truth, without knowledge of God's truth.

Did this mean that the Jews were ignorant of God and the law of God?

Oh no. They knew about God and knew much of the law. Their scribes interpreted and developed and expounded on the law. They were brilliant scholars and the synagogue was a place of education.

One author noted that "these scribes were given the prestigious titles of rabbi and master. They always sat in the places of highest honor at banquets and religious feasts. In the synagogue they would sit with their backs to the cupboards that contained the scrolls of the Torah, the sacred law of Moses, indicating their unique positions as its sole interpreters . . . the people were almost completely reliant on those leaders for any knowledge of God's word. Even the tombs of famous rabbis were venerated with a superstitious awe."ⁱⁱⁱ

Yet, it was to these leaders that Jesus Christ hurled his strongest words of condemnation. He chastised these experts in the law, as we are told in Luke, chapter 11, verse 52a, when He said,

Woe to you . . . for you have taken away the key of knowledge . . .

To another group of leaders He said, in Matthew, chapter 22, verse 29,

. . . You are mistaken, not understanding the Scriptures nor the power of God.

With all their effort and all their scholarship and all their learning, they were ignorant of the true meaning of God's word because they did not believe in the God-man, Jesus Christ.

Paul wrote in Romans, chapter 10, verse 2,

. . . they have a zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge.

The word he used for "knowledge" was not the usual Greek word for intellect, or "gnosis," which speaks of facts or "head knowledge," we could call it. Instead, Paul used the compound word, "epignosis" (ἐπίγνωσις), which means, "recognition, spiritual perception or understanding," and could be translated "true knowledge".

Paul referred to this issue when he wrote of the unbeliever, in II Timothy, chapter 3, verse 7,

[they are] always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth.

They had memorized a set of rules, but they had no relationship with God through Jesus Christ. They had chosen facts over fellowship; doing over being; religious action over authentic Christianity.

Jesus Christ said, as recorded in John, chapter 8, verses 31 and 32,

If you continue in My word . . . you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.

Do you know what the responsibility of the church is? It is to teach the truth of God's word. And Jesus said that the truth of His word would set people free.

The religious Jews and scholars would not be taught and they remained bound to their traditions and their rules. They were going full speed . . . in the wrong direction.

I was in a store recently, and was being aided by a very helpful young man as I purchased a small printer. Since I was the only person in line and he did not seem to be in a hurry, I asked if he was able to get free on the weekends to attend church somewhere.

He said, "Oh, I have major problems with organized religion."

I said, "You know, I can't stand it either."

"Yea, I've got philosophical differences with organized religion."

I said, "Well, just what *do* you believe?"

He said with absolute conviction, "It's rather complicated, but I have developed my own religion."

Whether he knew it or not, he happened to believe in the organized thoughts of his own philosophical opinion, which in fact, was his own religion.

He was confident, committed, at high speed . . . going down the wrong road. God says, in Proverbs, chapter 14, verse 12,

There is a way which seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death.

How different from that story of unbelief were the contents of a note I received several days ago. It was from a young woman I had shared Christ with some time earlier. She did not accept Christ, and I had left her with the challenge to read God's word. I believe David's promise in Psalm, chapter 119, verse 130,

The unfolding of Your words gives light; it gives understanding . . .

A couple of weeks after that conversation, she wrote a very kind note to me which included the following words. They so clearly apply to what Paul is saying in our text today.

"I have always thought that seeking out literature was the best way to find a solution; to be prepared and knowledgeable about a wide variety of subjects, and feel good about knowing 'the facts'."

I promise I did not make up this note. She then wrote,

"But guess what? The best source of knowledge was right there in front of me all along in the Scriptures. How wrong I have been . . . and I HAVE accepted the gift of salvation from God!!!"

Note the three exclamation points!!!

This is not "gnosis," or "the facts," it is "epignosis," or "the understanding of truth by coming to know the One who is the truth, our Lord Jesus Christ".

Paul is agonizing over his fellow kinsmen, as they are unwavering in their religious passion and un-teachable in their spiritual position.

They are uninhibited in their spiritual performance

3. Thirdly, they are uninhibited in their spiritual performance.

Notice further in verse 3 of Romans, chapter 10.

. . . ***[they are] seeking to establish their own .***

. . .

Their own what? Their own righteousness.

They refuse to acknowledge their sin; they refuse to admit their need of salvation; they refuse to accept a God who might judge sin and condemn sinners, so they are left with nothing to believe in but themselves.

So they had better make themselves worth believing in, right?

They seek to establish their own righteousness. The present tense of this verb, "to seek," emphasizes the fact that they are continually in search of ways to establish themselves as holy people.

Matthew, chapter 6, catalogues their public performances before men. They prayed in public so they could be seen by men; they did not bathe or wash their hair when they fasted so that people would know they were going without food and would admire them as holy men; they gave money in the most ostentatious manner possible so that people could see their giving and could "ooh" and "ah" over their godliness.

Jesus Christ said, in verses 1 and 5 of Matthew, chapter 6,

Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them . . . you are not to be like the hypocrites; for they love to [do what they do] so that they may be seen . . .

.

They are seeking to establish their righteousness!

The Greek word translated "to establish" (στησαι) in Romans, chapter 10, verse 3, ". . . [they are] seeking to establish their own . . .," is a word that in Paul's day, actually referred to the building of a monument; to a shrine to the glory, not of God, but of themselves.

I saw illustration after illustration of this in England and Scotland. I entered one cathedral after another and saw the shrines, or the elaborate tombs inside the cathedral walls. I visited the most famous indoor graveyard of all – known as Westminster Abbey. I walked its famous corridors and into the massive cathedral where the stones were marked with

the names of people buried beneath your feet. There were so many noblemen and women; heads of state; kings and queens buried there. Some had grand shrines above ground – statues in their likeness, showing them with folded hands in prayer. If you know enough church history, you know that many of them were antagonistic to the gospel of Christ and some of them openly persecuted believers. Their rejection of biblical truth did not matter – “Just make sure I’m buried in the church.”

What irony it was to walk across one large stone that had carved into it the name “Charles Darwin”. Imagine spending your life and intellect and influence arguing against the biblical record of creation and then, your family, I was told, paid enough money and arranged with the right people to have your grave put inside a church, which supposedly acknowledges the existence of God the creator. “Never mind that . . . just make sure his bones are in the sanctuary.”

What beautiful statues; what a magnificent cathedral – surely this is the way to God; surely this is the doorway into heaven.

I will tell you of the grave that I will never forget. It housed the bones of a believer named John Knox. His grave lies outside of the church where he thundered the truth, even though reigning nearby, was Bloody Mary who hated him and his gospel. He led the reformation in Scotland and was used incredibly, to lead thousands to the truth of God’s grace.

If you walk behind the cathedral of St. Giles where he pastored, you will find his grave. It is easy to miss, however. That is because it is underneath the asphalt of a parking lot. The only thing that marks the spot is a small square of yellow paint – right there on parking space number 23. When I went to find it, there was a car parked in that space. I could see behind the rear bumper however, that block of yellow paint.

There was no shrine; no monument like the others; no sculptured figure with folded hands; not even a grave stone marking the spot. There was just some yellow paint on parking space number 23, while men, like Charles Darwin, lie in Westminster Abbey. Knox really does not care.

So many others have tried to establish their own righteousness on earth; he has established his righteousness in Christ. John Knox is even now, in a magnificent, glorious heaven.

Unbelievers are unwavering in their religious passion, which is apart from the illuminating, redemptive work of God, they are un-teachable in their spiritual position, and they are uninhibited in their spiritual charade or performance.

They are unyielding in their spiritual pride

4. One more characteristic of unbelievers is that they are unyielding in their spiritual pride.

Notice verse 3b again.

. . . they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God.

Literally, they were unwilling to subject or place (υποτασσω) themselves under the orders of God; to surrender themselves to the righteousness of God.

Sanford C. Mills, a Jew who came to faith in Christ, wrote, “Israel wants to be the captain of her own soul, the master of her own ship. But Israel lost both her rudder and her compass . . . what is to save her from being drawn into the vortex of hell?”^{iv}

The answer is not more speed! The answer is not more wind in her sails; better sailors; a better boat. None of that matters when you are sailing toward Niagara Falls.

The solution is humbling, but much simpler than any of that. It is best put in the note that I read earlier, in which a young woman said, “I was wrong . . . it wasn’t about finding my own solution . . . feeling good about knowing certain facts . . . feeling worthy to approach God . . . I have simply, humbly accepted the gift of salvation that comes freely from God.”

That is the solution.

If you are going full speed . . . in the wrong direction, stop . . . stop! The further you race down that path, the further away from home you go. Perhaps today is the day for you to humbly accept the gift of salvation that comes freely from God.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 8/22/2004 by Stephen Davey.

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- ⁱ Geoffrey W. Bromiley, Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (Eerdmans, 1985), p. 297.
- ⁱⁱ William Barclay, Romans (Westminster Press, 1975), p. 137.
- ⁱⁱⁱ John MacArthur, Romans (Moody Press, 1994), p. 55.
- ^{iv} Ibid., p. 56.