

“THE STUMBLING STONE.”

Rev. Robert T. Woodyard

First Christian Reformed Church

March 16, 2025, 10:30 AM

Scripture Texts: Romans 9:30 – 10:4

Introduction.

Until now in Romans 9 the Apostle Paul has been addressing the Jew/Gentile issue from the perspective of heaven, from the divine point of view. He has talked about God’s choosing, about God’s election from before the foundation of the world, about God’s plan and purposeful decision to choose Isaac and not Ishmael, Jacob and not Esau, the children of the promise and not the children of the flesh, vessels of mercy and not vessels of wrath.

Now Paul is going to end this chapter looking at these things from an earthly or human perspective. We are turning from the initiative of God to the response of human beings, from the perspective of the sovereignty of God to that of the responsibility of man. Both are true, both are taught in Scripture.

We are shifting from the sun at the center of the solar system exerting the powerful force of gravity, to the planets’ response to that gravity.

There are people who are seeking God and don’t find Him.
There are people who are not seeking God and do find Him.

Both these contrasting actions are considered from below, from the perspective of the attitudes and actions of men, the Jews rejecting Christ, and the Gentiles receiving Christ.

What shall we say then? What about the Gentiles?

How did the Gentiles come to receive the righteousness of God that is through Jesus Christ? They did it the way Paul said anyone can all through his letter.

Romans 1:16-17 For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. 17 For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith.”

Romans 3:21-22 But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, ... 22 the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction.

Gentiles responded to the free offer of salvation and received this righteousness by faith.

What shall we say then? What about Israel?

We know that God chose them from out of all the other nations and made them His people.

Romans 9:4-5 They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. 5 To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ.

So what happened? The Jews did not see that they needed Christ for righteousness because they thought their righteousness was based on being Israelites. The Jews tried to attain righteousness through the works of the Law and not by faith.

Romans 9:31-32 Israel who pursued a law that would lead to righteousness did not succeed in reaching that law. 32 Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but *as if* it were based on works.

They had Abraham as their father, as an example and they missed it.

Romans 4:2-5 If Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. 3 For what does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.” 4 Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. 5 And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness.

The Jews didn't have faith in God, they had faith in their way of having faith, faith in their works, their goodness, their efforts.

They thought the law was all about what we do, when all along it was about trusting and responding in love to what God had done. That little phrase “*as if*” implies that the law was never intended to be pursued by works but only by faith.

They thought they could do something to win God's favor and approval. When we put our confidence or trust in any of our works, in any of our efforts, in any of our own

goodness we are at that moment at war with God, we make ourselves enemies of God and enemies of His righteousness. Don't bring your righteousness to God and think He will be pleased.

They wanted God and righteousness on their own terms, on their own conditions. Those who think they can do something to earn their salvation by works, make two mistakes.

First, they underestimate the power of sin. They ignore their sin, or downplay it, they think they are basically good people. Certainly nothing like terrorists or people who shoot up schools or sell fentanyl and meth. While their sins might be so bad in our world's eyes, they are still sins. Like the bucket boys say about the people they meet on the streets in Bellingham, they just sin different than us.

As Paul said in Romans 3:10-12, "None is righteous, no, not one; no one seeks God; no one does good, not even one."

What does Isaiah say about our righteousness?

Isaiah 64:6 We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment.

Do we really think about ourselves that way? When we sing Amazing Grace, do we really mean it when we say a wretch like me? Do we think we really are as disgusting as those smelly homeless people who live in tents and push shopping carts around?

Like the Jews we underestimate the depth of our sin and depravity, and the reason we do is because we compare ourselves to others, and not to the holy righteous God against whom we have sinned. The Jews compared themselves to the Gentile and thought they came out smelling like roses. They felt secure they were far more righteous. When I call myself the chief or worst among sinners it is to keep my pride and own sense of self-righteousness in check, so I don't lose sight of how far I have fallen, and how much I need grace. I am nothing, Jesus is everything.

Second, they underestimate the cost of salvation, the cost of grace. There are not enough good works in the world that could pay the debt and buy the forgiveness of all our sins. Only the life and blood sacrifice of the Son of God is sufficient to pay for and cover the debt of all our sin.

The Jews made both these mistakes and because of that they rejected Christ and missed God's offer of the free imputed righteousness of Christ.

There are only two classes of people in this world, those who have nothing in hands, and those who have their own self-righteousness. When God saves, He saves people in a way that breaks the pride of the privilege and works, and in a way that overcomes the despair or hopelessness of the outcast, the despair of those who have nothing, no goodness, just sin and surrender by faith alone.

Think about it. Paul is talking about God's people. They were unbelievably tempted to live by works, and refused to live by faith alone. It has always been that way with God's people, it is today.

Who's works do you want to trust? Your works or Christ's works? Let's be honest, we all have our works, our things we do to prove how good we are. What we drive, where we shop, how much we recycle, how we keep our yard. We are so driven by appearances, what people think about us.

The Stumbling Stone.

This is why the Jews stumbled over the stumbling block of Jesus. I asked the question of the Life Groups, why was Jesus a stumbling stone? I mean what's not to like about Jesus. How could you find any fault with a perfect Man, a perfect Savior, who is loving, gentle and lowly?

Aw, there it is, lowly. Jesus was an offense to the Jews because He was supposed to be the Messiah that delivered them from the Romans, the Messiah that would make Israel great again. Instead He was a huge disappointment, a huge embarrassment. Not only did He not defeat the Romans, the Romans defeated Him and killed Him on one of their Roman crosses.

A crucified Savior? Impossible. The cross was a scandal. Christ crucified was a stumbling block to the Jews. They could not humble themselves and submit to such a Christ.

Philippians 2:5-8 Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, 6 who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, 7 but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. 8 And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

That's the stumbling stone. Jesus is offensive because we have to humble ourselves to follow Him, we have to give up on our goodness and our own self-righteousness, our pride.

In the temple at eight days old Simeon lays his hand on the baby Jesus, and looks in Mary's eyes, and says, "This one is appointed for the rise and the fall of many in Israel." He recognized the Messiah would be both the salvation of many and the destruction of many in Israel.

Jesus was going to be the one upon whom unbelievers stumble, but "he who trusts in him will never be put to shame."

What will be the difference? Those who are proud and trust their own righteousness, who refuse to recognize or acknowledge their need for a Savior from their sin will stumble.

When we pursue our own works and righteousness what we are saying is I am in charge, my religion is about my efforts, my achievements. I am putting my righteousness over God's righteousness and that robs God. Anyone one who tries to prove their righteousness with God tramples on the blood of Jesus and the gift of God.

To sum it up, what separates Christianity from every other religion is grace. We obey not in order to gain his favor but in gratitude and love for the God who saved us. In every other religion, you do good works to be accepted by God; in Christianity you do good works because you have been accepted by God. The Gospel says I am already accepted by grace through faith, so my grateful response and desire is to obey.

Romans 10:1-4

Romans 10:1-2 Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved. 2 For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge.

This is an amazing verse. Remember what Paul has been talking about, the sovereignty of God in our salvation. You will hear people raise objections against the sovereignty of God in choosing who is saved.

They will say why bother praying or witnessing if God is sovereign, what will happen will happen no matter what and there is nothing we can do about it.

For those who naively or foolishly draw the conclusion there is no need to pray or to evangelize, notice the Apostle who is teaching these truths and understands them perfectly and with great depth, is the Apostle who is most praying and most

witnessing. He is the one who said pray without ceasing, and who gave all his life and energy to evangelizing.

These truths are not incompatible with our calling to extend the mercy we have received from God to everyone we can so that they might also become vessels of mercy displaying the glory of God.

God purposefully uses the prayers and witnessing of the saints to accomplish His sovereign purposes. In fact God commands us to do those things. God's sovereignty doesn't make us passive, it makes us active, confident that we are praying to a God who really can change human hearts.

A great old theologian answered this question in a unique way.

“Does God know the day you'll die? Yes. Has he appointed that day? Yes. Can you do anything to change that day? No. Then why do you eat? To live. What happens if you don't eat? You die. Then if you don't eat, and die, then would that be the day that God had appointed for you to die? ...Quit asking stupid questions and just eat. Eating is the pre-ordained way God has appointed for living.” A.A. Hodge

Praying and witnessing are the pre-ordained ways God has appointed for bringing His salvation to those He has chosen. God's sovereignty in no way negates human freedom and responsibility. God fulfills His purposes through human actions.

Let this encourage you to be all the more fervent in your prayers for loved ones and prodigals who are lost, and actively share the gospel, knowing that God uses these means to accomplish His purposes. You can be bold and confident knowing it doesn't depend on you but on God's sovereign power.

Don't stumble on Jesus. Humble yourself even as He did in becoming like us, and submit to Him and His righteousness. Don't try to prove your value or worthy or acceptance with Him or with each other. Don't boast in your achievements, boast in His grace and be grateful for His mercy. Let God's grace and love and approval be sufficient.

Christ is the end of the law, meaning He perfectly fulfilled all the righteous demands of the law on our behalf. Let His righteousness be the only righteousness you need or trust in. Rest on the finished work of Christ. Enjoy the freedom He died to purchase for you.