

FULL OF ZEAL, HARD OF HEARING

by Steve Zeisler

I have gone on scores of diets in my lifetime, and usually I start with a sense of heroic purpose: I will be disciplined, and I will take on the fat monster and defeat it in single-handed combat! I have a vision of myself looking different quickly, so I decide to ingest only about five hundred calories per day to get it over with. There is a good amount of pride mixed in with wanting to do what is probably the right thing to do. But of course the diet never lasts, and my zealous self-discipline always falls by the wayside.

It has been pointed out to me recently that the concept of dieting is wrong. If you start starving yourself, your body thinks that it is going to die, so your metabolism slows way down and you continue to burn fewer calories than you eat. Unfortunately, it turns out that the real solution to being overweight is to change a great number of things, including how you think of yourself. It is internal change that is the key to the whole thing. Over a long period of time you learn to eat the right things in reasonable amounts and to exercise.

Zeal Without Knowledge

I mention all that because essentially the same issues are raised in the passage before us this morning. We discover wrong-headed zeal to be useless in spiritual things as well as in physical things. Let's read Romans 10:1-7:

Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved. For I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge. Since they did not know the righteousness that comes from God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness. Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.

Moses describes in this way the righteousness that is by the law: "The man who does these things will [have to] live by them." But the righteousness that is by 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 deep?'" (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead).

Paul is praying an earnest and heartfelt prayer for the salvation of his people, the Israelites. This leads us once again into the tension that we have already seen in this section of Scripture. On the one side is the sovereignty of God, who completely independent of anything else is going to do exactly what he chooses to do. He will have mercy on some, and he will harden some, and we make no contribution to his choices. On the other side is our complete freedom and responsibility to choose. Paul is now at the second of these poles. He is praying that they will hear and believe, that the truth will penetrate and change them, that they will make the choice to respond to God that is theirs to make. God is sovereign *and* we are responsible; both are true. Chapter 10 is filled with energy, persuasion, prayer, preaching, sending, and going. Those who take the gospel to others are described as beautiful, and they share it because it will give life to anyone who will hear and believe.

Something else we need to pay attention to is what Paul is praying for: salvation itself. That serves to remind us that we are in desperate need of being saved. For some, phrases like 'being saved' sound a bit archaic and almost embarrassing because of their association with a "button holing," hit-you-with-the-Bible, street-preaching kind of approach. But the fact remains that we are born with a horrible spiritual disease: rebellion against God. We are born self-centered and prefer ourselves to God at every turn. And there is nothing except being saved that will set us free from that condition. Paul is praying for salvation because we are lost and desperate. We are dead in our sin until life becomes ours as a gift from God. We need a spiritual revolution to take place.

What do you most often pray about spontaneously? Sometimes when I think through prayer, set aside time for it, and organize my thoughts, I pray about great and eternal things. But when I pray spontaneously, I usually find myself talking to the Lord about the temporal things: the mini-crisis that is in front of me, or gratitude for any unexpected blessing.

I often pray for my children, that they will be able to deal with whatever problems they face in school or whatever pressure they are under socially. I pray that no danger will descend on them and that they will be kept physically safe. And of course most of us pray for spouses and siblings, parents and grandparents, as well as other loved ones. Spontaneous prayers about temporary things are appropriate, but we must acknowledge that God's greater concern is not to make us safe for the moment, but saved for eternity.

What Paul is praying about here is that the Israelites whom he loves, about whom he anguishes, might know the life of God that lasts forever.

The Problem of Pride

The problem, however, is pride. This entire chapter is going to make that point a number of different ways. Pride is what keeps us from saving knowledge of God, from living with a sense of his enjoyment of us and ours of him, from life itself. We take that up in verses 3 and 4. Although the Israelites were zealous for God, "Since they did not know the righteousness that comes from God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness. Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes." As with diets, at times we find ourselves zealous for reform: "Things are going to be different this time! I'm going to get shaped up and make a significant contribution to the betterment of myself." And in things religious Israel throughout its history determined, having the standards of God before them, that they would keep the standards. In Romans 9:31-32 Paul said Israel pursued a law of righteousness, and they pursued it by works, not by faith.

There is a proper basis, of course, for living lives that have discipline and that are filled with concern for God; a proper basis for doing the right thing. That basis is gratitude to God for what he has already done for us. Lives that are already filled with his presence and that are already totally approved of by him should be lived out in grateful obedience. But we should be warned, recognizing that instead of being grateful to God for his gift for us, we want to establish a righteousness of our own. We want to make a gift of our lives to God rather than receiving life from him as a gift.

Now, Christmas is the gift-giving season we are most familiar with, of course. For months now you have probably been receiving Christmas catalogs focusing on all the spending and hoopla that go with Christmas. And most of us, whether or not we will admit how entrapped we are by materialism, like to be effective and creative gift-givers. We like to find just the right gifts for special people. We enjoy the thought of someone's opening a gift from us and being flooded with appreciation for our thoughtfulness.

But the Christmas season at its heart is not about any gift-giving that we should do, but about the gift of God to us. It is supremely about how God the Son himself chose to abandon the privileges of heaven and to be squeezed down into the form of a poor child born in a stable, who would live a life of ostracism and rejection, and who would finally die as a criminal on a cross. He is God's gift to us. God is giving us something we do not deserve and cannot completely understand.

You probably hear the song *The Little Drummer Boy* more than you want to around Christmas time. There are some interesting lines in it. The little boy observes wise men and others bringing gold and very marvelous gifts to the King, and he says to himself, "I have no gift to bring that's fit to honor him. I'm a poor boy." But then he finally decides, "I'll play my best for him." Now, if he is saying thank-you by that, that's one thing. But if he is saying, as so many of us subtly or unconsciously want to say, "I will make the best version of me possible; I will take whatever I find in myself, put it into the most attractive package, discipline it, and offer it to God to make him happy," then that is incredibly dangerous and foolish. The line "I have no gift to bring that's fit to honor him" is always true. I have no gift to bring---and I never will have. The best version of me is not good enough to offer him. No matter how zealous or focused or energetic I become, no matter how much

better I can make myself, it is still not going to be fit to honor him.

Yet the anguish of Paul in this passage is that his fellow Israelites, the people of his nation, sought to establish their own righteousness rather than discovering the righteousness that comes as a gift. That very commitment to doing it themselves meant that they missed the opportunity to receive life as a gift, the righteousness that is by faith. Verse 6 says, "Don't imagine heroic and disciplined deeds for yourself. Don't tell yourself, 'I'll climb the highest height, heaven itself, and there I'll find the Lord.' Don't say, 'I'll descend to the depths of the sea, into the very caverns where Christ has gone in death and burial, and find him there.'"

The Righteousness of Faith

What does the righteousness of faith say, then? Verses 8-13:

But what does it say? "The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart," that is, the word of faith we are proclaiming: That 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. As the Scripture says, "Anyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame." For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile--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 will be saved."

Love must precede a response to love. The same issue that Paul raises here in spiritual matters also applies in family circumstances. It is right and the calling of God for parents to freely love their children. And you are very blessed if you have been given unqualified, unfettered love from your parents. But if you have not been given it, you can never earn it. If you have received rejection and disapproval from your parents, there is no amount of change, effort, goodness, discipline, service, or accomplishment that will make them love you so that you can be sure of their love. You will continue to wonder, "Is this payment enough? What more must I do?" Real love comes from the good heart of the giver; it is not earned by the loved one.

The Lord has already given us love. "As the Scripture says, 'Anyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame.' For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile--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 will be saved.'" It is already announced to us that he loves us and richly blesses those who call on him. That is who he is by nature. He longs to be merciful to us; we already have that from him. We can simply say, "Thank you." That is why Paul said, "What you really long for is already there. It is right in your mouth, right in your heart, as near to you as it can be. You don't need to climb to any heights or descend to any depths. You don't need to become heroic or zealous. You don't need to be reformed."

Letting God give us the gift of salvation is simple even while it is profound. There are two things involved in discovering this gift: First, we believe in our hearts that Jesus was raised from the dead. That is really a summary of a fuller statement. Jesus was executed on our behalf. As he was buried, our sins were removed from us and hurled into the depths of the sea (see Micah 7:19). The burial of his body was the burial of our sin nature. And then Jesus was raised again to new life so that we might be. The simple belief that God raised him from the dead really means that we believe the reason that he was raised from the dead and understand what went into all of that, and we agree that it really happened: Our sins were really paid for, the tomb was really empty, and God really loves us; we are persuaded of it at the deepest level.

The second thing that allows us to discover the gift of salvation is that we are willing to say we believe in public. We are willing to take a stand, to march under a banner, to say that now Jesus is our Lord and give the world the right to hold us to it. If we live contrarily to that, then we are hypocrites. There is only one Lord, and his name is Jesus.

But there is nothing particularly heroic about either of those things. They don't take a lot of discipline, zeal, or religion. God has already said that he loves us, and all we have to do is believe it and say so in public.

That is a lot like marriage, isn't it? One of the easiest things to do in the world is get married; you can get

married in five minutes. A lot of things get included in a wedding ceremony just because you spend so much money and time on it (buying all those dresses and so forth) that you want to make it seem like it's worth it. But there is nothing lengthy, difficult, or hard to understand about the actual marriage. Just two critical elements are required if you're going to have a married life beyond the ceremony: First, it has to be true in your heart. You must have already given yourself to somebody in love so that you are willing for the rest of your life to forsake all others and grow together despite the circumstances---sickness, riches, poverty, or whatever comes. And second, you have to be willing to stand up in front of witnesses and say so. Being secretly married is not being married.

One of Jesus' most famous stories is the story of the Good Samaritan (see Luke 10:30-37). A man was beaten and left for dead by the side of the road, and a priest and a Levite, both holy men, walked by him and left him in the dust and blood. They were returning, we assume, from Jerusalem to Jericho. If we were to think the best of them, we can imagine them filled with the thoughts of God. They were returning from recently serving in the temple; witnessing the crowds thronged around, the sacrifice offered, the songs sung, and the Scripture read. They might have been filled with wonderful thoughts of nearness to the Lord and the glory of the God of Israel. But at the very moment that their thoughts, if we were to grant them the best, were filled with God, they missed what he had for them! Their focus on their role in the things of God had been, if anything, misleading to them.

It was the Samaritan who had nothing more than the compassion that comes as a gift from God---he wouldn't be permitted to go into the temple, an outcast in Jerusalem when he was there---who pleased God. There was something inside him that was responsive to the compassionate heart of God. The simple conclusion, based not on the appearance of things but on the reality of them, made both Jesus and the lawyer who listened to him conclude that it was the Samaritan who did what God wanted.

And Paul is saying that it is not the zealous, spiritually committed, earnest, disciplined, focused, prideful, and self-made person who finds life from God. It is the one who merely says, "Thank you" in response to what God has already done for them. Saying, "Thank you" doesn't require us to be of a certain race, to have known a lot, to be reformed, or to be attractive. Only, do we believe he died for us and rose from the dead because our sins were paid for? And are we willing to say so?

Too Proud To Hear

Verses 14-15:

How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!"

Now Paul is answering another question. The Jews have been filled with zeal and enthusiasm, but they are charging off in the wrong direction. The priest and Levite are going down the road thinking about God and missing God. If religious zeal isn't enough, if it requires knowledge about Christ and the willingness to believe it and confess it, then how will they know? And Paul goes on to say that they will know because God will, through a community of his people, send spokesmen whose very feet will be beautiful to those who want to hear. The Lord is about the business of getting the news out. He wants his name known; he wants the truth about Christ to be proclaimed. He wants people to have the opportunity to know how much they are loved, so they can be persuaded of it and march under the banner of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And then the question is, if unbelief remains, how do we account for that? Verses 16-21:

But not all the Israelites accepted the good news. For Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed our message?" Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ. But I ask: Did they not hear? Of course they did:

"Their voice has gone out into all the earth,
their words to the ends of the world."
Again I ask: Did Israel not understand? First, Moses says,
"I will make you envious by those who are not a nation;
I will make you angry by a nation that has no understanding."

And Isaiah boldly says,
"I was found by those who did not seek me;
I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me."
But concerning Israel he says,
"All day long I have held out my hands
to a disobedient and obstinate people."

There are questions that can be asked about people who have not heard about Jesus Christ, who live in places in the world where no preaching has gone forth. But that is not the question being asked here. The question here is, "What about those who really have heard and don't believe? Can we find some fault in the telling of the story? Could the preaching have been better? Would they have been persuaded if we had just said it a little differently, come on a different day, or made the package more attractive? Can we hope that maybe they didn't really hear and that more telling will make a difference?" But Paul says that in the case of those in Israel who rejected their Messiah, that was not the problem, because Moses saw them made jealous by the nations that were different from them, and Isaiah preached to them and was rejected. There is continued reference to envy and anger and disobedience and obstinacy.

The reason there is not belief, again, is because we human beings prefer ourselves and the answer from our own strength rather than receiving a gift from God. We would like to make ourselves worthy rather than to be declared unworthy and loved anyway. And it is precisely that pride that is the sticking point for those who have heard the gospel and have not responded, whether those in Israel, those in our city or our family, or others we know and care about. "A disobedient and obstinate people" are those who do not believe though they have heard.

To be a bit irreverent, this reminds me of Peter Sellers' *Pink Panther* movies. They tell the story of Inspector Clouseau, a bumbling, obnoxious, self-important, silly fool who keeps stumbling into the solutions to crimes completely by accident and driving his superior crazy. His superior can never solve the crime, or get the girl. And although Clouseau is clueless, undeserved accolades, adventure, and other good things keep coming his way; and his superior, a bright and capable individual, is robbed of his place in glory. He finally goes crazy because he is so jealous and angry and frustrated, and they have to lock him up in the loony bin.

We all very much want to do well and be appreciated for it; we want to succeed and be cheered. And there is something about pride that makes God's habit of giving away gifts like this aggravating. But that does not mean that we have not heard. The obstinate person wants credit for himself. Religious zeal may be sufficient to bring glory to us, but it is simple faith that glorifies God.

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