



Stumbling by Works

Romans 9:30-33

Rev. Fred Greco

This morning we are back with an old friend: Paul's letter to the Romans. After a few weeks' absence, we're back in chapter 9 of Romans. We'll be looking this morning at Romans 9:30-33. We pick back up right where we left off in this famous chapter 9 in which the apostle Paul is speaking about God's sovereignty and salvation.

Please give attention to the reading of God's Holy Word. For the Word of the Lord is completely inerrant, the Word of the Lord is completely sufficient, and the Word of the Lord is completely authoritative. Romans 9, beginning at verse 30:

"What shall we say, then? That Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness have attained it, that is, a righteousness that is by faith; but that Israel who pursued a law that would lead to righteousness did not succeed in reaching that law. Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as if it were based on works. They have stumbled over the stumbling stone, as it is written, 'Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.'"

Thus far the reading of God's Holy Word. Let's pray for his blessing upon it. Heavenly Father, we ask this morning that you would open up your Word to us, that by the power of your Holy Spirit we would look in it and see the Lord Jesus Christ. Lord, we ask this morning that you would meet with us in your Word. Be a blessing to us. This we ask in Christ's precious name, amen.

We are back now in Romans, chapter 9, and we need to remember where we have been, because it has been a few weeks since we have been together in the book of Romans. If we remember where Paul brought us to this point, it began in chapter 9 with Paul pouring out his heart for his kinsmen, Israel, who have not believed on the Lord Jesus Christ and, therefore, are not saved. It was not only a burden that the apostle Paul carried in this instance; it was actually something he acted upon, because Paul went and preached Jesus to the Jews from city to city.

Then the objection came to Paul, "Well, maybe it's that the Word of God has failed. That's why the Jews haven't believed. Perhaps the promises of God to his people were not true." Paul answered, "Certainly not!" He began to show that the unbelief of the Jews is a part of God's sovereign plan of salvation. This was the doctrine of election we looked at.

Then Paul spent the next 15 verses answering a variety of objections. It's as if he was in a room, and up at the back of the room hands kept being raised. "Well, what about *this*, Paul? What about *that*? What about the unfairness of election? What about why God doesn't show mercy to everyone? What about the fact that God shouldn't be able to find fault with sinners if election is what is true?"

Now, after having answered those objections, Paul is going to turn from election to man's responsibility, showing us that both of these teachings are true. He does this by showing what is required of man for salvation. So this morning, we see three things from our text. First, we see that there is a *righteousness obtained by faith*. Second, we see that there is a *righteousness that is missed by works*. Then thirdly, we see that *Jesus is the difference*. Righteousness obtained by faith, righteousness missed by works, and Jesus is the difference.

Righteousness Obtained by Faith

As we come to our text this morning, once again Paul begins a section with this phrase, "What shall we say, then?" This is Paul's way of saying, "Let's stop and think about this." He has been teaching us the doctrine of election, and now he's going to begin to tell us about the importance of man's responsibility. This responsibility is seen in faith.

This is the third time Paul has used this phrase in the book of Romans. The first time was after the teaching he had given to us about the abounding grace of God. Someone objected that that meant, of course, that he should be able to go on sinning, because that would just mean there would be even more grace. Doesn't that make sense? Paul says, "What shall we say, then?" "Stop. Think about what you're saying. Let's examine this a bit."

Then he did it after the doctrine of election. Someone objected that this made God unfair, and Paul said, "Stop! Think about what you're saying. What shall we say, then? Should we say that God is unfair? That makes God not God. Think about what you're saying." Now here he does it again after teaching about the sovereignty of God in salvation. Someone might object and say, "Well, Paul, that's all well and good. Then that means no one is responsible." And you know what Paul says. "Stop! Think about what you're saying. The Bible is full of the responsibility of man."

You see, the objection comes, "Why is it, if God is sovereign, that Israel is not saved but the Gentiles are? If God is sovereign, isn't he to blame for Israel's unbelief?" Paul then proceeds to answer this question by showing that God is not to blame but rather that man is responsible, and he does this by comparing Gentiles generally to the Jews generally. He shows there is a reason the Gentiles have been saved and the Jews have not.

In doing so, he is teaching an overarching principle of the Bible: election and human responsibility are both biblical teachings. We tend to view these two teachings as being totally separate and ultimately irreconcilable. As Reformed Christians, we see this in those who reject election. Their great objection to election is that it makes humans robots or puppets in the hands of God. They say, "I can't believe in election because that makes evangelism useless. It takes that responsibility to believe away from people."

Often, our reaction is to show, rightly, that election is in the Bible. We just have to take some time to do that, but if we act as if we have to choose between election and human responsibility, we're going to choose election. If we have to either give up God's sovereignty or give up human's responsibility, we're going to side with God. The problem is the Bible doesn't ask us to do that. God does not give us the option of choosing which we believe. Both are true according to God's Word.

Let me answer the objection that comes at first to this. You may say, "Oh, that can't be true. It's not logical. It's not logical to have divine sovereignty and human responsibility." There's an answer to that objection, and the answer, if I may paraphrase the apostle Paul, is "O man, humble yourself before God." God says in his Word that both are true. Paul actually says that right here in Romans 9. Election is biblical. Responsibility is biblical. You must submit to God's Word.

We must remember that we are the ones with the fallen logic. It is our minds that are tainted by sin. God doesn't have to conform to our notions of logic any more than he has to conform to our notions of justice. You might think about it *this* way. If you were to have a drawing in front of you of two parallel lines, you would look at them and say that these lines would never cross, because, of course, that is the definition of parallel lines: two lines next to each other that never come together.

But can you honestly tell me by looking at a sheet of paper you can tell me that those two lines are absolutely, fundamentally parallel and they are not one half of a degree pointed inward? You have that keen of eyesight, that direct knowledge that you can tell, if those lines were extended hundreds of miles out in distance, they would never cross?

That's a picture of the doctrines of election and human responsibility. To us, we see them as parallel. They can never go together. It's illogical. They never cross, but not to God. God sees things we don't see. God knows things we don't know. All we need to do is to take God at his word that both are true and both are found in God's Word. What Paul is doing here and will do in chapter 10 is to show the biblical truth of man's responsibility and its importance.

So how does Paul do that? Paul does that by showing what human responsibility is, that it is the responsibility to have faith. Faith has been established by God as our responsibility. He does it first by showing how the Gentiles *have* been saved, and then he shows us why Israel has *not* been saved, and, finally, he shows that people are either saved or unsaved because of their relationship to Jesus.

Paul starts with what may seem to be an unexpected truth. You see, the Jews were the covenant people of God, and Christ was predicted and came from the Jews, from their line. He was the son of Abraham. He was the son of David. At the same time, it was the Gentiles who were known for their resistance to God. They did not have God's Word. They did not want God's Word. They mocked the worship of God.

So we would expect that it would be the Jews who would be saved and the Gentiles who would be lost. That makes sense. Right? That would be fair. Right? Except the truth is just the opposite. Everywhere Paul went he preached first to the Jews. He always went first to the synagogues, yet almost always he was driven out of the synagogue. He was often driven out of town. He was opposed. He was beaten. He was threatened. The Jews did not come to Christ.

At the same time, the Gentiles in these places *did* come to Christ. They established new covenantal communities called the *church*. All we have to do is look in our Bibles and see how many letters Paul wrote to Gentile places and

churches: Corinth, Colossae, Thessalonica, Ephesus, filled with Gentile converts. How can this be? Why are the Gentiles being saved and the Jews not?

Paul tells us it is because of the way of salvation that God has established. He says the Gentiles did not pursue righteousness, but they *have* attained it. When Paul is using the word *righteousness* here, he is using it as a synonym for salvation. It is a word that is in the same family of words we get the word *justification* from. We might even say that justification is being found righteous.

The Gentiles did not go after righteousness. They did not seek it. This is not new for us, because this is exactly what Paul told us in Romans 1. Far from seeking righteousness, they rejected it and ran away from God. They did not *want* to be justified. They did not *want* salvation. They ran from God. Yet in the next breath, Paul tells us they have attained righteousness.

Paul is very emphatic here. If we look at verse 30, he says, "Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness have attained it." It's interesting in this translation. It's one of the few instances in which a noun is replaced in the Greek text with a pronoun. What Paul actually writes is, "Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness have attained righteousness."

We all understand what the *it* is. It refers back to the noun before it, but do you see Paul making an emphasis here on righteousness? He wants us to know the Gentiles have come to have righteousness, to be right before God. They've caught it, Paul says. They've seized it. They've come upon it. How can this be? The answer, Paul says, is by faith.

This fits perfectly with the doctrine of election. It is not that the Gentiles were rewarded for seeking God. After all, Paul tells us that no one seeks after God. No. Instead, it was God seeking *them* by grace, God in his sovereign will pursuing the Gentiles with salvation. This salvation is only attainable, Paul tells us, by faith. If there's one thing Paul makes clear in the book of Romans it is the importance of our faith. The word *faith* is used more than 40 times in this letter.

In verse 17 of the first chapter, Paul tells us righteousness is revealed by faith. He tells us in chapter 3, verse 22, it is through faith that we come to Jesus Christ. In chapter 3, verse 28, he says we are justified by faith apart from works, and it is this faith, in chapter 4, verse 9, that is counted as righteousness for us. Finally, in the first verse of the fifth chapter, he says we are justified by faith, yet again, and because we are justified by faith we have peace with God. Faith has been established by God as the way of salvation. It is by faith that we are saved and not by works.

So the Gentiles were saved because they believed on Jesus. It really is that simple. The same is true for you and me today. To be saved you must believe in Jesus. You must trust him and what he has done. That is how you attain righteousness. This is true even if you have lived your whole life and never pursued righteousness with God. Why? Because God has established faith as the way of salvation. That is *your* responsibility. It will do you no good to try to determine if you are elect. Election is shown by faith, and it is your responsibility to believe.

Righteousness Missed by Works

Now, after Paul establishes how the Gentiles were saved, he then turns to the Jews, and he shows us how their attempts at righteousness miss by works. This reveals another surprising truth to us. The Gentiles, who had not pursued God or righteousness, were being saved, but the Jews who *did* pursue righteousness were not. We would have expected the mass of Israel to be saved once Jesus had come. After all, they had been looking for him. They had Scriptures which had spoken of the Messiah.

This is even true today. Do you know that today when Jews celebrate the Passover they leave an empty chair for the prophet Elijah? Do you know why they do that? Because as they read the Scriptures, Elijah is the forerunner of the Messiah. He announces the Messiah to come. They don't believe the Messiah has come, so they don't believe Elijah has come, and they're waiting for Elijah to tell them the Messiah has come. They do this eagerly year after year after year. They have all the right form but not the substance. We can actually say they are still pursuing the Messiah.

This is in line with what Paul says in verse 31. Israel is contrasted with the Gentiles. There is a *but* here. Words are important in the Bible. Paul says in verse 30 the Gentiles have attained to righteousness, but, on the other hand, in opposition, the Jews have not. Israel pursued a law that would lead to righteousness, but it did not succeed in reaching that law. The Gentiles had no concern for righteousness, but the Israelites were obsessed with it. They pursued a law that would lead to righteousness.

This word *pursued* here is a vivid word. It means to go after, to hunt down, even to strive after. When I see this verb *pursue*, I think of those old television shows, especially *The Fugitive*. Do you remember that show? The man who is on the run, convicted of a crime he didn't commit, a doctor, and everywhere he went someone pursued him. No one ever said, "You know what? I'm tired of chasing the fugitive. Let's be done." No. It didn't matter where the fugitive went. They pursued after him and pursued after him and pursued after him.

That's the way the Jews were with righteousness. They didn't say, "Oh, this is too hard; we give up." No. They doubled down their efforts. They were pursuing righteousness. They were sincere in their pursuit. They were active in their pursuit. It's not as if they ignored God completely. Do you notice exactly what Paul says? It is, once again, important to read the Bible carefully, to take in all of its words. They do make a difference.

Paul says they pursued a *law* of righteousness. What they were pursuing was a way of righteousness that could be obtained by the law. That's why our translation is "that would lead to righteousness." Israel did not succeed in reaching that law of righteousness. Why? Because they were not pursuing God's way of salvation, but they were pursuing their own. They assumed they knew what God wanted. They ignored all of the signs and all of the Scriptures that laid out God's way of salvation.

Paul has quoted from the Old Testament Scriptures for us earlier in this letter from the book of Habakkuk. He says, "The just shall live by faith." In a real sense, Israel pursued God the way all of the pagan Gentiles did: by thinking they could earn righteousness before God. Again, Paul is very emphatic here. We might translate verse 32 literally, "Because not by faith but as if by works." Our translation fills this out a bit to make it smoother in English, but I want you to see the stark distinction Paul is making here between faith and works.

When you pursue righteousness by works, you will not find it. When you pursue righteousness by faith, you *will*. This brings us, then, to a principle today, and it is applicable to us as we tell others about Jesus, but it is also applicable to *us*. That is, there is a wrong way to seek after God. This is not a popular statement in our day and age. It seems so contrary to what we expect. Today, we are glad if anyone shows any openness at all to God.

We live today in the age of the "nones," people who when they're asked what their religious affiliation is, they have none. They claim not to believe in God at all, let alone to have any care about finding him. Many today in America repeat this refrain that all roads lead to God. "As long as you are sincere and as long as you're seeking after God, you'll be all right. You could be a Muslim. You could be a Buddhist. You could be vaguely spiritual. It doesn't matter. You just need to be pro-God. As long as you're pro-God and sincere, God will reward you."

The truth of God's Word says otherwise. Beloved, Israel was pro-God. They were zealous for what they thought God wanted. Paul himself knew that well. It was why he destroyed churches. It was why he killed women and children. He had a zeal for God. This is the difference between biblical Christianity and all other religions or ways of seeking after God.

All of the other ways of seeking after God can be summarized in this statement: "I will do what I need to do in order to be right with God." This doesn't fulfill your responsibility, because God has established that there's only one way to be right with him. It is by faith in the Son of God, Jesus Christ, who died for the forgiveness of sins. When you seek after God in another way, by works, you make two great errors that lead to failure. These are the same errors Israel made.

First, you underestimate your sin. You say to yourself, "Well, I'm not that bad. My sins aren't that big of a deal. Surely God won't keep me from him because of such minor transgressions. It's not like I'm a murderer. It's not like I'm a wicked criminal." We underestimate our sin. Secondly, you underestimate the cost of salvation. You think you can make up for your failures by doing a few good works.

"Surely everything will balance itself out in the end," we say to ourselves. "How bad can it be? How much debt can I owe to God? So long as I stay on the straight and narrow, everything will be fine." This is very dangerous. It seems so right. It seems like common sense to many of us, but it is exactly what Israel thought, and Paul tells us plainly that this is not the way to seek after God.

Jesus is the Difference

Finally, briefly, Paul gives us a vivid image of those who pursue righteousness by these two ways, by faith and by works, and what happens as a result of this. Paul has been using the image of a race. It's a metaphor he has been using throughout this section, talking about pursuing, reaching, coming to the goal, seizing the prize, so to speak. He tells us why Israel and all of those who run by works do not attain the prize, that is, righteousness.

He says they do not win the race because they stumble. This is the second part of verse 32. "They have stumbled over the stumbling stone." Picture for me, if you would, a race at the Olympics, the hurdles. Have you ever watched a hurdles race in which someone who maybe was even far out ahead tripped and stumbled over a hurdle, landed

face first on the track, and then didn't even...? It's not just that they didn't win; they didn't even finish the race because they stumbled at the hurdle and lost.

Paul says that's what happens to Israel. They fall down in their pursuit of righteousness. They stumble at the stone. This is the interesting part about what Paul says. He doesn't say they don't attain righteousness because they grew weary. Paul could have said, "The Israelites got tired and gave up," but that's not what happens. It's not that the law of righteousness was too hard for them to complete it. That's true, but that's not what Paul says.

He doesn't say it was too difficult for them to handle and they just weren't up to it. No. He says what caused them to stumble was this stumbling stone. As we look at the citation from Isaiah, we see that that stumbling stone is Jesus. They stumble over Jesus. "Now wait a minute," you might say. "How can Jesus cause anyone to stumble? Doesn't he want everyone to be saved? Isn't he doing all he can to bring everyone to salvation?" Paul answers that question with two quotes from Isaiah: Isaiah 8:14 and 28:16.

The first verse is applicable to the stone of stumbling. Isaiah writes, "He will become a sanctuary and a stone of offense and a rock of stumbling to both houses of Israel, a trap and a snare to the inhabitants of Jerusalem." What Paul is telling us is that Jesus is a stumbling block to all who want salvation by their own efforts. They will not believe in him because they want the credit for their salvation. They're not willing to trust Jesus.

This is what Paul calls the *offense of the cross*, and it applies to Jews and Gentiles, to anyone who will not believe the Lord and his way of salvation. If you are here today and are unwilling to submit to Jesus and believe in him, you *will* stumble over the stone. There are none who will be saved apart from faith in Jesus Christ. Jesus is the only way. It is not enough to be mostly good. It is not enough to try your best. It is not enough to want to know God. Only Jesus saves.

That brings us to the second verse Paul quotes. He puts together these two references that both speak of the stone in the prophet Isaiah, but in Isaiah 28:16 there is more than stumbling. Isaiah writes, "Behold, I am the one who has laid as a foundation in Zion, a stone, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, of a sure foundation: Whoever believes [in him will not be put to shame.]" This stone of stumbling is also the precious cornerstone of salvation. Whoever believes will not be put to shame. He will have security, he will have hope, and he will have joy in Jesus.

This is the theme of Psalm 118 in which the psalmist describes this stone. The psalmist writes, "Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the Lord. This is the gate of the Lord; the righteous shall enter through it. I thank you that you have answered me and become my salvation." The psalmist is talking about salvation that comes only from God. He goes on to say, "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. This is the Lord's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes."

The story that goes along with this psalm is *this*. When the Israelites were building the temple, they had to bring stones from the quarry some distance away. They brought one particular stone, and when it came, the builders looked at it and said, "This will never do. Take it and put it over there to the side." And they did. Then as they continued to construct the temple, they had one final stone to place, the capstone, the cornerstone. It was a very specific size it had to be to finish off the temple.

They went back to the quarry and said, "We need a stone *this* size by *this* size. We need it for the cornerstone." The quarry said to the builders, "We already sent that over. We don't have it." So they went back to the building site, and they saw the stone that had been rejected that had been put aside, and it was indeed the cornerstone. This is a visual image of Jesus Christ.

You see, those who will not find salvation by faith reject Jesus. To them he is a stone of stumbling. They put him off to the side. They want nothing to do with him. They don't see why he's important at all. But this same one who was rejected is indeed the chief cornerstone. He is the capstone of our salvation. This is marvelous in our eyes. Jesus has brought salvation. He is all our foundation, our cornerstone. Jesus makes all the difference.

Do you want to know salvation today? Do you want not only to pursue but to attain righteousness? Do you want to know peace with God and have hope? Then you have a responsibility. Paul says you must believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and what he has done. If you give up your own works and trust in the works of Jesus, you will not stumble. You will not be ashamed. You will know Jesus as your capstone, as the foundation of salvation. Will you come to Jesus today?

Paul tells us that each of us has a responsibility before God, not because we are capable in our own strength but because God has laid out the way of salvation. Our responsibility is to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. Believe on Jesus and be saved.