

## **“Ignorance is No Excuse”**

### **Romans 10:1-4**

July 12<sup>th</sup>, 2020

The pastor was disappointed things were not “happening” in the church he served. So, he asked one of the elders, “What’s wrong with our church? Is it ignorance or is it apathy?”

The elder responded dryly, “Well, I don’t know, and I don’t really care.”

For sure, ignorance and apathy are problems in *any* organization. But, they are particularly troublesome for God’s Church. We’ll address apathy another time, Lord willing, but today, we’ll zero in on ignorance. I remember growing up, if I heard someone call others ignorant, it was about the worst thing you could say to them. It was in fact, like using profanity.

Often, ignorance is due to another “I” word: illiteracy. America has a literacy problem. Nearly 1 adult in every 5 cannot read. After completing high school, 60% of American adults will never read another book in their lifetime. But illiteracy isn’t just a problem in secular society. A far worse kind of illiteracy affects the church: Biblical ignorance.

Fewer than half of all adults can name the four gospel accounts. Many Christians cannot identify more than 2 or 3 of the apostles. According to data from the Barna Research Group, 60% of Americans can't name even five of the Ten Commandments. No wonder we break them all the time!

According to 82% of Americans, "God helps those who help themselves," is a verse in the Bible. Those identified as born-again Christians did better -- **by one percent**. Another Barna poll indicated 12% of adults believe that Joan of Arc was Noah's wife and a majority thought that Sodom and Gomorrah were husband and wife!

According to the American Bible Society, 87% of American households own a Bible, and the average household has 3 of them. *Good indicators, yes?* Yet, only 11% of Americans have read the entire Bible even once. Less than a quarter (22%) say they read through a section of the Bible a little each day. Americans have access to a Bible they don’t read! Ignorance is no excuse!

Ignorance is something the Apostle Paul addresses in the first 4 verses of the 10<sup>th</sup> chapter of his letter to the Church at Rome (we call it ‘Romans’). We’ve been studying this New Testament book on Sunday mornings since the first Sunday of last September. I’ve called this series, *Christianity Explored*, since it takes us through so many doctrines the Bible teaches. For certain, if you want to grow in your knowledge of God and yourself, then studying Romans is a sure way to go.

In the previous chapter (**Romans Chapter 9**), we learned God’s Church, His people, is made up of both Jews and Gentiles, once two distinct peoples, now united by faith in Jesus Christ, as one people. It is not by physical descent people are made part of the Church, but by spiritual descent – the descent of God the Holy Spirit upon one’s soul.

**Romans 10:1-4:**

“Brethren, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they may be saved. <sup>2</sup>For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. <sup>3</sup>For they being ignorant of God’s righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God. <sup>4</sup>For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.”

Paul begins verse 1 referring to his audience as “brethren.” We remember this term applies to both Paul and the Christian Church to whom he was writing. Truly, our brothers and sisters in Christ are the most important family Christians have; for some of you, a sweet fellowship arises from the fact that many of your physical family members also profess saving faith in Jesus Christ.

Then, Paul expresses a genuine desire that his fellow countrymen – Israelites/Jews – would also become a part of the Church – Paul refers to them with the last word of verse 1 as those who he hopes would be “saved.” To be ‘saved,’ is to no longer be held responsible by God for the punishment due your sins and transgressions. To be ‘saved’ is to be a part of the family of God. To be ‘saved’ is to have Jesus Christ in your corner, as your Substitute, Master, Savior, and Friend. You see, He lived, died, and was raised from the grave to secure your place in eternity. Jesus is making *you* a mansion in glory; He says as much in **John 14:2**.

You may remember we’ve already seen Paul’s concern for his countrymen in the first verse of Chapter 9 – “...I have great sorrow and continual grief in my heart.” Paul wished that he could be the one to go to hell instead of any of his unsaved countrymen.

Paul realized if that was going to happen, he needed to turn to the only One Who could do something about it; God Himself. So, we see in **Romans 10:1** that Paul prayed to God for that to happen! Prayer is an effective means of God’s grace; many times, the fervent prayers of believers in Christ bring about incredible results.

George Mueller of Bristol, England, the founder of the great faith orphanages, was a man of outstanding prayer. In his youth, he had two friends for whom he began to pray. He kept notes on his prayers, and his notes show that he prayed for them for more than 60 years. One of these men was converted just before Mueller’s death at one of the last worship services Mueller held.

The other became a Christian within a year of Mueller’s funeral. Toward the end of his life, but before his friends’ conversions, someone asked Mueller why he was still praying for them after such a long time, since they had shown no response. Mueller answered, “Do you think God would have kept me praying all these years if he did not intend to save them?” Paul knew something like that with his prayers for the people of Israel.

Christian friend, I hope you have at least one, if not several people for whom you are praying God will bring salvation. At least one, if not many people prayed for you to become a believer in Jesus. Don’t give up; keep praying regularly, and share your faith with those for whom you are praying. Prayer to our sovereign, almighty God and proclaiming His gospel are an unbeatable combination!

With verse 2, Paul commends the passion of the Israelites in pursuing God, but he also condemns their ignorance. “For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge.” “Zeal” is not a word we use all that often. *What does it mean?* A synonym to “zeal” is “enthusiasm.” Zeal is action; it’s an intense willingness to go as far as necessary to achieve a goal or an end. The Pharisees especially were very zealous to honor God.

But, the Jews were zealous without knowledge. Misplaced activity is worse than no activity at all. The Jews couldn’t rest on their laurels; they had to keep moving nowhere in particular. Activity at least looks like productivity is happening. Paul says here “Zeal is no substitute for conversion. Even the zealous must be saved.” (Boice, 1153)

The two hunters in this illustration were zealous without knowledge.

Before the opening day of pheasant season, two city-dwellers who aspired to be hunters bought a bird dog, having heard that such a dog would make for much more enjoyable and profitable hunting.

When the big day came, they were up bright and early. They hunted all day, but as dusk began to overtake them, they hadn’t fired even a single shot. The hunters were exhausted and frustrated over the poor performance of their bird dog.

Finally, one said, “OK, Joe, throw him up once more and if he don’t fly this time, I’m gonna shoot.”

The Israelites were ignorant; they put their faith in their own efforts and achievements. It seems they didn’t realize that ignorance was not an excuse. There’s was a human righteousness, a work-righteousness. What they needed, conversely, was a divine righteousness, God’s grace-righteousness. This is verse 3, “For they being ignorant of God’s righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God.”

Most of us bristle when we hear that we must submit to anyone else, for just about any reason. The Jews didn’t acknowledge Jesus as the Christ – the Messiah God had promised them from as early as the Garden of Eden in **Genesis Chapter 3**. They didn’t see in Him any reason to submit to Him. But, to possess the righteousness of God, we must submit to God through His everlasting Son, Jesus Christ.

You likely heard that Charlie Daniels passed into glory this past week. Charlie was a country-western-rock singer whose band released the immensely popular hit song “The Devil Went Down to Georgia” in 1979. Charlie was a believer in Christ. These are his words, which shed some light on today’s passage – “I want to see people understanding the gospel message. I think sometimes the reason they don’t is because of its simplicity. There’s nothing you can do but repent and believe. You can’t earn it.”

Martin Luther described zeal according to knowledge as “knowing what one does not know.” Sincerity isn’t enough. The righteousness of God is the righteousness, the right standing that comes from God. Another way of understanding God’s righteousness is to think of His holiness. “Holiness is what sets God apart. It’s what makes Him utterly unlike us.” (Boice, 1159) The writer

of Hebrews adds this important command in **Hebrews 12:14** – “Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see God.”

Jesus warned those who were neither hot nor cold but lukewarm he would vomit them out of his mouth (**Revelation 3:16**). That reflects that Jesus wants His people to be filled with zeal, but a zeal that is according to knowledge.

That brings us to the final verse in our passage, verse 4 – “For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.” God never intended the law to save anyone. The purpose of the law is for us to see our sin clearly, and to forsake it and run to Jesus who fulfilled the law. He said as much in the Sermon on the Mount, **Matthew 5:17**, “Do not think I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill.”

So, “the law was given to show us the righteousness of God. It was given so we can see the perfect righteousness of God and by comparison see ourselves, warts and all, and despair of our own righteousness.” (Sproul, 347)

The work of Christ means the end (goal) of the law. That means He is the end to law as a way of attaining righteousness. I like the way Donald Gray Barnhouse, the late radio Bible teacher and pastor of historic Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia once put it:

“Instead of the temple, it is to be Christ; instead of Moses, Christ; instead of Aaron, Christ; instead of the law, Christ; instead of ceremonies, Christ; instead of worship localized in a building, there is to be the eternal, omnipresent Christ.”

And this all is true of the believer in Jesus Christ. We are the ones who believe. And, we are the ones for whom Christ came to earth to purchase. Now, that’s something to get excited about! Don’t make me check your pulse!

At the beginning of this message I described some of the biblical illiteracy prevalent in our rapidly deteriorating Christian culture. This lack of Bible knowledge certainly has led to a lack of biblical doctrine. A recent LifeWay Research survey examines how Americans view Christian theology. Here are some of the conclusions:

- \* Fewer than half (47%) say the Bible is 100% accurate in all it teaches.
- \* Half (51%) say the Bible was written for each person to interpret as he or she chooses.
- \* Three-quarters (74%) disagree with the idea that even the smallest sin deserves eternal damnation.
- \* More than three-quarters (77%) say people must contribute their own effort for personal salvation.
- \* Over half (52%) say good deeds help them earn a spot in heaven. And 45% believe there are many ways to get there.

Christianity is a cognitive religion. It is first and foremost an intellectual faith. That’s why the Church in early America established schools as well as churches. The people needed to be taught how to read God’s holy Word. *Won’t you do everything you can for yourself, your family, church, and community to participate in and propagate the teaching of God’s Word?*