

Romans 10:1-13; text – v. 2

One of the most powerful forces in all creation is the power of religious zeal (religion in the broadest sense of the term). The energy unleashed in a man or woman from this kind of zeal can drive a person to spectacular achievements or to incredible feats of self-denial.

Exs.

- We see this quite often these days. Men and women and even boys and girls will line up in the name of their religion to become suicide bombers. It is absolutely amazing to see the zeal with which these dupes of the devil embrace death. The tragic irony is that a religion that strives for death will inevitably reach what it strives for and the zealous dupes of such religion will be condemned to everlasting death.
- I'm reminded also of a death that occurred many years ago. It's easy to bring this memory to my mind because of the shocking scenes that came before the Western world. I'm thinking of the death of the Ayatollah Komeini, who was the spiritual and political ruler of Iran. I can still see in my mind's eye the shocking news releases that came to the Western world through the news of his death and showed his devoted followers attempting to pull his body right out of the coffin. I can still see so vividly one of his zealous followers fighting off the mob and planting a kiss on the corpse of his spiritual leader and hero. Perhaps no such zeal had ever been manifested in the history of civilization for a dead man.

Even in the realm of Fundamentalism and evangelicalism we come face to face with fervent zeal.

- Some churches inspire a kind of zeal in their people that dictates to them that if they haven't led 10 souls to the Lord that week, they must be backslidden.
- Some church leaders think they have an accurate gauge of the spirituality of their people based on the mere external appearances of their church attendance, their financial contributions, and their support for every activity taking place in the church.

Now the earlier activities I've described are ridiculous in nature, while the last two are perfectly legitimate. But the point I want to emphasize today is that it is actually possible to be engaged in legitimate activities – but from a zeal that is misguided and which renders the deed (however impressive it may appear in the eyes of man) to be unacceptable to God.

This was the case with the Jews that are referred to in this passage of Scripture – *I bear them record* Paul writes *that they have a zeal for God*. And if you know anything at all about the Jews of Paul's day from your reading of the New Testament then you know that what he's saying is true. The Jews – the Pharisees in particular, were known

for their zeal for God. It seems that zeal toward God was the very badge of a Pharisee. Indeed Paul never mentions his former association with them without making mention of the zeal he possessed as one of them.

Ga 1:14 And profited in the Jews' religion above many my equals in mine own nation, being more exceedingly zealous of the traditions of my fathers.

Ac 22:3 (before the angry Jews) I am verily a man which am a Jew, born in Tarsus, a city in Cilicia, yet brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, and taught according to the perfect manner of the law of the fathers, and was zealous toward God, as ye all are this day.

The Jews, then were known for zeal. Paul acknowledges their zeal. Paul patterned himself after them and even exceeded them in the matter of zeal. And yet as he tells us in our text *it was a zeal that was not according to knowledge*. While this zeal had the appearance of devotion – the truth was that this zeal amounted to sin. It was not acceptable to God – however sincerely and intensely it was practiced.

In the sermon on the mount the Lord Jesus tells us that on that day of judgment when men appear before His throne they will plead their zeal as a basis for their acceptance. So He says in Mt. 7:22 –

Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? And in thy name have cast out devils? And in thy name done many wonderful works?

Here are legitimate activities! Here are manifestations of spiritual power! Here is proper orthodoxy! And yet the passage reveals that the Lord is not impressed, and these people are not accepted. Their zeal, while it may have appeared impressive, yet in the end turned out to be misguided zeal.

I believe there will be many things revealed on the judgment day that will amount to wood, hay, and stubble, and will go up in smoke – the believer himself being saved, yet so as by fire. And yet we sometimes get it in our head that the zeal behind the deed, the time and energy and sacrifice put forth in one kind of ministry or another will in and of itself render that effort acceptable to God. Paul told the Corinthians (1Cor 13) that it was actually possible to die a martyr's death – and be profited nothing by it.

Now at this point you may be thinking – serving Christ must be tough. The law is so exacting. It hardly seems worth it to try to serve Christ if I'm fairly certain even before I start that my efforts won't be accepted – that time and energy and sacrifice may count for nothing.

This is not what I'm saying, however. Paul had a zeal for Christ – a zeal which drove him to the point where he could say *I labored more abundantly than they all*. We can't know the Lord Jesus without having our zeal inspired for Him. And understood rightly, our zeal should and will unleash an energy within us of devotion and service to Christ –

devotion and service that can and will be acceptable by Christ if it's a zeal rightly based on the gospel.

I think you'll see, before we're through that you can serve Christ – that it's not hard to serve Christ – that we in fact have a tremendous liberty in our service to Christ that brings to us a wonderful spontaneity in our service to Him. All we need do is make sure that our service, our devotion, our zeal – is rightly based on the gospel.

And so the message today is simply this:

Beware of the Vanity of Misguided Zeal

In order to beware of misguided zeal, I would have you first of all think with me on:

I. The Cause for Misguided Zeal – *Rom. 10:2,3a*

The cause for misguided zeal according to our text is traced to *ignorance* – ignorance about God. The Jews, in spite of their heritage and in spite of the chief advantage they enjoyed of being the sole recipients of the oracles of God nevertheless were ignorant of God.

It's frightening to think of the advantages we enjoy in this land when it comes to the oracles of God. The Bible is so easily accessible in our day. Many people own one. Those who don't own one can certainly gain access to one very easily. I'm sure all you would have to do to gain one is go into any church and ask for one. In all likelihood that church would give you one – no matter what kind of a church it was. We're told that the Bible is still the number one seller among books. And yet in spite of such an advantage we sadly must acknowledge that like the Jews in Paul's day there prevails today great ignorance about God.

Now the text narrows the scope of this ignorance for us. We are told not merely that the Jews were ignorant about God – but we're told specifically that they were *ignorant of God's righteousness*. In analyzing the phrase we can say –

They were ignorant of God's essential righteousness – i.e. they really did not recognize or appreciate this aspect of God's character. They evidently had become so accustomed to measuring righteousness by the external appearances of things that they couldn't comprehend a thrice holy God before whom sinners fall as dead men.

And because they did not know God's essential righteousness – they also did not know how far reaching the moral law of God extends – That law, you see measures much more than actions. It measures words; It measures thoughts; It measures intentions; It measures motives.

Show me the deed performed by any man saved or lost that meets the standard of God's law. It can't be found – apart from the deeds done by one man – Christ. Show me the sermon preached that inherently merits the blessing of God. It can't be found – apart

from the sermons Christ preached. You see when Christ preached, every word was fitly spoken and every point He made came from perfect heart motivation for the glory of God and the good of His neighbor. Show me the thoughts behind the deeds of any man, saved or lost, and I'll show you thoughts that are defiled and corrupted and are at their very best imperfect before a thrice holy God.

And the initial step toward avoiding misguided zeal comes from the recognition that there are none righteous before God and that in our flesh there dwells no good thing. *I find a law*, Paul says, *that when I would do good, evil is present with me* (7:21).

This means that in your worship, your praying, your witnessing, your service – evil is ever present. Add to this spiritual law what Christ described as the essence of the law - Mark 12:30 *And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment.* What have you done or what have I done that has ever met such a standard? The very notion that we could ever rise to such a standard reveals an ignorance of God's essential righteousness.

See Christ in His radiant splendor and glory. See Him the way John saw Him on the isle of Patmos, or the way Daniel saw Him by the river Hiddekel, or the way Ezekiel saw Him by river Chebar. The very sight of Christ in His glory brought these men to their faces and they were moved to pronounce the sentence of death upon themselves – so aware were they of the contrast between God's righteousness and what they may take for their own righteousness.

Misguided zeal, then, can be traced to an ignorance of God's essential righteousness. But we could go a step further on this point and say also that –

The cause for misguided zeal can be traced to an ignorance of Gospel righteousness.

For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ; for it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek, For in it is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith. (1:16,17).

There is righteousness revealed in the gospel. But it's a righteousness without or outside of the works of the law – i.e. it's a righteousness outside of ourselves. And the righteousness revealed in the gospel is none other than the imputed righteousness of Christ. – *cf. 4:6,11; 5:17.*

Remember what I said a moment ago – no natural descendent of Adam has performed a deed, harbored a thought, or spoken a word untainted by sin – with the exception of Jesus Christ. Of Christ alone it can be said:

- He did no sin – 1Pet. 2:22
- He knew no sin – 2Cor. 5:21
- In Him was no sin – 1Jn. 3:5

And it is the righteousness of His obedience in His life and in His death that is imputed to us.

The knowledge of this blessed truth should control the way you read your Bible. Follow Christ through the gospels and see Him as your substitute fulfilling for you the law that you could not fulfill for yourself.

See Him at His baptism – He’s grown up to be a man. He’s spent 30 years on the face of this earth in obscurity but now at His baptism His Father’s testimony concerning Him is *This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased*. That testimony should move us to shout hallelujah! For if God is pleased with Him, then He’s pleased with you and me as we are joined to Him.

Follow Him in the Gospels over the next 3 years of His life on earth – He’s engaged in battle. See how the Pharisees try to provoke Him. See how His own disciples try His patience. See the traps that are laid for Him. See the times He has to duck out of sight to avoid being apprehended.

Then follow Him up the mount. We behold His transfiguration and again there comes the testimony from heaven – *This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased. Hear ye Him*. And again we have cause to praise God, for in all His trials and temptations – His righteousness still stands, which means our righteousness still stands in Him.

And then follow Him to the cross. He must go to the cross for our need is not only for righteousness we don’t possess – but our need is also for payment of a great debt – our debt to the law for having broken it.

There are no voices from heaven now testifying that God is well pleased, but rather a smiting of the Shepherd with the sword of justice. Is our righteousness still secure or has it gone to the grave for good? You know the story – He rose from the dead and Paul says in Rom. 4 *He was raised again for (on account of) our justification*.

We are legally declared to be righteous in Him and our righteousness therefore is as secure as the throne Christ occupies at the right hand of God the Father!

Here is the source, then, from which true zeal must flow. Here is the source of Paul’s untiring labor. Here is the source of Martin Luther’s strength which enabled Him to see Europe brought into the kingdom of God. Do you know why this source of energy and devotion is largely untapped today? Because oftentimes zeal not only springs from the wrong source, but –

II. It’s Guided by the Wrong Aim – 10:3 *they go about to establish their own righteousness*

We can understand this text with regard to the Christ-rejecting Jews to whom Paul is referring. This had been their practice for many years. Such a practice plays right into the fleshly pride of man and the Jews were certainly a proud people. You could say that

in one form or another this has been the practice of every false religion throughout the history of man. They aim to establish their own righteousness.

But it's hard to understand why this would be the aim of any Christian who knows the gospel. And yet the pursuit of self-righteousness plagues even us. It plagued the Galatians. They didn't think it was sufficient to have Christ's righteousness, but thought they had to contribute something beyond it in order to maintain the ground of their acceptance with God.

I honestly believe that to a large measure this is where the battle lines are drawn in our spiritual warfare. If I could describe it with theological words I would state it this way – *the battle rages over confusing justification with sanctification*. Justification is associated with imputed righteousness and sanctification is associated with imparted righteousness. Confusion springs from thinking that this imparted righteousness constitutes the grounds for God's favor.

Illus. – I may read more, pray more, witness more, strive to be holy more than anybody here. Are you less acceptable to God than someone else because you don't read your Bible as much as that person?

Answer – No! Bible reading contributes nothing to the grounds of your acceptance with God. If it does then you have to establish your own righteousness and Christ alone is the grounds of your acceptance.

Now show me a Christian who is neglecting time in the Word and time in prayer and I'll show you a Christian who probably isn't convinced that his standing with God is perfect based on Christ's righteousness imputed to Him. And when he's caught in the trap of trying to establish his own righteousness by spiritual activities – chances are he'll spend increasingly less time in those activities because he'll be frustrated trying to establish his own righteousness.

If that man is a Christian, I've got to convince him that he's justified in Christ. I've got to convince him that Christ is His righteousness. I've got to convince him that he enjoys a perfect standing with God for time and for eternity. Because if he's convinced of that – then the spontaneous response of his heart will be the desire to worship and serve Christ from a heart that is filled with love and gratitude and praise. This is the difference between guilt-motivation and gospel motivation. And now his zeal will not be misguided by a wrong aim.

But to the degree that he thinks he must establish his own righteousness – our final point is true concerning him. For not only is misguided zeal caused by ignorance and aims in the wrong direction – but:

III. The Result of Misguided Zeal is that we fail to submit to the righteousness of God. Cf. 10:3.

To the degree we think we must contribute to our standing with God – to the same degree we fail to submit to the righteousness of God.

Do you begin to see why there's no bondage worse than religious bondage? (or Christian bondage). The demands are so great and the efforts to meet the demands can be so great – and in the end it fails. It doesn't submit to the righteousness of God.

How then do we submit to the righteousness of God? – We daily disown our own righteousness and receive or appropriate Christ's righteousness as the grounds of our acceptance.

Practically illustrated – When I'm finished with this sermon I will go to my knees and confess to God that this sermon has no inherent value that could make it acceptable to God. Even if every word has been rightly expounded and rightly applied I know that I haven't loved Christ with all my heart and mind and body and soul.

I'm an imperfect preacher – but thank God Christ was a perfect preacher and I'll ask God to accept my feeble effort on the grounds of Christ's righteousness in His life and death – and God will accept it. You see what I mean when I say serving Christ need not be hard?

In Hebrews 13:10 we read that *we have an altar, whereof they have no right to eat which serve the tabernacle*. That altar is Christ. And all that's necessary for your service to be acceptable is that you offer it on the altar of Christ – pleading His merit as the grounds of acceptance for that specific act of devotion.

You begin to perceive, I hope, the glorious liberty you have to serve Christ.

Your witness for Him may be weak and feeble. *I'm so slow to come up with the right words. I'm so ineffective at persuading people*. But you should know that Christ's witness to the gospel was always perfect – and it's His righteousness that will render your attempt to be acceptable with God.

Your prayer life may not amount to much in your own eyes. It wouldn't amount to much with God even if it was glorious in your own eyes. But Christ's prayer life was perfect – and it's the grounds of His righteousness that renders your praying acceptable with Him. The same could be said for anything we attempt for Him.

Serve Him then in this liberty. Let your zeal spring from the right source – Christ's righteousness. Don't let it stray in its aim by thinking you need to or could establish a righteousness of your own. And the result will be service that is acceptable to Him, service that does indeed submit to the righteousness of God.