

How Can We Attain True Righteousness?

Romans 9:30-10:4

Pastor Jason Van Bommel, Forest Hill Presbyterian

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. - Romans 9:30-32, ESV

The word righteous can call to mind different images and definitions. You might think of the Righteous Brothers, and their hit song, "Unchained Melody," might pop into your mind. What made those brothers righteous? In the 60's, righteous was a slang term that meant really cool or impressive. But more likely when you think of the term righteous, you think of someone who is really moral and religious, a good person of upstanding character. Or perhaps you think of someone who is self-righteous, an uptight and obnoxious person.

But what is righteousness, really? Why is it so important that we attain righteousness? How can we? Well, righteousness is a core characteristic of God that He implanted in humanity when He made us in His image. Righteousness is uprightness or moral integrity. It forms the backbone of God's moral character and is the underpinning of true justice. When God created Adam and Eve in His image, He endowed them with righteousness, holiness and knowledge.

Sin and the fall into corruption has taken us from being inherently righteous to being inherently unrighteous. Much of human religion and morality is an endeavor to re-attain the righteousness we lost in our fall into sin. The problem with all human religious attempts to be righteous is that they all depend on our own efforts and we are the problem, because we are corrupt. So, if we are the problem, how can we be the solution?

The opposite of trying to be righteous by works is to seek God by faith and to receive His gift of righteousness instead of trying to establish our own. The law of God was never designed to lay out a pathway for a campaign of self-righteousness by works. Rather, it was designed to show God's people their sin, so they would turn from themselves and seek Him by faith. They responded to God's Law with works and not with faith, and so they failed.

Meanwhile, Gentiles who did not even have the law and who were not seeking to be righteous by their works received the Gospel and were made righteous by grace through faith. How is this possible? Because God decided to have mercy on them. We receive righteousness by grace through faith solely because God decides to have mercy on us. That's why we believe, and faith is how we receive God's gift of perfect righteousness in Christ.

The worst thing we could do after receiving the righteousness of Christ by faith is to then seek to somehow establish our own by works. Whatever our good works may be, they cannot be an attempt to establish ourselves as righteous. If they are, they undermine the whole Gospel and become toxic to our spiritual growth. Instead, we need to marvel at the grace of God and continue to submit to His righteousness, rather than trying to establish our own.