

When in Romans Do as the Righteous Do

"Now You Seek Him, Now You Don't"

3:9-18

Mt. Everest was named in 1865 after Sir George Everest, the British surveyor-general of India. It was once known as Peak 15. It was first ascended on May 29, 1953 by Sir Edmund Hillary of New Zealand and Tenzing Norgay of Nepal. James Whittaker was the first American to the top on May 1, 1963. Junko Tabei of Japan was the first woman to make the ascent on May 16, 1975. The youngest person to reach the summit was 15; the oldest, 64.

Approximately 6000 climbers have attempted to summit Everest, but only 2249 have made it. Over 200 people have died trying and of those, at least 120 bodies are still missing on the mountain.

Climbing Mt. Everest is almost a metaphor for human potential. If you can get to the summit, you've done something few have done or will ever do and you can do anything. You stand - both literally and figuratively - far above other men.

Mt. Everest rises five miles above sea level on the earth, which is 8,000 miles in diameter. From an earthly perspective it soars high into the heavens.

From a vantage point in the heavens, however, it is unnoticeable.

If you take a billiard ball two and a half inches in diameter and do a little figuring, you will find that a protrusion on the billiard ball proportionately as high as Mt. Everest is to earth would be less than one-six hundredth of an inch high. There are no human fingers sensitive enough to feel such a ridge on a billiard ball. The billiard ball seem smooth.

Looking down upon the earth from a vantage point in the heavens it appears as smooth as the billiard ball, Mt. Everest and all.

God looks down from Heaven upon the righteousness of men. Even if your righteousness was like that of Mt. Everest, reaching high above that of your fellow men, and you were one of the few standing on the summit of good works, **you would still be level with the rest of the human race.**

Jews had an advantage over Gentiles because they had the special revelation of God through the Scriptures. **Their advantage did not alter the fact that they were just as lost as Gentiles.**

Romans 3:9 What then? Are we better than they? Not at all. For we have previously charged both Jews and Greeks that they are all under sin.

There is a difference between “sin” and sins.

- **Sins** indicates we do things that are wrong.
- **Sin** refers to the fact we are dominated by a fundamentally evil nature.

Our predicament is not so much that we have done a few wrong things but that we are under the control and condemnation of sin and cannot by ourselves escape from it. As one writer put it,

The difference is not unlike that which exists between the symptoms of a disease and the disease itself. Any solution to the human problem that fails to deal with the root cause of "sin" is no more a solution than cold compresses on a fevered brow are a cure for the infection causing the fever.

This verse could also be translated, “Are we Jews worse off than Gentiles?” It’s a valid question in that it recognizes that if you have greater revelation you have greater responsibility to respond to it.

Either way you read this verse the point is that Jews are no better but no worse than Gentiles but that “all” mankind are “under sin.”

In the next several verses Paul will quote from at least six Psalms and the Book of Isaiah. Why? To prove from Scripture that this was not a new teaching of Paul’s. It was written in God’s Word.

Why, then, was there so much misunderstanding about God's method of saving people?

If you were to go to each of these Old Testament passages, at least some of them in their original context contrast Gentiles with Jews. The Jews are even called "righteous" in those Old Testament texts.

For example. In verses ten through twelve Paul quotes from Psalm 14:1-3. In those verses the psalmist describes people he calls "the workers of iniquity (v4). But then he contrasts them with people he calls "the generation of the righteous (v5).

The Jews had concluded that "the workers of iniquity" referred to the unsaved Gentiles, and that they - **all Jews** - were "the generation of the righteous." They equated being a Jew by birth with being righteous. Everyone else was lost.

In fact those texts describe the righteous as anyone who had come to God by faith, who God had justified, who God had **declared** righteous. Everyone else - Gentile **and** Jew - was unrighteous.

So you can see that a huge change in their way of thinking was being called for. It thus required that Paul defend it from their Scriptures.

Commentators have suggested that you can get a better handle on these next few verses if you see God portrayed first as a judge, then as a physician, then as a historian.

'Judge God' renders the following judgment.

Romans 3:10 As it is written: "There is none righteous, no, not one;
Romans 3:11 There is none who understands; There is none who seeks after God.
Romans 3:12 They have all turned aside; They have together become unprofitable;
There is none who does good, no, not one.

Context is always important. Psalm 14, from whence these verses come, begins with the famous phrase, "the fool has said in his heart, "*There is no*

God.” The words, “there is,” are not in the original text. So it read, “the fool has said in his heart, ‘No God.’ ”

It indicates one of two things:

1. It indicates that this person has decided, despite evidence to the contrary, that there is no God.
2. Or it indicates that this person is saying “No” to God and living as they see fit.

My point is that they are the same people Paul described in chapter one when he said, “although they **knew** God, they did not glorify Him as God...” (v21).

When the Scriptures say “there is none righteous, no, not one,” it means there has never been a man (except Jesus) who had a perfect righteousness. Even Adam, the first man, was innocent, but not righteous.

“There is none who understands; there is none who seeks after God.” This is troubling to people, especially when you consider that God Himself has said that men can and should seek after Him. For example in Jeremiah 29:13 the Lord promises, “and you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart.”

This is why I mentioned the context of Psalm 14 and showed that these people are the same people who Paul said once “knew God.” It is possible for lost men to seek after God.

So what does it mean, used of the human race, “there is none who seeks after God”? I think it simply means that if man is to be saved God must take the initiative to reveal Himself. It means that God can only be known if He reveals Himself. We are reading too much into it if we conclude it is impossible for the natural man to seek God even if he is given revelation.

God **has** revealed Himself, through creation and conscience, but especially by the special revelation of His Word. I guess what I’m saying is that no one could seek God and find Him apart from Him revealing Himself, but

because He has revealed Himself it is perfectly reasonable for Him to say, “you will seek Me and find Me...”

Because He has revealed Himself He can encourage those who are lost and without any righteousness of their own and who could never find Him on their own to seek after Him and find Him.

Are lost men seeking God? In chapter one we were told that “although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God. In verse twelve it says, “they have all turned aside.” Same people, same description.

- We learned in chapters one and two that Gentiles had “turned aside” from creation and conscience to worship the creature rather than the Creator.
- We learned in chapter three that Jews had “turned aside” by supposing that they could keep the law and *achieve* salvation as a work rather than *receive* it as a gift.

These are people who willfully ignore God’s revelation of Himself.

- It applies to Gentiles who willfully ignore God’s revelation of Himself through creation and conscience.
- It applies to Jews who willfully ignore God’s special revelation of Himself with regard to the fact that Jews are not automatically saved by virtue of birth and the keeping of the law outwardly.

“Unprofitable,” in verse twelve, is related to the word “withered” in John 15:6.

John 15:6 If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is **withered**; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned.

To be “unprofitable,” then, means you are unfruitful because there is no life-giving connection.

“There is none who does good, no, not one.” Of course men can do certain good deeds. But those deeds have no spiritual value in and of themselves.

In keeping with the idea that there is no life-giving connection, and that it is like branches pruned from the vine, there is no fruit being produced.

Here, then, is God's judgment. All men are "under sin" and have no righteousness of their own by which to get into Heaven. They are lost and in darkness. God thus reveals Himself to all men so that they might seek Him. Those "fools" who turn aside from the revelation that God has given of Himself, those who do not seek Him, remain cut-off from His life and all their good works cannot be considered fruitful from an eternal perspective.

Next God is portrayed as a physician analyzing the human condition.

Romans 3:13 "Their throat is an open tomb; With their tongues they have practiced deceit"; "The poison of asps is under their lips";
Romans 3:14 "Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness."

Jesus once said insightfully, "what goes into a man's mouth does not make him 'unclean,' but what comes out of his mouth, that is what makes him 'unclean'" (Matthew 15:11).

What comes out of the mouth, your words, represents what is in your heart and shows you to be unsaved. Even if you guard your words, what Jesus was really talking about is your mind and your thoughts - from whence words come.

If you are honest you will admit that your thought-life is far from righteous! In comparison to God's standard, which is perfection, your thoughts can be described as poison, cursing, and bitterness.

Inside we are spiritually dead and, thus, whatever comes out of our mouths is like the opening of a tomb. Again, this is all by comparison. Compared to other men I might seem to be at the summit of Everest in my thought life and speech. Compared to God I am on a level with all other men.

Next we have history interpreted by God.

Romans 3:15 "Their feet are swift to shed blood;

Romans 3:16 Destruction and misery are in their ways;
Romans 3:17 And the way of peace they have not known."

These verses are a good summary of the overall conduct of the human race throughout history, continuing right through our so-called modern age.

In verse eighteen Paul comes to a conclusion.

Romans 3:18 "There is no fear of God before their eyes."

This is from Psalm 36:1. It's a summary of the people Paul had just described. All unsaved Gentiles AND all unsaved Jews are included.

We could put it this way. All men are "under sin" - Gentiles *and* Jews. All are unrighteous before God. A Jew might be on the summit of Everest in comparison to a Gentile thanks to the many advantages of his birth. But he was and is just as lost and in need of saving.

Paul seems to really belabor this point, does he not? That's because the Jew (especially) thought he was saved as a result of his natural birth and that righteousness was achieved and maintained by keeping the law outwardly.

If a Gentile approached a Jew seeking God he would be told that the way of salvation was through rites and rituals and rules and regulations.

This is important and that is why Paul is belaboring it. **Paul was not teaching some new way of salvation.** He was presenting what the Hebrew Scriptures had said all along.

By the way, it's more common than you might think for even Christians to misunderstand this. It's easy to think a person was saved in the Old Testament by keeping the law or at least by offering blood sacrifices.

Nope! *No one was ever saved that way!* Salvation has ALWAYS been a matter of faith and of God declaring you righteous based on believing in Him, on believing in His Son, Jesus Christ.

Beyond that, even today many Christian groups add some work or another to believing in Jesus. It might be baptism or the keeping of the Sabbath, but whatever it is, if it is a work that is said to be essential to either achieve or maintain salvation, **then those who are teaching it are in exactly the same position that the Jews were in.**

So while we might think we 'get it,' that we must be declared righteous, that we receive it as a gift by believing - Jews and many Christians - at least those who *profess* to be Christians - **STILL** do **not** 'get it.'

Or we 'get it' theologically but then, in practice, we become legalistic. Having begun in the Spirit we start to think we will make progress by adding rules and regulations, rights and rituals, dress, diets and days to our walk.

We think we can reach the summit by our own efforts. It's all grace, all the time, all the way home.

