

Justification for Doers, Not Hearers, of the Law

Jeremiah 31:33-34; Romans 2:12-29

By Rev. Nollie Malabuyo • July 25, 2021 (BSCC)

Dear Congregation of Christ: “I used to believe that pagans in far-off countries were lost – were going to hell – if they did not have the gospel of Jesus Christ preached to them. I no longer believe that. I believe that there are other ways of recognizing the existence of God – through nature, for instance – and plenty of other opportunities, therefore, of saying ‘yes’ to God.” These were Billy Graham’s words in an interview with *McCall’s* magazine way back in 1978. And in 1997, he reaffirmed this same teaching in an interview with televangelist Robert Schuller, where he said, “I’ve met people in various parts of the world in tribal situations, that they have never seen a Bible or heard about a Bible, and never heard of Jesus, but they’ve believed in their hearts that there was a God, and they’ve tried to live a life that was quite apart from the surrounding community in which they lived.”

Many people, included professing Christians, believe the same thing out of concern for those who die never hearing the gospel. What does the Bible say about how a person is saved? Are those who have never heard of Jesus the Savior saved by living a life of good works? In our text today, is Paul teaching the same thing, that a person can be saved by obeying God’s law? These are some of the questions we will discuss today based on Romans 2:12-29.

Last Sunday, in Romans 2:1-11, we read that Paul rebukes his fellow Jews who judge unbelieving Gentiles for their ungodly lives. But Paul chastises them because they do the same ungodly things that Gentiles do. So, Paul later says that everyone—whether Jew or Gentile—will be judged by God according to their works. Today, we continue with Paul’s rebuke of his fellow Jews because they have God’s law from Moses, but they do not keep those laws. But right in verse 12, he does not condemn only Jews, but also non-Jews or Gentiles, saying, *“For all who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law.”* Therefore, all human beings are under God’s wrath because all sin (Rom 3:23).

Then in verse 13, he states clearly, *“For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified.”* It follows that salvation does not depend on whether a person is a Jew or non-Jew, but on keeping or disobeying the law. So, we’re back to the basic question: Is Paul teaching salvation by obeying the law, in other words, by doing good works? Our meditation today is **Justification for Doers, Not Hearers, of the Law**, under two headings: first, **Unbelievers Have the Law Written on Their Hearts**; and second, **Believers Obey the Law Written on Their Hearts**.

Unbelievers Have the Law Written on Their Hearts

Paul continues in verse 14, *“For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law.”* In the Old Testament, who were given the Law of God? It was the Israelites, the Jews, through his servant Moses. God revealed to his chosen

nation Israel his laws, covenants, and his promises to his people. Did God reveal these laws, covenants, and promises to other people in the whole world? No, he did not, except for a very few, including four non-Israelite women: Tamar and Rahab, both Canaanites, Ruth a Moabite, and Bathsheba a Hittite.

But isn't God being unfair when he chose a small nation, Israel, to reveal his laws, and leave the rest of the world to perish? This is the big question posited by Christians when they read the Scripture passages about election or predestination. Two thousand years ago, Paul knew exactly how people would react when he wrote in the great predestination passage in Romans 9:6-23. In verse 13, *"As it is written, Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated."* A few verses before, Paul wrote that God chose to save Isaac, Jacob's father, but not Ishmael, even before they were born. And his choice was not based on good works, but on him who calls, *"in order that God's purpose of election might continue."*

In the next verse, verse 14, Paul asks what most people ask today about this teaching of predestination, *"What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part?"* And his answer is an emphatic, *"By no means!"* "Absolutely not!" And his illustration is God's word to Moses in verse 15, *"For he says to Moses, I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion."* And again, in verse 18, *"So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills."* God is sovereign over everything in his creation, including his choice of whom he will save and whom he will not save. Therefore, in verse 16, God's choice is not according to a person's good works, *"So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy."*

Again, in verse 19, Paul knew how everyone will react when they read these words, *"Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?"* Again, they will say that God is unfair and incomprehensible. How can he condemn people whom he does not choose to save? If it is his will not to save a person, what can that person do, since no one can resist God's will not to save him? And again, Paul answers with another illustration in verse 20, *"But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, Why have you made me like this?"* God decides whether he will make a pot for "honorable use," and another pot for "dishonorable use," or whether a pot is made to be "a vessel of wrath" or "a vessel of mercy."

Therefore, in another great predestination passage in Ephesians 1:3-14, Paul affirms several times that God's sovereign choice in election depends only *"according to the purpose of his will"* (5), *"to the praise of his glorious grace"* (6), *"according to the riches of his grace"* (7), *"according to his purpose"* (9), *"according to the counsel of his will"* (11), and *"to the praise of his glory"* (12).

How then can an unbeliever be saved? It is through the preaching of the true gospel of Christ: his sinless life, his death for the sins of his people, and his glorious resurrection to conquer sin, Satan and death. This is why Paul writes in Romans 10:14-17, *"How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? ... So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ."* When I mentioned four Gentile women who were saved by God, I omitted the 100,000 people of Nineveh. How were they saved? God sent Jonah to them, the reluctant prophet, to preach the gospel to them.

When Evelyn and I were training to be missionaries of Wycliffe Bible Translators, there was a couple who wanted to become Bible translators. What place in the world did they choose? It was one of the remotest jungles in Indonesia, where there were people who have never been reached by missionaries. How did they happen to choose that particular place and people? It was, of course, God's hidden providence and election. He had chosen to save some people there. We also read in Acts 16:6-10 that Paul was prevented by the Holy Spirit from going to some places in Asia Minor because God had chosen to save people in Macedonia.

This is the answer to the question, "How would people who have never of the gospel of Jesus be saved?" If God wanted to save a person even in the remotest part of the world, he will send a missionary there to preach the gospel to him. Only him knows whom he had chosen to save and only him knows how he would save that person. Therefore, it is imperative for Christians and churches to support the work of missionaries, both domestic and foreign.

But the question remains, "How about those who die in their sins without hearing the gospel? How can God judge them?" Paul answers in Romans 2:15 that they have no excuse because God has "*written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them.*" Every single human being possesses in his mind, his mind, his being, God's law. This is called conscience, which accuses or excuses everyone when he does good or evil.

What is the evidence for this? Do you see that all civil societies in the world have the same laws against murder, adultery, stealing, and lying? C. S. Lewis once wrote, "If anyone will take the trouble to compare the moral teaching of, say, the ancient Egyptians, Babylonians, Hindus, Chinese, Greeks and Romans, what will really strike him will be how very like they are to each other and to our own." Ever hear of the Code of Hammurabi which was written about 300 years before the Ten Commandments? It is so similar in its laws to the Ten Commandments, that unbelievers present it as evidence that the writer of the Ten Commandments plagiarized from it. However, this only shows that even before God revealed his law to Israel, he already has written his law in the hearts of all human beings. The writer of Ecclesiastes knew this when he said, "*[God] has put eternity into man's heart*" (Ecc 3:11). Everyone knows that there is life after this life, after death, and that there is a judgment day.

And this is true whether one is a Jew or Gentile. But it is even worse for Jews because they know God's laws, covenants and promises, yet they do what the law prohibits and not do what the law requires them to do. In doing so, they dishonor God's name. We too, Christians, do we dishonor and blaspheme God's name among unbelievers when we claim to be Christians but do evil things? One of the lame excuses why unbelievers do not want to go to church is that "the church is full of hypocrites." They observe the un-Christian behavior of those who claim to be Christians.

Therefore, there is no excuse for unbelievers. God has written his law on the hearts of everyone.

Believers Obey the Law Written on Their Hearts

The exact opposite goes for true Christians. They hear the law, and they strive to do what the law requires and to not do what the law prohibits. This does not mean that true Christians do not sin. Far from it. True Christians are both saints and sinners at the same time. They are saints

because God has chosen them and separated them from the world for his purpose. They are saints because they strive to do God's will all their lives, to mature in the knowledge and image of Christ.

But this is not so with the Jews. They have God's laws, covenants, and promises, but they do not keep them. They do not live their lives grounded on them. Rather, they ground their salvation on keeping outward appearances. So, our Lord Jesus Christ rebuked the scribes and the Pharisees. They believed that their salvation depended on their outward good works. But inside, in their hearts, they are like *"whitewashed tombs... full of greed and self-indulgence... hypocrisy and lawlessness."* They want to get the praise of men for their outward works.

Paul chastises these Jews because of their reliance on outward works of obedience to the law. Why? Because their hearts are far from God. They depend on their Jewish religion, their outward temple sacrifices, their outward circumcision as a sign of their membership in God's holy nation. But their obedience to God's laws is only outward. Paul cites circumcision as an example of this outward religion. The Jews believe that circumcision saves, that no matter what their behavior is, they are God's people. But Paul says, *"For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God."*

From the very beginning, God's people are those whose hearts are near to God, whose hearts are contrite when they sin. God commanded Israel, *"Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn"* (Deu 10:16). When their hearts are contrite and repentant, they will *"love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live"* (Deu 30:6). True Christians strive to please God rather than man. True Christians strive to obey God's laws inwardly, not outwardly, following God's laws to the letter like the Pharisees.

Beloved brothers and sisters in Christ, the question remains, "Is Paul teaching salvation by obedience to God's laws and doing good works?" All other religions, except for Protestant Christianity, believe in salvation by doing good works. On the contrary, Paul teaches that all who strive for salvation from God's wrath through good works will never be saved. Why? Because God's standard is perfect, *"Be perfect as I am perfect,"* and no one can be sinless, except for our Lord Jesus Christ. One sin condemns us to death and then eternal punishment, and so all are condemned, and all human beings are born sinners (Rom 3:23).

So, Paul writes in Galatians 3:10, *"For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, 'Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.'"* Dear friends, if you believe that doing good works will save you from God's judgment, be forewarned. God demands sinlessness, and no one can be sinless. How can you be saved? By believing in the gospel of Christ, that he is the only Savior and Lord. Paul affirms this in Romans 3:20, *"For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight."* Jesus himself commands us, *"Repent and believe in the gospel, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand"* (Mark 1:15). Your salvation is by God's grace *alone* through faith *alone* in Christ *alone* (Eph 2:8-9). God has fulfilled his promise that in the new covenant, he will write his law in our hearts (Jer 31:33-34), so by the Spirit, we will be able to obey his law (Ezk 36:26-27)