



Pastor Kyle Mercer
The Hidden Danger of Self-Righteousness

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Series: Sovereign
Romans 9:25-10:4

**BIG IDEA - THE GOSPEL CALLS US TO STOP DEFENDING OUR
GOODNESS AND DEPEND COMPLETELY ON CHRIST**

Reflect Church is coming because, by the grace of God, Two Cities Church is sending. Give yourselves a round of applause. Guys, listen. If you're new to our church, you just have to understand how crazy what we're doing is. In one year, we're planting three churches. It's exciting, but it is painful, because we're not just partnering to plant.

Let me explain to you partnering to plant. We've done it. We'll do it again. We're not against it. Partnering to plant is "Hey, everybody. Meet Bob. Bob goes to a different church. Bob is on staff at a different church. We're going to give Bob \$10,000, and Bob is going to preach once. Here's here for Bob!"

That's something different than what we're doing now. We're parenting, which means all of our church planters... We're paying their salary and their benefits while they spend all of their time trying to get you to leave our church and go with them. It's kind of crazy. Now listen. We're excited about Seth, because he's planting with Austin Needham. So, two of our staff are heading out at the same time. I'm glad you're excited. Yeah, yeah, yeah. You're excited about that. Good. You're excited about it. We're all excited about it.

Here's what's neat. One of the secret sauces of Two Cities Church is that it has been built on a friendship, mine and Pastor Dave's friendship. I've known Pastor Dave since third grade. We've been super-close friends since tenth grade. I asked Austin and I asked Seth, and they both say they're each other's best friend, so that's good. Sometimes you think you're someone's best friend. You know what I'm saying? Okay. So, they're going out together.

Now, why Winston? Because every city, including Winston-Salem, needs more gospel-centered churches. Seth and Austin are going to be able to reach people we can't reach. I say this all the time, and I believe it. It takes all types of churches to reach all types of people. They're specifically hoping, in part, to reach Winston-Salem State University, which we're super excited about.

So, what's your next step? Well, if you're interested at all in being a part of Seth's launch team, text the word *REFLECT* (that's the name of his church) to 39808. By the way, we have a podcast, if you don't know this, and every Monday we release a new episode, and I got a chance to sit down with all three of our church planters.

I know it's confusing. We have three guys going to three different places. You saw one video, and you want to know more information. Tomorrow, I have close to an hour-long discussion where they talk about everything they're going to be doing from basically right now to when they launch public services in September of 2027.

So, with that said, guys... Also, can we welcome all of our college students? Yes. Don't worry, college students. I'm not going to make you stand and be like, "Look at them." I'm not going to do that. Here's what I want to let you know. Believe it or not, I went to college. I know it doesn't look like it, but I did. I went to college.

Guys, college is a unique, four-year window (for some of you, it was five or six years, but it should be a four-year window) where it's going to have the opportunity to be a potential spiritual greenhouse. If you're new... You're a freshman. You just showed up. This is your first Sunday, Winston-Salem, Two Cities Church. "What's going on?"

I want to just encourage and challenge you to give our church one year. If you give our church one year, I think you will find a community, you will find a mission, and you might find yourself, a year from now, helping Seth to plant a church in Winston-Salem, and it may be one of the most significant things you do during your college experience. With that said, let's pray, and then we're going to get to work in Romans 9.

Lord, we have talked about so many deep things over the last few weeks, and I can feel it in my own Community Group that you are taking us deeper into the Scriptures. There is a spirit of expectation about what your Word is going to say and where it is going to show us something about you or something about ourselves that we don't know and we definitely need to know. So, I pray you would use the end of Romans 9 and the beginning of Romans 10 to do what you always do, Lord, to glorify yourself and to serve and help us. We pray this in Jesus' name, amen.

Well, I read this interesting article. It's actually a few years old now. It came out in March of 2022, two years after COVID. If you're new, I have to mention COVID every sermon just

once. There it is. It's done. It came out two years after COVID, and the article was called "The Rise of the 'Umms,'" kind of that word you say when someone asks you a question and you don't know the answer. You go, "Umm..."

It was interesting when I read the article. It talks about three different types of people who we don't find in church anymore: the Nones, the Dones, and the Umms. Now, you know the Nones. Right? They've never been to church. They're not even ever planning on coming to church.

If you grew up in some kind of Christian home, it's like someone asking you to go to a Mormon temple or a Jewish synagogue or a Muslim mosque. You're like, "I don't care if the pastor is funny and the music is good and they have kids' ministry. I'm not going there. Maybe out of respect I'll show up for a wedding or a funeral, and that's it." That's a lot of Americans. They're the Nones.

Then there are the Dones. The Dones used to go to church, but for some reason... You know, something in their life happened. They deconstructed their faith. They had a bad experience at church. They're not a None, because they used to go; they're a Done. But he said after COVID there are the Umms. Part of it is the online stuff and all the shutdowns and sheltering in place and all this stuff.

It basically said that nowadays there are all of these people, and we're not sure what they believe, because every time we ask, "Are you in church?" or "Do you believe in Jesus?" or "Are you reading your Bible?" they give a bunch of "Umm..." They don't really have an answer.

In Romans 9, Paul is dealing with Israel, which is the ultimate Umm. They're not a None; they were in. Are they a Done? Are they an Umm? What are they? Well, what I'm going to do is I'm going to read you... This passage today is deep in a different way. Paul has been telling us all of these narrative stories. He has been like Jacob, Esau, Abraham, Isaac, and last week Moses. So, all of these famous Old Testament stories, which at least we're somewhat familiar with. Today, he starts with prophecy.

I'm going to read all of it, and we'll dip briefly into chapter 10 as well, and we'll pick up exactly there next week. All right. Look at verse 25 of Romans 9. ***"As indeed he says in Hosea..."*** I'm not sure if you made it this far in your Bible reading plan. That's a prophet in the Old Testament. ***"Those who were not my people I will call 'my people,' and her who was not beloved I will call 'beloved.' And in the very place where it was said to them, 'You are not my people,' there they will be called 'sons of the living God.'"***

He's like, "Okay. Hosea is a small book, but let me tell you about a big book that we all know about: Isaiah." ***"And Isaiah cries out concerning Israel: 'Though the number of the***

sons of Israel be as the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will be saved..." By the way, what they're dealing with is "Why are so many Gentiles believing and so many Jewish people are not believing?"

"...for the Lord will carry out his sentence upon the earth fully and without delay.' And as Isaiah predicted, 'If the Lord of hosts had not left us offspring, we would have been like Sodom and become like Gomorrah.'

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.

They have stumbled over the stumbling stone, as it is written, 'Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.'" Then Paul shares his heart one last time. He did this at the beginning of Romans 9.

"Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved. For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For, being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes."

Okay. The big idea is Paul is like, "God has a global mission," because here's what they're trying to figure out. First of all, he spent... If you're new, we've been walking through the book of Romans for a while, so if this doesn't make sense, you can go back and listen to the sermons and read the rest of Romans 9.

Paul spent a lot of time in Romans 9 basically saying, "Not all Jewish people are believers." Now he's going to open up something new that they weren't ever thinking before, which is, "Hey, and actually, now God has chosen the Gentiles." By the way, unless you're in here or at one of our campuses and you're a Messianic Jew (welcome if you are), we're probably all Gentiles here.

This isn't a really big deal to us. We're kind of like, "Of course. Not many Jewish people believe, and a lot of Gentile people believe." But you have to understand that in... For example, in Acts, chapter 15, the church has to hold a meeting to decide something. Nothing has ever changed. Right? They have to hold a meeting.

Basically, here was the big argument that you don't ever think about and don't really care about, but just so you know, it was a big deal to the early church. Basically, they were

asking this question: "Do the Gentiles need to become Jewish before they can become Christian?" I know; you've never even thought of that question, but they asked that question.

Paul says, "No, no, no." In fact, here's what's so interesting. Paul says... This is a little bit of an appetizer. Keep coming back, because in Romans 11, Paul deals with Israel again, and it's almost as deep as Romans 9, if not deeper in some ways. Basically, in the church age, which is what we're in now... Paul goes, "This is going to really shock you. In the church age, not many Jewish people are going to believe, and tons of Gentiles are going to believe."

God has a global mission, and every type of people in every type of place... Some of them are going to believe. If we go to the book of Revelation, at the end of time, there's this multitude that John sees, it says. He looks into heaven, looks into the future, and he says, "I see a multitude, and they're from every tribe and tongue and people and language." So, basically, here's what Paul is saying: "Guys, you shouldn't be surprised that a lot of Gentile people are believing, because this is what God said would happen in Hosea."

Let me read verse 25 again. We'll go back now and take each verse by itself. ***"As indeed he says in Hosea, 'Those who were not my people I will call "my people," and her who was not beloved I will call "beloved." And in the very place where it was said to them, "You are not my people," there they will be called "sons of the living God."'"***

If you don't know your Bible very well, that's okay. Welcome. We're glad you're here. The story of Hosea is one of the craziest stories in the entire Old Testament. Basically, what happens is God comes to Hosea... By the way, just read what he made Ezekiel and all of these other guys do. Sometimes he wants his prophets to be a parable to the nation of Israel, to be a picture of everything.

So, he goes to Hosea and goes, "Hosea, you need to find a wife." Hosea is like, "All right. I need to find a wife." He goes, "Here's what I want you to do. I want you to take Gomer," which isn't the greatest name, by the way. If that's your name, you're welcome here. Gomer is her name, but that's not the bad part about her. The bad part about her is that she's a prostitute. *That* messes with your theology. God tells Hosea to marry a prostitute.

Then he says, "Have a bunch of kids with her, but, by the way, she's going to run around on you, because that's exactly what Israel does to me." In fact, he says, "Name this kid *this*, and name this kid *this*." The third kid... He says, "Your youngest kid, the runt in the family? Call him Not My People." Could you imagine doing roll call at kindergarten? "Is Not My People here?" "Here."

He says, "Here's what I'm going to do. I'm going to rename you." God is like, "Look. I'm going to..." By the way, he says, "In that very place where you were called 'Not My People,' I will call you my people." God can change you right where you are, right *as* you are.

Now, this is the interesting thing. He says, "I'm going to give you a new name." Now, names are powerful. Right? We only nickname the people we love and the people we hate. You have a nickname for your spouse, and I personally don't want to know what it is..."Smookums" or something like that...whatever your nickname is. But also, I bet you have a nickname for the boss you don't like. I bet you have a nickname for the political candidate you don't like. I bet you have a nickname for the coworker. We have nicknames for people.

Names are powerful because names can travel with you. I mean, even nickname kinds of ideas. Some people... They call them *self-schemas*. Like, you're told in fourth grade that you're a troublemaker. We're always trying to figure out... "Oh, you're not the pretty one" or "You *are* the pretty one" or "You're the athletic one" or "You're not the athletic one; you're the smart one." "Oh, you're neither of those? Well, try to be funny, because that's your only option left."

So, he says, "You're not my people; I'm going to call you my people." But then look at this. In Isaiah... I'm only going to talk about this for a minute. He's introducing these things. He's going to come back to them. ***"And Isaiah cries out concerning Israel: 'Though the number of the sons of Israel be as the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will be saved...'"***

Now listen. In Romans 11, Paul is going to talk about the remnant, but here's what I want you to know. Paul is dealing with this whole idea that "Wait a second. Even though the vast majority of people who are going to believe are going to be Gentiles, God is going to keep a remnant of Jewish believing people." The idea that God keeps a remnant, a small group of people who believe in every place...

If you think about it, that's a big theme in the Bible. How many were saved in the ark with Noah? Eight total. Of the two million people in the wilderness, how many made it into the Promised Land? Well, two: Caleb and Joshua. And doesn't Jesus say the way is hard and there are few who find it? If I told you I have a few bucks on me... I mean, you might not even be able to buy a Starbucks drink with that. Right? It's like two or three dollars.

So, he says there's a remnant, but then this is where Paul goes with the prophecies. ***"And as Isaiah predicted, 'If the Lord of hosts had not left us offspring, we would have been***

like Sodom and become like Gomorrah."" Now, unfortunately, a long time ago, I had to preach a whole sermon on Sodom and Gomorrah, and that was not very fun. I'm not going to go into detail right now. You can read the story.

Just know it's the most infamous place in the Old Testament. There was debauchery and chaos and sexual perversion. It was a terrible place. Lot goes there, and Lot is kind of interested. It's like the Las Vegas of the day, and he's lingering there. Basically, God ends up destroying that entire city. Do you know what's interesting? Ruth Graham, who was married to Billy Graham, said, "If God doesn't judge America, he owes Sodom and Gomorrah an apology." *She* said that, not me.

It makes you think for a second, because what does Paul say? We're going to get into this in a little bit. Paul goes, "Don't think you're better than anyone." Every once in a while, I'll make jokes about downtown Asheville or Portland, Oregon, or San Francisco. Whenever someone moves here from California, I always say, "Welcome to America." You know, that kind of stuff.

But in all seriousness, when I'm thinking rightly, I'm thinking biblically. Paul is like, "Guys, don't think you're any better than Sodom and Gomorrah. If God were to take away his restraining grace from your life, you could easily have become that and experienced the judgment of God."

By the way, interesting historical archaeological fact: we don't know where Sodom and Gomorrah was. A lot of the places, we're like, "Oh, there's some rubble *here* and there's some rubble..." If you go to Ephesus, there's a lot of rubble there. There's a debate of two or three locations because, basically, God so destroyed this place we can't even find it.

So, Paul goes, "All right. I need to give you some background that God is going to work in the Gentiles," but this is where it really gets started. In verse 30, Paul asks this question: ***"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."***

Paul goes, "This is shocking, isn't it?" This is the total surprise, that the Gentiles would believe and the Jewish people wouldn't believe, that the outsiders would become insiders, that the strangers would become family. It's the exact opposite of what the Jewish people thought, even though the Bible said the Gentiles would come to believe.

This is the ultimate upset. I started to think about, "What is the ultimate sports upset?" That could have come many places, but I thought about this picture. Some of you recognize this picture. Oh, yeah. That was when App State blocked a field goal from

Michigan with just a few seconds left in the Big House, considered by many to be the greatest upset in college football history.

What I want you to know is Michigan was the Jewish people, and App State were the Gentiles in that one. Nobody thought that the Gentiles would be included, even though the Bible said they would. Here's the thing. Paul says, **"What shall we say, then?"** Now watch this. If you look up to verse 14, if you have your whole Bible and you're... We are trying to study this book all together. It's hard to preach this week in and week out, because the book was meant to be read all at once.

If you look up to verse 14, you'll notice Paul asks the exact same question. Do you see it? "What shall we say then?" Then he comes down to verse 30 and says, "What shall we say then?" What is he asking? Well, the idea that God chooses some and doesn't choose others. We talked about that over the last few weeks.

His first answer to "Well, why does God choose some and then not choose others...?" We said the answer to that, in verses 14-24, is that God has a sovereign plan. Now the answer to that, in verses 30 and following, is because people are prideful. It's really, really interesting. Both are true at the same time. It's called an *antinomy*. *Antimony* is a word meaning an apparent contradiction because our reason has reached its limits.

This happens. I told you in the first week, if the Bible says two things that seem to contradict themselves, I just believe them both. Now, this actually happens. This is interesting. In physics, for example, physicists (and I'm not one of them, obviously) are surprised because sometimes light behaves as particles, and sometimes light behaves as waves.

Now, if you're not a physicist, you're like, "Who cares?" Well, supposedly a physicist is like, "That's impossible! It can't sometimes be waves and sometimes be particles." Guess what they said? "I guess we don't know enough physics. I guess there are things in physics that we don't understand." Well, that's exactly what happens in theology as well.

Charles Spurgeon was a great preacher, and he was asked one time, "How do you reconcile God's sovereignty and man's responsibility?" and he said, "I never reconcile friends." Here's what he's going to do. This is where we're going to go today. Paul is going to spend the rest of the time telling us why people reject the gospel. I think that's really, really important, because we're all going to have family members and friends and coworkers and classmates.

At one level, one of the answers is God is sovereign, and another answer is they're prideful. Let me show you this. Let's go on and look at verse 31. **"...but that Israel who pursued a law that would lead to righteousness did not succeed in reaching that law."**

So, Israel was pursuing a law that they thought would lead to righteousness and their salvation. It says, ***"Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as if it were based on works."***

Sometimes we read this and are like, "Oh, those silly Israelites, those silly Jewish people a long time ago who thought they could pursue something and it would bring them life and salvation." It's like, that's all we ever do. Here's how we do it. Let me explain this. Whether you're brand new and you're a college student and someone told you there was going to be food afterward and that's why you're here and you've never been to church, it doesn't matter. This is going to be for all of us. Watch this.

Here's what all of us do. All of us create a functional hell (not the real hell of the Bible, eternal conscious torment), and we all create a functional heaven (not the real heaven where Jesus is worshiped), and then whatever we think will get us out of hell and get into heaven, that is our savior that we worship.

Now, you might go, "That doesn't make sense." Let me explain it. For some people, being fat is their functional hell. They're like, "I would never want to be fat." So, what is their functional heaven? Being fit, being in shape, not having a dad bod...something like that. So, what do they worship? Whatever gets them out of their hell into heaven. Have you ever wondered why some people have almost religious devotion to CrossFit or Burn Boot Camp or Orangetheory? You have to almost use religious language.

Or how about people...? Some people view their functional hell... This is a lot of Americans. Their functional hell is being poor, and their functional heaven is being rich. Maybe they don't say *rich*. They just say, "I just don't want to have to worry about money." That's the same thing as being rich. "I don't want to worry about money. I want financial independence." That's all the same thing as being rich.

So, here's what people do. If their functional hell is being poor and their functional heaven is being rich, now you understand why they worship their college degree or why they worship their career or why they're a workaholic. You need religious language. For some people, being single for the rest of their life is hell, and marriage, especially if you grew up in a Christian home... You're not supposed to have sex outside of marriage and all this stuff. So, their functional heaven is marriage.

If you've ever met somebody who has not dated for a really long time or have never dated, and they finally have a boyfriend or girlfriend, and their commitment to them is almost religious, it's because that boyfriend or girlfriend is potentially the savior that's going to bring them out of their functional hell.

Now, with Israel, we're told that they did two things wrong. The first thing is they pursued the wrong thing; the second thing is they pursued the right thing the wrong way. It kind of hurts your head, but follow me. If you want to look... We'll get there toward the end. We're told they were pursuing a righteousness. Then, in chapter 10, verse 3, which I read to you at the beginning, it says they were pursuing a righteousness of their own.

Okay. I want to talk to you about something very important. Every time I get up here on a Sunday, there's always a part of the sermon that I'm like, "This is really what I want to get to. I have to talk about a lot of things because they're in the Bible, but this is the *rhema*. This is the word for our church right now." Well, that's the part of the sermon we're entering, so buckle up. "Buckle up, buttercup," as they say.

Here's what we're going to talk about. We're going to talk about being self-righteous. I think it is the greatest sin in the church today. It's definitely one of the greatest sins... It leads to cancel culture and everything else. It's one of the greatest sins in the culture today. Self-righteousness is any righteousness that leads to comparison instead of worship. Let me say that again. Self-righteousness is any righteousness you have that leads to comparison, not to the worship of God.

By the way, have you ever noticed...? Self-righteousness is all about comparing yourself to other people. What's funny is in the church, I never hear anyone compare themselves to the missionary who was martyred. Have you noticed that? No one does that. They compare themselves to their brother-in-law who occasionally goes to church and said he finds the Bible interesting. It's like, "Okay. You win."

I want to talk about this, because I think self-righteousness keeps more people out of heaven than unrighteousness. Like, if you're unrighteous, you know it and we know it. I actually think this is why Jesus... Remember when Jesus shows up and everybody is confused because all of the religious people and the religious leaders who were self-righteous did not like Jesus? It was self-righteous people who killed Jesus.

But then everyone is confused, because when he hangs out with the sinners and the tax collectors and the prostitutes, they're all so eager to hang out with him. It's like, "Yeah, because he extended them grace because they knew they were sinners."

Here's how this works. I'm going to just prepare your heart. I'm going to call you at the end to repent of self-righteousness, which is hard to do, because if you're self-righteous and I call you to come down to the altar, the very reason you need to come down to the altar is the very reason you won't, because the self-righteous person starts saying, "Well, I've never seen so-and-so down at the altar. What if so-and-so sees me down here?"

Okay. Here's how it works in the church. People are self-righteous as soon as they find out somebody else did some type of sin. Please, guys. I'm trying to preach against a self-righteous spirit, if you haven't noticed. Don't ever say you would never sin in that way. Do you remember all of the people afterward who were like, "Yeah, Tiger Woods slept with, like, 21 women; I'd never do that"?

I'm like, "You would never have the chance! Ever. You're not a billionaire with a private jet. You wouldn't even have the chance." But this is what we do. Actually, given the wrong situation at the wrong time, any of us are capable of doing horrible things, and that's a good thing to remember.

Here's another way self-righteousness shows up in the church: thinking that you have perfect theology. I've been in churches before that are like, "We only read Reformation Trust books." I'm like, "Why?" And I read Reformation Trust books. People are like, "These are the only authors I listen to; these are the only pastors I listen to; these are the only podcasts I listen to, and here's my stance on every secondary and tertiary issue, and if you don't believe it, you're wrong." That happens.

Here's another huge way this happens in churches. Self-righteousness is shown, maybe most clearly, because we'll see at the end it says they were unwilling to submit... Here's the thing. Self-righteousness shows itself up in being unteachable. Some of you are incredible at taking sermon notes for other people. "Oh, I hope my wife is listening. See what he said right there?"

"Oh, we need to get my sister here because..." I can see some of you sending this sermon to your aunt. "Hey, this is on self-righteousness. I think it could help you." This is what we do. Then, guys, I want to start with the church, but the culture is just... Oh my goodness. For example, personally, I think the most self-righteous thing is to put a yard sign in your front yard. If you have a yard sign in your front yard, I do not want to know about it.

I mean, literally. Every time I see a yard sign, I'm like, "Somebody went to the store and bought that." Where do you even buy yard signs? They buy a yard sign, and then they walk in their front yard. "Yeah, I believe this, and you should too." You know what I mean? Then you read it, and it's like, "Water is life, and humans are people, and I believe in science." What is this? It is so self-righteous. It's like, "Here are a bunch of things I believe because I'm a good person."

People play the victim all the time. I always have to say there *are* real victims, but basically, playing the victim is self-righteous. "For someone like me, things should be going so much better than they are." Basically, self-righteousness shows up and... You

know, you see it with your coworkers and your classmates, who we love. We need to see self-righteousness in our hearts first.

Basically, here's self-righteousness in a nutshell for the average person who lives here in the Triad. They blame God for every bad thing that happens, and they take credit for every good thing that happens. Most of what you're going to experience in Lexington, Davie County, and Winston-Salem is self-righteousness with a smile. "I'm fine. I'm doing great."

Basically, when you're self-righteous, here's what you do: you define what it means for you to be a good person, and you spend your life defending that. Paul says, "Guys, that is the opposite..." Because there's unrighteousness (that's sinful living), there's self-righteousness, and then there's the gift righteousness that Christ gives.

He says, "Not only that." Let me show you this. Not only do they pursue the wrong thing; they pursue the right thing wrongly. It says, **"...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."**

Basically, you can't do religious activities...going to church, going to Community Group, reading your Bible, praying, sharing your faith, serving others...to earn anything from God. I forget who first said this. It might have been Tim Keller. It might have been Jerry Bridges. If you're in Christ, there's nothing you can do to make God love you any more, and there's nothing you can do to make God love you any less.

Here's how works in the Christian life, like, good works, good deeds...reading your Bible, praying, serving one another, being generous, or whatever it is... You do them not to *earn* salvation (this is a whole paradigm shift); you do them to *enjoy* your salvation. That's a whole different reason to have your quiet time or memorize your Scripture or share your faith or worship. It's like, "I'm not doing this to *earn* my salvation; I'm doing this so I can more deeply *enjoy* my salvation."

Paul says that basically... It's interesting. He uses the language of pursuing, but then look at verse 32 continued. **"They have stumbled over the stumbling stone, as it is written, 'Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.'"**

Basically, the stumbling stone is Christ. I love this, because what do you stumble over? You only stumble over something solid. Nobody stumbles over vague New Age spirituality, because it's a fog. People just walk right through it. Here it says, "Hey, listen." Why do you stumble, by the way? Well, you stumble because you didn't see it. That's what Paul is getting at.

They were pursuing something completely different, and then they stumbled over it. Paul talks about this in other places...all of the different reasons people stumble over Christ. It's not intellectual enough, but basically, the main reason we stumble over the gospel is because it offends us, because it not only tells us, "You're more loved than you could ever know," but also, "You're more sinful than you could ever know."

So, Paul basically says, "Look. The people are prideful and self-righteous, and that's why they're not coming to Christ." But look at what he says in verse 1. He says, "But this doesn't mean I don't pray for them." He says, **"Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved."** I love this.

By the way, the opposite of self-righteousness... Part of it. Like, how do you get rid of the self-righteousness in your life? One way would be to pray for other people, especially lost people. Paul doesn't look down on the lost; he kneels down *for* the lost. Here's the thing. We need to pray for the lost.

I looked it up this week. Guess what people pray for? For the average American Christian, their favorite thing to pray for is body parts. Again, we pray for the sick. We pray for people who have cancer. We pray for people who have tumors. These are really serious things, but the average Christian's entire prayer list is Tommy's tummy and Sally's stomach and Billy's belly. Right?

Have you ever been in a Bible study or Community Group before where it's like, "Hey, guys. Any prayer requests?" Guess what everyone does. They think, "Do I know anybody who's sick?" Then we spend an enormous amount of time praying for God to keep Christians out of heaven, which is really strange. "Let's pray for my 98-year-old grandmother who has known the Lord for 70 years and has pneumonia." It's like, "Let her go!" When you visit her in hospice, she's like, "Let me go!" It's ridiculous.

We spend an enormous amount of time praying for old, old, old Christians to not go to heaven, and we spend almost no time praying for lost people to go to heaven. So, he says, "Guys, we have to pray for it." So, the first thing people pray for is body parts. The second thing Christians pray for: for life to go well for them and the people they love. The third thing Christians pray for: help them and the people they love when things go bad.

I looked it up. The two most least likely things for Christians to pray for that the Bible tells us to pray for: First, government officials. There are actually biblical texts that tell us to pray for governing officials. Most Christians never do it. Secondly, praying for the lost. Paul goes, "Somehow, God is sovereign and people are prideful, but God uses my prayers."

I haven't told this story in a while, but basically, Dave and I go back to third or fourth grade. It's hard to believe this, but in elementary school, I was kind of cool. I don't want to brag. I was kind of popular. I've always been talkative...all that kind of stuff. So, it's fourth or fifth grade. Dave is in my class, and I start making fun of Dave because I found out that Dave's dad was a pastor.

I grew up as a casual Catholic, so I'm like, "Oh my goodness. Your dad is a pastor," which I thought meant a priest, so I thought he wore a dress and lived at the church. I was like, "I have to make fun of this guy." So, I would make fun of Dave in front of other people, and Dave would go home and tell his parents.

You know, if you're a parent and someone did something to your kid, you're like, "Well, I hope I'm a soccer coach, because he'll never play." That's how you think. Just be honest. That's your sinful heart when someone hurts your kids. But the Vogels were godly. They were mature, so they said, "Let's pray for Kyle."

I think, genuinely, in God's providence, one of the main things God used to bring me to salvation... I didn't know it. I didn't find out they were praying for me until after I became a Christian six or seven years later. Then, his family ends up discipling me. It's like a biblical story. It's really beautiful. God uses our prayers.

Look at what Spurgeon said. Can we put the Spurgeon quote up on the screen? Charles Spurgeon said this. By the way, just so you know, my office is behind the stage, and this exact picture hangs on the right side of the door every time I walk out. "If sinners be damned, at least let them leap to hell over our dead bodies. And if they perish, let them perish with our arms wrapped around their knees, imploring them to stay. If hell must be filled, let it be filled in the teeth of our exertions, and let not one go unwarned and unprayed for." Wow!

That should be our heart. We should be praying for lost people and asking God to do a great work. We're not going to be self-righteous at all if we're praying like that. In fact, Paul ends talking about the other struggle of Israel, which I think is also a big struggle for Americans. Look. **"For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God..."** By the way, isn't that amazing? Paul is not self-righteous. He can actually see the good in people who are wrong, and he can see the good in people who've hurt him.

"For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For, being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness." Let me talk about zeal for a second. Zeal is passion. Zeal is energy. The word *zeal* literally means to boil or to become hot. Think of fire. Fire is great in the fireplace; fire on your curtains will bring your whole house down.

He says you need zeal and you need knowledge. Now, the Jewish people were so zealous... It's hard to even put into words how religiously zealous they were. In the Old Testament, there are 613 laws, but the leaders of the day were worried that people were going to break the 613 laws, so they built a fence, metaphorically speaking, around the Torah where they made a bunch of rules about the rules, which is what religious people love to do.

So, when you're reading your Bible, and you're like, "Why is it saying that Jesus went a Sabbath day's journey?" it's because in that culture, they told people you could only walk so far on the Sabbath. That's not in the Bible, but they didn't want you to work on the Sabbath, and they said, "Well, if you walk more than, basically, three-fourths of a mile, you're working. So, on the Sabbath you can walk, but not that far." This is what religious people do.

Paul, the guy who wrote this, was zealous. I mean, he was a persecutor of the church before he came to Christ, if you know his story. But I started to think about Americans, and I thought, "Okay. Americans are definitely self-righteous. Definitely." Then I thought, "Man, zeal without knowledge. Isn't that the perfect...?" Do you know what the Greek word for zeal without knowledge is? *Twitter*. I'm kidding, but that's where everybody puts on all of their thoughts and passions about everything.

Here's the thing. People have so much zeal for politics. Correct? Studies have shown the average American could not pass a citizenship test. In other words, most Americans do not know the first thing about politics. They do not understand how it works. They've never read the Declaration of Independence. They don't understand the different branches of government. They *don't*. But, man, are they passionate.

Here's another one: AI. You can always tell somebody has zeal without knowledge because you'll have evangelists and prophets at the same time. Have you noticed that for AI we have the evangelist Elon Musk? He's saying, "Don't worry. Don't save for retirement. We're going to have sustainable abundance." Then, on the other side, you have all of these doomsday prophets saying AI is going to take over the whole world.

Here's another area of zeal: cryptocurrency. I remember back when Doge was really big. I'm going to lose some of you on this, but there was a cryptocurrency called *Doge*, and I bought it at just the right time. It started going up and up. I called my dad, who's in wealth management and all this kind of stuff.

I called him up, and I was like, "Dad, I'm making a lot of money on Doge." He was like, "Sell!" I'm like, "I can't sell. I can't sell." He said, "Do you understand how cryptocurrency

works?" I said, "No." He said, "That's literally the first rule of investing. You don't invest in something you don't understand." Zeal without knowledge.

Or, here's the main one in our culture today: health. We are back in the Old Testament in some ways. We now again have dietary laws. A lot of people read the Old Testament and think, "That's so weird, all these dietary laws." It's like, "You're the one who talks about eating clean food. You have your own saints. They're called *influencers*, and they have nice abs on social media."

We have our own evangelists. Have you ever met the guy who went to CrossFit? Don't worry; he'll meet you. He'll find you. He's an evangelist. I mean, we have zeal, but we don't have knowledge. Zeal is the energy; knowledge is the direction. Paul says, "Man, what I want them to know so badly is God's Word."

Here's what's sad about being in America today. We have so much zeal. I just mentioned it. We have so little knowledge. We live in the most biblically illiterate America, even though the average person has more Bibles in their home than were accessed by whole communities for most of human history.

So, here's how Paul ends. Paul ends in verse 4. He has been dealing with self-righteousness in people, and he says, ***"For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes."*** He basically says, "Guys, what I'm so frustrated about with religiously lost people, and particularly with the Jewish people, is that they don't understand that Christ is what the law was pointing to. He was the goal. He was the substance. He was the end of it."

You know what? This is going to sound really silly, but whenever I think of this verse for myself, do you know what I think of? This will make more sense in one second. I think of Buc-ee's. Can you just raise your hand if you love Buc-ee's? I don't see enough hands. We should all love Buc-ee's. They're building one in Mebane, and I can't wait. It's going to be great. It won't be ready for two years, but that's okay.

So, here's what happens. When we go down to Florida, there's always a Buc-ee's, and I get excited the very first time I see a Buc-ee's sign. They show up really early. They'll show up 150 miles before Buc-ee's. It's like, "Hey, Buc-ee's in 150 miles." Then I'll reorient my whole life and the life of my family. I'm like, "We're not getting gas. We're going to have to make it. No one is peeing for 150 miles. We were going to eat at Chick-fil-A, but we're eating at 2:00 p.m. at Buc-ee's." You know what I mean?

Here's why I tell you that. It's really silly, but if you think about it this way, why do I love the Buc-ee's signs? Because I love Buc-ee's. It would be so silly if every time I saw a Buc-ee's sign, I grabbed my family and said, "Come over here. We're stopping at the sign." We

get pictures. We camp out in front of the Buc-ee's sign. The whole point of the sign is to point you to Buc-ee's. I'm most grateful for the signs when I'm standing in Buc-ee's eating their three-meat sandwich.

In the same way, the whole point of the Old Testament... Everything was anticipating him. Everything was pointing toward him and preparing for him. Guys, the only way we can have a righteousness that doesn't lead to comparison and, instead, leads to worship is to realize that the righteousness we have, as the old theologians would say, is an alien righteousness. It's a gift righteousness, because Jesus lived a sinless life, died a substitutionary death, and rose victoriously, and anybody who would ever believe can have that righteousness.

So, here's how I want to end. I want to end with a time of repentance. That's how we should probably end every service anyway. Just a time of repentance to repent of self-righteousness. Now, the hard thing about self-righteousness is self-righteous people are always the last people to know they're self-righteous.

In just a minute, I'm going to ask you to come forward. Maybe you've realized, "Man, there's some self-righteousness in my life, and that's actually the reason I don't pray for non-Christians. There's some self-righteousness in my life, and that's the reason I can't tell anyone what I'm struggling with. There's some self-righteousness in my life, and that's why I'm not getting in community."

Listen. There was a story I read years ago, a true story of a college ministry. They really wanted to reach their campus, so they did something strange. I'm not recommending this. This is descriptive, not prescriptive. They put a confessional booth on the front of their student lawn. Kind of old-school Catholic in some ways. They put a confessional booth on the lawn, but here's the trick. It was the Christian students who would be in the confessional booth, and anyone who came by, they would confess their sins to them.

Can you imagine what that must have been like? Some kid is walking to class. "Oh, these goofy Christians, stupid Christians, dumb Christians." "Hey, come here, man. I need to tell you something. Here are a couple of things I struggle with." The guy tells the story. He says it broke out a little renewal, a little revival on the campus, because there's nothing that will... The two things that will tear away self-righteousness in your heart are going to be praying for lost people and confessing your sin.

So, in a minute... I'll meet you down here, but here's what I want to do. I want us to come forward for the self-righteousness that's in our hearts and, in general, the self-righteousness that is in the communities of Davie, Lexington, and Winston. Guys, we end up being stumbling blocks that don't need to be stumbling blocks. We want to be the

most humble, joyful, Christ-centered people. Here's the thing. We want to look like Jesus, but before we can look like Jesus, sometimes we have to look like people who need him. Let's pray.

Lord, across all of our campuses, I pray just to come forward in a time of repentance. Lord, we don't want to be self-righteous. Self-righteousness destroys marriages because it creates an "us versus them." It creates victim mentalities. Lord, self-righteousness destroys parenting because we're so concerned about how our kids look because of how it makes *us* look.

Self-righteousness destroys evangelism because we care so much about what other people think or are so judgmental of their sin we don't have a heart to pray and share with them. Lord, would you break our hearts for what breaks yours? Would we, like the apostle Paul, be able to say, "My heart's desire and prayer to God is that they might be saved"?

Lord, in our church and in the church plants that are going out from here, would you destroy the self-righteous spirit and put a grace-centered spirit in us, Lord, where we all know we are sinners who need the grace of God and relate to each other as sinners who need the grace of God? We ask this in Jesus' name, amen.