

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost, Epistle, Year A

PROVING OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS IS KILLING US

Romans 10:5-15

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

Analysis by Matthew DeLoera

5 Moses writes concerning the righteousness that comes from the law, that “the person who does these things will live by them.” 6 But the righteousness that comes from faith says, “Do not say in your heart, ‘Who will ascend into heaven?’” (that is, to bring Christ down) 7 “or “Who will descend into the abyss?’” (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). 8 But what does it say? “the word is near you, on your lips and in your heart” (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); 9 because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. 10 For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved. 11 The scripture says, “No one who believes in him will be put to shame.” 12 For there is not distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. 13 For, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.” 14 But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? 15 And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!”

DIAGNOSIS: Actions Speak Louder than Words

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): We Mean to Act

For a bunch of people so concerned about unity, Christians never

seem to stop arguing about discipleship. How should Christians really live? After all, Jesus' disciples stood out in a crowd by their words and actions. They were recognizable. Counter-cultural, just like their rebbe. So, if we really believe in Jesus like we say we do, then we had better be distinctive too. Besides, we're supposed to be evangelical. If we have any hope of persuading others, we need to know what it looks like to walk our talk. This is what we actually mean by our beloved phrase "the marks of discipleship"—the end-all and be-all of so many congregations. And then, we remember how strongly Moses taught the law, because how else would the Israelites be distinct from the rest of the world, and demonstrate the superiority of their God? In the end, we know that righteousness is really about action, since actions speak louder than words.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Failure to Act
But, for as hard as we try to prove our righteousness, we're not very good at it. At every turn, our checkered past continues to dog us and nip at our heels. The Internet is particularly good at unearthing everything we want to keep buried. Yet, this doesn't really matter, because we're such creatures of habit anyway. History always repeats itself, and we're just like everyone else. Nevertheless, we make internal vows, double-down, and persevere, because we've always been taught that that's what disciples do. As 12-step programs like to say: "fake it 'til you make it." Besides, what about Mother Theresa, Bonhoeffer, Grandma, and all our paragons of faith? Their righteousness totally stands out. Who's so foolish as to suggest otherwise? Yet, these beloved ones routinely put us to shame by our obvious failure to act, because they prove that we knowingly blunder forth in our slipshod service, minimizing or overlooking the damage we cause. And all the while, we co-opt God's grace, making it our escape route. After all, no one's perfect.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): The End of Action

However, our blind perseverance leads us to overlook the fundamental problem with equating righteousness and action. Jesus' perfect righteousness kills him. Of course, what that says about God is too threatening for us, so we quickly skip ahead to talk of Jesus descending to the dead and ascending to heaven like it was some kind of supremely righteous victory tour. Like he never actually died at all. Nevertheless, this descending and ascending mean the same thing—he's not here. He's dead. This is the real scandal of the law—it didn't even save Jesus. And if righteousness didn't add a single moment to Jesus' life, it won't add to ours. It's all futile. Still worse for us, if the law purports to preserve life, then there's only one way to finally cease the damage we inadvertently cause by our actions. God takes us out of the equation, and deep down we know God should, because everybody dies. And isn't this the real reason why we're so obsessed with righteousness? It's not that we love God, but that we're desperately trying to escape our own inescapable death.

PROGNOSIS: Words Speak Louder than Actions

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Promises

But cross and death are not the end for Jesus after all, because on the third day he rose. God so loves the Son, that God won't be separated from Jesus by any law. In such defiant love, God raises Jesus from death in spite of the law. Therefore, Jesus' righteousness was not futile or vain, because his crowning achievement IS his death. And because the end of his righteousness is death, it puts to death all our own striving and self-security. Better yet, death isn't even an accomplishment at all. In fact, it's the anti-accomplishment. The anti-striving. The anti-security. We don't have to do a single thing. But that's not all! Jesus likewise so loves us that Jesus won't let the law separate us from him either. He takes our sin upon himself precisely to bind us to him, yanking

us right into his resurrection. Where he is, there we are. So, we don't have to worry about descending or ascending—Jesus already descended and ascended, FOR YOU/US, just as he promised he would.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Confessions

So, when the things that have shamed us become the very things that bind us to Jesus, we no longer have to hide in shame, or deny our failures, or bargain with God. We don't fear death anymore, precisely because Jesus has been resurrected. We no longer have anything to try to escape. And, this means that we can even freely confess our failures to others, because we now realize that we don't have to trust ourselves anymore. Even if it were possible to be perfect disciples, it wouldn't add one moment to our lives anyway. It certainly didn't work for Jesus! But what was once our pathetic excuse has now become our forceful confession of the death of our ambition, our striving, our self-security, and everything that used to torment us and grind us down. Descending and ascending aren't even on our radar, because we're free from our struggle for righteousness—Jesus has given us his own. In a sudden, earth-shattering moment, we finally hear what Jesus has been saying to us for our entire lives like some holy, broken record—death is no longer the end, because everyone knows it's the only way to resurrection! And it dawns on us that we're never really going to get what we deserve after all, because we trust that Jesus means exactly what he says.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Truths

Our actions now become what they were truly meant to be all along—free gifts to our neighbors—all because giving itself has now become what it was truly meant to be all along—not self-justification but pure and simple fulfillment. Nothing could make us any happier than this—freely sharing our whole selves without fear of failure, and rejoicing in those blessed moments

when we behold our neighbors thriving. Of course, we will still encounter failures, and misunderstand our neighbors' needs. But even these mishaps help us to know ourselves better, that we might appreciate the full reality of who God in Jesus has made us to be. And that's nothing to be ashamed of! We're right there with Mother Theresa, Bonhoeffer, and Grandma, by the surprising and derailing ways that our imperfect actions benefit others in spite of our imperfect intentions, just so we can actually behold the true power of God breaking forth. In the end, this was always the real truth about righteousness that we never understood: It's not pretending to be what we aren't, but revealing the truth about God in Jesus and about ourselves. And we do it through a new story that we're just dying to go and tell others. Truly, we will. Which just goes to show us—words really do speak louder than actions.