

ROMANS 10:12–17. (EHV)

So there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, because the same Lord is Lord of all, who gives generously to all who call on him. Yes, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” [Joel 2:32]. So then, how can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one about whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without a preacher? And how can they preach unless they are sent? Just as it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news of peace, who preach the gospel of good things!” [Isa. 52:7]. But not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, “Lord, who believed our message?” [Isa. 53:1]. So then, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message comes through the word of Christ.

This passage is a big deal in some Christian circles, and not for the reason it should be.

In Texas there was a rehab home at which I held a service every week. One of the attendees was a lady we’ll call Miss A. Miss A had suffered a stroke several years back and was a member of a different Christian denomination, one that teaches decision theology. “Decision theology” is a shorthand way of saying that they believe that, in order to be converted to Christ, you have to publicly commit yourself to Christ and give your life to Christ, out of your own free will. After one of those services, Miss A said she was interested in becoming a Lutheran. So I started taking her through a Bible information class.

While I was still in the process of doing this, the Christmas season came around, and Miss A invited me to attend the rehab home’s Christmas dinner as one of her guests of honor. As it turned out, the other guest of honor she invited was a friend of hers who was still a zealous member of the Christian denomination that Miss A had grown up in. We’ll call this friend Mrs. X. Because this particular Christmas dinner was very well attended, I actually ended up sitting next to Mrs. X, several seats down from Miss A. I tried being as peaceful and agreeable as possible in my conversations with Mrs. X, but she wanted to talk religion at the end of the meal, and she was commenting on differences between her denomination and Lutherans. This turned into a lively conversation about the merits and effect of infant baptism and, ultimately, about the question of free will when it comes to faith and conversion.

Well, if Mrs. X was somewhat indifferent towards Lutheranism before the conversation, she was decidedly against it afterwards, in spite of the passages I cited. She kept coming back to this passage from Romans 10: “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved,” and to one a few verses earlier: “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” She kept saying that babies cannot confess Christ with their mouths. In fact, she took this so seriously that she told me at one point that she actually prayed to God that her children would not accept Christ at too young an age. She didn’t want them to confess Christ with their mouths until they were old enough to really mean it, so that they would be saved.

Even though I had plenty of passages to quote that were opposed to these beliefs of hers, I’ll admit that I struggled with this passage for a while. What point was Paul making? What point was God making?

Well, let's look more closely at and consider these verses this morning, and see *the who and how of God's saving plan*.

1.

The first point Paul is making, which is the point that answers Mrs. X, is *the who* of God's saving plan.

By the time we get to Romans 10, Paul's main focus is no longer on how we are saved. He has covered that at length in Romans 3–5. "We conclude that a person is justified"—that is, declared innocent in God's sight and saved eternally—"by faith [in Christ] without the works of the law," he wrote (3:28). He stressed over and over again that the righteousness that counts before God is a righteousness apart from works (e.g. 4:6). This by itself should make us raise our eyebrows when we hear people like Mrs. X say that we must confess Christ and call on him out loud with our mouths in order to be saved. That would mean that we *are* saved by works, or at least by one work—the work of confessing Christ with our mouths. But Paul says that it is not by works and apart from works, so that all boasting in ourselves is eliminated (3:27).

Like I said, Paul's main focus is no longer on the question of how we are saved in Chapter 10. He is the middle of talking about *who* is all involved in God's saving plan. He himself is a Jew and he knows that there are Jews in the Roman congregation, and he says that his heart breaks for his people, because they have by and large rejected the gospel of Jesus, even though they were God's chosen people up to the time of Jesus. God adopted them as his sons and revealed himself and his word to them. In the time of the Old Testament, if you wanted to know the true God, you had to get acquainted with the Jewish people (Rom. 9:1–5).

But he also says that, even in the Old Testament, it was clear that physical descent from Abraham was not the deciding factor with God. Faith in God's saving promises was. Even in the Old Testament, God made it clear that *everyone* who believes in him will not be put to shame, as the prophet Isaiah said (Isa. 28:16; Rom. 10:11), and *everyone* who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved, as the prophet Joel said (Joel 2:32).

That is the question that Paul is now answering—not *how* are we saved, but *who* are the intended recipients of God's promise of salvation. And the answer is: everyone, whether Jew or Gentile. God invites everyone to believe in Jesus and to confess Jesus as Lord and to call on him.

To digress a bit, this is something we always do well to pay attention to—what question is being asked and answered in a given section. Otherwise we will hear Paul say in Romans 3, "We conclude that a person is justified by faith without the works of the law," then we will hear James say in James 2, "You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone" (2:24), and we will say, "These two were teaching the opposite thing. The Bible contradicts itself!" It does not contradict itself. Paul and James are asking and answering different questions. Paul is asking, "How are we saved? How do we get to heaven?" and he answers, "By faith in Christ, apart from works." On the other hand, James is asking, "What does the life of those who are saved look like? If they say they believe in Jesus, can they live however they want?" and he answers, "Those who are saved don't just claim to have faith in Christ, but they also prove their faith by their works."

The same is true here when Paul himself is asking a different question than he was asking earlier—not how are we saved, but who are the intended recipients of God's promise of

salvation. When answering this second question, he and the prophets are comfortable not just talking about faith but also the fruits of faith, not just talking about believing in Christ, but also confessing him as Lord, calling on him, and worshipping him.

And let's not ignore the fact that confessing him and calling on him *is* a primary fruit of faith. Jesus himself said, "Whoever confesses me before men, I will confess him before my Father in heaven. But whoever denies me before men, I will deny him before my Father in heaven" (Matt. 10:32–33). It's not a fruit of faith that everyone can perform to the same extent. For instance, infants and those without the gift of speech cannot do it with their mouths. But most Christians can, and if they can, they will, because that's what faith does—it speaks. If believing infants and believing mute people could physically speak about Christ and to Christ, they would.

But let's not miss this first point—the who of God's plan of salvation. Paul says, "There is no distinction between Jew and Greek, because the same Lord is Lord of *all*, who gives generously to *all* who call on him. Yes, 'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.'" That means God wants *you* to be a recipient of his promises. God wants *you* to be a recipient of the salvation his Son has won for you. God wants *you* to be a recipient of his generous giving. God wants *you* to go to heaven. And he also wants it for everyone around you. He wants it for everyone you meet, whether you like them or not. He wants it for everyone in the world.

2.

But then, in a section where Paul is not mainly focusing on the question of *how* we are saved, he now goes back to the question of how we are saved. That's because when you hear, "God wants everyone to be saved," that naturally leads to the questions, "Then why isn't everyone saved? Why are so many condemned?"

So Paul continues: "So then, how can they call on the one they have not believed in?" Notice that, now that Paul wants to go back to how we are saved, he goes right back to faith. "And how can they believe in the one about whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without a preacher? And how can they preach unless they are sent?" These are all rhetorical questions whose answer is clear. You cannot call on Jesus if you do not believe in him. And you cannot believe in him if you have not heard about him. And you cannot hear about him without someone preaching about him. And you cannot have preachers of the gospel if they are not sent out. We are saved through faith, and "faith comes from hearing the message, and the message comes through the word of Christ," the gospel. This doesn't mean that everyone who hears the gospel will believe it, but it does mean that you need to hear the gospel, or get it some other way if you are robbed of the gift of hearing, if you are going to believe it.

This is why confessing Jesus as Lord and calling on him is so important. This is why training and calling and sending pastors and missionaries is so important. God wants everyone to be saved, but they cannot be saved if the gospel message is not shared with people in a way that they can hear it. Pray for gospel preachers and teachers. Encourage gifted young people to consider studying to become gospel preachers and teachers. And support the training and sending of gospel preachers and teachers.

But also stop to give thanks and be filled with joy. Sometimes Catechism students will ask me, sometimes adults will ask me, “What about those who haven’t had a chance to hear the gospel?” Some, even in our own circles, like to answer that question by saying, “Everyone gets a chance, so it’s their own fault if they don’t believe it.” Oh? It is our own fault if we don’t believe it and are condemned, but show me where it says in the Scriptures that everyone gets a chance to hear it. Paul himself wanted to go to Spain because the people in Spain hadn’t heard the gospel yet. According to early, reliable tradition, he eventually made it there, but he certainly didn’t preach the gospel to everybody, and certainly some people died before he got there, without hearing his message. And Paul clearly says here that if people don’t hear the message, they can’t believe and be saved.

The idea lurking behind the question, “What about those who haven’t had a chance to hear the gospel?” is this: “It’s not fair of God to condemn people who haven’t had a chance to hear the gospel.” No, brothers and sisters, that’s not what the Bible says is not fair. Condemnation is what all of us deserve. What’s not fair is that any of us do get to hear the gospel. That’s why it’s called grace—because it’s undeserved. Why did God have me born into a Christian family? Why did God do the same for many of you? If any of you were not born into Christian families, why did God make sure that you would hear the good news of Jesus Christ?

It’s grace, undeserved love, love that is not fair. By grace God moved the hearts of those before us to send preachers so that they would preach, so that people, including us, would hear, so that they would believe, so that they would call on the name of the Lord and be saved. By grace God seeks to move our hearts to do the same, so that the next generation can hear the gospel of Jesus and believe in him.

Who are the intended recipients of God’s plan of salvation? Everyone. That’s a main theme of the season of Epiphany.

But how are they actually saved? Through faith in Jesus, which comes through the preaching and hearing of the good news of Jesus, the good news of peace with God won through Jesus’s life and death and sealed by his resurrection, the good news of sins paid for and forgiven, the good news of a generously giving God, the good news of eternal life in heaven, the good news that prompts us to confess him and call on him with our mouths and to glorify him with our lives.

So, all of you, cherish that good news, and share that good news. Amen.