

Salvation - Justification by Faith

Does Romans 10:9-10 Teach Salvation by Faith Plus Works?

By Dr. Paul M. Elliott

A popular translation confuses the most essential issue in the Bible.

Our Reader's Question

A reader asks:

I have a question on Romans 10:9-10 (ESV), which says: "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. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved."

Here it says two things are necessary to be saved, faith and a work. How can this be harmonized with faith alone? Further, there seems to be a distinction between "justified" and "saved" here, with "saved" being the dominant thing. Many translations use the term "righteousness" rather than "justified".

A Poor and Misleading Translation

The English Standard Version's translation of these verses, especially verse ten, is inaccurate and confusing. It is not supported by the original Greek text. A correct literal rendering of verse ten would be, "For with the heart is belief to righteousness, with the mouth is confession to salvation."

The ESV's mistranslation first appeared in the Revised Standard Version in the 1950s. The RSV was the product of the theologically liberal International Council of Religious Education, which later became the Division of Christian Education of the apostate

National Council of Churches. The NCC released the full RSV Bible in 1952. The English Standard Version, released by Crossway Bibles/Good News Publishers in 2001 and updated in 2007, is not a fresh translation, but is a revision of the RSV with less than 10% of the wording changed.

Like the ESV, other translations have also followed the RSV's lead in rendering Romans 10:10 in a way that implies a distinction, or even juxtaposition, between how one is justified and how one is saved. These include the New Revised Standard Version, Today's New International Version, the New Living Translation, the New American Standard Bible (1995 edition), and the Good News Translation. The mistranslation of this key verse is one of many reasons why Christians should avoid these versions.

Some critics have rushed to attribute the inferior rendering of Romans 10:10 to that fact the versions we've mentioned are all based on an inferior family of Greek source texts known primarily as the Nestle-Aland text. (They are also known, in various forms, as the Alexandrian, Westcott-Hort, or Critical text.) However, in Romans 10:10 there is no difference between Greek of the Nestle-Aland text and that of the far more reliable Received Text, which is the basis of the Geneva Bible, the original King James version, and the New King James translation, among others. Also, several English translations that are based on the Nestle-Aland body of source texts render Romans 10:10 accurately and clearly. The root of the problem in the ESV and other versions is not a difference in the source text used, but rather an inaccurate translation of the text.

The Vital Issue of Context

A key factor in the correct understanding of Romans 10:9-10 is to understand the context in which these verses appear. The entire tenth chapter of Romans is an

expansion of what Paul has been saying in preceding chapters about the nature of true salvation. He sums it up at the end of Romans nine:

What shall we say then? That Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have attained to righteousness, even the righteousness of faith; but Israel, pursuing the law of righteousness, has not attained to the law of righteousness. Why? Because they did not seek it by faith, but as it were, by the works of the law. For they stumbled at that stumbling stone. As it is written: "Behold, I lay in Zion a stumbling stone and rock of offense, and whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame." (Romans 9:30-33)

Immediately in chapter ten, Paul continues by explaining the definition of the salvation that Israel, in its pursuit of works-righteousness under the law, has missed:

Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they may be saved. For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes. (Romans 10:1-4)

The way of salvation, Paul declares, is not by attempting to establish one's own righteousness by works, but by receiving the perfect righteousness of Christ by faith. Paul continues to build on this point in verses 5-8, and comes to a climactic point in verses 9-11:

But what does it say? "The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith which we preach): that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead,

you will be saved. For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. (Romans 10:9-10, NKJV)

The Definition of Saving Faith

Commenting on these verses, Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones said that

the Apostle Paul is giving us a definition of saving faith. And there is nothing more important than that we should be absolutely clear as to what it really is. The verses can be divided up quite simply. We must consider first of all the *content* of saving faith, and then its *character* because the Apostle's words deal with both aspects quite plainly.

Before we take up the first of these matters, there is a mechanical point which we must deal with. In these two verses Paul reverses the order of what he is saying. In verse 9 confessing with the mouth precedes believing in the heart, whereas it is the other way round in verse 10. But there is no great difficulty about this change. The explanation is as follows.

Verse 9 is written from the standpoint of a man making a statement about himself as a Christian. It begins therefore with confession. Verse 10 adopts the standpoint of how the man is ever able to speak as he does, and so the believing is the thing that comes first. Psalm 116:10 puts it perfectly: "I believed and therefore I have spoken." The same is found in the Gospels: "For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh" (Matthew 12:34).¹

Where the ESV, RSV and others imply a distinction, or even a juxtaposition, between how one is justified and how one is saved, the original Greek does not. Confession with the mouth is the evidence or testimony of saving faith. It is not, as the ESV implies, a work that saves.

Another Critical Defect: Undermining Imputed Righteousness

Returning to our reader's question, let me take up one further point that he rightly raises. The word that the ESV translates "is justified" in verse ten is not a verb at all, but is the Greek noun *dikaiosune*. (Also, the Greek that the ESV renders as the verb "is saved" is actually the noun *soterian*, meaning salvation.) The Greek word *dikaiosune* is used thirty-one times in the New Testament, and four of those are in Romans 9:30-10:10. Both of the King James versions always translate *dikaiosune* as "righteousness" and never as "justification" – or "is justified" as the ESV does in this case, taking the unwarranted liberty of making a noun into a verb. The Greek word that is used for "justification" (three times, in Romans only) is a different noun form of the same root, *dikaiosis*, which has to do with God's legal "not guilty" declaration.

This is not a mere technical point. Contrary to what postmodernists tell us, words do have meaning in context. That is especially true in the inspired Word of God. The Holy Spirit has chosen words carefully, and translators must be faithful to His choices. Let me explain why this is so crucial in Romans 10:9-10.

The ESV's translation of the beginning of verse ten, "For with the heart one believes and is justified," is linguistically off the mark. Yes, the great doctrinal theme of Romans is justification by faith. But in this particular part of the book, Paul is focusing on the question, "What is the *nature* of the righteousness of the true child of God? Is it my own righteousness that I earned and deserved, or is it an alien, *imputed* righteousness that I did nothing to deserve?" Paul is declaring that it is the latter. The doctrine of the imputed righteousness of Christ is essential to the doctrine of salvation. The ESV's wording obscures this fact.

Many false teachers are denying that essential doctrine today as they proclaim the heresy of justification by faith plus works. Our sins are imputed to Christ, they say, but His righteousness is not imputed to us. Law-keeping, they say, must be added to Christ. A mistranslation of Romans 10:9-10 gives them one more bit of illegitimate

ground on which to base their spurious claim. A faithful translation pulls the rug out from under them.

References:

1. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Romans: An Exposition of Chapter 10 – Saving Faith* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1997), page 90.

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