

Deut 9–10:5 The Perils of Self-Righteousness, Rebellion, and Stubbornness

All religions boil down to one of two options: either 1) We contribute *something* to our own salvation; or 2) we contribute *nothing*. We either deserve salvation or we don't deserve it. We earn it or we don't earn it. We do it ourselves or someone else does it for us.

Genuine Christianity fits into the second category—we don't contribute anything; it's all of God's mercy and grace, not through our own contributions. Whenever a religion claims that we deserve or can earn God's approval, you can write off that religion as false. It is certainly not biblical Christianity.

Since that is true, there is no room in the faith for self-righteousness. God saves us in spite of our sins. Cf. Rom 5:8—"while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."

In Deut 9, Moses is assuring the people that God is not giving them the PL because they deserved it or earned it. In fact, God is giving them the PL in spite of their serious, persistent, and stiff-necked rebellion. Their own righteousness has nothing to do with it. In fact, they are not righteous at all. It's only because of God's grace and Moses' intervention that they were not destroyed several times out in the wilderness. It's only because of God's *mercy* that Israel will inherit the PL, not because of any *merit* on the part of Israel.

Last week, we looked at the Perils of Prosperity from Deut chapter 8. Moses could foresee a time when Israel has conquered the land and become prosperous. That prosperity, he fears, may lead to independence, pride, and self-sufficiency.

Chapter 9 presents another set of perils—the perils of self-righteousness, rebellion, and stubbornness. Even before they conquer the PL, Israel might think that they deserve that land. They are better than the Canaanites; they've earned God's approval.

No one earns God's approval. God always relates to us on the basis of mercy and grace, not on the basis of merit. We do not earn or deserve any of the blessings God gives us. These come to us purely by God's grace and mercy.

As we make our way through this text, we'll see how Moses warns Israel here about the perils of self-righteousness, rebellion, and stubbornness.

- I. .1-3 Israel will conquer the Canaanites.
- A. .1 The conquest will begin soon. The nation is about to cross over the Jordan and start the conquest “today.” Not that very day, but soon. In fact, it would be about a month before Israel crosses the Jordan.
- B. .1b-2 The conquest is a monumental task—note the words—greater, mightier, great and fortified up to heaven, great and tall, who can stand before them?
- .2b The conquest requires that Israel overcome greater nations, take over great cities, and defeat the Anakim—the sons of Anak, the giants, the Nephilim/Rephaim.
- So Moses affirms that this task seems impossible. From a human perspective, they had no hope of conquering the Canaanites.
- C. .3 The conquest is possible only for one reason: the Lord your God “goes over before you as a consuming fire.”
1. God will destroy the Canaanites through Israel. Israel must drive them out and destroy them quickly. God has guaranteed Israel’s success. The Canaanites are doomed before the first battle begins.
 2. Note the words here describing God’s expectations for the Canaanites: destroy, bring them down/subdue, drive them out, destroy/annihilate/exterminate them.
 3. There is only one reason that they’ll be able to do this—“God is he who goes before you.”

App: Our attitude should be that if we accomplish anything, it’s because God is with us. We must give credit to God for anything we accomplish.

Trans: Moses begins here by describing *what* is about to happen; they are about to begin the conquest of the PL. But...

- II. .4 Israel must not misunderstand why God is giving them the PL.
- A. .4a The conquest is not due to their own righteousness.
1. He repeats the same thing three times here—vss. 4, 5, 6.

2. The fact that Moses has to assure the Israelites repeatedly that they are not righteous implies that some of them were thinking that they were. “God is giving us the PL because we are good, better than the Canaanites.” Moses assures them that such is not the case. In fact, the nation is not righteous at all; they are quite sinful—he’s about to give many examples of their sin (cf. vss. 7ff).

So the conquest was not due to Israel’s righteousness.

B. .4c, 5b The conquest was due to the wickedness of these nations.

1. Just so they don’t misunderstand, Moses repeats this statement twice—vss. 4c and 5b.
2. The iniquity of the Amorites has finally reached its limits (cf. Gen 15:16). God is bringing judgment on the Amorites through Israel as it conquers their land. The time had come for God’s wrath to fall on these wicked pagan people.
3. The fact that the Canaanites were wicked and deserved judgment did not mean that Israel was righteous and deserved to take over their land. The destruction of Canaan does not imply the righteousness of Israel.

App: Sometimes people assume their own goodness when they compare themselves to others. “I am not as bad as others, so I am good. I am righteous because I’m better than others.”

The NT tells us not to compare ourselves to others (2 Cor 10:12). When we compare ourselves to others, the result is often self-righteousness. We see ourselves as better, or at least not as bad, as others. And that leads us to believe that we have earned God’s blessings.

God blesses us in spite of our sins. We have nothing to boast about; it’s all of grace.

The conquest was not due to Israel’s righteousness; it was due to the Canaanites’ wickedness, and there is another reason ...

C. .5end The conquest was a fulfillment of the promises God made to the patriarchs, i.e., the covenant made with Abe, Isaac, and Jacob (Gen 15). The conquest is a fulfillment of the “word which the Lord swore” to the fathers.

Moses' point here is that the people have *not* been obedient up to this point. God is not blessing their obedience because they have not been particularly obedient. Much the contrary; they have been quite rebellious and stubborn ever since they left Egypt.

App: Self-righteousness is a peril that we must avoid. We must not claim that we are saved through our own efforts at righteousness. We totally deny works-righteousness for salvation. And we should not think of ourselves as righteous just because we are better than others. The behavior of others is not the standard of comparison. The standard is perfect obedience to God's law, and we all fall short of that.

Paul tells us in Romans not to think of ourselves more highly than we ought to think. After all that Paul had done for Christ, he still saw himself as the chiefest of sinners who was not worthy of anything. After all we can do, we should still think of ourselves as little more than unprofitable servants. So self-righteousness has no place in the life of a Christian. All the glory must go to God, not to self. Avoid the peril of self-righteousness.

III. .6end Israel is a stiff-necked people who continually provoke the Lord to wrath.

What does "stiff-necked" mean? It's a figure of speech referring to stubborn hard-hearted disobedience.

To show that Israel was not righteous and did not deserve/earn conquest of the PL, and to show that the gift of the PL was all of God's grace and mercy, Moses gives several examples to how Israel had provoked the Lord to wrath.

A. .7 You provoked the Lord to wrath in the wilderness.

1. Note the words "remember; do not forget." Moses is impressing this profound truth upon Israel—they are a stiff-necked, rebellious people who don't deserve anything from God.
2. You've rebelled against the Lord from the day you departed from Egypt until now. Israel had a history of rebellion against God. We find many examples of that in Exodus and Numbers.
3. They should be anything but self-righteous. Because of their sin and rebellion, they should be repentant and humble.

B. .8-21 You provoked the Lord to wrath at Horeb—the infamous golden calf incident.

1. .8 Moses reviews the story of how he received the 10 Commandments on Mt. Horeb/Sinai. While Moses was up on the mountain fellowshiping with God and receiving the 10 Commandments, the people were down below breaking several of them.

a) .12 “they have quickly turned aside” – the people had left Egypt only a few months before this. They had seen all the miraculous works that God did for Israel in very recent history.

b) You would think that such a group would never become idolatrous. You’d be wrong.

App: The human heart is “deceitful above all things and desperately wicked.” Cf. Gen 6:5—“only evil continually.” We must not under-estimate the sinfulness of the human heart. One of the Reformers called the human heart an “idol factory.”

c) .13-14 Israel is so stiff-necked that God threatened to “blot out their name from under heaven.” There is an emphasis here—“indeed (וַיִּדְעוּ) they are... ” (.13b).

Vs. 14 is something of a window into how God feels about sin, especially about idolatry. God is frustrated with the nation to the point that he’s threatening to destroy them. In spite of all that God has done for Israel, the nation responds by being rebellious and idolatrous.

“Let me alone” – what if Moses had not intervened?

d) .16 Moses came down the mountain and saw it with his own eyes; the people had “turned aside quickly from the way which the Lord had commanded you.”

e) .18-19 Moses interceded with God because of the Lord’s “anger and hot displeasure.” This expression refers to God’s fierce or furious anger. God was so displeased and upset with Israel that he was ready to destroy them. The only thing stopping it was Moses intercession for Israel and for Aaron.

It's rather ironic that some in Israel thought God was giving them the PL because of their righteousness, when in reality Israel deserved to be destroyed for its sin.

App: Two thoughts: 1) Isn't it funny how some of the most degraded and depraved people think of themselves as righteous. E.g., people claiming to be Christian while at the same time engaging in all sorts of depravity.

2) We see here that some things make God angry and exceedingly displeased. God may indeed experience "hot displeasure" because of human sin. Many people today totally ignore the potential for God's hot displeasure. They emphasize God's love and downplay or deny his wrath. But here we see God's strong displeasure and wrath against sin.

- f) .21 Moses destroyed the golden calf and threw the dust into the river. He doesn't mention it here, but he also made the people eat the dust from the golden calf (Ex 32:20).

They provoked the Lord at Horeb/Sinai.

- C. .22 You provoked the Lord at other locations and occasions.
 - 1. Taberah—the people complained (unknown reason) (Num 11:1-3)
 - 2. Massah—the people complained about having no water (Ex 17:1-7)
 - 3. Kibroth Hattavah—the people complained about manna (Num 11:31-34)

In each of these cases, the people complained, and it provoked the Lord to anger.

App: What does that tell you about complaining? Next time you feel like complaining, especially complaining against God, remember that Israel's constant complaining provoked the Lord to wrath.

- D. .23 You provoked the Lord at Kadesh Barnea, when the people refused to go up into the PL.

This was the occasion when they sent in the spies into Canaan and they returned with an evil report. The people decided not to begin the conquest of the PL even though Moses, Caleb and Joshua encouraged them to go ahead.

1. .23end You did not believe him. After everything they had seen, they still did not believe God.
2. .23end You did not obey his voice. God commanded them to go ahead, and they stubbornly refused. Their lack of faith in God led to active disobedience.

App: That is a profound biblical principle—lack of faith in God leads to disobedience. Really, every time we disobey, we are showing our lack of faith.

3. .24 “You have been rebellious against the Lord from the day that I knew you.”

Moses sounds really exasperated here. Remember that Moses did not want to do this job in the first place. I imagine that there were many times that Moses regretted stopping to see that burning bush. Dealing with Israel had been one big crisis after another. So he seems rather frustrated and exasperated here.

App: Serving God and God’s people can be a very exasperating, frustrating experience. People are often hard to deal with. Some of the most difficult people to deal with are self-righteous. Some are rebellious and disobedient. Dealing with people like that is frustrating and difficult. But like Moses, we can’t quit; we must persevere in spite of the frustrations and exasperations of ministry.

Moses is very frustrated, but notice what he did for the people...

4. .25f Moses interceded, prostrating himself before the Lord on behalf of the people.

Moses is referring to the same event as in vs. 18. This section gives us the content of his prayer, a further explanation.

- a) .25 Moses “prostrated” himself, meaning that he laid down on his belly with his face on the ground, a very humble position before God.
- b) .26 Moses pleaded with the Lord not to destroy Israel.

- c) .27a He asked God to remember the promises made to Abe, Isaac, and Jacob.

Moses knew that God will never revoke his promises. God must fulfill his promises; he cannot deny his own word. Moses reminds God of that fact here—he made promises to Abe, Isaac, and Jacob, and he cannot go back on them.

The NT affirms that God cannot deny himself (2 Tim 2:13). One of the reasons our salvation is secure is that God is faithful to his promises. We can trust God's Word.

- d) .27b He pleaded with God not to look on their stubbornness, wickedness, and sin. He's not denying their sin; he's pleading with God to overlook it.

Moses is *not* asserting that the people are repentant. He's appealing to God's grace and mercy even without Israel's repentance.

Quote: Israel is utterly undeserving and completely reliant upon their mediator appealing to the LORD for mercy.¹

App: We should be glad that God is merciful and gracious in spite of our sin.

Cf. Mic 7:18-19

- e) .26-27a He reminded God that Israel is his own people.

Note all the "you" statements—your people, your inheritance... In spite of all their sin and failure, Israel is still "your people and your inheritance."

- f) .28 Moses is concerned about God's reputation; what would the Egyptians think if God failed to protect Israel? God's reputation would be discredited if Israel died in the desert.

[We see Moses as a great mediator before God here.

¹ Matt Fuller, *Teaching Deuteronomy: From Text to Message*, Teach the Bible (Ross-shire, Scotland; London: Christian Focus; PT Resources, 2022), 159.

A few things about Moses' intervention/intercession with God: Moses' position with God was absolutely unique. No one else spoke with God like Moses did—face to face, lit. mouth to mouth, as a friend speaks to a friend. No one else had that kind of relationship with God.

We might look at this and think that Moses persuaded God to do something he did not want to do. It seems like Moses changed God's mind about this; Moses prevented God from doing something he intended to do—i.e., destroy Israel.

From a human perspective, it might seem that way. When we pray for others, it might seem as if we are trying to change God's mind. But that's only from a human point of view. God knows the end from the beginning. Because God is omniscient, he never has to change his mind.]

God uses human language here to express his disapproval with Israel. But God has plans for these people; God has made promises to them. He's not going to destroy them.

- IV. 10:1–5 Israel received another copy of the 10 Commandments.
- A. Moses does not state it directly here, but God at some point accepts Moses' intervention/intercession for Israel, determines not to destroy the nation, and decides to extend grace to very underserving people.
 - B. Moses went back up Mt. Sinai and received another copy of the 10 Commandments. God wrote them out and gave them to Moses.
 - C. Moses came down the mountain and presented the law to the people.
 - D. So instead of destroying the people after the golden calf incident, he extended grace and mercy toward them and reaffirmed his law. He is not done with Israel; he gives them another chance.

App: We should be thankful that God does not destroy us in his hot displeasure. God extends mercy and grace to us even if we are self-righteous, rebellious, and disobedient. That's mercy—he does not give us the judgment that we deserve.

And if you are saved, you should be thankful that you have a mediator with God—Jesus is our mediator, our advocate. Heb 7:25

Moses points out that Israel was guilty of several significant sins: self-righteousness, rebellion, idolatry, and stubbornness. They continuously provoked the Lord to wrath because of their sin and unbelief. God spared them because of his great mercy and grace, not because of their righteousness.

Some people today think that they will be saved because of their righteousness, but they are not thinking biblically. No one is saved through personal righteousness. We are saved by grace through faith. We are saved because God promises to save those who turn from their sins and trust in Jesus. The only righteousness we have is given to us when we put our faith in Jesus.

I wonder if vs. 29a pertains to you??

Even if we are saved, we can be guilty of the same sins—hopefully not idolatry, but certainly self-righteousness, rebellion, and stubbornness. Perhaps we have provoked the Lord to wrath because of these sins. Perhaps others are frustrated with us because of these personal failures. If so, repent.

Although this passage focuses on Israel's sin and lack of merit, it also reveals God's grace. In spite of their sin, God did not destroy Israel. God extended mercy and grace to these ill-deserving, self-righteous, rebellious, stubborn, idolatrous people. That's how God relates to us—through grace and mercy. Instead of being self-righteous, we ought to be thankful and humble. We should be glad that we have an intercessor before God—we have a better mediator than Moses, Jesus.

Like Israel, we are sinful people. The solution to our sin is God's mercy and grace. And that mercy and grace is mediated to us through Jesus. He is the solution to God's hot displeasure against our sin.