

## The End of Law

**BROKEN: Good News for Tough Times**

**Romans 10:5-15, Year A**

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**WATCH/LISTEN: [www.fbcjc.org/sermon/the-end-of-law/](http://www.fbcjc.org/sermon/the-end-of-law/)**

"Mr. Mom" is a classic 1983 comedy directed by Stan Dragoti. The story revolves around Jack Butler (played by Michael Keaton.) Jack is a laid-off automotive engineer who becomes a stay-at-home dad after his wife Caroline lands a job. Jack initially struggles to adjust to his new role as the primary caregiver for their three young children, struggling with household chores, cooking, and the kids' daily routines. Hilarity results as Jack faces various challenges, ranging from a malfunctioning washing machine to trying to fit in with the stay at home moms.

There were so many great scenes in this film, but one of my favorites is when Jack "did it wrong" trying to drop the kids off at school. Many of you know his pain. Some of you are one week into a new school year and dread dropping off and picking up your children from school. For the veterans, you're infuriated by the newbies who don't know the system. For the newbies, you're outraged by the system. No one is happy.

On Jack's first day taking the kids to school, he enters the circle drive in the wrong direction. It's south to drop off and north to pick up, but Jack starts in reverse. His kids from the back seat chime in, "Dad, you're doing it wrong." Being a good, competent, insightful father, he explains, "We're going to do it the Jack Butler method!" Other cars are honking. His kids are mortified, sinking down in the back seat.

As he pulls up to drop off the kids, the crosswalk guard has him roll down his window. "Hi, Jack? I'm Annette. You're doing it wrong." The funniest part of this scene is when he's leaving the school, and one of the moms rolls down her window as she drives away in her tan station wagon and screams, "South to drop off!" followed by a word that rhymes with boron.

Romans 10 is Paul's Annette moment. "Hi, Israel? I'm Paul. You're doing it wrong."<sup>i</sup>

Last week I mentioned Paul did not actually "write" Romans. He most likely dictated it, or spoke it aloud, to a scribe and fellow man of faith named Tertius, who actually wrote it down, according to Chapter 16. Perhaps they had conversation together as they crafted this letter, both Paul and Tertius interjecting and responding, wordsmithing, working together to capture what they wish to say to the believers in Rome. Delivered and probably read aloud for the very first-time by a woman deacon named Phoebe, this letter was addressed to a diverse audience of believers. In Romans, Paul is sometimes focused on the Gentile believers or the non-Jews or Greeks as they are sometimes referred to in the New Testament. And sometimes Jewish believers. And always, on the church as a whole.

In chapters 9-11, Paul's focus shifts to the Jews, his family. Maybe Tertius interrupted with a question that made Paul remember his anguish over the Jews rejection of Jesus as the promised Messiah. Maybe Paul's sorrow just catches up with him, because now, in these chapters, he is burdened for the Israelites, his brothers and sisters.

Paul is a Jew. Growing up, he was taught by one of the most esteemed Jewish Rabbi teachers named Gamaliel (Guh MAY lee ull). Paul knew and practiced the Jewish law as faithfully as anyone. Paul tells us himself in Galatians 1:14, that "I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors." He was so zealous, so passionate, so convinced he was right, that he considered Jews who followed Jesus to be dangerous heretics and persecuted them. Until he became one of them.

It happened on a trip. Paul, who was called Saul at the time, encountered Jesus on the road to Damascus. Jesus asked Saul to roll down the window, and said, "Hi, Saul. I'm Jesus. You're doing it wrong," and it changed everything for Saul, including his name. Now Paul, he is as earnest as ever, but it isn't for the traditions of his ancestors. He is passionate for Jesus Christ. In Galatians 1:11, he writes, "For I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin, for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ." (Galatian 1:11)

In the movie "Mr. Mom," Jack's life is transformed as he navigates the complexities of homemaking and parenting. He discovers the significance of his wife's former role in the home and gains a new appreciation for the demands of domestic life. And in the film's final scene, Jack is now a volunteer at the school, and what is his new job? He is the crosswalk guard. At the end of the movie, a newbie Dad drives up, doing it wrong just like Jack did months earlier. Jack tells him, as one who knows first-hand, "Hey, man. You're doing it wrong. South to drop-off, north to pick-up."

The Apostle Paul goes from doing it wrong to helping others who are doing it wrong. Paul is now the crossing guard, using what he has learned first-hand to direct all the newbies of the faith, new to Christ, to the good news. God has forgiven. God has sent and raised Jesus from the dead. God is working inside us, setting us right, not because of the law but because of Christ.

The Apostle Paul never got tired of sharing this good news. And he was particularly burdened to reach two groups: religious folks who are depending on their works to get right with God; and pagans-Romans and others who wanted all their distractions, celebrations, hobbies, pleasures, and gods. And both groups were confused.

We jumped into Romans 10 today at verse 5, but the first four verses are important. "Brothers and sisters, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them [the Israelites] is that they may be saved. For I can testify that they have a zeal for God, but it is not based on knowledge. Not knowing the righteousness of God and seeking to establish their own, they have not submitted to God's righteousness. For Christ is the culmination [the end, the fulfillment] of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes." (Romans 10:1-4)

Paul notes the passion and enthusiasm of his people, the Israelites, for God, but then confesses their zeal is misplaced. They see the law as a means for earning God's favor through religious activity. Obedience to the law will save them. But, Paul insists, a right relationship with God, or righteousness, does not come from the law. It comes from faith in Christ alone.

To help the listeners understand the difference between righteousness that comes from the law and righteousness that comes from faith, Paul uses vv. 6-13 to compare the difference between the two, and he uses multiple Hebrew scriptures to make his case to those who would know the scriptures. He reframes what they've always believed to demonstrate the law could not do for them what Christ has ultimately done for them – thus, Christ ends or fulfills the law. What the law could not do, Christ has done.

Here's what Paul told the Romans: If you trust in the law for your salvation, then it becomes an idol. You are believing YOU can earn your way into a right relationship with God which would be a rejection of God's grace. If you trust in the law for your salvation, then you're setting yourself up for a life of guilt, shame, and captivity, because no one can perfectly keep the law. Reaching God by keeping rules is impossible. Perfection is unattainable; Jesus is not. He is accessible. He is near. You don't have to climb up to heaven or crawl down to hell. It's all been done for us.

What Paul believes his fellow Israelites need to be saved from is their anxious and endless striving to save themselves. Maybe you know something about that. Paul knows. He says in Philippians 3 that when it came to righteousness under the law he was blameless. He lived it perfectly, but Paul still didn't have peace with God. Not until he met Jesus. That's when things changed for him. That's when he could let out a sigh of relief. And it wasn't because of anything he did. It was because of what Jesus did. Whatever the price of salvation was, it had been paid in full.

Before we get too arrogant thinking we understand the law can't save us, if we're honest, we, too, find it hard to trust that God's grace is sufficient for us. Our traditions, churches, parents, peers, Christian literature and sermons can lead us to believe that we must follow a list of do's and don'ts if we're to be fully accepted by God.

But if we're trusting in our own behavior, we're not fully trusting in Christ. It is easy for right living to become an idol, but focusing on our efforts leads to an endless cycle of guilt, shame, striving, and self-reliance. Perhaps we can see how we can begin to think WE are responsible in some way for our salvation through what we do or don't do.

It so difficult for us to shake this in our culture. We're taught to earn our way in life, to demonstrate we deserve to be at the table, to live and do certain things in order to be accepted or loved in our relationships. And we naturally, even unconsciously, apply that to our relationship with God.

But friends, we're doing it wrong. There is not enough good we can do to earn God's love, nor enough bad we can do to separate us from God's love, because it has always been about God, not us. Always. Paul wants us to have peace of mind, courage, and confidence in the God who authors our salvation, not our efforts.

Paul says in Romans 10:9, "Because 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." We often put a lot of emphasis on the confess and believe as things we've got to do, and we forget this verse is in the middle of a passage where Paul is saying that you cannot be saved by what you do. Maybe faith is something we rest in or surrender to rather than muster up.

I heard a pastor<sup>ii</sup> use the metaphor of floating on a river to help explain this, and I thought if there is a metaphor Missourians might get, it would be floating down a river. We love our float trips.

He told his congregation to think about a river winding around the base of a cliff. On the cliff are rock climbers, with helmets and harnesses, going up that cliff one risky maneuver at a time, while in the river below are people floating by on inner tubes, staring up at the cliff and saying, "Would you look at that?" They admire those rock climbers. They know they don't have the skill to do that. But they can float down the river, and they can trust those tubes to hold them up.

If you can understand that illustration as a kind of a parable, you can see he's talking about two different approaches to salvation: one where you trust your skill as a rock climber, and the other where you trust the principle of buoyancy. Paul had been climbing his whole life before he met Jesus. He was good at it. He may have been the best climber of his time. But the cliff was high. It reached into the clouds. He had never been completely sure he would make it to the top. Now he was trusting Jesus for his salvation—floating down the river of life, supported by grace, surrounded by love—and in no danger of sinking. "Well, but wasn't he doing something?" someone might ask. "Wasn't he trusting Jesus?" Well, yes. Yes he was. But he was doing it in the same way you trust water to hold you up when you're floating in an inner tube. You don't have to think about it. You don't have to do anything. You just have to float. And here's the good news: not everyone can climb the face of a cliff, but everyone—everyone—can float in an inner tube.

Many of us feel like we're doing it wrong in life. Parenting, marriage, friendship, relationships, work, school, faith. We feel like we pulled into situations going the wrong direction, and everyone is telling us we're doing it wrong.

Many of us feel like we are halfway up the cliff or still at the base looking up, realizing we don't have it in us to keep going, to keep climbing.

Some of us may believe, without realizing it, that we don't even need the inner tube, because we should be able to walk on water if we simply have enough faith. I mean, wasn't that the problem of the disciple, Simon Peter, when he walked on the water in the storm toward Jesus

and began to sink? He lacked faith and if he had just believed harder, if he had been more faithful, he could walk on the water like Jesus, too. But, friends, Jesus never asked Peter to walk on water. Simon Peter gave Jesus an ultimatum, telling Jesus that if it is you, tell me to come to you. And Jesus is like, well, it is me, so, "Come, Peter." Maybe Jesus never expected Peter to walk on water to prove his faith. He told the disciples to get in the boat, and trust that when the storms came, Jesus would be with them, and they would not need to be afraid. But they didn't trust Jesus was with them, and they were afraid. Perhaps that was their lack of faith on display, not Peter's inability to walk on water.

About this story, author and pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber wrote, "Like Peter could have kept walking on water if he just thought I think I can, I think I can enough. The message being that with enough faith, you too can walk on water all the way to Jesus. Which, on the surface, sounds inspiring. But taken to its logical conclusion, it also means that if you are not God-like in your ability to overcome all your fears and failings as a human....if you are not God-like in your ability to defy the forces of nature, then the problem isn't the limits of human potential, the problem is the limits of your faith and you should probably muster up some more.... I mean, if we could just muster up what it takes to do what Jesus did, doesn't that mean we wouldn't need the guy anymore? I mean, if you can make yourself that Christ-like you'll never again be in need of healing. Mercy and forgiveness will be things other people need but not you. But that doesn't sound like faith to me. It just sounds like arrogance."<sup>iii</sup>

Arrogance was what Paul was fighting in the early church. Some would say the Church has never faced a bigger controversy than that of whether to include the Gentiles in the circle of salvation. The Jews think that they have salvation because of following the Law. The Gentiles think they have salvation by having faith. And Paul says, "For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved." (Romans 10:12-13) Everyone. There is no room for arrogance in the church. "The circle of believers that was once defined by its boundaries, the law, is now defined by its center, Christ. The attention to who is in and who is out is no longer the focus. Rather the focus is on the One who calls and claims, redeems and loves all."<sup>iv</sup>

Friends, brokenness is the gap between the people we strive to be and the flawed people we are. It is the gap between God's perfection and our own imperfection. Brokenness is the divisions we create and defend between all of us in God's creation. Jesus Christ repairs the brokenness. Jesus restores what was broken, fulfilling God's promise of salvation, fulfilling the law. There is no cliff to climb. Every one is invited to float, supported by grace, surrounded by love, and in no danger of sinking. We simply have to decide to get in the river.

So, friends, shall we gather at the river? Shall we go down to the river to pray? Shall we get in our inner tubes, trusting God's grace and love to carry us forward in the river of life? When we confess Jesus is Lord and believe in our hearts by the act of trusting what God has done for us, we'll get peace like a river. We'll get love like a river. We'll get joy like a river in our souls. And not just you. Not just me. But every one who is willing to float.

Melissa Hatfield © 2023

All scripture quoted is from the NRSVUE unless otherwise noted.

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<sup>i</sup> J.R. Daniel Kirk. *Romans for Normal People*, 2022, 121.

<sup>ii</sup> <https://fbcrichmond.org/video/when-in-romans-wholehearted-belief/#transcript>

<sup>iii</sup> [https://thecorners.substack.com/p/the-case-against-wwjd-bracelets?token=eyJ1c2VyX2lkIjozNzMwOTAxNCwicG9zdF9pZCI6MTM1OTkyNjcwLCJpYXQiOjE2OTE5NDg1NzYsImV4cCI6MTY5NDU0MDU3NiwiXzIjoicHVlIzNzMzliwic3ViljoicG9zdC1yZWVjdGlvbij9.8a3Pxa\\_EZ3ONPisevZakilQ7yEF3FVfVZvFI3G9-bqk&utm\\_source=substack&utm\\_medium=email](https://thecorners.substack.com/p/the-case-against-wwjd-bracelets?token=eyJ1c2VyX2lkIjozNzMwOTAxNCwicG9zdF9pZCI6MTM1OTkyNjcwLCJpYXQiOjE2OTE5NDg1NzYsImV4cCI6MTY5NDU0MDU3NiwiXzIjoicHVlIzNzMzliwic3ViljoicG9zdC1yZWVjdGlvbij9.8a3Pxa_EZ3ONPisevZakilQ7yEF3FVfVZvFI3G9-bqk&utm_source=substack&utm_medium=email)

<sup>iv</sup> David Bartlett, Barbara Brown Taylor. *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 3*, 328.