

Righteous Performance Review

Romans 9:30-10:4 (EHV)

³⁰ What shall we say then? That Gentiles, who were not pursuing righteousness, have obtained righteousness, a righteousness that is by faith. ³¹ But Israel, while pursuing the law as a way of righteousness, did not reach it. ³² Why? Because they kept pursuing it not by faith, but as if it comes by works. They stumbled over the stumbling stone. ³³ Just as it is written: Look, I am putting a stone in Zion over which they will stumble and a rock over which they will fall. The one who believes in him will not be put to shame. ¹ Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God on behalf of the Israelites is that they may be saved. ² Indeed, I testify about them that they have a zeal for God, but it is not consistent with knowledge. ³ Since they were ignorant of the righteousness from God and sought to establish their own righteousness, they did not submit to the righteousness from God. ⁴ For to everyone who believes, Christ is the end of the law, resulting in righteousness.

Grades, self-reflection, those little surveys at the end of a customer service call are all performance reviews. You get them at school, work, even pastors get them. What would a performance review look like for us as Christians? What if there was a job description of being a Christian in the back of the Bible along with a checklist to measure how well you're doing? How would you fill it out? "Loved the Lord my God with all my heart, mind, soul, and strength every hour of every day." Could you check it off? "I never let anything come before my God or worshiping him." Check? "Loved and served my neighbor at least as much as Jesus Christ loved and served me." Ummm... "Always did the will of God perfectly." I'm not even going to pretend to check that one off. Let's just say that I did good enough, tried hard enough, at least tried sometimes.

How about when your Christian performance review is opened up to others? How would your family, parents, children answer these questions about you? What about your fellow students, your coworkers? Your enemies? Your pastor? Would the reviews match? In the areas where you found yourself lacking, what would be the next steps? How would you improve? Would you get fired from being a Christian for your performance? How would you be able to say that you are right with God with what you have done?

Many Israelites in Paul's day regularly gave themselves a performance review when it came to their faith. They asked themselves if they had checked the right boxes, given the proper sacrifices, fulfilled all the moral laws. This spurred them on to do a great many good things in keeping with their religious laws. They were giving themselves these performance reviews to make sure that they would be assessed as being right with God.

Is that any different from people today? There are many around us every day who are doing a great things in the name of their religion. Their zeal is impressive. Actually, looking at them - all the church callings they take up, all the volunteer time they give, all the tithes, all helping neighbors move or clean up a yard after a storm, taking two years out of their early years of life to dedicate themselves to sharing their religious beliefs with others - they can make me feel ashamed for how I live my faith, that I don't show the same zeal. I probably look lazy comparatively and would get a much worse performance review. But why are they doing all these good deeds so zealously? They're pursuing a righteous performance review from God by what they do, striving to become perfect one day to make a better future for themselves.

Have we adopted the same mentality? Do we believe that our religious performance review will be based on how many things we did for God, how many spiritual boxes we checked, how many church obligations we fulfilled? Are we pursuing laws and works as the way to become right with God? What happens if we do that?

What happened in the performance review of the Israelites? Paul informs them: "But Israel, while pursuing the law as a way of righteousness, did not reach it." (verse 31) They failed. All that zeal, all those works, all that effort, and they still weren't meeting their goals or their quota of righteous life deeds. Why such a failure? "Because they kept pursuing it not by faith, but as if it comes by works. They stumbled over the stumbling stone." (verse 32) They were doing it wrong the whole time.

How crushing is that?! If you've spent your whole life crossing all the t's and dotting all the i's of good works to God and now you are told that none of it was enough, that all of it was wrong, that every year when God pulls out your job descriptions, he tells you all the places that you were imperfect and ultimately rates you a failure, and tells you that you need to do better or you're fired as my follower, as a Christian, this would crush you. All that zeal and effort with nothing to show for it.

If this was my performance review, I would want to defend myself, defend some of the good work that I've done, all the effort I've put into it. But ultimately God would still say to me, "You did all the work wrong. You pursued a good, righteous performance review

by what you did, by keeping laws. You failed.” Wouldn’t we say in response, “I quit. This is a toxic work environment with impossible standards. I don’t need this!” and then storm out. But the performance review would still stand as a failure.

Paul crushes the Israelites and us with this righteous performance review, but he doesn’t leave us there. No, he points to those who have a glowing performance review, those who fulfilled their responsibilities perfectly and were right with God. “What shall we say then? That Gentiles, who were not pursuing righteousness, have obtained righteousness, a righteousness that is by faith.” (verse 30) The Gentiles, the non-Israelite people, were already right with God since they didn’t pursue it by keeping laws or doing works but by faith in what God had already done and accomplished for them.

How can that be? Paul wrote earlier in this letter to the Christians in Rome: “But now, completely apart from the law, a righteousness from God has been made known. The Law and the Prophets testify to it. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all and over all who believe. In fact, there is no difference, because all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.” (Romans 3:21-24) Paul refers back to this truth and summarizes it with verse 4: “For to everyone who believes, Christ is the end of the law, resulting in righteousness.”

Christ is the end of the law. As God, he came down from heaven and took on human flesh. He did this to live under his own law so that he could keep it perfectly and get a righteous performance review. He always loved God with his whole heart, mind, soul, and strength. He always loved others and served them. He always kept all of God’s laws all the time. He was right with God because of what he had done, but he did this for us in our place, as our substitute. He established and gave us this righteousness, his righteousness. It’s as if Jesus stepped in during our performance review and corrected everything we failed to do, everything we did imperfectly. Jesus says, “I took care of that. I paid for it. They get a perfect score because I did it all for them.”

This is our performance review. We are right with God already as the Holy Spirit has caused us to believe that Christ is the end of the law, that he fulfilled everything written in it, that he lived it out 100% perfect all the time, that he sacrificed his life on the cross to remove all our sins and wrongs and imperfections, and rose from the dead, all resulting in us being right with God with a perfect performance review.

When I have shared this righteous performance review with others, I’ve been told, “Nope. That’s too easy. If that’s how we get right with God, then everyone would sin all the time and keep doing bad things because Jesus already established their righteousness.”

How you’ll answer a person objecting in this way depends on your relationship with them. One way you can answer that objection is to say: Are you saying that Jesus didn’t do enough, that you need to add to what Jesus did? Because what Jesus did is a masterpiece of righteousness, a work of perfection as he actually lived completely perfectly for us to fulfill all righteousness in our place. What would happen if you took the *Mona Lisa* and added flowers into her hands to “complete” the painting? You’d ruin and devalue the entire masterpiece. It’s the same with what Jesus did. He did it perfectly. If we add anything to it to make it complete, any effort on our part as if to complete something incomplete, we devalue what he has done and wreck it, trying to establish our own righteousness instead of the righteousness he established for us. When people want to do something and take some credit for a right standing with God, this causes people to stumble, stumble over a God who establishes our righteousness with him through faith in Christ, not by works.

The way I ended up answering the person who said it was too easy for God to already have made me right with him by what he did and that people who believed that would just sin all the time, was to say, “I am living proof contrary to that idea.” This is where our zeal in living for God changes. We don’t live for God, making him first in our lives, loving others as he has loved us, serving others as he has served us because we are trying to get a good performance review and be declared right by what we have done. We live for God zealously doing these things because we already know our performance review. We live for God because we are that perfect masterpiece of righteousness by what Jesus has done. “For to everyone who believes, Christ is the end of the law, resulting in righteousness.” (verse 4) To now zealously live for God and strive as a Christian to follow his will and keep his commandments is consistent with the knowledge that Christ established our righteousness already.

If we are going to tell people that we are living proof that we are already righteous before God and then zealously live by God’s will for our lives, we actually have to do it. We take up those opportunities to serve as Christ served us. We cast out all our sins, our evil thoughts, all those things listed in our Gospel reading. Instead, we pray that other people would know this righteousness obtained by faith, not by works. We share that this is how we are right with God right now. We zealously live for God, keeping his command, serving others, because we already know what our performance review reads: We are right with God by what Jesus did. Amen.