



## The Renewed Heart: Lenten Bible Study Romans 10:8b-13

### Introduction to the Study

“Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.” Can there be a statement of belief more central to Cumberland Presbyterian theology and practice? Our denomination came into being because of a desire to see people come to faith in Christ without obstacle. This study will provide opportunity to examine some of Paul’s clearest teachings about how that happens and the rewards that accompany salvation.

### Changing the Rules

One of the most frequent complaints men make about women is that we are not consistent in our expectations. We tell him we want him to be more sensitive to our needs and to help out around the house. But then he winds up underfoot, and we tell him to get outside and do some manly things! We tell him to be more tolerant of our mothers, and then we complain when he takes her side when she’s driving us crazy! We tell him to pay more attention to the kids, and then we complain when they start acting like his side of the family! While many cling to the conviction that changing our minds is a female prerogative, it can make for some interesting family dynamics.

Many people sometimes feel about their spiritual lives like the men in our lives sometimes do. Just about the time they think they have figured out what it is God wants from them and decide they can do it, it seems that God, or some of God’s messengers, change the rules. One of the strongest affirmations of Paul’s writings to the Romans comes in 10:8b, in which he quotes the prophet Isaiah who said, “The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart.” In other words, what God wants us to know, God will find a way to say to us clearly. Then Paul sets out to help us understand how we come to faith and how that confession changes our lives forever.

### To Think About Together

Discuss with members of your group times when you have felt that people in authority over you have changed the rules.

How did you feel about their behavior?

How did their actions change your relationship?

Have there been times when you felt that God, or God’s representatives, were behaving in similar ways?

How did those times affect your spiritual growth and your ability to trust God?

### The Rules Are Simple

I teach piano. I began studying and playing when I was very young, and have continued to play through all the years and places I’ve been since then. I now play for worship in our congregation every Sunday. I also teach a few students. I have played the piano for so long that it is almost second nature to me. I sometimes have to stop and remember that my students have not played as long as I have, and that they have not developed the habits and practices I have. Teaching them those things is not easy, but it is a part of my

responsibility. While it all sounds so simple to me, I must remember that they are just beginning to develop skills.

That same kind of sensitivity is a good thing to keep in mind as we share our faith in Jesus with others. Paul makes it sound so easy: “if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” Too often, people who hear those words from Paul through us become frustrated when we start all the add-on’s and conditions that we apply to Paul’s (and God’s) simple call to discipleship.

Confessing with our lips that Jesus is Lord may sound easy, but acknowledging the Lordship of Jesus Christ in our lives is anything but easy. An old adage says, “Talk is cheap.” Saying that Jesus is Lord is the easy part. Practicing the kind of discipleship that reflects that conviction is often not.

### **To Think About Together**

Discuss how group members’ understanding of what it means to be faithful has changed since their initial commitment to Christ.

How does their maturing understanding of being a follower of Jesus differ from where they began?

### **A Renewed Heart**

Believing in our hearts that God raised Jesus from the dead (Romans 10:9b) requires changing our hearts. The Confession of Faith for Cumberland Presbyterians, while affirming that salvation is available to all who seek it (2.01), also states clearly that salvation is something all of us need. When the Confession says that our first parents “became inclined toward sin in all aspects of their being (2.03),” it sets up its own next statement that we, all of us, “become slaves to sin and death (2.04).”

Professing faith in Christ is not something we can just wake up and decide to do one day. Our natural inclination is to do things our way instead of God’s. Like rebellious children, we convince ourselves that we know better even than God does what is good for us. Even those of us who are reared in the Church and in faithful families find submission of our will to God’s to be an obstacle to changing our hearts. The truth is that changing our hearts is something we cannot do. The Good News is that God can.

God has a variety of ways to change our hearts. Music has always been a powerful way God speaks to me. It soothes my spirit. It provides ways for me to give back to God the gifts God has given me. Not everyone, I know, is musically inclined. Preaching is another important tool God uses to change hearts. (And since my husband is also my pastor, let me hasten to say that good preaching is important to me, too.) Prayer, Bible study, sharing in community with other Christians, and, borrowing more language from the Confession of Faith, “ways beyond human understanding” (4.02) are all ways God employs to change our hearts and to call us to commitment. No one way or combination of ways is right for every individual, but God knows how to reach us, and God is able and willing to do whatever is required to call us to faith and to empower us to respond.

### **To Do Together**

Sing “Change My Heart, O God” with your group. The song is included in many recent hymn books and other music resources.

If you can plan ahead for this time together, you might want to ask group members or guests to prepare special music which is helpful to their spiritual formation to share with the group.

Invite members of your group to talk about the ways God has used and continues to use to call them to faith and encourage them to grow in faith.

### **No Distinctions**

Another thing a renewed heart offers is openness to others. Just as someone cared enough about us to share the Good News about Jesus with us, so God calls us to share what we have found in Christ with others. The Church often does a good job of sharing the Good News among our own people. When it comes to sharing Good News beyond ourselves, however, we are not always what we claim to be. Think about people in your community who know little or nothing about God’s love for them. How would they be received in the programs and activities of your congregation? Would the worship, educational programs, service opportunities, and community-building events be meaningful to them? Or have we in the Church retreated so far into ourselves that we take good care of our own needs, but have forgotten our responsibility to share what we believe with those who are still searching?

American Protestant congregations tend to be pretty homogeneous groups. Most of our congregations are made up of people who pretty much look and act the same. The Sunday morning worship hour continues to be one of the most segregated times of the week in most communities, regardless of whether we are talking about racial, socio-economic, or other distinctions among us. When we do extend our ministry to people who are different than we are, it usually comes under our understanding of outreach or mission work we do somewhere else, not in our own backyard.

Paul insists in Romans that, in God’s eyes, there is no distinction between any of us. All of us stand in need of renewal of heart and spirit. “The same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him” (10:12). Too often, entry into the Church is more of a matter of educational level, ability to dress in a particular way, or some other artificial criteria than it is a matter of searching for renewal and new life. Sometimes we need to be reminded that the criteria for entry into God’s Realm are not the same as the ones we have set for life in the Church. Sometimes it is easy for us to think about the generosity of God’s grace to people we have decided need it worse than we do. Paul’s words remind us that we all stand in need of God’s saving grace and that many will not find it if we do not become more generous about sharing it. Renewed hearts are so grateful for the transformation they have experienced that they are not threatened by opportunities to share what they have found with others.

### **To Think About Together**

Examine the programs and activities of your congregation. How many of them are open to participation from people who don’t already know about them? How are they publicized to people outside the church? What can you suggest in response to what

you discover?

What can your Women's Ministry group do to help other women in your community experience renewal of heart? How can you encourage your whole congregation to join you in this ministry?

**Prayer**

God of renewal and new life, help us to be so thankful for the change you have wrought in our hearts that we look for opportunities to help others experience it, too, instead of running from them. Remind us that your love is for all who seek it, and make us thankful for what we have found. Amen.