

The Mercy of God

Thesis

The same freedom by which God chose the covenant line is the freedom by which God's mercy has now been delivered to everyone.

Romans 9:14-18 (9:6-29)

What should we say then? Is there injustice with God? Absolutely not! For he tells Moses, I will show mercy to whom I will show mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. So then, it does not depend on human will or effort but on God who shows mercy. For the Scripture tells Pharaoh, I raised you up for this reason so that I may display my power in you and that my name may be proclaimed in the whole earth. So then, he has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy and he hardens whom he wants to harden.

Introduction: That's Not Fair!

- One of the earliest phrases we learn in life is, "That's not fair!"
 - Growing up I always felt this with my sister: cake, trouble.
 - It's a universal experience to feel like life is not fair in some way.
- If we are honest, we never really outgrow this.
 - Now, the things we see as unfair are just on a different scale.
 - We get passed over for a promotion at work.
 - We are a good person, life should not be this hard.
 - Eventually, our complaints move upward, "Is God unfair?"
- This is the question Paul is wrestling with in Romans 9.
 - In Romans 8, Paul celebrated salvation, **"Who can separate us from the love of Christ?" (Romans 8:35)**
 - In what feels like whiplash, his mind goes to unbelieving Jews.
 - Heart breaks so that he desires to be cut off to save them; ponder.
 - Yet he quickly responds, **"It is not as though the word of God has failed..." (Romans 9:6)**
 - The rest of Romans 9 focuses on explaining this statement.

- The same freedom by which God chose the covenant line is the freedom by which God's mercy has now been delivered to everyone.

Point One: Ancestry

- Jewish identity was rooted in a covenant traced through Abraham.
 - God said, **"I will make you into a great nation, I will bless you, I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, I will curse anyone who treats you with contempt, and all the peoples on earth will be blessed through you."**Genesis 12:2-3)
 - Thus, they traced their lineage to Abraham and felt secure.
- Paul ponders this and writes, **"...not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. Neither is it the case that all of Abraham's children are his descendants. (Romans 9:6-7)**
 - How can your descendants not be your descendants?
 - How can offspring be traced through only one son?
 - Paul is not being cruel but being precise.
- Paul reflects on two examples to illustrate his perspective.
 - First, the example of Isaac and Ishmael, **"On the contrary, your offspring will be traced through Isaac." (Romans 9:7)**
 - These brothers shared the same father, different mothers.
 - God chose Isaac to be in the covenant lineage for the Messiah.
 - Second, the example of Jacob and Esau.
 - Both had the same father, mother, and womb!
 - Yet God chose Jacob as the carrier of the covenant promise.
 - **"I have loved Jacob, but I have hated Esau." (Romans 9:13)**
- God hated them? No, God did not hate Esau or Ishmael.
 - Scripture comes from Malachi 1:2-5; focusing on nations.
 - Malachi is reflecting on two nations - Israel and Edom.
 - "Hate" is an idiom of comparative preference, not loathing.
 - Same idea in **Luke 14:26**; "hate" your father and mother.
 - Jesus is not saying hate them; choose God over them.
 - Ishmael and Esau were loved, blessed; not the covenant carrier.
- The point is not that God loved some and despised others.

- God's plan to bless the world was never restricted to bloodlines.
- Covenant traveled through one family to reach every family.
- **God's mercy is bigger than ancestry.**
 - How can we understand this? **Think of it like a delivery driver.**
 - The driver is chosen to carry the package.
 - That does not mean everyone else is excluded from receiving.
 - Driver was chosen for those who would get the package.
 - Abraham, Isaac, Jacob are the carriers of the blessing.
 - This blessing goes to people like Ishmael and Esau.
 - The covenant brought the Messiah; Messiah blesses the world.
- What then are the implications for our lives?
 - God's mercy does not operate by ethnicity, biology, ancestry.
 - Your biology, choices, ethnicity does not invalidate mercy.
 - God's mercy is delivered to all people differently, but to all.
- **Paul anticipates hearing their response, "That's not fair!"**
 - How can God just decide who carries the promise?
 - Why would God not just go along with birth order?
- If God chooses who carries the promise, is that not unjust?

Point Two: Failure

- Paul senses this question and seeks to answer it, **"What should we say then? Is there injustice with God? Absolutely not! For he tells Moses, I will show mercy to whom I will show mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. So then, it does not depend on human will or effort but on God who shows mercy. For the Scripture tells Pharaoh, I raised you up for this reason so that I may display my power in you and that my name may be proclaimed in the whole earth. So then, he has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy and he hardens whom he wants to harden."** (9:14-18)
- First, Paul's mind goes to the exodus; defining story for Israel.
 - He recalls God's statement, **"I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion."** (Exodus 33:19, NIV)

- Notice, the bent of this entire argument is mercy!
- God's freedom is the freedom to be merciful, not arbitrary.
- Second, Paul provides the example of Pharaoh; the plagues.
 - First five, Pharaoh hardened; second five, God hardened.
 - What was the purpose? **"I have let you live for this purpose: to show you my power and to make my name known on the whole earth." (Exodus 9:16)**
- Hardening isn't the point, the whole earth is the point.
- "That's not fair" is a refrain Paul imagines again, **"You will say to me, therefore, "Why then does he still find fault? For who resists his will?" (Romans 9:19)**
 - If God uses the failures, does God cause us to fail?
 - If God causes the hardening, does God cause the failure?
- Paul reaches to an ancient illustration - from Isaiah and Jeremiah.
 - In Jeremiah 18, God sends Jeremiah to a potter's house.
 - Jeremiah watches and the clay is marred in the potter's hands.
 - What will the potter do? Toss it away and start again?
 - The potter puts it back on the wheel and reworks the clay.
 - This astonishing movement teaches us a lot about God.
- God is a potter; a potter who refuses to give up, continues to work.
 - Paul asks, **"Has the potter no right over the clay?" (Rom 9:21)**
 - And then, **"And what if God, wanting to display his wrath and to make his power known, endured with much patience objects of wrath prepared for destruction?" (Romans 9:22)**
 - Did you hear that, **"Much patience."**
 - Not language of person made for destruction; eager to destroy.
 - Patience signifies God who is waiting; working a larger purpose.
- The hardening is the backdrop but mercy is the point of the story!
 - God did not throw Pharaoh away; showed him his power.
 - God used Pharaoh's hardening; proclaimed name through world!
- Many people assume they have become unusable.
 - They are too broken, damaged, and think they are too far gone.
 - The Gospel says otherwise; potter still works with damaged clay.
 - **God's mercy is bigger than failure.**

- Paul calls this a mystery, a partial hardening of Israel for the Gentiles.
 - And at the end of this section, the destination of the argument.
 - **“For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may have mercy on all.” (Romans 11:32)**
- The potter is not finished, God is still merciful working.

Point Three: Boundaries

- So who are these vessels of mercy Paul is talking about?
 - He names them and the answer is the whole point.
 - Paul writes, **“And what if he did this to make known the riches of his glory on objects of mercy that he prepared beforehand for glory — on us, the ones he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles?” (Romans 9:23-24)**
- “On us...” Paul could have said “the Gentiles.”
 - Yet Paul says “us;” though he is ethnically Jewish.
 - Paul places himself in that group; whole argument headed here.
 - The people no one expected, the outsiders; all people!
- Paul recalls the words of Hosea, **“I will call Not My People, My People, and she who is Unloved, Beloved. And it will be in the place where they were told, you are not my people, there they will be called sons of the living God.” (Romans 9:25-26)**
 - Imagine being told for generations you were outside the covenant.
 - Then suddenly, those who were Not My People are My People.
 - This text, originally about northern Israel, now applied to Gentiles.
 - The promise was always bigger than it had seemed.
- Paul reflects back on Israel and recalls Isaiah, **“But Isaiah cries out concerning Israel, Though the number of Israelites is like the sand of the sea, only the remnant will be saved; since the Lord will execute his sentence completely and decisively on the earth. And just as Isaiah predicted: If the Lord of Armies had not left us offspring, we would have become like Sodom, and we would have been made like Gomorrah.” (Romans 9:27-29)**
 - This remnant is a sign that God does not abandon.
 - The remnant survives judgment and carries the promise.

- God's mercy is not stingy; God's mercy persists through everything!
 - Some of us are afraid our story disqualifies us.
 - Some of us fear that our failures disqualify us.
 - Some of us worry we are outside the reach of grace.
 - Romans 9 speaks one word to all our fears: mercy.
 - **God's mercy is bigger than our boundaries.**
- **Reflect back on the delivery driver illustration from the beginning.**
 - The driver made it through, the package has arrived.
 - The covenant narrowed all the way down.
 - Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, to David, and to Jesus.
- The delivery was addressed to everyone; even us, even you!

Conclusion: Always Merciful

- So let us return to the original question, "Is God unfair?"
 - Paul taught that God is not unfair; **God has always been merciful.**
 - Mercy can look unfair; Jesus shared many stories like this.
 - The older brother in the Prodigal Son story.
 - The parable of the workers working for the same wage.
 - God is not unfair, God is merciful.
- God is not unfair, God is mysterious.
 - No one sermon, person, theology can grasp all; **2 Peter 3:16**
 - This is where Paul ends; a beautiful refrain.
 - God's mercy is bigger than ancestry.
 - God's mercy is bigger than failures.
 - God's mercy is bigger than our boundaries.
 - After three dense chapters, Paul's concludes praise. **"Oh, the depth of the riches and the wisdom and the knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments and untraceable his ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor? And who has ever given to God, that he should be repaid? For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen."** (Romans 11:33-36)
 - This is the response when we see the beauty of God's mercy!
- Even confused, let us trust God's mercy is bigger than we imagine!

Communion Transition

- And now celebrate what mercy has been pointing to.
- A table that was never meant to be exclusive; all are invited!
- Through his death, Jesus shows us the depths of God's mercy.

Communion

- **"On the night when he was betrayed, the Lord Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, broke it, and said, "This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, also he took the cup, after supper, and said, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. (1 Corinthians 11:23-26)**
- Therefore we proclaim the mystery of faith:
 - Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.
 - (For the bread) "This is the body of Christ, broken for you."
 - (For the juice) "This is the blood of Christ, shed for you."
- "The Gifts of God for the People of God. Take them in remembrance that Christ died for you, and feed on him in your hearts by faith, with thanksgiving."
- Offering baskets will beginning of second song for any financial gifts or Connection Cards. Take time to reflect; come and take communion; and then continue to worship through song.

For further study:

Scripture: Genesis 12:1-3; Jeremiah 18:1-6; Hosea 2:19-23

Resources: "Romans for Everyone: Part 2" by N.T. Wright

To prepare for next week: Meditate on Romans 9:6-29