

***Romans 9, Pt. 2***

Last week, we concluded with a significant problem. Paul had finished chapter eight with the soaring conclusion that nothing can separate us from God's love in Jesus. But Paul then thinks of those Jewish people - his people - that refused to believe in and follow Jesus. Paul experiences anguish at the thought of their unbelief. As I mentioned last week, I think the heart of this chapter is the same as Christ's message to Nicodemus in John 3: **You must be born again**. Before we dive into that subject. I would like to begin by making two quick notes.

1. **Historical note.** We sometimes are concerned about the Jewish rejection of Jesus because it seems to suggest that God was unfaithful to his chosen people. However, there is good reason to believe that contrary to the common rhetoric the Christian mission to Diaspora Jews - those Jews who had been scattered around the empire - was actually quite successful. Yes, there was opposition. Nonetheless, many Jewish people accepted Christ as Messiah and Savior. One such example is Paul's young companion Timothy. His mother and grandmother were both believing Jews of the Diaspora who had come to know Jesus and pass their faith to this young leader. But there were many, many more.
2. **Practical note.** Paul is showing us how to discipline and disciple our hearts. He expresses strong emotion. He does not suppress it or run from it. And then having validated those emotions, he begins arguing with his heart response. We can do this, too. When we feel a strong emotion, we do not need to suppress it. Instead, we should listen to it, interrogate it, and even argue with it. This is a pathway to growth. If someone cuts you off while driving and you feel angry, then you should take the time to understand that anger. What is my concern? Do I have enough information to judge that other person harshly? Why anger and not thankfulness that there was no accident? What does Scripture say about anger? By asking these questions, the experience of these emotions can get you closer to Jesus.

Now we can return to Paul's argument. Paul applies his towering intellect to the matter at hand. Implicit in his words is a question: *Is there anyone who is entitled to receive God's mercy?* Paul sees what is at risk in this way of thinking. If there are people who are entitled to receive God's mercy, then God's mercy is transformed into a characteristic or attribute of human life. It becomes something that can be managed and manipulated by human interests. It has become just another scarce resource in a world of scarcity. If anyone is entitled to receive God's mercy, then mercy is not mercy in the end. The answer to this question as it flows out of the rest of Romans is a resounding *No*. Remember what Paul taught in chapter eight: "And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ" (8:9). The presence of the Spirit pouring God's love into our hearts (5:5) is the determinative factor. We either have the Spirit or we do not. We either have new hearts or we do not. There are no other factors at play. No one is entitled to God's mercy. Instead as Paul writes, quoting Exodus 33:19, God says, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." Mercy does not belong to people as an entitlement but to God as a gift which he has the right to give.

Beginning with verse six, Paul lays out five situations in which we attempt to make God's mercy an entitlement. To each area of life, we might say the words of Jesus, "You must be born again." Let us look at the five areas.

**Pure-blood (vv. 6-9).** Are people entitled to God's mercy because they are of a pure-blood line, descended from Abraham? Absolutely not. Paul is clear here: "It is not the natural children who are God's children, but it is the children of promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring" (v. 8). Isaac was the child promised to Abraham and Sarah. And the appropriate response to God's promise is not a declaration of pure-bloodlines or physical pedigree, but trust in those promises. This is the kind of faith that Abraham had (chapter four). In becoming part of God's people, every Christian is connected to every other Christian in a community of faith and love. Genetic qualities and last names don't warrant God's mercy. You must be born again.

**Position (vv. 10-13).** Are people entitled to God's mercy because of their status in society? Absolutely not. Rebekah had two twin boys. Esau was born first. Therefore, he was entitled to be the inheritor of his father's house. When Isaac

died, the bulk of the resources would be transferred to Esau so that he could manage the family land. A smaller portion would be given to Jacob as he would not bear primary responsibility over the inheritance. But God's promise did not go to the firstborn, but to the second-born. God's choice is clear: "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated" (v. 13). This is not an absolute declaration of love and hate. Instead, it should be understood as a way of saying that the second brother was chosen to carry the promise. There may be some social utility to recognizing offices and titles - Dr., Rev., Councilperson, and the like, but none of this entitles anyone to God's mercy. You must be born again.

**Power (vv. 14-18).** Are people entitled to God's mercy because of the power that they hold and that they can wield over others? Absolutely not. Paul now brings forward the example of Pharaoh. He is thinking of the king of Egypt who ruled at the time of the Exodus; and yet he is also thinking of Pharaoh as a type of anyone who holds power over others. Egypt was a hierarchical society, and Pharaoh stood at the top of the hierarchy. But God's word is clear. God permitted Pharaoh's rise to authority for reasons far beyond Pharaoh himself. He was raised up so that he could be brought low. He was permitted authority so that he might be allowed to turn against God's authority and experience the hardening of his heart. Pharaoh could make unlimited demands on the people of Egypt or the Israelite slaves, but he could not make demands on God. People are given power, but that power doesn't make anyone more worthy in God's eyes. You must be born again.

**Purpose (vv. 19-24).** Are people entitled to receive God's mercy because they believe themselves to have a great purpose in life? Absolutely not. In this section, Paul uses the image of a potter: "Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use?" (v. 21). It is the potter who gives purpose. Some people have been called to great tasks. Some have been called to more humble avenues of service. God, however, doesn't feel compelled to mete out mercy to a CEO and withhold it from a custodian. God doesn't save up mercy for elected officials and withhold it from stay-at-home parents. It is true that some people have wider spheres of influence than others. But the size of someone's footprint doesn't get anyone extra affection from the Lord. You must be born again.

**Privilege (vv. 25-33).** Are people entitled to God's mercy because of the privileges that they have? Is it access to resources and social connections which draws God's attention? Absolutely not. Paul quotes from the prophets Hosea and Isaiah to make it clear that God is ready to extend the title "my people" to those beyond the borders of Israel (v. 25). For all of the privilege, it is, in fact, only a remnant that will be saved (v. 27). This is because of the statement that Paul had already made in v. 6: "For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel." Is it unfair that God gave mercy to Gentiles even as Israelites rejected Jesus and failed to receive mercy? No. For those who have rejected Jesus prove that they followed the law "not by faith but as if it were by works" (v. 32). They were, to speak in the language I have been using, playing law games. And when confronted with Jesus, they stumbled over the stone. On the other hand, all who "trust in him will never be put to shame" (v. 33). Privilege may have its uses, but it must be used well. You must be born again.

When Paul thinks of those fellow Jews who had not yet responded to the call of Jesus, he felt anguish. But as we have seen, he reminded himself that mercy that can be tied to human categories is not mercy in the end. As we will see in chapter ten, Paul does not give up on his people. As long as someone has breath in her body, she still has time to enter into a living relationship with God in Jesus Christ. As God's people, you and I must remain ever vigilant against the creep of entitlement thinking. More than one local church has been decimated by assertions of privilege, power, and position. But God's mercy always levels the playing field. You must be born again.