

St. Luke's Evangelical Lutheran Church -- Watertown, WI
Pastor Mark Gartner
Sermon for Pentecost 13 -- August 7th and August 10th, 2008

Romans 11:13-15, 28-32

I am talking to your Gentiles. Inasmuch as I am the apostle to the Gentiles, I make much of my ministry in the hope that I may somehow arouse my own people to envy and save some of them. For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?

As far as the gospel is concerned, they are enemies on your account; but as far as election is concerned, they are loved on account of the patriarchs, for God's gifts and his call are irrevocable. Just as you who were at one time disobedient to God have now received mercy as a result of their disobedience, so they too have now become disobedient in order that they too may now receive mercy as a result of God's mercy to you. For God has bound all men over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all.

Dear recipients of God's undeserved mercy. Amen

Some parts of the Book of Romans that we have been reading from this summer are abundantly clear. Romans 3 with its concise message of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ and Romans 8 with its reassuring words that nothing separates us from God's love are easy to understand. On the other hand, other parts of the Book of Romans are not. Their difficulty doesn't make them less worthy, because, of course, all of the Bible has been given to us by God for our spiritual growth and the strengthening of our faith. It just means there are times when we have to work a little harder at understanding what God is telling us. Which is always worth the effort.

Our text for today falls into the "harder to understand" category of Scripture. Perhaps as you heard it read you came to that conclusion on your own. In short order we're going to spend some time on it, but right from the outset we can state what at its core this section of the Book of Romans is all about:

Sermon Theme: It's All About Grace!

- 1. The sad consequence of misunderstanding it**
- 2. The joy of standing in it**

Before working through this rather challenging text some background information will be essential. Beginning with Romans chapter 9 and continuing through chapter 11 Paul addresses an issue which undoubtedly posed a problem to early Christian believers – and still does for many present day Christians. It has to do with God's relationship with the Jewish nation. Actually, the questions being asked back then are still being asked today. Such as: If the Jews are indeed God's historic "Chosen People," then why is that so many of them stand outside and are even strongly opposed to Christianity? If Jesus Christ is the Messiah prophesied about throughout the Old Testament, then why did and do so many Jews reject Him? Is the Jewish nation still the "Chosen People," and if they are, does God have a special way of saving them outside of faith in Jesus Christ (as suggested by some branches of modern day Christianity); a sort of salvation-by-pedigree arrangement?

In chapters 9 to 11 Paul makes two essential points. The first is that the true Israel of God has nothing to do with bloodline, but has everything to do with faith in Christ. That is what saves the individual eternally, not the race into which they were born. Despite the fact they were God's Old Testament Chosen People with all the advantages that went along with that, Paul says that the majority of Jews rejected God's message and thus lost their place. Now those of *any* nationality who believe that Jesus is the promised Savior are the "Chosen People" – and there is no alternate way of salvation for the Jews or anyone else who rejects the message of Jesus Christ. Because Jesus Himself defined the terms in

John 14:6 when He proclaimed: ***“I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”***

The second point Paul makes is that even though the majority of Jews rejected God, God has not turned His back on them. There always was and will always be a “remnant” – that is, Jewish believers who understand the Gospel message and believe in Jesus Christ. Remember Pentecost and the effect of Peter’s preaching to his fellow Jews? 3000 converts with more each day. So it should not be forgotten that the early church had as its primary base Jews who had become Christians.

But it wasn’t long before a shift began to take place. Jesus Christ came to be Savior of all people, not just one particular race, and soon the message of Christianity was spread to non-Jews as well. In our text, for instance, Paul refers to himself as the **“apostle to the Gentiles”** (a word in Greek that could also be translated “nations”). As a result, the early church began taking on a different, mixed composition of both Jews and Gentiles.

Not only that, before long the Gentile converts began to outnumber the Jewish converts. And as the years went on in those early days of Christianity, the Jews (not all of them, but in general) distinguished themselves not by embracing Christianity, but by an intensifying rejection and opposition to it. In the Book of Acts the people who routinely interfered with the Apostle Paul’s Christian mission work and gave him the most grief were unbelieving Jews. After a while, Paul gave up on trying to reach them with the Gospel and concentrated his efforts on the Gentiles. So we’ve got this dynamic at work: The people whom we would most expect to accept Christ as Savior in reality were His fiercest opponents. And the people whom the Jews had always despised as pagans and heathens were streaming into the Kingdom. But, as Paul tells us in the verses that precede our text, this was all part of God’s strategy. Jewish rejection of Christ actually hastened the preaching of the Gospel to the non-Jews.

With this as background, Paul now addresses the Gentile believers who were part of the church at Rome: **¹³ I am talking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch as I am the apostle to the Gentiles, I make much of my ministry ¹⁴ in the hope that I may somehow arouse my own people to envy and save some of them. ¹⁵ For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?** Paul was a Jew and was saddened at the rejection of his people. God had called him to be a missionary to the Gentiles, a role he took very seriously. But he hoped that as his countrymen saw the peace and joy the Gentiles experienced by knowing the love and forgiveness of Christ, **“some of them”** might be attracted to hearing what Paul had to say. By their rejection of Christ, the message of **reconciliation** (peace with God through the redeeming work of Christ) was hastened throughout the world. Should they return to Christ, Paul, says, it would be like a spiritual resurrection. This was Paul’s great hope.

Paul continues this theme throughout chapter 11. Our text picks up near the end of the chapter with a sort of summary statement. **²⁸ As far as the gospel is concerned, they are enemies on your account; but as far as election is concerned, they are loved on account of the patriarchs, ²⁹ for God’s gifts and his call are irrevocable. ³⁰ Just as you who were at one time disobedient to God have now received mercy as a result of their disobedience, ³¹ so they too have now become disobedient in order that they too may now receive mercy as a result of God’s mercy to you. ³² For God has bound all men over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all.** We might paraphrase what Paul says here like this: As a result of Jewish “disobedience,” the Gospel came to Gentile believers, who at one time also had been “disobedient” to God in their own sin and unbelief. Now *they were the believers* and *the Jews were the unbelievers*, and as such, spiritual enemies. Nevertheless, God still loves His Old Testament people and always has. So this role reversal was part of God’s plan. As the Jewish nation produced the Savior who saved the Gentiles, the Gentiles now had the truth of the Savior to share with the Jews, some of whom would respond in faith and be saved.

But in the end, the essential truth Paul wants us to know is this: regardless of background, every person of every nation is by nature sinful and disobedient. Nobody – Jew or Gentile – stands righteous before God. Therefore our eternal salvation depends entirely on God’s mercy. In other words, salvation is all about God’s grace.

Sadly, says Paul in these chapters, that is precisely what so many of the Jews of his day had forgotten. They had moved the basis for eternal salvation from something *God did for them* in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, to something *they did for God* through their rituals, ceremonies, laws, acts of obedience, and what they thought were the “inalienable rights” God owed them as the Chosen People. That’s why so many of the Jews – especially the religious leaders – had a problem with Jesus, isn’t it? Jesus said admit that you have failed to be the kind of people God asks you to be and look to Me for forgiveness of your sins, but they wouldn’t. They believed they didn’t need a Savior, that they could earn God’s favor on their own by doing this or doing that, and they resented the fact that Christ called them sinners. Eventually their anger turned to hatred and ultimately they crucified Jesus because they didn’t like what He was saying about them. And at the root of it all was a rejection of God’s grace.

Rather than shaking our heads at them, what we must do today is beware that we don’t fall into the same trap they did. Because it’s easy to do. So let’s talk about God’s grace. And let’s begin with a basic question: What is grace? Well, it’s part of our Christian vocabulary. Grace and/or mercy (we use the terms almost interchangeably) is not just God’s underserved love, but it is in fact receiving from the hand of God the exact opposite of what we have coming. We are sinners who deserve a sentence of death; instead we receive the promise of eternal life. We are transgressors who deserve punishment; instead we receive a paid vacation. We are the disobedient who deserve nothing but retribution, but instead we receive a reward.

What’s behind this unimaginable switch? Why is it the Christian can say with confidence I know I’m going to heaven when I die? Is it because I try so very hard to live a Christian life? No. Is it because I was baptized a Lutheran and can count on one hand the times I miss church each year? No. Is it because I tithe or give a goodly amount of time to working around church? No. All those things make *us* the cause of our salvation. And we aren’t. The cause of our salvation is God’s grace. Specifically God’s grace in the doing, the dying and the rising of Jesus Christ which we, through the enabling work of the Holy Spirit, make our own through faith. Grace in turn moves us to all those other things: to live our lives to His glory, to worship Him consistently, to contribute generously.

When grace is misunderstood or unappreciated or rejected (as it was by the Jews of Paul’s day), the result is a life where we *expect* to be rewarded by God for our actions. Misunderstanding grace moves us into an “entitlement” mentality: I do something for God, so God should do something for me. And if ever we’ve found ourselves thinking God is treating us unfairly because, after all, I try to be a good Christian or I go to church regularly or I give my offerings and that ought to be worth something, we’ve slipped into such an entitlement mentality. And the next thing that can lead to is actually getting mad at God because He isn’t coming through as quickly or to the degree that we’d like.

But the fact of the matter is that God *owes* us nothing. Yet in His grace, He *gives* us everything. And when we understand that everything we have, both temporally and eternally, is a gift of His undeserved grace, it has an effect. We can’t help but love Him more and more. Loving God is the natural response to His grace. As is trusting God. When we understand how God in His grace has met our greatest need – the forgiveness of our sins – in Jesus Christ, we can’t help but trust that He’ll always work out the far lesser things that come into our lives. Reflecting on grace is a wonderful antidote for worry.

We could put it this way: when we understand grace, we begin to understand the very nature of God. And when we understand the very nature of a God who loves us and cares for us, we rest securely and contently and confidently in the promise that **“all things work together for good to them that love God.”** Until we get to heaven, there is no better place to be than firmly nestled in His grace. This text was a difficult one which perhaps took a little more time explaining than usual. But what we unearthed was worth it. Because it’s all about God’s grace. A grace which God, in His great mercy, has showered upon us. By His power and through His blessing, may we always enjoy, appreciate and stand fast in it. Amen.