

Vessels of mercy

Romans 9: 14-33

We continue in this chapter considering Paul's lament over the Jews who rejected the messiah and some of the questions others probably those in the church at Rome raised concerning the Jews. We've dealt in the previous sermon with one of these questions and that is "*Has God's promise failed?*" When we see baptised children leave the church and the faith a similar question might come up can we not trust God's promises? Such as the promise in our form for the baptism of infants which says "God graciously includes our children in His covenant with its promises and obligations." The Roman Catholics get around the dilemma with their interpretation of the sacrament of baptism saying that regeneration accompanies baptism but that baptism can also be lost.

However since the Bible doesn't teach baptismal regeneration that's the wrong road to go down. Paul steers us in the right direction by pointing us to election. All the promises of God stand for those who repent and believe.. Those who repent and believe are God's elect, According to Romans 9:1-13 they included Isaac and not Ishmael, Jacob and not Esau.

It depends on who God chooses

Someone raises another objection. Verse 14 "*what shall be say then there is no injustice with God is there?*" In other words "is God unjust?"

Paul's answer was "May it never be" and then he continued with his teaching on the relationship between faith and election. At the end of this chapter Paul finishes with a challenge "what will you do with the Messiah? Stumble over him or let him lift you up?"

So the theme of the passage is this. We become objects of mercy by God's sovereign will through faith in Christ.

And here in our text Paul uses a number of examples in salvation history in order to make this theme clear.

a) He begins with *the Israelites around the time of the Exodus*. Verse 15 says "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy and compassion on whom I will have compassion" That is a quote from Exodus 33:19. God said this to Moses just after Israel's sin of idolatry with the golden calf. When Moses met with the Lord in the tent of meeting afterwards Moses made a plea on behalf of the nation asking the Lord to favour the Israelites and saying to God that "this nation is your people". The Lord's response was I will have mercy to whom I will have mercy."

Now clearly the incident with the golden calf showed that not all Israel had faith in God. Why? Well as we learned with the case of Jacob and Esau it ultimately comes down to God's mercy. But the thing to note is that God's mercy is displayed in the lives of his people. There were some faithless Israelites who grumbled in the desert and looked back wistfully on their lives in Egypt the way Lot's wife looked back wistfully at Sodom and Gomorrah. They didn't trust God to lead them to the Promised Land.

Paul's explanation for their lack of trust is seen in verse 16 "It does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs but on the mercy of God who chooses. In fact he chooses those who are his from before the foundation of the world. Therefore not all Israel are Israel.

b) Another example is that of *Pharaoh*. Paul wrote. "For the Scripture says of Pharaoh for this very purpose I raised you up to demonstrate my power in you that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth. Here Paul quotes Exodus 4:21 and 9:16. There we find that the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart so that Pharaoh refused to let the Israelites leave Egypt. Romans 9:17 tells us why God hardened Pharaoh so that God's power seen in the ten plagues He afflicted the Egyptians with would become evident and that God's name would be proclaimed throughout all the earth.

Well there can be no question that the world knows about these historical events and that God has power over nations and over the elements to judge or to bless Ultimately for the sake of Christ and his church.

Nevertheless, an objection is raised in verse 19. If God shows mercy to whom he wills and if God hardened Pharaoh's heart why does he still find fault and who resists his will? Was it Pharaoh's fault that God hardened his heart? Is it any fault of those who reject Christ today if God has hardened their hearts? Some explain it away like that. They say that Pharaoh already had a hard heart and that's why God hardened it. However in Exodus the first occurrence of Pharaoh's heart being hardened is found in chapter 7: 3 where the Lord says "I will harden Pharaoh's heart."

Again Paul had the Jews in mind who rejected the Christ, and so we can also think about people we know who have grown up in the church and then abandoned the church because they loved the world more than they loved Christ and his church. But is it really their fault if it doesn't depend on the "man who wills but on God who chooses?" He will after all have mercy on whom HE will have mercy!

Paul doesn't answer that question directly. Instead he replies, "who are you O man to answer back to God? He puts us with our impious questions in our place.

We are man; God's creatures. Not the perfect man made in God's image in true holiness and righteousness and love. We are the fallen sinful people who pollute God's creation, break God's commandments and who think too much of ourselves in relation to God. We even dare to question God and express our indignation at Him.

Now the answer, "who are you O man to answer back to God?" may not seem very satisfactory because of its brevity. But that is all the Holy Spirit wanted Paul to say perhaps to curb human perversity as Calvin says or perhaps because our finite minds are incapable of fully understanding God's wisdom wrt. election and reprobation. In any case the charge who are you O man is designed not only to remind us of our sinfulness and finiteness but also to encourage a little humility in readers. We don't have all the answers we are simply called to submit to the will of God.

What follows has a similar purpose. In verse 20 & 21 Paul asks, "The thing moulded will not say to the molder, why did you make me like this?" In other words what the clay is to the potter is what man is to God. We are clay in God's hands who makes of us what HE wants. Isaiah provides the commentary . "Woe to the one who quarrels with his maker, an earthenware vessel among the vessels of the earth! Will the clay say to the potter "What are you doing?!" (45:9) If God hadn't formed Adam from the dust of the earth, Adam would have remained just that; dust. And if God doesn't have the power to raise the dead then after we die we'll simply turn back into clay or the dust of the earth. So who are we to question

what God does with his creatures? Who are we to deprive God of his honour or his authority over men and life and death? Who are we to say to God “its not fair?”

In any case with respect to both the elect and the reprobate God is not just fair He is longsuffering. . According to verse 21 even those vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, even Pharaoh, the unbelieving Jews all those who reject the Messiah today are dealt with patiently by the Lord. He doesn't destroy them at the earliest opportunity but postpones their judgment to make known the riches of his glory on vessels of mercy which he prepared beforehand for glory. Why did God tolerate Pharaoh even for 5 minutes why does he allow wicked people like Isis suicide bombers to exist now?

The answer given here in Romans 9 is “to make the riches of God's glory known to the objects of his mercy”. It may be difficult to see that now. Its like we are looking at the underside of an unfinished tapestry. God can see the real picture from the top we see the vague outline and parts of a work in progress underneath. And so we wonder how and when we will see God's glory in the judgment of the wicked. We can see some of it in history for example when the Israelites were liberated from Pharaoh and slavery, when Christ rose from the grave after his crucifixion with the expansion of the church. But presently judgment is postponed and evil continues to run rampant it seems.

But think about the victims of persecution those who were martyred for their faith where are they now? What do they say?

Though they have suffered and were martyred for their faith they are not questioning God and they are not saying “its not fair!” What they are saying is “ how long O Lord holy and true will you refrain from the judgment and from avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” (Rev 6:10) And how does God respond? Rev 6:11 says “They were give a white robe and told to rest a little longer until the number of martyrs was full.” Then in the rest of the chapter we read of a coming judgment where the reprobate try to hide, hoping that they might be buried under falling rocks rather than have to face the wrath of God and of the Lamb.”

Once again this may not answer all the questions but what it does say is that God's justice is unquestionable and inevitable and that God and his chosen one will be vindicated.

c) Paul now provides a *further example from OT history* to explain the theme “we become objects of mercy by God's sovereign will through faith in Christ.” This time he turns our attention to *the prophet Hosea* quoting Hosea 1:10 and 2:23 which say, “I will say to those who were not my people, you are my people... and they shall be called the sons of the living God.” Paul is using Hosea to show that the Gentiles who were strangers to the covenant are yet loved by God. Why does Paul quote Hosea? It was because of the Jews who rejected Jesus but who still thought that they were God's chosen people and the object of God's favour. Paul wants to make it crystal clear that God would include many who were not Abraham's physical descendants and reject some who were. Quoting the prophet Isaiah he adds, “Though the number of Israel shall be like the sand of the seashore only the remnant will be saved. And “but for God's mercy and grace in saving this remnant the whole nation would have become like Sodom and Gomorrah; subject to the judgment of God.

So let's bring this part of the text to a conclusion. The theme of the passage is that we become objects of mercy by God's sovereign will through faith in Christ.

Since the fall of mankind into sin “all people fall short of the glory of God. All by nature are dead in their trespasses and sins. All walk according to the course of this world and according to the prince of the air. All by nature live according to the lusts of the flesh and therefore are by nature children of wrath.

That means that we too in the church today would be like Sodom and Gomorrah but for the grace of God. God in his mercy has chosen some to be saved. Why some and not all? Because He is the potter and we are the clay and in his infinite wisdom God uses even the wicked to show forth his power and glory in their final judgment.

d) The rest of the passage shows by *what means we come into this state of grace as God's elect.*

Let's first begin by saying what does not bring us into this state of grace.

First of all it has nothing to do with the family we were born into or whether we are members of the church. Paul repudiates that in Philippians. He calls it having confidence in the flesh. According to Jewish thinking Paul had all the right credentials. He was circumcised on the 8th day, of the nation Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, as to the law a Pharisee. It's like me saying that being a member of a Christian church, and especially a good Bible believing church at that and being an office bearer in the church will guarantee my salvation. According to Paul in Philippians 3:8 that is “rubbish!”

Many Jews were in the covenant but were not elect. They were covenant despisers like Esau who despised his birth-right. Similarly baptism into the covenant won't save you whether you were baptised as an adult or a child. The NT and church history shows that there were those who repudiated their baptism though a wilfully sinful life or by believing and teaching heresy.

Neither will our own righteousness save you. Look at verse 30, “What shall we say then? The Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness attained righteousness but Israel pursuing a law of righteousness did not arrive at that law.” Adherence to rules and regulations, ceremonies, temple and synagogue attendance was not a righteousness that saves. Neither should we think that coming along to church every Sunday, trying to keep the Ten Commandments, living a self-disciplined life can save us. Why can't our exemplary behaviour save us?

2 reasons

1. It is not exemplary. like Israel (look at the end of verse 32) who did not arrive at the law so too us our obedience is always flawed.

2 the second reason our exemplary behaviour won't do because true righteousness only comes by faith.

So now then the question becomes, faith in what or whom?

Paul continues..... they stumbled over the stumbling stone and quoting Isaiah (8:14 and 28:16) “Behold I lay in Zion a stumbling stone and a rock of offense he who believes in Him will not be disappointed.

There you have the answer. Faith in the one who is the corner stone or capstone of that spiritual edifice which is the church Jesus Christ.

When Christ came the Jews stumbled over him. They hated him because he said that their works weren't pure enough to merit God's approval or entry into the kingdom of heaven. This infuriated them. It wounded their pride. Instead of letting Jesus lift them up they tripped over him.

But it does come down to election and the sovereignty of God in salvation. He is saying that no one has special privileges in God's eyes. No one is more worthy than the rest. All are in fact worthy of judgment because of sin. God will be glorified both by the judgment of the wicked and the vindication of the righteous.

And that when it comes to the question is it fair? The answer is God is the potter we are the clay the potter has the right to make any object he wants out of the clay . He can make an object of wrath or he can make an object of mercy its entirely up to the potter

Finally who then are objects of mercy? The religious; the members of the covenant of grace? Not necessarily.

The objects of mercy are the righteous,.... Those made righteous,... not by birth,... or by membership in the covenant community,..... not by keeping the law or by works ,..... but by grace alone though faith alone and in Jesus Christ alone.

The stone the Jews rejected became the capstone, the head of the church. Whoever believes in him will not be disappointed

Amen