

“We Depend on God’s Mercy”

Is God fair? Is God just? People have long asked that question and continue to do so today. Is it fair, they ask, that people very much like you and me were gunned down unexpectedly as they participated in a social activity? Is it fair that God has allowed homes to be flooded and lives to be lost and property to be destroyed in hurricanes and flooding? Is God fair when wildfires rage and destroy? It is understandable that people would look at situations like these that we have witnessed in the past several weeks and months and wonder whether God is fair.

God has an answer. If you want fairness, make sure that you first consider your sinfulness. See that your heart has been darkened by sin from the moment it first beat. See how your thoughts and words and actions are corrupted. See how your sins have broken relationships and strained friendships. Yes, look at the world around you and see what all the sinfulness of people just like you and me has done to our world. Consider it from the perspective of our holy God, who looks at sin as rebellion against him. He reminds us that we deserve or have earned no good thing in this world and in this life, and that nothing but punishment ought to await us in the world to come.

But God is not fair to us in that way. He is merciful. He is gracious. He give us what we could never earn or deserve. That’s the point of Jesus’ parable in our Gospel today (Matthew 20:1-16). The workers had earned neither the right to work for the master nor the right to demand their pay, but the master invited them and offered them wages. God’s mercy is the point of our sermon text today as well, Romans 9:6-16.

By inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the Apostle Paul in these verses takes Old Testament examples to highlight God’s mercy in bringing people to faith and in choosing them for salvation. Some may have supposed that if they were Israelites, if they were Jews, if they were descendants of Abraham, then very naturally they would be saved. In fact, in the verses right before our text, Paul explained how the Israelites had many blessings in possessing God’s law and carrying his promise through many years. In fact, the Savior himself came from that special chosen people.

But now there is something even more important than their lineage, and that is their faith in the Savior. Paul writes that **“not all who are descended from Israel are Israel.”** In other words, being a physical descendant of Abraham or Isaac or Jacob does not make you a part of God’s people. They may be Israel in a certain sense, but the true Israel is the people of God, those who have faith in their Savior Jesus. This is the Holy Christian Church, the true Israel. It is made up of no particular nation or people group, but of all who believe in the words and promises of God.

The very history of the Israelites teaches this. God promised Abraham that he would give him a son, Isaac, who would be an ancestor of the Savior. Abraham’s child through his servant Hagar would not be the one to receive this promise, even though he too was a child of Abraham. God gave a specific promise that Isaac, the son of Abraham and his wife Sarah, would receive his inheritance. And with his inheritance, Isaac would carry on the line of the promised Savior. God called Abraham and Sarah to believe this promise. And they did. And all who believe God’s promises in the same way that they did are the true descendants of Abraham, the true people of God.

There are all sorts of implications from this passage for our lives today. We are members of God’s family not because of what family we were born into, but because God called us to faith in his Son Jesus Christ as our Savior. Our salvation doesn’t depend on being members of Grace Lutheran Church, but on being members of the Holy Christian Church. And it is so easy for us to lose sight of these things. It is so tempting for us to place such a high value on our church membership or our family relationships that we forget about the incredible value of being a part of God’s family, God’s true Israel.

Paul goes on to explain more from the history of the Old Testament Israelites. He speaks about Jacob and Esau, the twin boys of Isaac and Rebekah. It was customary for inheritances and blessings to be passed

down to the oldest son, but in their case God made a change. He was going to give blessing to the younger son, that would be Jacob, rather than the older. Jacob, not Esau, would be the ancestor of the Israelites and eventually of the Savior. This promise, like the previous one to Abraham, highlights God's grace. It underscores the blessings that God had in store for the patriarchs, for the Israelites, and for all believers.

The promise was not made on the basis of what the children would do. No, the promise was made before the children had any opportunity to do anything good or bad. The promise was made **“in order that God's purpose in election might stand: not by works but by him who calls.”** Here again is a profoundly comforting truth. God did not choose Jacob, or for that matter Isaac or Abraham, because of the things they did. Indeed, the history of all of their lives reveals how thoroughly sinful each was. None of them could have earned the right to be a part of God's family. None of them could have earned the right to be ancestors of Jesus. No, God chose Abraham, and then Isaac, and then Jacob only out of his grace.

And because God had chosen Jacob, Jacob received what God had promised. That's the point that Paul makes by quoting from the book of Malachi. In speaking of Jacob's descendants and those of his brother, God said, **“Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.”** As God promised, so he delivered. The older son Esau did serve the younger, Jacob.

Was this unfair? Paul himself asks the question that he expected his readers might, the question that has formed the theme of our readings and our service today: Is God unjust? Is he unfair? The answer is no. God is perfectly just in all his dealings, and he is also merciful. God himself says, **“I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.”** And so he chooses and calls and forgives many who have done nothing whatsoever to deserve any such treatment. And to maintain his justice, he punishes their sins in the sacrifice of his Son.

And Paul sums up the whole matter with these words: **“It does not, therefore, depend on human desire or effort, but on God's mercy.”** This discussion and this explanation reframes the whole question for us. If we are saved based on our own efforts, or if we are saved based on our own desire, then we could demand fairness and equity in the way that we are treated. But every aspect of our salvation, the choosing, the calling, the forgiving, is due only to God's mercy and his grace and his compassion for us. Thank God that his actions toward us don't rely on human notions of fairness! Thank God that our salvation does not depend on our desire or effort! Thank God that he has graciously carried out his promises to our fathers in the faith, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and sent his Son to be our Savior! Thank God that he has made us a part of this family of faith!

See, it is worth repeating that we don't really want to approach God on the basis of fairness. We don't want salvation to be dependent on our efforts. We don't want it because our efforts have never been enough. From the moment of our conceptions we have been sinners, and our actions, our words, and even our thoughts have been thoroughly sinful. What could we give to God that he should forgive us? What he asks, what he demands, is perfection. And we can never measure up. If we really want what is fair and just, we would be asking for the punishment of hell. That is what we have deserved. That is what justice demands. But that justice was satisfied in Christ who took our place. And God's mercy has given us Christ's perfection.

So what about those times when we witness tragedy and feel that it just isn't fair? What about those times when we ourselves or our family members or friends suffer? What about when the world around us accuses that God is simply not fair or just and start to wonder whether they are right? Well, those times and opportunities should cause us to realize that we are part of a sinful world. They ought to be calls to us to repent. They ought to remind us that because of God's mercy, we have something better to look forward to. We have heaven as our home and will one day live there forever.

That's why we can remind ourselves and share with others that God is merciful to us, unfair in that he does not treat us as we deserve. We depend on his mercy. And we have it.

The Text: Romans 9:6–16 (NIV)

For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. ⁷ Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham's children. On the contrary, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned." ⁸ In other words, it is not the children by physical descent who are God's children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring. ⁹ For this was how the promise was stated: "At the appointed time I will return, and Sarah will have a son."

¹⁰ Not only that, but Rebekah's children were conceived at the same time by our father Isaac. ¹¹ Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad—in order that God's purpose in election might stand: ¹² not by works but by him who calls—she was told, "The older will serve the younger." ¹³ Just as it is written: "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated."

¹⁴ What then shall we say? Is God unjust? Not at all! ¹⁵ For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion."

¹⁶ It does not, therefore, depend on human desire or effort, but on God's mercy.