

September 7, 2014
Pentecost 13

"God's Grace Is Always Amazing"

ROMANS 11:1, 13-15, 29-32

Ask then: Did God reject his people? By no means! 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? 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.

Imagine for a moment that you are part of small group of Jewish Christians who started the Christian congregation in Rome shortly after Pentecost. As your little congregation grows in size it also changes. Soon there are more Gentiles or non Jew Christians in your church than Jewish Christians. How easy it would be to conclude that God cared more about Gentile converts to the Christian faith than Jewish converts. In this letter to the Romans Paul raises the question, "Did God reject his people?" He answers that question with strong words, "By no means!" In the words we just read to you from Romans 11 he wants us to see that God's grace never stops trying to reach people, even people who reject him.

As we heard in our sermon last week, all of us carry in our hearts a deep love and concern for people we know who have never been connected to Christ Jesus their Savior or have lost their connection to him. Some of these disconnected people are very close to us such as members of our own family. Some are good friends and good neighbors. We pray for them continually, and we even wonder at times, "When will God's grace break through into their lives and bring them to Jesus?"

Jesus never gave up on people, even the people who hated him and rejected him. He said of the people in Jerusalem, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings and you were not willing." When we see people we love not responding to God's grace, we need to remember that God's grace is relentless. It pursues people. It reaches out to them in countless different ways.

God's amazing grace makes people jealous for Christ

If you want evidence that God's grace will go to great extremes to reach people who are lost, then look at how the Lord provoked the stubborn Jewish people to jealousy by bringing Gentiles or heathen into the Christian church. Paul writes, "I am talking to you Gentiles. In as much 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."

Paul is known as the Apostle to the Gentiles. Shortly after God's amazing grace brought this persecutor and hater of Christians to saving faith in Christ Jesus, the Lord Jesus said, "This man

is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles." In Romans 1 he says, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes, first for the Jew and then for the Gentile." When Paul came into a new city to talk about Jesus, he first went to the Jewish synagogue. When he was rejected he then went to the Gentiles.

How did the Jewish people react to the large number of Gentiles coming into the Christian church? Some reacted in disdain and disgust and prejudice. How could these dirty, rotten Gentiles follow Christ and even dare to use the Old Testament to prove that Jesus is the longed for Messiah? But always there was the hope that these Jewish people would become jealous of what the Gentiles found in Christ. Paul wanted them to see that they were missing out on the precious blood of Christ that washes us clean from our sins and his beautiful robe of righteousness that covers us.

Could God's amazing grace work the same way today? Yes, it can. I read a story about a man who worked in an automobile plant in Michigan. During the lunch hour he would take a few minutes to pull out his Bible and read. One of his coworkers was impressed by how well he conducted himself and at work and how he faced the trials of life. When this man was going through a devastating divorce, he turned to this Christian friend for help. He wanted what he had. This Christian friend led him into the Bible, took him to worship, and helped him get into a class to learn more about the Bible.

Does the story of the Canaanite woman from our gospel lesson not provoke us to jealousy in a good way? Who of us does not long for such a faith as this woman had? Jesus is walking through the heathen area of Tyre and Sidon. A Canaanite woman, a non Jew, a Palestinian, comes up to him and says, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is suffering terribly from demon possession." Jesus does not answer her, but she keeps crying out after him, "Lord have mercy on me!" Then Jesus says, "I was sent to the lost sheep of Israel." When she hears that word "lost" she knows there is room for her because Jesus loves the lost. She keeps on crying out, "Lord help me." Then Jesus says, "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs." She will not give up. She catches Jesus in his words and says, "Yes, Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table." If Jesus gives me just a crumb of his mercy it is all I need. I want that kind of faith that loves to catch Jesus in his Word and apply them to my life. That's a godly jealousy that the Lord provokes in our lives.

What a huge blessing it is for the Christian church when people who reject Jesus are made jealous and brought to saving faith in him. Paul reflects on how that might even happen among the Jews who would become envious and then be brought to Jesus. "For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?" When the Jewish people rejected Jesus it led to his death on the cross and reconciliation and forgiveness won for all the world. When Jewish people come to believe in Jesus and accept him it is life from the dead. We stand in awe of God's amazing grace every time we see Jewish people brought from death to life in Christ. That's the way God's amazing grace works.

God's amazing grace has mercy on the disobedient

God's amazing grace also finds a way to reach out and have mercy on those who are disobedient. The Jewish people in the Old Testament were disobedient to the Lord even though they were God's chosen people. Paul writes about their disobedience. "As far as the gospel is concerned, they are enemies on your account: but as far as the election is concerned, they are loved on account of the patriarchs for God's gifts and his call are irrevocable." Over and over again we find the Old Testament people turning their backs on the Lord, but that does not discredit how God in his mercy chose these people to be the nation from whom the Savior would come. They had the prophets, but they did not listen to their words. Isaiah begins the chapter on the suffering of the Messiah

in Isaiah 53 with these words, "Who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed." In Isaiah 65 the Lord says, "All day I have held out my hands to an obstinate people."

When you look at the disobedient people in the Old Testament you really have a window into your own heart and life. See the people bowing down to a golden calf or worshiping the god Baal. See yourself allowing the things of this life, even foolish unimportant things, to become more important to you than the Lord. Martin Luther was correct when he said, "The human heart is an idol factory." God in his amazing grace is always reaching out to disobedient and rebellious people. Paul writes, "Just as you who were at one time disobedient to God have now received mercy as a result of their disobedience, so they have now become disobedient in order that they may now receive mercy as a result of God's mercy to you." When Paul was rejected by the Jews, he went to the Gentiles. And what did the Gentiles do when they became believers? They turned right around and reached out to the Jewish people to bring them into the Christian faith.

To help us understand this better let's picture two of us in this congregation going door to door in this neighborhood to tell people about Jesus. We knock on one door and they yell at us because they hate Christians. We knock at the door of the next home and these people who are not Christian then come to believe through the message and the Bible we are sharing with them. They in turn reach out to their neighbors who hate Christians and they have the opportunity to bring the gospel to them. Paul went to the Jews. The Jews rejected and then he went to the Gentiles. The Gentiles then turned around and brought the gospel to the Jews. That's the way God's amazing grace worked in the congregation in Rome and it is still working this way today.

What does God want for all people? According to Paul our God in his amazing grace wants all people to come under his mercy. "For God has bound all men over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all." Think of Adam and Eve after the fall into sin. The Lord came to them. He exposed their disobedience by calling out, "Where are you?" God knew where they were. He wanted them to recognize their disobedience and confess their sin and trust in his mercy.

When mom left the kitchen, her little daughter pushed a chair up to the cupboard and secured a piece of chocolate that she was told not to eat. The mother comes in the room and sees the chocolate on her face. She asks her if she has been eating the chocolate and she says with a rather sweet tone in her voice, "No." The mother then takes a mirror and shows her the chocolate on her face.

The Lord does this here for us in his Word. He binds us over to disobedience by showing us how much we have failed him and fallen short of his glory. In his amazing grace our God keeps pursuing us and showing us where we have failed so we turn to him for mercy and forgiveness in Jesus.

This past week there was a touching story of a little baby about 7 weeks old in England receiving hearing aids that allowed him to hear for the first time in his life. They turned on the hearing aid and at first he was a little startled at the strange sounds. But then he heard the sound of voices speaking to him with kind and loving sounds. A little smile came to his face and then a bigger smile.

That's what the Lord wants for all people including the people we are praying for. He wants to open their ears to hear and their eyes to see the mercy and kindness and love he has for them in Jesus. Amen.