

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, September 11, 2016**

WHAT ABOUT THE JEWS? (2)

Romans 9:6-16

I generally like to keep this a football-free zone, but I will take a moment this morning to acknowledge that the off-season and the pre-season are finally over, and the regular NFL season is upon us. Some of you, I know, are excited about it – more excited maybe than you ought to be. Others of you are indifferent about it at best.

For our hometown Washington Redskins, the season doesn't begin until tomorrow night, when they host the Pittsburgh Steelers – my two favorite NFL teams squaring off against each other in what I hope will be a preview of next February's Super Bowl. I hope both the Steelers and the Redskins make it to Super Bowl LI (51). But I will share with you one of the life lessons I have come to understand and value. Here it is: One of the keys to happiness in life is low expectations. It is not the only key to happiness, and it doesn't apply to everything in life. But it is one key to happiness. And it does apply to football, regardless of your favorite team. If you have low expectations, it will lessen your disappointment if your team does not do well, and it will increase your enjoyment of their success in the event they do well.

Remember: Low expectations is one of the keys to happiness. That's all I have to say about that.

Now let's turn together to Romans 9:6-16. With the high expectation that God will speak to us today, let's give our full and reverent attention now to the reading of God's holy Word.

* * * * *

Last Sunday, as we began to explore Romans 9, we couldn't help but notice Paul's passionate longing for the salvation of the Jewish people. So great were the sorrow and anguish of his heart over the Jews' rejection of the gospel and their refusal to believe in Jesus as the promised Messiah sent from God that Paul wished he could somehow be cut off from Christ and cast into hell in order that they could be saved (Romans 9:2-3). That is how deeply he cared about his Jewish brothers and sisters (9:3-4).

The truth, though, is that neither Paul nor anyone else who ever lived – except Jesus – could trade places with them. Only Jesus could suffer and die in their place. Only Jesus could suffer and die in *our* place. Only Jesus could take the curse upon Himself that *we* deserve. Only Jesus could trade places with *us*. Which is exactly what He did in His suffering and death on the cross.

We also took note of eight specific privileges or advantages that accrued to the benefit of the Jews in their “most-favored nation” status with God. These blessings, unfortunately, became a source of pride in the life of the Jewish people. They took enormous pride in their ancestry,

in their identity as the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They viewed themselves as morally and religiously superior to everybody else. They considered themselves entitled to the special favor and blessings of God. They knew they were a chosen people, but they seemed to forget that their chosen-ness wasn't about them so much as it was about God and His sovereign choice of them.

Moses had said to them in Deuteronomy 7: “(Y)ou are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be His people. His treasured possession. The LORD did not set His affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the LORD loved you” (Deuteronomy 7:6-8a) that He brought the people of Israel out of Egypt, planted them in the Promised Land, and gave them all the blessings they all too often took for granted.

It was not about their worthiness. It was about God's sovereign love and choice. But many of the Jews forfeited the gift of salvation God offered them through faith in His Son Jesus Christ. They forfeited it through their unbelief. Through their rejection of Jesus and His saving work. Which, Paul points out, is a tell-tale sign of the truth that, no matter who you are, your ancestry can't save you. Your family tree can't save you. It all comes down to Jesus and what you do with Him.

TWO ILLUSTRATIONS OF GOD'S ELECTING CHOICE

Now, starting in verse 6, Paul gives two examples from Israel's history to illustrate the truth that not all of Abraham's descendants were the beneficiaries of God's sovereign, electing grace. The first example involves Abraham and his sons Ishmael and Isaac. Abraham and Sarah were childless into their old age. Abraham was already 75 years old when God promised to give him a son. The Bible says that “Abraham believed the LORD, and He credited it to him as righteousness” (Genesis 15:6). He believed God, in spite of the fact that he was a member of the Mesopotamian equivalent of the AARP. Ten more years passed without a son, and Abraham and Sarah decided it was time to try plan B. Sarah suggested that Abraham sleep with her maid Hagar in order to build a family through her. Abraham complied. Hagar became pregnant and bore Abraham a son, whom he named Ishmael (Genesis 16). Abraham was 86 when Ishmael was born. But Ishmael was not the son God had promised to Abraham. Thirteen years later, when Abraham was 99 years old, God renewed His promise of a son to be born to Abraham and Sarah (Genesis 17:1, 15-16). By the miraculous power of God, Sarah conceived and gave birth to Isaac, just as God promised (Genesis 21:1-6). All of which Paul uses to make the point that “it is not the natural children” such as Ishmael, “but the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's (true) offspring” (Romans 9:8).

From Ishmael and Isaac Paul then turns to Esau and Jacob, the sons of Isaac and Rebekah (9:10-13). Just as God distinguished between Ishmael and Isaac with regard to His electing choice, so He also distinguished between Esau (the firstborn) and Jacob (his twin brother). Before they were born, while still in their mother's womb, before they had done anything to commend or disqualify themselves before God, before their characters had been forged

through the experiences of life, God chose Jacob, the younger brother, to be the one through whom His covenant blessings would be passed on. It wasn't because Jacob was morally superior to or more deserving than Esau. Neither of them was particularly deserving. Neither was deserving at all. Just as none of us is deserving of God's electing grace. As I have already said, it is not about us and our worthiness. It is not about us and our character, not about our acts of mercy, not about our sacrificial service to God or society. It is not about us. It is all about God and His sovereign, loving choice.

God's choice of Isaac (not Ishmael) and of Jacob (not Esau) did not originate in them or in anything they either did or might have done. It had its origin in God. It had its origin in His loving design and gracious purpose in election (9:11). As it says in *The Message*: "What God did in (the case of Jacob and Esau) made it perfectly plain that His purpose is not a hit-or-miss thing dependent on what we do or don't do, but a sure thing determined by His decision, flowing steadily from His initiative" (Romans 9:11-12, *MSG*).

Do you see that? The working out of God's plan for the Jews – and for us – is not accidental. Nor is it arbitrary or capricious, as if there is no rhyme or reason to what God does. The working out of His plan is purposeful, wise (if mysterious), just, merciful, and loving. Always.

JACOB I LOVED, BUT ESAU I HATED?

Verse 13 is not easy to digest. Here Paul quotes from the Old Testament Book of Malachi, where the Lord says: "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated" (Malachi 1:2-3). Did God really hate Esau? Far from hating him, the Bible indicates that God actually blessed Esau with considerable wealth, land, and descendants of his own (see Genesis 36).

Sometimes in the Bible the word "hate" literally means "hate." Sometimes, though, it is used in more of a figurative sense to highlight a contrast or preference. For example, in Luke 14:16, Jesus says: "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters, - yes, even his own life – he cannot be my disciple." Is Jesus saying that we must literally hate those nearest and dearest to us in order to be His disciples? In order to be counted among His true followers? No. That is not what He is saying. That would contradict the consistent message of the Bible about our family relationships. What Jesus is saying is that our love for Him must be so much deeper and stronger than any other human love that our love for our husband or wife, children or parents or siblings will seem miniscule in comparison. Jesus is *not* preaching hate!

John Stott says the verse ("Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated") "sounds shocking in Christian ears and cannot possibly be taken literally. Although there is such an emotion as 'holy hatred', it is directed only to evildoers and would not be appropriate" in this context. "So several suggestions for softening the statement have been proposed." One suggestion is that "the reference is less to the individuals Jacob and Esau than to the peoples they fathered, the Israelites and the Edomites, and to their historical destinies. Others" – John Calvin among them – "interpret the sentence as meaning 'I chose Jacob and rejected Esau.' But," says Stott, "the third option seems best, which is to understand the antithesis" between love and hate "as

a Hebrew idiom for preference.” Which is how Jesus uses it in Luke 14:26, the verse we already mentioned. Behind the quotation from Malachi, though, is the idea that God did indeed put Jacob above Esau, choosing to carry out His electing, redeeming purpose through the one and not the other (Stott, *The Message of Romans*, 267-268).

SOVEREIGN IN MERCY AND COMPASSION

Does this mean that God is unjust in the way He deals with people? Did God treat the descendants of Ishmael and the descendants of Esau unfairly in His election of Isaac and Jacob and their descendants to be His covenant people? That is the objection Paul anticipates in verse 14. But his answer is crisp and unequivocal. He says, in the Greek, “*Me genoito!*” It is an expression that can be translated in a variety of ways. The NIV has: “Not at all!” The ESV reads: “By no means!” Others say: “God forbid!” I like the way *The Message* expresses it: “Not so fast, please.” Still another way of saying it is : “No way!”

In the next verse (9:15), Paul answers the charge that God is unjust by declaring the mercy and compassion of God, which gets to the heart of God’s electing purpose, His sovereign choice of a redeemed people of His very own. We are all natural-born sinners. We are all guilty in God’s sight and deserving of condemnation by God. No one who has ever lived (except for Jesus) deserves to be saved. Yet God, in His sovereign love and loving sovereignty, chooses to have mercy on sinners like you and me who don’t deserve it and never will. He chooses to show compassion to people like us who rightly deserve to spend eternity in hell, completely cut off from His love and favor.

Why does God choose some and not others to be the objects of His sovereign mercy and grace? Only God knows.

Why has God chosen to have mercy on sinners like you and me? I only know it is not because we deserve it. Because we don’t. And we never will.

The truly amazing thing about God’s electing purpose, about His sovereignty in salvation, is not that some people are saved while others are not. The truly amazing thing is that God chooses to save anybody at all. Because nobody deserves it. You don’t. I don’t. None of the heroes of the Christian faith deserve it. And nobody ever will.

THE AUDACITY OF GOD’S MERCY AND COMPASSION

President Obama wrote a book ten years ago that became a *New York Times* and Amazon.com bestseller around the time he decided to run for the Presidency of the United States. The title of the book was *The Audacity of Hope*. He was seeking to inspire America to a new and renewed sense of hope, which became one of the themes of his campaign.

I want you to catch at least a glimpse today of the audacity – the radical boldness – of God’s mercy and grace and compassion for sinners who can never even come close to being good enough or doing enough to deserve it. Of course, the very nature of mercy and grace is that

they are undeserved. If it is deserved, it is no longer mercy. If you earn it, it is no longer grace.

The audacious, astonishing, world-changing truth is that God chooses to love sinners. God chooses to have mercy on sinners. God chooses to show compassion to sinners. God chooses to lavish grace on sinners. In His sovereign love and power, God chooses to save sinners. His electing purpose and love extend to all who will come to Him in humble repentance and trusting faith. Both Jews and non-Jews alike.

To the penitent tax-collector who cries out: “God have mercy on me, a sinner”, God shows mercy (Luke 18:13-14). To the prodigal who returns home after running from God and wasting his life, God shows mercy (Luke 15:11-24). To the woman caught in the act of adultery, Jesus shows mercy (John 8:1-11). To the dying thief on the cross, Jesus shows mercy (Luke 23:39-43). Sovereign mercy. Not because He has to, but because He chooses to do so.

It is not about your ancestry. It is not about your character. It is not about your effort. It is not about your resume or your reputation. It is about who God is and the effect of His sovereign love, mercy, and grace on your life. Do not miss out on it! Open your heart and life to receive it. To receive *Him!* More and more of Him, and more and more of His mercy, grace, and love.

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.