

Mystery and Mercy

Maybe you would never say it, but have you ever thought that a certain person (or even a whole people group) is too opposed, too hostile, too apathetic towards God to ever come to faith in Jesus? Do you ever think that a certain person is beyond the reach of God's mercy? For the Gentile believers in Rome, it was easy for them to have such thoughts about the Jews. But in the passage we are looking at today, Paul describes God's mystery and God's mercy to continue to argue (as he has been doing in chapter 11) that God is not finished with the Jews. As we consider these verses, may they help us think about those individuals or people groups that we tend to think have no chance with God.

Opening Discussion: Was there ever a time in your life when someone might have thought that you had little chance with God? If so, explain.

Read Romans 11:25-32

1. What sticks out to you in these verses?
2. How does Paul describe the mystery that was revealed to him?
3. In what sense might the Gentiles be wise in their own estimation (NIV = "conceited") if they don't understand the mystery (v. 25)?
4. What does Paul teach about God's mercy?
5. How should what Paul writes in these verses (25-32) help shape the Gentile believers' view of the Jews?
6. Brian suggested that verse 32 serves to summarize the book of Romans. How so?

Brian said:

As we think about God's revealed mystery, I think there is a principle here that we can apply to our situation and how we tend to view those individuals and groups who seem so unlikely to ever come to Christ. The Jews never would have guessed that God's plans included the Gentiles. And the Gentile believers in Paul's day never would have guessed that at some point in the future vast numbers of Jews would come to faith. God sometimes does stuff that we would never expect in matters of salvation. . . .What seems impossible to us in matters of salvation isn't impossible with God. And so when you think about that individual or that people group who seem so unlikely to come to Christ, you really don't know. And the fact that God sometimes does stuff that we would never expect in human lives to turn them to Himself should move us to keep praying for them; to keep loving them; to keep pointing them to Christ. We can hold onto the hope that God sometimes does that which seems impossible to us in matters of salvation.

7. Are there any individuals in your life (family, friends, co-workers, etc.) or people groups for whom you need to remember that God sometimes does stuff that we would never expect in matters of salvation? If so, explain.

Brian said:

When we understand that we were shut up in disobedience and were in desperate need of God's mercy, it helps us not be arrogant towards those who don't know God. This is specifically Paul's point here with the Gentiles. And if we can remember that we needed mercy, it can help us love others. Here's how Tim Keller describes how mercy helps us love:

The person who knows that he received mercy while an undeserving enemy of God will have a heart of love for even . . . the most ungrateful and difficult persons. When a Christian sees prostitutes, alcoholics, prisoners, drug addicts, . . . the homeless, the refugees, he knows that he is looking in a mirror. Perhaps the Christian spent all of his life as a respectable middle-class person. No matter. He thinks: 'Spiritually, I was just like these people, though physically and socially I never was where they are now. They are outcasts. I was an outcast.'

(Keller, *Ministries of Mercy*, 60)

Paul's point is that we were all outcasts. We were all in need of God's mercy. And by remembering our desperate need for God's mercy, it can help us love others. That person who seems so far from God really is like you.

8. What do you think about this idea that if we can remember our own need for God's mercy that it can help us love the most difficult persons? How have you experienced the truth of this in the past?
9. What do you sense is the main thing God is saying to you through this portion of Romans?