

God's Mercy on Full Display
Romans 9:23-29

In July my three brothers and I took our first annual “brothers trip.” We went to Nashville and did AirBNB, Uber, roller derby, and the Country Music Hall of Fame. We mostly sat around and told stories. And we took this picture:



Whenever we get together we strike the same pose and take this same picture: Mikey, Jeffy, Stevie, and Tommy. Every time I see this picture I think of the song, “Clowns to the left of me, jokers to the right. . .”

I’m guessing that when you look at that picture, you know we’re brothers. A couple years ago my younger brother (Tommy) and I were walking into Home Depot back in Hattiesburg, MS when a lady asked us, “Are the two of you twins?” The fact that I looked THAT much like Tommy was a disturbing thought. But that’s how it goes: people with the same parents take on the family resemblance.

This is also true in the family of God. Those who have God as their Heavenly Father take on the family resemblance. We were never meant to be stealth Christians; we were always meant to be a living example of what it looks like to know God. It’s not that we become clones; there is a fascinating type of diversity in the body of Christ that should be celebrated. But in the deepest ways we are alike: we have same the identity in Jesus Christ; we have the same mission of making disciples of all the nations; we have the same Spirit that produces in us the same fruit (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, etc.). When people see us together, they should recognize the family resemblance and say, “Those people have the same Father.”

Today’s passage highlights one aspect of this family resemblance: our common experience of mercy. It points out that God’s mercy should be on full display in our lives. People should look at us and be amazed at how merciful God is. Last week Brian taught from Romans 9:14-24. In verses 23 and 24 Paul explained why God is so patient,

withholding judgment from those who deserve it. This is a complicated sentence, so we'll take it slowly:

23 And He did so to make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory, 24 even us, whom He also called, not from among Jews only, but also from among Gentiles.

Paul is describing one of God's long-term commitments. For thousands of years, God has patiently withheld His judgment so that He might "make known the riches of His glory." God has a long-term commitment to making known just how glorious He really is. God actually cares about His reputation. He is not content when people think He is a light-weight. He wants people to know that He is weighty - which is the core idea behind "glory."

God displays His glory in many ways. Psalm 19:1 says that "the heavens are declaring the glory of the Lord." That's why people post so many pictures of sunsets and rainbows and storm clouds: creation reveals the glory of God - that He is powerful and radiant and beautiful and creative.

But in this passage Paul says that God is committed to making known His glory through "vessels/objects of mercy." In other words, people see how glorious God really is when they see how merciful He has been. When God lavishes His mercy on someone who really deserves His wrath, that person displays God's glory. When you see God's mercy you see God's glory. [By the way, something similar is true for us as humans; Proverbs 19:11 says that "it is a person's glory to overlook a transgression."]

In verse 24 Paul restates who he's talking about when he mentioned "objects of mercy" when he says "**even us**" - both Jews and Gentiles whom God has called into a relationship with Himself. Paul is saying that **People should see how glorious God is when they see His mercy on full display in our lives**. God basically says, "If you want to know how glorious I really am, look at My people. Look at the mercy they have received."

Today as we work our way through verses 25 through 29, consider your own experience with God's mercy. Ultimately this passage challenges us to accept that God wants to display His glory through us. This conviction that God's mercy should be on full display in our lives will have numerous implications for how we think and speak and live. We'll talk about some of those implications at the end of this message.

Remember that in Romans 9-11 Paul is wrestling with the fact that so few Jews had believed in Jesus. Even though Jesus was Jewish and the original disciples were Jewish, the church across the Roman Empire was largely Gentile. Paul's opponents argued that if Paul's message about Jesus were true, God could be accused of all sorts of malpractice: He didn't keep His word, He isn't just, He isn't fair. Paul argues in these chapters that the Jews' unbelief and the Gentiles' faith is fully compatible with the history of Israel.

In verses 25 and 26 Paul shows how the history of Israel foreshadowed the mercy that God would pour out upon the Gentiles.

God's Mercy and the Gentiles' Faith (*Romans 9:25-26; see also Hosea 2:23 and 1:10*) In these verses Paul quotes twice from the book of Hosea. Hosea was a prophet who lived in the northern kingdom of Israel in 700 b.c. Remember that after King David died, ten of the tribes broke off to form the northern kingdom of Israel; two tribes (Judah and Benjamin) formed the southern kingdom of Judah.

God sent Hosea to confront the northern kingdom of Israel about their unfaithfulness. God actually commanded Hosea to do something quite shocking in order to communicate to Israel the depths of their unfaithfulness. God commanded Hosea to marry a prostitute to symbolize how the nation had “played the harlot” with other Gods. His marriage and his children would be an object lesson about Israel’s unfaithfulness. Hosea married a prostitute named Gomer and had children with her. The children were given names that reflected Israel’s unfaithfulness. One was named *Lo-ruhamah* which means “no compassion,” and another was named *Lo-ammi* which means “not my people.” Every time the people saw these kids they were reminded that because of their unfaithfulness they were not God’s people and they were not experiencing God’s compassion. But the message of Hosea was that **God was still pursuing them**. In chapter 3 we read that even though Gomer cheated on Hosea, he took her back to demonstrate that even though the people had cheated on YHWH other gods, God would take them back.

In verse 25 Paul quotes Hosea 2:23 somewhat loosely (instead of word for word).

25 As He says also in Hosea,
“I will call those who were not My people, ‘My people,’
And her who was not beloved, ‘beloved.’”

God promises that one day He would renew His relationship with the ten northern tribes of Israel. Whereas in Hosea’s day they were not His people and they were not experiencing His compassion/love, God would call them to Himself. Nobody would have accused God of being unjust or unfair if He had said to Israel, “You’ve cheated on me so many times that I’m done with you forever.” Nobody would have blamed Hosea if he had said something similar to his wife when she cheated on him. But God is so rich in mercy that He says, “I will call those who were not My people, ‘My people,’ and her who was not beloved, ‘beloved.’”

In verse 26 Paul quotes verbatim from Hosea 1:10.

26 “And it shall be that in the place where it was said to them, ‘you are not My people,’
There they shall be called sons of the living God.”

The “place” mentioned here is probably a reference to the people being sent off into exile. Even in **that** place - the place where it was obvious that they were not

experiencing protection as the people of God - **there** they shall be called “sons of the living God.” In that culture, being a son meant you were identified with your father and would inherit everything your father owned. God’s mercy would be so extravagant, so glorious, that people who had betrayed Him, rebelled against Him, cheated on Him would be called “sons of the living God.” YHWH was often called “the living God” to distinguish Him from the gods of the nations made from stones and wood. The living God could think and speak and act in power. Unworthy people would be called sons of the one, true living God!

For Paul, the plot of Hosea solidified the principle that God had a longstanding commitment to showing mercy to people who didn’t deserve it. That’s what God had promised the northern kingdom of Israel in Hosea’s day. And that is what God was bringing about among the Gentiles in Paul’s day. The fact that so many Gentiles believed in Jesus and entered into a new covenant relationship with the God of Israel was consistent with what God had done in ancient Israel. God has always been committed to lavishing mercy on the most unlikely people.

This spiritual reality never makes a person arrogant or self-absorbed; it humbles us to the core. As believers in Jesus we live our lives with the realization that nobody could bring a charge against God is He had left us in our sins and given us what we deserved. Because God is so glorious, He has lavished His mercy upon us in the most extravagant way. Even though we were spiritual outsiders, we are now sons and daughters of the Living God.

Peter made this same point in 1 Peter 2:9-10. As I read these verses, consider how you and I would live our lives if we fully accepted this as our calling and our identity. Peter says to Gentiles:

9 But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; 10 for you once were not a people, but now you are the people of God; you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

Like Paul in Romans 9, Peter challenges us to see ourselves as people who put God’s mercy on full display. Our claim to fame is not who we are and what we accomplish. Our claim to fame is what God has accomplished in us. God has called us out of darkness into His marvelous light. God has lavished his mercy upon us in ways we never could have anticipated.

The history of Israel foreshadowed that God would be merciful to people beyond the boundaries of Israel. But in verses 27 through 29 Paul shows how the history of Israel also foreshadowed how God would show mercy to Israel in spite of her unbelief.

God’s Mercy and Israel’s Unbelief (Romans 9:27-29; see also Isaiah 10:22-23 and 1:9) In these verses Paul quotes twice from the book of Isaiah. Whereas Hosea had prophesied in the northern kingdom of Israel, Isaiah prophesied in the southern kingdom

of Judah during the Exile. Paul first quotes from Isaiah 10:22-23; the emphasis is upon how few within Israel would actually be saved.

27 Isaiah cries out concerning Israel, "Though the number of the sons of Israel be like the sand of the sea, it is the remnant that will be saved; 28 for the Lord will execute His word on the earth, thoroughly and quickly."

God had promised Abraham that his descendants would become a great nation - as numerous as the stars in the sky and the sand on the seashore (Genesis 22:17). By Isaiah's day the nation had indeed been "fruitful and multiplied." But very few of the people were faithful to God. True to His character, God would not reject the people entirely. In His mercy a "remnant" would be saved. Normally a remnant is a scrap of cloth that is throw away. But unbelief was so prevalent in Isaiah's day that only a remnant would be save - brought back from Exile and restored to full fellowship with God. This confirms once again what Paul had written in verse 6: "They are not all Israel who are descended from Israel"; being a physical descendant of Israel never guaranteed salvation.

In verse 29 Paul quotes from Isaiah 1:9.

29 And just as Isaiah foretold,
"Unless the Lord of Sabaoth had left to us a posterity,
We would have become like Sodom, and would have resembled Gomorrah."

God's merciful restraint was the only reason they weren't wiped out completely. In His mercy God preserved a "posterity" (literally "a seed"). Since God had promised Abraham, "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Genesis 11:3), He preserved a seed/posterity so that the Messiah could be born of the tribe of Judah in the promised Land. God is a God who keeps His Word.

Paul understood that the unbelief of the Jews in the first century was consistent with the unbelief of the Jews in Isaiah's day 800 years earlier. He was heartbroken over the fact that only a remnant believed. But God *had* left them a remnant. Paul himself was part of the Jewish remnant that was saved. Instead of focusing on what God hadn't done and accusing God of not keeping His word or of being unjust and unfair, Paul noticed what God had done: God had preserved a remnant as "objects of mercy." When people saw the mercy shown this remnant, they were supposed to marvel at the glory of God.

A couple of weeks ago I told you my mother's story of being raised Jewish and coming to faith in Christ in her 20s. Using the categories of today's passage, we would say that she is part of this remnant that God has saved. It turns out that God never wavered in His longterm commitment to "make known the riches of His glory" through "objects of mercy" - "even us, whom He also called, not from among Jews only, but also from among Gentiles."

I'd like to challenge all of us who believe in Jesus to accept this simple truth: ***People should see how glorious God is when they see His mercy on full display in our***

lives. Do you accept that God's reputation in this world is bound up with our experience of His mercy? Do you accept that God says, "If you want to know how glorious I really am, look at My people. Notice how I have lavished mercy upon them in Christ Jesus"?

As I mentioned earlier, if we accept this truth we will be humbled to the core. Instead of drawing attention to ourselves and our accomplishments, we will continually point people to what God has done. When Paul told his story, he did this very thing. One example is found in 1 Timothy 1:15–16.

15 It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all. 16 Yet for this reason I found mercy, so that in me as the foremost, Jesus Christ might demonstrate His perfect patience as an example for those who would believe in Him for eternal life.

Paul never got tired of telling people about the mercy he had received. He saw himself as an example for others who would believe. He accepted that he was an "object of mercy" - that the mercy of God should be on full display in his life.

In light of everything we've discussed this morning, I'd like to encourage you to **think through ways that you are an "object of God's mercy."** If this is our calling, it seems to me that we should accept it and understand it. Think about **past mercy you've received.** If you're a follower of Christ, think of the mercy God showed you in drawing you to Himself. Like Paul's statement in 1 Timothy 1, your story is an example for others who need Christ. Think about ways that God has shown

Think about **the mercy you need this week.** If you and I didn't have any weaknesses or temptations, we wouldn't need mercy and grace, would we? We would be self-sufficient and wouldn't need God's help. But since we have so many weaknesses and since we face so many temptations, we desperately need mercy and grace. And so (as we're urged in Hebrews 4:16), we "draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."

After you and I accept and understand that we are objects of mercy, our assignment is to live transparent lives. Our assignment is to let other people see the mercy we've received. We do this through our words (we talk about it). We do this through our actions (people who've received mercy show mercy). When we live as objects of mercy, people see the family resemblance and conclude, "Their God is glorious."