

God's Mercy

Romans 9:15

Sermon Transcript by Reverend Ernest O'Neill

Let's pray. Dear Lord, you intend every morning to be fresh like that. We thank you that you want us to wake up every morning with joy in our heart. Lord, we thank you that we can wake up every morning and use your dear Word to ward against the darkness and the oppression of Satan as we say, "This is the day which the Lord has made; we will rejoice and be glad in it. [Psalm 118:24] Thank you Father that we can do that day by day in Jesus' name. Amen.

Let's talk about God's mercy and talk about it in connection with Romans 9:15; "For he says to Moses, 'I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.'" I'd ask you, have you ever questioned God? When your Mom or Dad died, or a friend died in circumstances that you didn't think were altogether fair, or something happened to you that you didn't think was fair, have you ever questioned God?

Last Sunday we discussed that question, and we said that yes, there was a sense in which you could question God. If you were coming to God and saying, "Lord, I don't understand why this has happened," that was a legitimate way to question God. Jesus himself, you remember, said to Nicodemus, "You must be born again," and Nicodemus said "How can a man enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" And Jesus said, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and you don't understand these things?" Jesus obviously felt that Nicodemus should understand them.

There's a place in the Bible where Jesus says, "I have not called you servants, because a servant doesn't know what his master is doing, but I have called you friends." So Jesus obviously implied that we have a right and a need to understand our Father's nature, and to understand why God does things. We said that we believed that God is the Father of Jesus Christ and that He is our Maker, not because we dissected His mind and examined it and lined it up against every other philosophy we'd ever heard of and proved that it is right. But we believe in God because of the existence of the universe, the order and design of the universe, the existence of our own personalities, the order and design of our minds, the reality of Jesus' dealings with his disciples in the first century, of His life, and of His death and resurrection. That's why we believe that the Father of Jesus is God and our creator, not because we agree with everything that His great mind contemplates, because we don't know everything that His mind contemplates. It's right to come to Him with an attitude of believing and say, "We believe in you, but could you explain why you've put me in this job, or why you've given me these abilities?" So you can see that you can believe in God and question Him in a spirit of believing and humility.

We said the illegitimate questioning of God is if you approach him the same way as the person in last week's verse, Romans 9:14. In that verse, you'll remember, the person said that God appointed the younger son, Jacob, to inherit his father's authority as a patriarch in Israel instead of Esau. Then he says in Romans 9:14, "What shall we say then, is there injustice on God's part?" That's a way that it's not right to question God if you say you believe in him. There are loved ones who don't care about God, and of course they can question him all they want. But if you say you believe in God, then you can't even when the little one dies of cancer, even when you lose your job, even when divorce is staring you in the face. You can't go to God and say, "Now look here, is this fair, what you're doing to me?" You can't, because that's the attitude of the proud sceptic, who not only

puts himself on an equality with God, but actually puts, himself above God and says, "Let's examine this action of yours and let's find out if it's fair. Let's find some absolute standard against which you and I, God, may examine your action."

Now that is an illegitimate way to question God if you say you believe in him. You can't question him in that challenging, accusing, doubting way. Because really what you're saying is, "Well, I kind of believe in you, but I'm not sure of what you did here, and if you really did this, I'm not sure that I do believe in you." So, really what you're saying I don't believe in you. Moreover, the dumb thing about it is this; what you're saying is, "Now I want to find out if what you did here in this situation is fair, and just; so let's find some absolute standard and compare it with that." Of course the dumb thing about that is when you say the Father of Jesus Christ is God; you're saying he is the absolute. If you say you believe such and such a person is God, you're really saying he is the final moral authority in the Universe. He is the final, absolute standard. So if you come to God and say, "Now let's examine this action of yours and see whether it's fair and right or not," then God has a right to say to you, "All right, but against what standard are you going to examine my action and me behavior?" Then you say, "Well, I'm going to compare it with the standards of balanced humanists." Then God has a right to say to you, "Then that's your God. If you want to compare me against the attitude and the opinion of the balanced humanists, then they are your absolute standard, and they are your God." You have to see that and be intellectually honest about it.

That's what Paul says to us this morning. He really is quite aggressive. He says that if you're asking whether it was right for God to appoint the younger son, Jacob to inherit his father's authority and position in Israel instead of the older son, will you see this: That God is the one who has the right not only to pre-design Jacob to take that position and pre-design Esau not to have it, but he has the right to determine the conditions which we have to fulfill to live with him forever. So, far from Paul attempting to justify God's actions he says, "Wait a minute. God has not only the right to send us to do certain jobs, but he has also the right to decide the kind of people who will live with him forever, in love and peace."

Now, that's really what this verse says, just look at it and you'll see it plainly - Romans 9:15; "For He says to Moses, 'I will have mercy on whom I have mercy and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.'" You know we have a tendency in our democratic way that when someone asks us, "Now wait a moment. Is it fair of God to send me to this earth to do this job that I'm doing? Is that fair?" We have a tendency, you know, to retreat and say, "Well, wait a moment, I'll try to explain it to you; I'll try to explain the advantages and the disadvantages and I'll try to justify God's action to you." In a way, old Paul brings a fresh breeze of sanity and good sense to the whole question. He says, "Look, back off. God hasn't only the right to determine what job you ought to do here on earth because he made you and knows you better than anybody else. But God has also the right to determine the people who will live with him after this life is over in heaven." That is what Paul is saying.

Loved ones, before we get into the details of explaining the verse, do you see that you didn't elect God? I didn't elect God. We can't throw him out at the next election. He isn't subject to the Nielsen ratings. It doesn't matter whether you like him or don't like him. Once you become convinced that Jesus is really a supernatural man who destroyed death and broke the barrier between this world and what is beyond it, once you decide that and therefore decide that he is speaking truth, and that his Father is God who created us all, then you're in the position where you have to admit that he has the right to do whatever he wants. He has the right to determine what he wants to determine in

this Universe.

Many of us are poor nervous wrecks today because we don't see that. We don't see that God is the one who is dependent only on Himself. No one created Him. His existence is not subject to anyone else's permission. He is absolutely self-existent. And He can do whatever He pleases. At last when you admit that, you have a blessed fixed point in the midst of all the relativity and change that we see around us. That might come to you as a shock at first because you know we are so opposed to unquestioned authority, but there is blessing and health in that position. Once you accept that there is a God who made all this, then if you follow-through intellectually, you must believe he has the right and the might to do whatever he wants.

That is what God prompted Job to write. It's the kind of answer that God gave to Job as Job questioned Him in Job 40:6 "Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind, 'Gird up your loins: like a man, I will question you. You declare to me. Will you even put me in the wrong? Will you condemn me that you may be justified? Have you an arm like God? And can you thunder with a voice like his? Can you deck yourself with majesty and dignity, clothe yourself with glory and splendor? Can you pour forth the overflowings of your anger and look on everyone that is proud and abase them? Can you look at everyone that is proud and bring them down low, and tread on the wicked where they stand, hide them all in the dust together and bind their faces in the world below? Then will I also acknowledge to you that your own right hand can give you victory. Behold, Behemoth, which I made as I made you. He eats grass like an ox. Behold his strength is in his loins and his power in the muscles of his belly. He makes his tail stiff like a cedar. The sinews of his thighs are knit together. His bones are tubes of bronze. His limbs are like bars of iron. He is the first of the works of God. Let him who made him bring me his sword.'" God says, "Look, I made you all, and I made this whole world. I have the right and the might to determine what will be done here." So, whether you like it or not, the only attitude we as creatures can take as we come to God, is "Lord, will you show us the kind of people you want with you for eternity." We can't argue with God. We can only come to Him with that kind of attitude.

Now, I'd point out to you that we're trying to escape from the authority-questioning 60's, when we were right to question authority. In that case it seemed that authority was abusing our moral conviction about the war, and it was right to question. It is always right to think, but it is important to see that if there is not a final authority we cannot question in this universe, then it's every man and woman for him or herself. It's us all doing what is right in our own eyes. God says in this verse, "Listen, I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion."

So let's now interpret what God is saying to us. John Calvin was a dear and a great theologian, and it's important to see that. He brought us many insights into God. But one of the greatest misconceptions he brought to us men and women about our God was based on this verse, that is Romans 9:15. Calvin came to this verse, he read it to his congregation, "For He says to Moses, 'I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion,' and Calvin then said, "This means that before you were born, God would designed some of you to go to heaven and some of you to go to hell, irrespective of what you would do in this life, of what you would choose, or of the kind of people you would be." That's what he said. It's called double predestination when God says, "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy," He means, "I'll pick them out. I will predestine some of you to go to heaven and live with me in peace and joy forever, and I will predestine some of you to go to hell and live in the darkness and selfishness that Paul Sartre outlined in his play "No Exit."

So God will determine who individually will live with him forever, and who individually will live in loneliness and frustration forever. That was Calvin's interpretation; that's what people mean when they talk about predestination. It means that God just chooses some of us. Some of us, according to Calvin, are going to go to heaven whatever we do, and some of us are going to go to hell whatever we do. Now at times he would suggest that the good ones will probably lead reasonably good lives, but because God makes them and the bad ones will live reasonably bad lives, because God makes them.

Of course, the whole interpretation runs counter to everything else in this dear book. That's the problem with predestination. It runs counter to a basic verse like John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever"---and that's a magnificent word, "whosoever". It's an English pronoun that means whoever wants---"whosoever believeth in him shall not perish but have everlasting life." Not just the people that God determines will believe in him, but anybody, "whosoever believeth in him." Of course, Calvin's doctrine of predestination contradicts that "whosoever" every time it appears in Scripture.

There's a verse, you remember, where Jesus says, "If any man wants to come after me"---any man---"let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me." But any man. Jesus says "if any man wants". It doesn't matter who you are, if you want to, it's up to you. Then there are great verses in the Old Testament where God says "Choose ye this day whom you will serve. If God, then follow him, if Baal then follow him." He implies that it is our choice that determines where we will spend life after death. It is up to us. It is not up to God making some decision in eternity that we can't detect. It is up to us.

You have many verses like that where God implies we have freedom of choice to do what we want in regard to him. It isn't that we're predestined. It isn't because God has made us some way, or that Skinner has determined us. [B. F. Skinner, behaviour psychologist, 1904-1990] It is because we are free to reject God or accept him. Jesus teaches it very strongly in the verse that says "O, Jerusalem, Jerusalem! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not." [Matthew 23:37, Luke 13:34] That's the Son of our Creator saying, "I wanted you to come to me, but you wouldn't." Of course that teaches plainly that it doesn't matter what God wants; if we don't want it too, then he cannot bring it about in our lives. So really, loved ones, you can't interpret this verse as double predestination.

What's the normal interpretation? The normal interpretation is this: I will have mercy on the kind of people on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on the kind of people on whom I have compassion. That's the normal interpretation throughout all denominations, all theologians, except for extreme predestinarians. The verse means God is saying, "I will determine the kind of people on whom I will have mercy, and I will determine the kind of people on whom I will have compassion." That has resulted in myriad interpretations. The Muslims say God will have mercy on the people who follow certain patterns in their ritual and their worship, those who bow down to Mecca so many times a day. Those God will have mercy on. Then, the churchgoers say God will have mercy on those who attend church regularly, that's whom God will have mercy on and compassion on. The Transcendental Meditation people say no, no, God will have mercy on those who enter into passivity. The Social Gospelers and the social activists say, no, God will have mercy on those who lose themselves in activity. The Fundamentalists say God will have mercy on those who believe right. And the Charismatic's say no, God will have mercy on those who speak in tongues. So there are as many interpretations of the people on whom God will have mercy as there are philosophies and religions. On what kind of people will God have mercy?

Let's look at the verse and see the heart of it, because it is good when you look into the Greek and look at the real meaning of Romans 9:15. do you notice the tenses of the verbs are different? For he says to Moses, 'I will have mercy on whom I have mercy...' I will have mercy, that's the future tense---on whom I have mercy, that's the present tense. So God says, I will have mercy on whom I have mercy. In other words, God's saying, "Look, I can't help myself. I have mercy on certain people. It's my nature to have certain people whom I regard as my friends and my children, and to them I will express my mercy.

So God is really saying, it's my nature that determines my actions. I will have mercy on the people to whom I have mercy at this moment. I just naturally have mercy on certain kinds of people and to them I will express my mercy. God's action is determined by the kind of person he is, by his nature. Indeed you can see it yourself if you follow the whole movement of the verse, because the whole movement of the verse is from the outward action to the inward nature. "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy", is the out-ward expression, and what does that come from? "I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." It comes from the compassion in his heart. So the verse is saying, God will express mercy in relationship to the compassion that is in his heart. In other words, in relationship to his own nature of compassion.

That has always been God's revelation to us. God cannot act against His own nature. In a way, we often say God is free as if he is free to kill a baby, free to kill people. Well, he's not. He's not free from his own nature. It's not his nature to do that kind of thing. The key to the people that God will receive to himself at the end of this life is his own nature. That is the meaning of a verse I'm sure you've often wondered about, Exodus 3:14. You may have read it and thought, oh, what is that, it's kind of mumbo-jumbo stuff. God is speaking to Moses, and Moses asks Him, "What is your name?" And in verse 14, God says to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." I often thought, oh, why didn't he answer the poor guy and tell him? Then in verse 15: "God also said to Moses, 'Say this to the people of Israel, I Am has sent me to you.'" Do you see the footnote in the RSV? It can be translated "I am what I am." or "I will be what I will be." There are many people who say the Hebrew word Jehovah comes from the Hebrew verb "to be." Really what God is saying is, "I am what I am. The gods of the Hindus can be fickle and changing; they can act in one way one day and the other day the other way, but I can't. I have to act the way I am. I can only be what I am, I can only do what it's my nature to do, I can only receive unto myself the people that it's my nature to receive." That's the key to this verse.

When God says, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy," which people will he have mercy on? The key is in his own nature. You can find it in Leviticus 20:26, and after all the dust has cleared, you know, and we've all invented our little religions and philosophies, God's nature will determine those of us who are with him forever in love and peace. Leviticus 20:26 says; "You shall be holy to me, for I the Lord am holy, and have separated you from the peoples, that you should be mine." God is holy. And he'll have mercy on holy people. He'll have compassion on holy people. Why? Because he has mercy at this moment on holy people, and because it's his nature at this moment to have compassion on holy people. That's why he said when Jesus was baptized, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." This Son of Mine is filled with the love that I have, he's filled with the joy that I have, he's filled with the patience that I have, he's filled with the kindness that I have. But many of us, I think, say, Yes but we're not like him. If God is going to have compassion on Jesus and all people who are like him, we're not like Him. I am unkind when Jesus is kind. I get angry when he's patient, and I get down when he's filled with joy, I am selfish when he's unselfish, I'm unloving when Jesus is loving, I'm not like Jesus. So how can I possibly be one of

those to whom God will show his mercy?

Loved ones, there is only one way to become like Jesus. There's a famous verse in which that word "like" occurs, Romans 6:15. It's the only way to be among those on whom God will show his mercy and will shower his compassion. "For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his." Only if you are willing to identify yourself with Jesus in his death to his own rights, in his death to peer pressure, in his death to his own reputation, in his death to his own pride, in his death to his own wishes. Only if you are willing to be identified, that's what united means, "if we are united with him in a death like his," then God's spirit will re-create you, and in this life, in this present body, you will be recreated in Jesus' image by the power of His Spirit. Only on those of us that are in Jesus in that way will God show his compassion and his mercy. Who will God accept at the end of this life? Those of us who are in Christ. There is a bath of cleanness, there is a bath of clean water, that God has arranged in the Universe, and unless you plunge into that bath of clean water which is Jesus' death, and allow His Spirit to clean you, God cannot have compassion on you. He knows where your heart is.

Loved one, this morning do you remember the little "Have a happy day" face? You draw the mouth that way, \, / and say, "Have a happy day" and you draw the little eyes. I don't know much about art, but you get happiness by drawing it that way, that must be a happiness curve. If you turn the face upside down, it's a sad face. The mouth is that way, and the eyes are drooping. Just turning the face upside down makes it a happy face or a sad face. Loved ones, some of you can only see the angry face of God because you will not leap into Jesus' death. There's something in your life that you won't let go of, and all you see is the sad, angry face of God, because your life is upside down. So his face is upside down. And the moment you submit on whatever it is in your life where you're resisting God's will, the moment you are willing to identify yourself with Jesus in everything but God's will for you, that moment you see the smiling side of God's face. That verse is literally true. God will have mercy on those of us on whom he has mercy this very moment by his own nature, and his own nature is to love and receive unto himself those who are like his son Jesus or those who are willing to be made like his Son Jesus through his death.

Yet, those of you this morning who are rejecting God, resisting him on some issue. You know, he's spoken to you a thousand times about the way you're drinking, or the way you're eating or the way you're smoking or the way you're acting towards your colleagues at work or the way you treat your wife or the sarcastic words you speak to your roommate or the impatient way you treat your friend. God has spoken to you a thousand times about that and said, "Look, accept what my son accepted. Identify yourself with my son, let me take care of what people think of you, be willing to live like my Son lived, to die to the things that he died to. A thousand times he's said that to you, and you're still resisting him on it.

Then it is interesting that this morning in spite of all my words, and the happiness in my own heart, you will see the angry face of God. But if you in this moment will just turn your little will and say, "Lord, I've smoked the last time, I've spoken the last sarcastic word I'm speaking to that loved one at home; Lord, I'm finished with that unclean thought life that I've justified for so long." The moment your will swings, it's like that face being turned upside down. It's like God turning around and suddenly you see what was reality all the time. His face is smiling, and there's mercy for you. It's interesting that that's true.

Some of you, you know, at times think, "Oh, brother, if you'd preach happy sermons, I'd be happy. Or if you'd preach about the love of God, I know I'd feel the love of God. It's strange--you won't, you

won't. You'll have a mental and emotional experience of it, but you'll only know spiritually the love of God in your own conscience and will and your own spirit if you are willing to be one of those people on whom God will show his mercy. That is a person who is in Christ, who is in Jesus, who is identified with Jesus' death, and therefore with his resurrection. I pray, that if there's any one here who's been suffering under condemnation, you'll see that the key is in your own hands; it isn't in the preachers, it isn't in the books, it's in your own hands. You can turn the little face the other way round the moment you submit to God. That moment His Spirit will manifest to you His love and His mercy. Try it, I thank God I've done it in my own life, and I know it's true, but try it; try it and you'll see.

Let us pray.

Dear Father, I pray that you will, I know that you will. I know you cannot do anything that your nature guides you to do. I know, Lord, that you will smile on anyone here this morning who submits their will and life to you in your dear Son Jesus. Lord, I pray by your Holy Spirit that you will be able to do that this morning because someone here or someone watching in their own home will turn their life over to you and say, "Lord God, you are my God. You have the right to determine what my life is to be. I submit it to you. I gladly ask you now to show me all the implications of Jesus' death for me. As you show me them, I will walk forward in obedience and I trust you now to give me your Holy Spirit and make me like Jesus. So, that I may be one of those people who God has mercy on.

Now the grace of our Lord Jesus, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us today and throughout this week. Amen.