

19th Sunday Ordinary Time

Is being Good... Good enough for God?

There is coming a day soon when I will have to give an account of my life to Jesus Christ. This day will come for all of us. This reality was the urgency that inspired Paul's letters to the Romans... "So then each of us shall give account of himself to God". ([Romans 14:12](#))

Paul's letter to the Romans appears first in the Scriptures because it is the longest of his letters. It was written about 57 A.D., as Paul was getting ready to travel to Jerusalem. Many consider the letter to the Romans to be his most important work because he makes the case that Judaism will find its completion and perfection in Christianity.

Paul begins by emphasizing that following the law and doing good are not enough to earn heaven. To earn heaven one must have faith in Jesus Christ... Faith is where the heart resides.

There are many good men and women in the world who do not know God. They believe he exists but they do not know him in the way one knows a loved one, like a child, a sibling, or a spouse. Perhaps that applies to many of us.

Paul reminds us that being a good person is not enough to enter Heaven. We see this throughout his letters but it is a point of concern in his letter to the Romans. In Romans 3:20, he teaches that keeping the Law of God cannot save a good man. His certitude of this truth comes from his life experiences... The best and brightest amongst mankind are still sinners in the eyes of God (Romans 3:23; James 2:10). This truth is expressed throughout the Scriptures...

Ecclesiastes 7:20, "For there is not a just man upon earth, that doeth good, and sinneth not."

Only Jesus Christ is sinless (1st Peter 2:22; 2nd Corinthians 5:21; Hebrews 4:15).

Jesus is the perfect Lamb of God Who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29).

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A Thorny Issue... The rejection of the Messiah by God's Chosen People

Chapters nine through eleven of St Paul's Letter to the Romans are a response to a **theological thorn bush**. He is addressing the **troubling question** of why the Jewish people as a whole did not **accept** Jesus as the Messiah. It is important for us to understand that the chapter that forms a part of today's readings (Romans 9:1-15) and the two following it (Chapters 10 and 11) were not written in anger but in heartbreak. Paul could never forget that he was a Jew. He would gladly have laid down his own life, if by doing so he could have brought other Jews to Jesus Christ.

Paul is well aware that the Jews were God's chosen people. He emphasizes this point as he refers to seven gifts or blessings that were given to Israel. These gifts underscore Israel's special place in God's plan of salvation. For Paul's it is clear that the Jews were God's chosen people, and they had a unique place in God's purposes. And yet when God's son came into the world they rejected him.

This rejection however was not a rejection by the entire nation of Israel. Paul carefully distinguishes that while many, and even most Jews rejected Jesus... Not all Jews did... Some received him and believed in him.

To try to understand how a chosen people could reject the promised Messiah, Paul turns to Scripture and the biblical history of the Jewish people. He focuses on the following belief... many Jews anchored their election in the fact that were the sons and daughters of the Abrahamic promise. However the biblical record clearly shows that racial descent from Abraham does not make a Jew.

God's Selection

Time and time again throughout Jewish history there was in God's ways a process of selection (Paul calls this election), whereby some who were racial descendants of Abraham were chosen and some were rejected. We can find this process in the birth of Esau and Jacob and in the favors that God grants to Rachel and Leah.

The Scriptures are clear... The real chosen people of God never lay in the whole nation of Israel but in the righteous remnant. This was so in the days of Elijah when 7000 remained faithful to God.

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The Challenges of God's Selection and Fairness

God's process of selection presents challenges... How can a fair and merciful God elect some and reject others through no fault or virtue of their own? This was clearly the case with Esau and Jacob, as the selection occurred in the womb. It had nothing to do with a life lived in righteousness as neither had yet been born.

The realization that Paul comes to would seem harsh to us. This is especially true when our view of God is anchored exclusively on his attributes of love and mercy. To our thinking a God who is loving and merciful must tolerate our constant rejection of him. We often forget that God is the standard of what is good and righteous. And as that standard he is also it's judge. This is what Paul is trying to get the Roman's to understand.

As Paul sees it God can do what he likes and we have no right to question his decisions, however difficult to understand they may be. The creature does not decide what is good and righteous... The creator does. The clay cannot talk back to the potter.

Here again it is important to turn to the scriptures before we judge God too harshly. The scriptures bear witness too an abundance of divine activity that proves that God is loving, merciful and in fact quite patient. He has tolerated his creatures rejections innumerable times... creatures who truly deserve his wrath. And he has done this in order that he might demonstrate the wealth of his glory to both Jews and Gentiles. And with that understanding it is quite possible that the rejection of Israel was not callous or haphazard at all.

A Bigger Picture – God's Picture

When the door closed on many of the Jews, it became open to the many Gentiles. In the truest sense the door was opened for a greater good because it was now opened to all. The tiny nation of Israel was to be the conduit of salvation for the world... Oh happy fault!

And the door was closed on many Jews because they made a fundamental mistake... They tried to get into a right relationship with God through their own efforts. They tried to earn salvation... They knew that the only way to God was the

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way of faith, and that human achievement led nowhere. But they clung to the way of human achievement through a strict obedience to the law. They staked everything on bloodlines, the law, and works.

The Gentiles for their part simply accepted the offer of God in perfect trust. However they cannot take pride or comfort in their election. They must always remember that they are in the position of wild olive shoots, which have been grafted into a garden olive tree. They did not achieve their own salvation... They are dependent on the Jews – they are branches that have been grafted onto the main stem. And being dependent on the Jews they are also susceptible to thinking that what they do will earn them salvation.

God's View, God's Will, and God's Purpose – Bigger than we could imagine!

Perhaps it is God's purpose that the Jews will be moved to envy the relationship the Gentiles have to Christ so that eventually they will be admitted to it themselves.

We must always remember that it is by God's invitation not necessarily by merit, that some are chosen over others (CCC 160, 1025). This is true for all of us. God invites all and loves all but not all choose Him.

God's love includes justice, and at the same time goes beyond justice since it favors patience, mercy, and forgiveness over a strictly proportionate punishment for sin (CCC 1431-1432). Most importantly we must remember that He sets the standard for what is good... For he is in fact the ultimate good.

We must also be aware that we must choose. And it is certainly always possible to choose to remain hardened by sin and resolute in rejecting the grace of God. This to is a truth we see played out in scripture all too often, as Pharaoh did in the face of God's mighty works. Ultimately it is God's will that all be saved, and a part of being saved is trying to understand His will, whatever it may be, and accepting it.

Our Good in Not Good Enough

And what does it mean to accept God will? It means trusting in his love and providence no matter what this life throws our way. It means believing that he

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has our best interest at heart even when things are not going the way we want them to go. It means choosing to consider that there is a greater good at work that is beyond our grasp for now. Most importantly it means trying to see the greater good in the struggles of daily life.

Today's Gospel offers us some comfort in this regard (Matthew 14:22-33). This passage situates the disciples at sea and Jesus alone in prayer on the mountain. It is likely that as Jesus prayed he was able to see their struggle with the sea.

The passage tells us that the disciples are on they're own, and that they are faring badly. Their struggle with the wind and the sea is symbolic of all of our struggles. They struggle through the night, in the darkness, the cold and the wet. They are expert fisherman... they know what to do, so there is no need to ask for help.

In their time of need, Jesus comes to rescue them appearing as the Lord over the powers of nature. Peter represents the disciples (and all Christians) in his enthusiastic love and insufficient faith. In fright he addresses Jesus with a prayer "Lord, save me". And Christ saves him.

In being saved Peter is left to face Christ in the smallness of his faith. Peter is reminded that being a skilled fisherman was not nearly good enough to save him. He needed supernatural help, and so do we.

Jesus' question to Peter, is also a question for us... "Why did you doubt?" Why after centuries on winds and waves, do we fail to see the countless simple forms that Jesus' hand takes? Why is our faith so small?

Our Expectations Blind us To God's Will

Maybe it is because we think that our idea of good is or should be the same as God's idea of good. Or maybe we are easily impressed by our own abilities. Or perhaps we are expecting the dramatic... life's special effects.

Our expectations, plans, and desires have blinded us to God's will and the way that God works in our lives. We, much like Elijah, can hardly here the "tiny whispering sound" of God's voice. Yet, the sound is there, or rather, here in our heart. And so is Jesus... "It is I." Surely it is not "us."

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The Requirement of Faith

Faith calls us to trust that however perilous the waves, or chaotic the wind, Jesus is right here, whispering in the night's silence. We are to take heart in the fact that whatever is going on outside of us... God has a bigger view. And he wants to share that view with us, He wants to place it inside of us. He wants us to make that view our hearts desire, for the heart is where we encounter God.

“Take courage, it is I: do not be afraid”

Trust in me... for I have plans for you.

Lean on me... come to me.