

Explore the Bible: Mercy

April 13, 2020

- *The Explore the Bible lesson for May 3 focuses on Romans 11:17-32.*

Faith is a relationship. Faith is not a fixed, boxed set of beliefs about God. It's the boxed-set idea of faith that can get anyone into trouble. Much like the ancient Gnostics, if we reduce faith only to what we intellectually believe, we can behave anyway we want while living ungodly lives.

Jesus has invited us to the most holy of relational partnerships that alters the actual steps we take. John put it this way in another epistle. "Whoever says, 'I have come to know him,' but does not obey his commandments, is a liar, and in such a person the truth does not exist; but whoever obeys his word, truly in this person the love of God has reached perfection. By this we may be sure that we are in him: whoever says, 'I abide in him,' ought to walk just as he walked" (1 John 2:4-6).

I can argue with anyone about how many angels can sit atop a pin head, even as I surrender to the temptations that are common to all of us. A wise disciple considers his steps as they compare to Jesus' deeds and words.

We know we are growing in Christ when we can see evidence that we are more loving, forgiving, giving and caring with all whom God allows us to share this journey. If we grow more self-centered, burdened with decades-long grudges and protective of our ideas and possessions, we should pull off the road for a moment and try to discover how the caboose of our behavior got disconnected from the engine of trust in Jesus.

Our faith, therefore, is a relationship. What we believe is only a report on what we've discovered on that sacred journey.

A colleague reports on a young couple, not believers, who went on a college mission trip to Haiti. They were so moved and pained by what they saw, they went back home, sold everything they owned and moved to Haiti to care for the poor and starving.

When talking with them years later, the young man yet again said he was not a Christian. My colleague said, "Well, you act more like Jesus than many people I know who do claim to be Christians.

It is extremely important to remember that faith is a relationship as we plunge into this text. These words, taken alone and without a lifetime of trusting understanding, could easily blow any boxed set of beliefs to bits. A casual reading will not suffice. Some extra study with easily available online study tools is highly recommended.

It's not a contest

The book of Romans was titled, as were his other epistles, by the name of those to whom Paul was writing. This letter is to believers in Rome, almost certainly Gentiles.

Though the gospel had reached Rome, Paul was not the one who started the church there. The gospel had taken root nonetheless, and the church blossomed to life. Yet, sadly, there was a growing divide between the relatively new Roman Christians and the Jewish community. In pedestrian terms, there was such a divide that the new believers saw themselves as winners in the grace contest and the Jews as losers.

Paul specifically refers to the "root" of God's kingdom, deeply rooted in the world. He then refers to followers of Christ as branches that have been pruned from the tree. and some that have been grafted into it.

Paul was deeply concerned that some Jews had, indeed, claimed to obey the

Jewish (Old Testament) law while, at the same time, surreptitiously living spiritually lawless lives. In other words, they had a strong belief system, a boxed set of ideas about God, but no true relationship with God.

Back to the winners/losers in the grace contest, Paul informs the Roman Christians that such a contest doesn't exist. God's grace root is capable of saving any and all. God's purpose for the Jews will be fulfilled. "All Israel will be saved," (11:26), he proclaims.

Earlier, in the very beginning of the very long epistle, he also celebrated, "the gospel ... is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek" (Romans 1:16).

A merciful mystery

Paul delves deeper into the mystery of God's plan for redemption when he says, "God has bound all men over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all" (11:32).

The gospel is a mystery, a merciful mystery. There is no way known to man to fully grasp its meaning. We were not intended to understand the mysterious mercy of God. When John Newton penned the words to "Amazing Grace," he was spot on. Grace is so amazing because we simply can't grasp it.

We are called to believe the unbelievable. That God, in his mercy, will see to the salvation of all who call on God's name in Christ.

I often tell my wife that I simply cannot grasp how much she loves me. She knows everything about me, past and present and even the future toward which I'm leaning—and she loves me anyway.

Frankly, I don't want to understand her love. If I could understand it, like the mysterious mercy of God, it wouldn't be so amazing!

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