

Why some, and not others?

- I. Not your family line
- II. Not something in you
- III. But only God's grace!

For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. (Romans 9:6)
Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham's children. On the contrary, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned." (Romans 9:7)
In other words, it is not the natural children who are God's children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring. (Romans 9:8)
For this was how the promise was stated: "At the appointed time I will return, and Sarah will have a son." (Romans 9:9)
Not only that, but Rebekah's children had one and the same father, our father Isaac. (Romans 9:10)
Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad - in order that God's purpose in election might stand: (Romans 9:11)
not by works but by him who calls - she was told, "The older will serve the younger." (Romans 9:12)
Just as it is written: "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated." (Romans 9:13)
What then shall we say? Is God unjust? Not at all! (Romans 9:14)
For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." (Romans 9:15)
It does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy. (Romans 9:16)

Tell me, have you ever wondered, "How can it be that two different people can hear the same Gospel of Jesus Christ, and one person believes it and the other person rejects it? How can it be that two children raised in the same family can end up at polar opposite ends of the religious spectrum? Maybe you have family members who grew up with the same Bible stories that you grew up with, but now they want nothing to do with church, while you are here eager to feed your faith with the Word. Why is that? When you think of how many people in our world do not believe in Jesus, why do you? Was it something in you, something not in them? I mean, why some and not others?

Actually, that's the question that the Apostle Paul addresses in our text for today. A question which for centuries has been causing people to kind of scratch their heads. The question is simply,

Why Some and Not Others?

In other words, what is it that determines whether a person is going to be a believer or an unbeliever? Here in Romans chapter 9, the Apostle Paul seeks to answer that question for his readers. And he does so by evaluating three possible answers to that question. Answers that are both logical, and in fact, popular, both in Paul's day and still today. Today we are going to take a little closer look at each one of the possible answers and determine which one is the truth.

So why some and not others? Some people would answer that question by saying, "Well, it all depends on your upbringing. If you were you raised in a Lutheran family, then chances are, you're going to be a Lutheran. If your parents and your grandparents and your great-grandparents were all staunch Catholics, then it's almost like you were born to be a Catholic." Sometimes I call that "being Catholic by blood, rather than by belief."

The question is, is that true? Are you a believer because of your family? Is faith something you genetically inherit from your ancestors? The answer is, no. While it's true that our parents can have an influence on our spiritual life. Our parents can bring us into contact with the gospel in Word and Sacrament, the fact is, our parents don't make us believers. No one is physically born into the Christian faith. It's not a person's race, or his nationality, or his culture, or even his religion that determines whether he will ever be a true believer in Jesus. And as proof of that, here in our text, St. Paul points to his countrymen, the nation of Israel. In the verses immediately before our text, the Apostle catalogs all the advantages that God gave the Old Testament nation of Israel. Paul writes, *Theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all.* (Romans 4b-6).

And yet, in spite of all those blessings from God, in spite of all this spiritual advantages God gave them, still, as Paul says in our text for today, *not all who are descendants from Israel are Israel.* In other words, not everyone who was a physical descendant of Israel, that is, father Jacob, one of the patriarchs, was in fact a member of his spiritual family. Not everyone who descended from Israel actually believed what Israel believed, namely, believed in the Messiah who would come from Israel's line.

Paul says the same thing in the next verse, *Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham's children.* Do you see what Paul is doing? He's drawing a distinction between the physical descendants of Abraham and the spiritual descendants of Abraham (Jews by blood versus Jews by belief). Or as he puts it in the next verses, children of the flesh vs. children of the promise. Paul writes, *It is not the natural children* (literally children of the flesh), *who are God's children, but it is the children of the promise* (that is, those who believe the promise of a savior, it is children of the promise) *who are regarded as Abraham's offspring.*

In fact, didn't Jesus make that same distinction when confronted by the unbelieving Jews of his day? When the Jews proudly claimed the bloodline of the patriarch with the words, "We are Abraham's descendants," what did Jesus say? "If you were Abraham's children, then you would do the things Abraham did. As it is, you are determined to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I've heard from God. Abraham did not do such things. (John 8:39-41).

Jesus' point, yes Paul's point, is simply this. Just because a person comes from a believing family doesn't mean that person will be a believer. Even though the Jews had been given every advantage, there were plenty who still turned their backs on Jesus. Why some and not others? Paul would say, I. it is not your family line that determines whether you will be a believer.

So it's not something in your parents that makes you a believer. Well then, maybe it's

something in you. This is a much more popular theory. How often don't you hear people say things like, "Everyone has a free will, right? Everyone who hears the gospel has the choice to believe it or reject it, right? If a person opens his heart to Jesus rather than hardening it, that's what will determine that that person is a genuine Christian, right? When it comes right down to it, there's something in each individual that makes the difference. They wanted it more. They were more serious about their spiritual life. They genuinely loved the Lord." In the minds of many people, there must be something about that person that made the difference.

But what does Scripture say? When it comes to why some and not others, Scripture says, II. It's not something in you that determines who will be a believer and who won't. Here in our text, Saint Paul uses kind of a unique example to illustrate that fact. He uses the example of a pair of twins named Jacob and Esau. If you remember, Esau was the one who ultimately squandered his birthright, and the promise of the Messiah that came with it. In the end, Esau, and his descendants, the Edomites, turned away from the worship of the true God. Jacob, on the other hand, even though he was not perfect by any means, still was a believer in the true God till his dying day. The question is, why? Why one and not the other? Listen to what Paul writes. *Before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad* (in other words, before they could do anything to kind of set them apart, before they could do anything to win God's favor, but rather)—*in order that God's purpose in the election might stand: not by works but by him who calls—[Rebecca their mother] was told, "The older will serve the younger."*

In other words, why was Jacob the one who would be the greater of the two twins? Why would Jacob be the ancestor of the Messiah? Would it be because of something Jacob was or Jacob did? No. God simply chose Jacob (the word that Paul uses is that God elected Jacob), because that's what God wanted to do. God chose Jacob purely by grace. It's exactly what God once told the prophet Moses, *I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.*

Now please don't misunderstand those words. The point is not that God is somehow arbitrary or even fickle. (e.g. "I'll pick him, but not him. I'll show mercy to her, but not her.") No, God's point is that he is completely independent. No one can tell him what to do. He's not obligated to show mercy to anyone. No, quite the contrary, as a just and holy God, he's obligated to punish sinners. No sinful human being can ever earn his favor. If there's going to be any mercy shown to sinners, it's going to be purely because God—completely in and of himself—decided that he was going to show it. Undeserved, unearned, that's why we call it...grace.

And that brings us back to our original question. Why some and not others? Scripture tells us, I. It's not your family line that determines it. II. It's not anything in you that determines it. III. Rather, it's purely God's grace. Or as Paul puts it here in our text, *It does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy.* You realize that those two words, grace and mercy, are really two sides of the same coin. Grace is getting the good things we don't deserve. Mercy is not getting the bad things that we do deserve. Both of them provide the only answer to why anyone in the world is a believer.

Why do I say that? Why do I say that grace is the only explanation for why any of us believes in Jesus? The answer is found in what you and I, and every other human being in the world is like, by nature. Every one of us was born thoroughly corrupt. We could do absolutely nothing to please God. We could do nothing to win his favor. Scripture says that we were, by nature, objects of God's wrath. We were spiritually dead, blind, enemies of God. That means, that if left to ourselves, we were all damned.

But what did God do? He showed us mercy. He did not give us the hell we deserve.

Instead he sent Jesus to hell in our place. And then he gave us the grace we didn't deserve. Not only did he give us Jesus as an undeserved Savior from sin. He also gave us the faith to believe in Jesus as our Savior. You realize, that too, is undeserved gift from God, namely, your faith. You and I didn't work up faith in our own hearts. We didn't decide to become a believer any more than a child decides to become conceived. No, your spiritual life and mine was purely a gift from God—an undeserved gift of grace. Isn't that what Saint Paul means when he writes to the Ephesians? *It is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God.* What is the gift of God? Your faith is a gift from God, through which God has given you the gift of eternal salvation.

And why has God given you and me that gift of faith? Honestly, I don't know. I must confess with Saint Paul, *Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor? How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! (Romans 11 33,34).* All I know is that God did not give me saving faith because of my parents. He did not give me saving faith because of something I did or a choice I made.

No, when it comes to the question, why some and not others—or really the more applicable question for each one of us—namely, “God, why did you choose me?”, there is only one answer. And it's grace. Grace that God showed us before we were born. In fact, grace he showed us before the creation of the world. Saint Paul summed it up well in Ephesians chapter 1. *For God chose us in Christ before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—to the praise of his glorious grace.*

To the praise of his glorious grace. Really, that's what I want you to walk away with today. I don't want you straining our brain thinking, “God, why didn't you choose that person? Why isn't she a believer?” We talked about that in a sermon a couple weeks ago. Sometimes, in their hardness of hearts, people turn their backs on God's grace. That's not God's fault. It's their fault.

No, what I want you to focus on is what God has done for you. Why, out of all the unbelievers in the world, would God choose to work saving faith in your heart? The answer is grace. Why, when you keep falling into the same sins again and again, why would God still love you? How could he possibly forgive you? The answer is grace. How can you possibly be sure that you are going to heaven when you die? The answer is grace.

When you think about it, the real question is not, “why some and not others?” It's, “Why me?” And now, by God's grace, you have God's answer to that question, and also have the reason to live your life...*to the praise of God's glorious grace*, in Jesus' name. Amen.