

Sam Storms

Enjoying God Ministries

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The Ultimate Remedy for Racism (and other Important Issues)

Romans 9:24-33

The issue of race and the potential it has to divide and disrupt the life of our culture at large and the church in particular has, perhaps, never been so much in evidence as it is today. On numerous occasions in the past, I've explained how the division and racial hostility between Jew and Gentile threatened the very existence of the early church. You may also recall the strategy that Jesus gave the disciples for how the gospel of the kingdom would be spread, and simultaneously provided them and us with a remedy for racism. He said in Acts 1:8, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

I strongly suspect that when the disciples heard this, they flinched. Of course, the gospel should be taken to Jerusalem and wherever Jewish people are found. Yes, the gospel must be preached in Judea. But in Samaria? Are you kidding? And to the end of the earth, which means the many Gentile nations in the world? I suspect that they might have been inclined to protest, but Jesus was about to ascend to heaven and there wasn't much time for debate. But for Jesus to have left them with marching orders that included taking the gospel to the Samaritans and the Gentiles of the world was almost beyond belief.

The gospel was first proclaimed to the hated Samaritans by Philip and is described in Acts 8. This alone had the potential to divide the church into two separate and warring factions: one Jewish and the other Samaritan. Jewish Christians would have been suspicious from the start and would likely have held the Samaritan believers at arms' length. So the apostles Peter and John made the arduous journey to Samaria to lay hands on the Samaritans who had come to faith in Christ. This was to signify and proclaim loudly and clearly that salvation had indeed been extended to the once-hated Samaritans. How was the racial divide overcome? It was by means of the gospel!

The gospel then first reached Gentiles in Acts 10 when Cornelius had his encounter with Peter. Even Peter was caught off guard as he watched these Gentiles trust in Jesus and receive the Holy Spirit. Luke's portrayal of their response is telling:

"The circumcised believers [the Jews] who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles" (Acts 10:45).

Notice the words "*astonished*" and "*even*". They were shocked that even on the Gentiles the Spirit had been poured out. This was so contrary to what they had always believed and how they viewed the Gentiles that they nearly lost their minds (such is the force of the verb translated "astonished").

It all came to a head at what is known as the Jerusalem Council. It is described in Acts 15. There we read how the early church resolved the issue of what to do with the Gentiles who were coming to faith in Jesus. Should they convert to Judaism? Should they submit to circumcision? The conclusion of the Council was No, no additional burdens should be placed on the Gentiles other than a few secondary issues that might have caused unnecessary offense to the Jewish believers.

Why did they come to this conclusion? How were the Jewish Christians able to overcome their long-standing hatred of the Gentiles? What could possibly have healed this racial divide? It was the gospel! The apostle Peter stood up at the Council and declared:

“And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them [the Gentiles], by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith. . . But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will” (Acts 15:8, 11).

No amount of legislation will heal the heart of racism. Marches and protests and banners and angry shouts will do nothing to rid the heart of the sin of racism. The only thing that will put love in the place of hate and trust in the place of fear and unite the many diverse ethnicities is the Holy Spirit who regenerates the human heart and leads us to saving faith in Jesus Christ.

I couldn't help but notice last week that emblazoned on the back of the helmets of many players in the NFL were the words: “End racism.” Well, yes, by all means, we want racism to end. But don't ever think that an exhortation on a football helmet is going to do anything of a lasting and meaningful nature to put an end to racism. The only solution is the work of the Holy Spirit in cleansing hearts by faith in Jesus and binding believers of all ethnicities together as one spiritual body.

Now, why have I taken the time today to make this point? The answer is found once again here in Romans 9:24-33. In this passage Paul turns his attention to God's saving work among the Gentiles. His primary concern in Romans 9 up to this point has been God's commitment to the people of Israel and how he has promised to save from among them a remnant. He now turns his attention to God's purposes for Gentiles. And he labors to make two primary points. First, ethnicity counts for nothing when it comes to salvation. If you are a Jew or a Gentile, the issue is the same for both: do not trust in your physical descent or race or cultural heritage. Trust only in Christ.

The second point Paul will make is that righteousness is absolutely required for being in right relation to God. But one can pursue this righteousness in one of two ways. One way is by works, thinking that by consistent obedience to the law of God one might attain righteousness. This was the approach of most Jewish people in Paul's day. That is why they languished in unbelief. They had “stumbled over the stumbling stone” (v. 32). The stumbling stone was Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of all that the OT had promised. Their failure to see in Jesus the only way in which an unrighteous person could attain a God-approved righteousness was their stumbling.

But as I said, there are two ways by which one might strive to attain a God-approved righteousness. One is by working and striving to obey the law. The other way is by faith, trusting wholly and solely in Jesus Christ.

The Calling out of a People from among the Gentiles (vv. 24-26)

Even if God were to save Gentiles, most Jewish people continued to view them in a secondary, subordinate relationship not only with God but also with the Jews themselves. So Paul turns his attention to God's OT promise of salvation for the Gentiles. And he does it in the most unusual, indeed, shocking way.

In v. 23 Paul mentioned the "vessels of mercy" whom God prepared "for glory" beforehand, that is, in eternity past. Who are these "vessels of mercy"? Certainly he has in mind the spiritual elect from within ethnic Israel. We saw this in vv. 6-23. But he now declares that God has purposed and predestined to call out for himself "vessels of mercy" from among the once hated and deeply despised Gentiles!

Notice how Paul makes his point in v. 24. Yes, says Paul, God "has called" out from among ethnic Israel a remnant of spiritually elect descendants of Abraham. But it is not to them only that God has issued his call. It is "also from the Gentiles" that he has called out a people for himself.

That in itself would have been shocking. But Paul goes even farther and proves his point by citing two OT passages that in their original context referred exclusively to Jewish people.

Let me remind you briefly of what was going on in the OT book of Hosea. Hosea was a prophet who was instructed by God to take to himself "a wife of whoredom" and to "have children of whoredom" (Hosea 1:2). I apologize for being so graphic, but that is the precise language used in Hosea 1:2. God intended for Hosea and his wife to be a living illustration of what had become of God's people, Israel. Israel had committed spiritual adultery. They had turned to other gods. They had wedded themselves, so to speak, and had jumped into bed with foreign deities. They had committed spiritual whoredom.

So, God instructed Hosea to take for his wife a woman named Gomer. She would prove persistently unfaithful to Hosea, just as Israel, God's bride, had proven herself persistently unfaithful to Yahweh. Hosea and Gomer would have children, and the names given to them would also illustrate the shattered relationship between God and Israel.

The first child was a son, whom God named Jezreel, which means to sow, as if a seed. But God's intent was that just as seed is scattered for sowing, so Israel would be scattered and cast aside. The second child was a daughter named Lo-ruhama, which means No Mercy. Gomer then gave birth to a third child, another boy, and his name was Lo-ammi, or Not My People.

Of course, the good news is that God redeemed his people and reversed the names of the children of Hosea and Gomer. Jezreel was again understood to mean "sown", to indicate God's intent to plant his

people in the land. And Lo-ruhama, or No Mercy, would have her name changed to Ruhama, or Mercy. And Lo-ammi, or Not My People, would have his name changed to Ammi, my people. It's a beautiful story of how God worked to secure the redemption and restoration of Israel.

But Paul does something truly amazing. He takes these OT passages that referred to what God was doing with Israel and applies them to what God is now doing among the Gentiles! In Romans 9:25 Paul cites Hosea 2:23 and in v. 26 he cites Hosea 1:10.

Again, let me emphasize that these two texts in Hosea were addressed to the 10 apostate northern tribes of Israel before the Assyrian exile in 722-21 b.c. They describe both the rebellious condition of Israel ("not my people" / "not beloved") and her prophesied restoration ("my people" / "beloved" / "sons of the living God").

But if these passages in Hosea refer to the prophesied regathering and restoration of Israel, why does Paul apply them to the calling or salvation of *Gentiles*? Two answers have been given:

Some argue that the rejection and restoration of Israel have their *parallel* in the exclusion and eventual inclusion of the Gentiles in God's covenant blessings. In other words, Paul finds in the restoration of Israel to love and favor a *type* in terms of which the Gentiles will experience the same. Thus the *principle* according to which God will regather Israel applies to the gathering in and salvation of Gentiles as well. In sum: *the salvation of the Gentiles is analogous to*, but not the fulfillment of, *the salvation of the Jews*.

Others, such as myself, agree that the OT texts in Hosea are a prophecy of the future regathering/salvation of Israel. But I believe that "Paul deliberately takes these two prophecies about the future salvation of Israel and applies them to the church. The church, consisting of both Jews and Gentiles, has become the people of God. The prophecies of Hosea are fulfilled in the Christian church" (George Ladd).

Contrary to what many think, *this is not replacement theology*. Replacement theology argues that the Church has altogether replaced and supplanted Israel and that what was once promised to Jewish believers has been taken from them and given entirely to Gentile believers. No. Not a single believing Jewish man or woman will suffer the loss of the promises God has given to them. No one has been replaced. Instead, believing Gentiles have been included.

As we will see when we get to Romans 11, there is only one olive tree or one covenant people that God will save and to whom he will fulfill all his promises. In this one olive tree are what he calls "natural" branches. These are Jewish people who believe in Jesus. But also in this one olive tree are what he calls "unnatural" branches. These are Gentile people who believe in Jesus. Together, both believing Jews and believing Gentiles share in the covenant promises on an equal basis.

There is only one people of God, only one body that will inherit the promises given to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. It is comprised of all who believe in Jesus. That is why Paul has no problem taking prophetic texts that speak of the salvation and restoration of Christ-trusting Jewish people and applying it to the salvation and restoration of Christ-trusting Gentile people.

What I'm saying, then, is that the OT prophetic promise of Israel's regathering in covenant faith to Yahweh is being progressively fulfilled in the salvation of **both** believing Jews and Gentiles in this present Church age. Thus, Paul is here describing the calling out of Gentiles from among every tribe, tongue, people, and nation and God's grafting them in to the one olive tree alongside and in perfect unity with Jewish believers. No one who believes has been replaced. Instead, Gentiles who believe have now been included.

OT confirmation of Jewish salvation (vv. 27-29)

Here Paul expands upon the truth articulated in Romans 9:6. You will recall that God's purpose has never been to save all ethnic Israelites, but only a **remnant**. That is why the rampant and widespread unbelief in Israel in having rejected Jesus as Messiah does not undermine or threaten the integrity and truthfulness of God's promises. This is not a new doctrine, but something explicitly affirmed in the OT.

In Romans 9:27 Paul cites Isaiah 10:22. In Romans 9:28 he cites Isaiah 10:23. And in Romans 9:29 he cites Isaiah 1:9. All of these OT texts taken together basically communicate one message: God will bring judgment to bear on the unfaithful in Israel. He will execute the sentence on them required by his own nature and character as the just Judge of all the earth. But just as it might appear that this means the end of all Israel and the failure of God to fulfill his promises to them, we are told that he has spared a remnant. There is, as we saw in Romans 9:6-7, a spiritually elect remnant of believers within the physically ethnic nation as a whole.

That **only** a remnant is saved is indicative of the severity and extent of divine judgment (vv. 27-28). That **at least** a remnant **will be** saved is indicative of the miracle of divine grace (v. 29). Someone may wonder if Isaiah's and Paul's use of the word "remnant" means that few people will end up in heaven. Is Paul saying that only a minority of the human race are ultimately to be found in God's presence in the new heaven and new earth? This is an issue that is not resolved explicitly in Scripture. On the one hand, those who argue that there will be few who are ultimately saved point to the words of Jesus in Matthew 7:13-14

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“Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few” (Matt. 7:13-14).

This sounds as if there are “many” who are lost and “few” who are saved. But we cannot let this verse alone determine the outcome. Consider also the vision given to John in Revelation 7 –

“After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb” (Rev. 7:9).

In the final analysis it is difficult to decide. But my guess is that although the final number of the saved will be comparatively smaller than those who are lost, there will still be a multitude ***“that no one could number,”*** a huge throng of no doubt millions and millions of saved souls who surround the throne and worship the Lamb.

These verses speak once again to what we have seen repeatedly in Romans. It has to do with how God proceeds to save his elect people. The key is found in the word ***“call”*** and ***“called.”*** We see it in v. 24 where Paul declares that God has “called” people out from among the Gentiles no less so than he called Jews. This “call” is the effective, effectual drawing of people to saving faith in Jesus. We read in Romans 8:28 that these are the men and women “who are called according to his purpose.” They are the ones who have confidence that no matter what may come their way, God is working all things together for their ultimate spiritual good.

This is the same “calling” that Paul mentioned in Romans 8:30 where he said that all those whom God foreknew, he predestined, and all those whom he predestined he also “called.” We know this calling is the effectual call to salvation because Paul says that all those whom God “called” he also “justified” or declared righteous in Jesus. This calling is the work of the Holy Spirit where he does more than simply make known to us the good news of God’s saving work in Jesus Christ. It is also the powerful work of the Spirit by which he overcomes our resistance and penetrates our hearts to awaken us to the beauty of the Son and actually and without fail brings us to saving faith in Jesus.

These verses also speak to the only ultimate and lasting and meaningful remedy to racism. It is found in the saving, cleansing grace of God in the gospel. It is found in the uniting in one body, the Church, both Jews and Gentiles, formerly racial enemies. The same holds true today for black and white and brown and red and whatever ethnicity or skin color exists. The animosity and suspicion and fear and arrogant feeling of superiority can only be fully and finally overcome by the gospel and what the Holy Spirit does to enable us to see the beauty in every person of every race.

No one has said it any better than John Piper. Listen to his words:

“When God saves sinners and builds his church by passing over many of the ethnically privileged and calling to himself many of the ethnic outcasts, he makes plain that he will not base his blessing on race or ethnicity. He is going to save people in a way that breaks the pride of the privileged and overcomes the despair of the outcast. Ethnic envy and ethnic arrogance are excluded” (John Piper).

How is Anyone to be Saved? (vv. 30-33)

The doctrine of unconditional election is a challenging issue for everyone. That God should set his saving love on anyone in eternity past is a marvel of divine mercy. But simply being chosen by God does not save anyone. What do I mean by that? Simply this.

There are two reasons why a person gets saved and reconciled to God the Father. And they are perfectly compatible and harmonious. Neither one excludes or rules out the other. The first reason is what we've seen in Romans 8-9: divine election. In eternity past, God foreknew or foreloved his people and predestined them to be conformed to the image of his Son, Jesus Christ. Without election, no one would be saved.

But merely being chosen by God does not in itself or alone save a single soul. All those elected must, and will, come to personal saving faith in Jesus. So, it is not only election that saves. It is also the attaining of a righteousness that is acceptable and approved by God. And that righteousness is attained by only one means: faith in Jesus Christ.

All through Romans Paul has emphasized that salvation is only and altogether by faith in Jesus Christ. We are justified, or declared righteous in the sight and presence of God, when by the Spirit's enabling power, we put all our trust and confidence in the person and work of Jesus Christ, his sinless life, substitutionary death, and bodily resurrection. Of course, it is true that all those whom the Father has elected will be saved. But it is not election alone that saves. We must believe in Jesus. It is faith in Christ that saves. And it is only because of divine election that anyone ever comes to faith in Christ.

Now, having said that, I need to make one more clarifying comment. The question is often raised, what about those who die in infancy? What about those who never reach a point where they can exercise faith in the gospel, the so-called "age of accountability"? I say, "so-called" because the Bible never addresses the issue. It never specifies when a person has reached the stage/age when he/she is cognitively capable of engaging with divine revelation and making a morally informed decision. This would also apply to those who are cognitively impaired because of some disability. What happens to them when they die?

This is a massively complex and challenging question. My conviction is that all those who die in infancy are elect. All those who die without ever having developed cognitively or intellectually to the point where they could recognize and respond to God's revelation of himself, are, in my opinion, among the elect.

So, when I say that merely being among the elect doesn't save anyone, I'm not referring to those who cannot, through no fault of their own, respond to the gospel and believe. But for those who can, and that would likely include all of you listening to this message or reading these sermon notes, there must be a personal response of saving faith. To be saved, one must by some means or other obtain a righteousness that is acceptable in the sight of an infinitely holy and righteous God. And here in Romans 9:30-33 Paul tells us how that can be done.

Note first of all that he tells us how it cannot be done. Among most Israelites, whom Paul calls "my kinsmen according to the flesh" (Rom. 9:3), their pursuit of righteousness was based on their misguided belief that it could be achieved by obedience to the Law of Moses. As Paul says in Romans 9:31, although Israel sought after righteousness, they did so thinking that it could be attained by their works of obedience.

Gentiles, on the other hand, who did nothing by way of obedience or works, and quite honestly, couldn't have cared less about righteousness, attained an acceptable righteousness when God sovereignly called

them and enabled them to put their faith in Jesus. When this happened, God imputed or reckoned the righteousness of Jesus himself to their account.

Israel's problem was that instead of recognizing in Jesus the only hope for a righteousness that would avail with God, they saw him as an obstacle, a "rock of offense" (v. 33). They "stumbled" when they refused to believe in him. Why was Jesus and his work on the cross a "stumbling block"? Because the salvation that God offers on the basis of the cross of Christ undermines our sense of self-righteousness. It is an offense to human pride. The irony here is so thick you could cut it with a knife. Here is how Tim Keller explains it:

"The ones who knew the most about God [Israel] did not come to know God, while the ones who knew the least about God [Gentiles] came to know God best. The ones who most wanted to be righteous [Israel] ended up dead in their sins, while the ones who least wanted to be righteous [Gentiles] ended up holy and blameless in his sight" (72).

The reason for this ironic reversal is that in seeking after righteousness the Jews thought it would be the reward for their good works. The Gentiles, on the other hand, when they heard the gospel message, responded in simple, saving faith.

So, the point I'm making is that when God elects unto salvation an otherwise hell-deserving sinner, that person cannot enter into fellowship with God without a God-approved righteousness. God is infinitely holy and immeasurably righteous and altogether perfect in his character and conduct. To stand in his presence, forgiven and accepted, one must have a righteousness that is equal to that of God himself. And that righteousness is that of Jesus Christ himself, which is provided to us when we put our faith and confidence in him alone.

If you think you can attain this God-approved righteousness on your own, go for it. But I can assure you that it will never happen. Paul has already told us the condition of all humanity. Back in Romans 3:10 he said it as plainly as possible: "None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God." If you insist on establishing your own righteous standing with the infinitely holy and righteous God, I can assure you that the same thing will happen to you that happened to so many in ancient Israel: you will stumble and fall, having failed to see that your only hope was the righteousness of Jesus Christ that is given only to those who put their faith in him.

Gratitude for Grace!

How grateful are you for the saving grace of God that first elected you in eternity past and then brought you to saving faith in Jesus in the present day? Have you contemplated the alternative? Have you given any thought or consideration as to where you would be and what you would experience if it hadn't been for God's sovereign, saving mercy?

If you haven't thought about it, do so now. Look at how Paul says it in v. 29. Although in this text he has primarily in mind the Jewish people, the principle applies to us all, even Gentiles. If the Lord of hosts had

not called us to a saving faith in Jesus Christ, “we would have been like Sodom and become like Gomorrah.”

I hardly need to remind you of the incident to which Paul refers. No two cities were ever more evil or corrupt than these. They were profoundly wicked, and they were justly and righteously incinerated and annihilated. And that, dear friend, is what would have become of you and me were it not for the sovereign, saving, electing, calling, justifying grace of God.