



A Zeal for the Lost

Romans 9:1-5

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This morning we have before us Romans, chapter 9, verses 1-5. Please give attention to the reading of God's Holy Word. For the Word of the Lord is completely sufficient, the Word of the Lord is completely authoritative, and the Word of the Lord is completely inerrant. Romans 9, beginning at verse 1:

"I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit—that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh. They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen."

Thus far the reading of God's Holy Word. Let's pray for his blessing upon it. Lord, we ask that you would open up your Word to us, that by the power of your Spirit we would not only understand what you have given to us but that we would be moved by it, that we would be moved to action, O Lord. This we ask in Christ's precious name, amen.

We come this morning to Romans 9, which is the start of the third major division in the book of Romans. We've seen Romans 1-5 is the first division, and then we've just completed chapters 6-8. This third division is chapters 9-11, and then, finally, the fourth division is chapters 12-16. Some have come to Romans 9 and wondered what the purpose of this section is. It sometimes seems to be a stand-alone section. It has even been called by one commentator a kind of a sermon, as if Paul had written out Romans 9-11 and stuck it in his Bible just in case the occasion warranted it.

This comes up because chapter 12 would follow very well after chapter 8 in the book of Romans, and chapters 9-11 deal with a subject that is set off by itself, as it were. But this section actually serves an important function. Paul has just laid out the doctrinal ground for the Christian life, for our justification and our sanctification, and he will pick up how that truth affects how we are to live in chapter 12, but now here in chapter 9 he turns to a different matter: how God is sovereign in salvation and how that lays a burden on the Christian for evangelism.

Here in chapter 9, Paul specifically takes up the case of the Jews, because some would see the present state of the Jews in Paul's time as evidence of the failure of the gospel. After all, they had rejected Jesus Christ as their Messiah. It may seem odd to us at first to place together the teachings of the sovereignty of God and election and evangelism side by side, but that's what Paul does. He does this for a reason.

So as we begin this chapter, I would like us to see three things from our text. First, *a heart for the lost*. Paul shows us that *he* has and we *must* have a heart for the lost. Secondly, *knowledge of God's mercy*. Paul has a knowledge of

God's mercy, and that informs him as he thinks about the lost. Finally, *there is no presumption we should have upon God*. A heart for the lost, knowledge of God's mercy, and no presumption.

A Heart for the Lost

Let's begin this morning by looking at Paul's heart for the lost. He starts by telling us of the importance of having a heart for the lost. Note the placement of our text. This is not an accident. It's not an accident either for a brilliant man like Paul or for the Holy Spirit who has placed this text exactly in this place for a purpose. Paul is not writing a philosophical treatise on God's sovereignty. He is unfolding salvation, and he knows we cannot stand by as observers to God's salvation.

Paul himself is not an observer. He was so deeply affected by the lost it drove him to action, and he wants us to be driven also. That's why he sets forth such a difficult teaching to accept. As he's going to talk about the election of God's people and the sovereignty of God in salvation, he starts with this passage about the *need of the lost*. After all, we are about to launch into the most systematic expression in the Bible of God's sovereignty in salvation, but before we do, Paul wants us to understand what is at stake.

He wants us to understand there are real people who need Jesus. We can never forget that. So Paul starts by showing that he takes this subject very seriously. Before he even tells us what is on his mind, he uses several methods to get our attention. He wants us to know this is not just an offhand remark he's making. This is a short introduction to the topic at hand, but it is an important introduction to the topic. There are three different ways he draws attention to the importance of this matter and the strength of his statement.

First, he gives *the positive*. He says, "I am speaking the truth in Christ." This is a way for Paul to emphasize what he's about to say. It's not as if in other places Paul is *not* speaking the truth. He's just being emphatic. Have you ever done that? Have you ever said to someone, "Now let me be frank here" or "Let me be totally honest with you now"? The implication is not that you've been lying to them all other places or that you're never frank. You just want them to sit up, pay attention, and listen to what you're about to say.

Paul wants us to take notice of his statement. But he goes on even further. He says he is speaking the truth *in Christ*. Now what does that mean? It's not a formula. It's not an oath. We don't see Paul using this in other places. It's not something Paul uses as a formulaic message. No. He is speaking, he's telling us, from a place of union with Christ. That union is the place from which his emotions spring. He is motivated to say this because he is in Christ. That motivates him to speak.

Secondly, Paul gives us *the negative*. He says, "I am not lying." It's not enough for Paul just to give us the positive statement, "I'm speaking the truth in Christ." He gives us a negative statement to emphasize the truthfulness of what he is saying. This is a pattern Paul uses often in his letters. He does that to show that in Christ there can be no lie. Not even an exaggeration is possible. For example, in Galatians 1:20 he says, "In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie!" Or in 1 Timothy 2 he says, "For this I was appointed a preacher and an apostle (I am telling the truth, I am not lying)..."

Often, if we're honest with ourselves, we exaggerate for effect, and sometimes we have people around us who call us on that. "Was it really that big? Was it really that often? Are you sure that's the case?" But Paul here is not exaggerating at all. There is no lie. There is no stretching of the truth at all in what Paul is saying. Everything he is saying to us is the true truth. "Pay attention," Paul says. "I'm not exaggerating. Listen to me."

The third thing Paul does that shows us the importance of a heart for the lost is *he brings a witness to bear*. He says, "My conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit." Conscience is an independent assessment of our conduct. It brings what we do under scrutiny. Those of you who are about my age remember the cartoon that had Jiminy Cricket in it when you were children. Jiminy Cricket was the conscience for Pinocchio. He was outside of Pinocchio. He was an independent assessment of what Pinocchio was doing. That's the way the conscience works. It assesses what we do.

Now, for the most part, the conscience is negative. It tells us that what we're doing is wrong; we should stop it. Something violates our conscience. It makes us feel uneasy about doing something, so we're to stop it. That's typically what the conscience does. Paul appeals to his conscience over and over again in his ministry. For the most part, he does this by saying, "My conscience is clear. My conscience is clean. My conscience does not condemn me."

He says this in Acts 23. He says, "Brothers, I have lived my life before God in all good conscience up to this day." Paul is not afraid to say he has a clear conscience before God. But again here, just as he did when he spoke of speaking the truth in Christ, Paul goes yet another step farther. He says, "My conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit." What does this mean? Well, it's just Paul expressing the truth that the conscience can be improved upon.

We all have a conscience, but until we come to know the Lord Jesus Christ, until the Spirit of God indwells us, until we know and understand the Word of God, that conscience can limit us in ways that it should not. The classic example of this in the Bible is the conscience of those who are newly converted to the faith convicts them that they should not be eating meat that has been offered to idols, and Paul says, "This is not what you need to do. You are free to eat this meat in Christ."

There are two types of people having this discussion. There are the weaker brothers whose conscience restricts them, and there are the stronger brothers whose conscience frees them on this point because it has been informed by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit improves your conscience. The more you read your Bible, the more you pray, the closer you come to the Lord, the more aware you are of the work of the Spirit, the better your conscience will be. That's what Paul says.

We have here in the first verse Paul telling us in multiple ways, in the strongest possible language, "This is important. Listen up." What Paul is saying about the lost has a very high priority. So, what is Paul going to say about the lost? Well, that's what we have in verse 2. We see the *depth of a heart for the lost*. Look at verse 2. "I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart." Paul reveals his heart. He reveals his emotions. He reveals his subjective state of mind about the lost.

Now, do not forget what we've just said. This is not just emotionalism coming out of Paul. Paul has emphasized the truth of what he's saying. There's an objective reality here, but he wants us to know the depth of how this truth is affecting him. Beloved, we need to understand that emotions are not wrong. I think sometimes we set emotions up against the intellect and think, "Emotions are bad. We need to be completely intellectual and only think about the truth."

The reality is what the Bible tells us, what Paul is teaching us here is if we know the truth, the truth affects us and our emotions flow out from the truth. Now, if we have emotions that are *contrary* to the truth, that's wrong, but emotions that flow from the truth of what God has told us in his Word are perfectly appropriate. It could very well be here, just as with Paul, that the truth of something hits you and you are deeply affected by it. That's what's going on here with Paul.

So Paul uses two phrases to draw our attention to his heart. The first is he says, "I have great sorrow." The matter of the lost here is a deep and heavy one for Paul. It weighs him down. It's not something that's easily put aside. He tells us it is great. It has significance. It also is a grief, and it's a grief that is no momentary sadness. It's not just being sad about something. You, for example, may be sad when your favorite team loses, but you move on from that, don't you? It doesn't have a grip on you.

But when someone close to you dies or when your home is destroyed, that affects you deeply. You don't just get over it. You grieve. You're saddened. You are weighed down. That's what's going on here. Paul has such an intense grief at what he sees he cannot easily shake it off. This is made even clearer by the second phrase Paul uses. He says, "I have unceasing anguish in my heart." He says, "The feeling I have is constant. It is continual. I can't get any relief from this. It is unceasing."

Just as Paul tells us in other places that he is constant in his prayers for the churches, so he is constant in his anguish for the lost. Think about that for a moment. Paul is letting us know there is not a hierarchy of importance. He is constantly gripped by a concern for fellow believers, yet he is constantly pained by the state of the lost. There is no competition. Paul focuses on both. So should we. This is the first thing Paul wants us to know: that he is constantly thinking about those who do not know Jesus. This is a critically important thing.

Knowledge of God's Mercy

Now, why would Paul be so concerned for the lost? We might not expect this here right before Paul expounds on the doctrine of election and the sovereignty of God in salvation. After all, isn't that the rap against the doctrine of election, that someone who believes in it won't care about the lost, won't be interested in evangelism, that if God is in complete control we don't even really need to care? What we see here is something very different than that. Paul has come to this point by teaching about God's grace.

Paul has a knowledge of the mercy of God, and he understands that the mercy of God begets mercy. There's a good old-fashioned King James word for you: *beget*. You know what it means. It means to father. We see that all throughout the genealogies of the Old Testament. "So-and-so begat so-and-so who begat so-and-so." What that means is the mercy of God brings even more mercy to bear. It doesn't stop with one person. Mercy to one person spreads to another.

Paul understands how God's grace works. Remember what he told us before in Romans is that everyone is lost in their sin, that no one seeks after God, that no one can do anything worthy of salvation. Instead, it is God who reaches down in his grace and gives to us mercy. He sent his Son, Jesus Christ, to do what we could not. Paul knows he was the recipient of mercy. More than that, Paul knows he was not a *worthy* recipient of mercy. He had spent his whole life persecuting the church and opposing Jesus. If anyone should have mercy withheld from him, it would be Paul.

We'll look at this in a little bit of detail in a moment, but do not miss the big picture. Paul's doctrine of the sovereign grace of God must be accompanied by a heart of mercy. If you have been shown mercy by God, you must want to see mercy shown to others. This is what it means to be affected by grace. The Bible shows us a picture of what the opposite looks like in the person of Jonah. You remember that Jonah fled from God. He would not take God's mercy to the Ninevites.

Do you remember why he would not go to Nineveh? It wasn't because he thought it was a waste of time. It wasn't because he thought the Ninevites would reject God. It wasn't because he thought it was a fruitless endeavor. The Scripture tells us Jonah fled because he knew God was a God of mercy and he didn't want mercy shown to the Ninevites. That's why he fled. You see, we are called to be a people who experience mercy and who long to see that mercy go out to others. Jonah at that point did not understand God's grace, and he obviously did not understand his own sin, because he had been a recipient of this grace.

The Bible also describes for us what this *should* look like. You may remember that in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus says, "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy." If you'll allow me to do a bit of math with Jesus' words, I think you can flip this on the other side. Picture this statement as two statements with an equal sign in the middle of it. The reverse is also true. Those who receive mercy will be merciful. That's what Jesus is saying here.

So, how does Paul express this mercy? He does so in the strongest possible terms. In fact, it is so strong some commentators don't know what to do with it. Paul says, "I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh." Some say what Paul is talking about here is himself before conversion: "I was cut off from Christ." It's a past-tense statement that before he knew Christ he wanted to be cut off from Christ.

But that makes no sense here. It doesn't match what's going on. It also doesn't match the grammar, because this is not a strict past-tense statement. It is a continuing sense. It is an imperfect tense. It's something that marks Paul not only previously but now and continues to go on. Others say Paul really means it, that he would be cut off from Christ if he could save others, but there's a problem with *that*.

How could anyone who knows Jesus Christ want to be cut off from Christ? After all, hasn't Paul just told us in the previous chapter that nothing can separate us from Christ? So how could Paul possibly want that when he knows it's impossible? I think the answer here is that Paul has such a heart for the lost, specifically for the Jews, that he starts the process of wishing this, even though he knows he can't because something stands in the way of such a wish.

I think our translation captures this very well. Do you see this? "I *could* wish..." I *could* wish, but I'm not. It's a hypothetical to the extent that if it were possible and if it would actually affect the salvation of his kinsmen, he would be willing to be accursed on their behalf. He starts the process of wishing, but the fact of his union with Christ becomes an obstacle that cannot be overcome. Martyn Lloyd-Jones puts it *this* way. We could translate this, "I was on the point of wishing, but I stopped."

There's a parallel for this in the Bible in the person of Moses. You remember the story of the Israelites building the golden calf. Moses went up on the mountain, and as he was gone day upon day, week upon week, the Israelites became disturbed and said to Aaron, "We don't know where God is. We can't see God, and now we can't even see Moses. You need to build us a god we can see." Aaron submitted to their wishes and took from them the gold they had and built for them a golden calf.

What I like about this is the way the Bible describes that. I don't think the Israelites said, "Could you build us an itty-bitty calf?" I think what they probably said was, "Build us a big, strong bull." By the time Aaron got done collecting what they had, he said, "Well, y'all don't really have enough. I can make you a little calf. Will that do?" That's what happens when we start to go down that road. When we start to substitute things for God, we don't even get what we think we want as a substitute. We get a poor imitation of a poor imitation.

Well, Moses comes down after God has told him what they're doing. You remember that Moses' reaction is frightening. It just seems to me one of the most appropriate reactions to idolatry in all of the Bible. You remember what he does. He takes the golden calf and burns it down, but that's not enough. He spreads it in the water, and *that's* not enough. He says, "Now you drink it. Drink the calf." Then he says, "All who are with me and on the Lord's side, go against those who have rebelled against the Lord," and thousands die on that day.

So Moses goes back to the Lord. The Lord has already told him, "The people have sinned. Listen. I'm done with these people. I'm going to wipe them out, and I'm going to start a new nation from *you*." Now that's pretty tempting, isn't it? "You get to be the second Abraham. Everyone comes from you." Moses instead says, "I don't want that."

He says, "Think of how the Egyptians would gloat if you destroyed the people you just rescued. Also, remember the covenant you made with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob." He says, "Please forgive them, and if you can't forgive them, then blot me out of your book too." What does this mean? What is all this language from Moses and from Paul? I think Paul and Moses here come as close as is humanly possible to the mind of Christ...Christ who was willing to be made a curse for the redemption of sinners.

This does not mean they could do what Jesus did, but it *does* mean they were so burdened for the souls of others they could even use this language. Now, what do *you* think about this? Are you burdened for the lost? Are you willing to even give up some comfort, some money, some time for their sake? Does your heart beat with the flow of mercy and grace so much that you long for others to experience it as well? Mercy begets mercy.

The other thing we must understand about mercy is that it is necessary. By this we mean more than necessary for salvation. Of course this is the case, but the context of our passage highlights another aspect of its necessity: that we

are helpless without God's work in our lives. One of the great dangers a person faces after believing on the Lord Jesus Christ is that somehow he thinks it was up to him to accomplish it. We begin to think there's something special about us, that we had an ability that allowed us to come to Jesus. This shows itself in the way we view unbelievers.

We look at them as if they've failed, as if somehow they've missed the boat, as if it's *their* fault that they haven't believed. Now, understand me. All unbelievers are accountable before God. All have sinned and fall short of God's glory, but all equally need the grace of God to escape his wrath and their sin. Think about what Paul is saying here about the lost and who that "lost" are. They are his countrymen. They are the Jews. And what have the Jews been doing? They've been opposing Paul at every turn.

They have been his enemies. They've been trying to kill him. They've whipped him. They've tried to undo all of his work for Jesus, yet Paul is expressing the greatest form of love for them that he could. He says, "If it were possible, I would wish to be accursed so they could be saved." How do *you* view the lost? Let me ask more directly. How do you view the lost who are your enemies? Not the person who patiently listens to you talk about your faith. No. I mean the person who mocks you. I mean the person who stands in your way. How do you view them?

We need to be very careful here if we do not deny our theology. If God is sovereign in his grace, then he is so with everyone. We cannot look at sinners and say, "Oh, I wish they would clean up their act." We can't treat them with annoyance or with contempt. That's far too easy in our day because we are divided into camps. If we look at Paul here, he didn't display any annoyance, any contempt, or any hostility toward the lost, and those lost were the ones who were against him.

What did he do? He puts himself in their shoes. He knows they need Christ. He knows that apart from Christ they will be hostile to the things of God. He knows they can't help themselves apart from the Holy Spirit. They're just like he *was*. So he wants God to give them his Spirit so they might be saved. If you have been changed by the mercy of God, you must not only be someone who wants mercy to be spread; you must know that mercy is necessary for change. This informs the way we interact with the lost. You understand that they need the Lord, so as a result, you are patient. You're not dismissive, and you put yourself in their shoes. You put yourself in their position.

No Presumption

The final thing Paul wants us to see is that we cannot presume upon God. Paul's zeal for the lost is about more than his natural ties to the Israelites. He certainly *has* those, but Paul also has a concern for Israel because of the place they occupy in redemptive history. He doesn't want God to be accused of having failed because many Israelites rejected Jesus as the Messiah. We'll talk more about that specifically in two weeks, but for now we see that Paul begins to list the covenant privileges Israel had, and they were many.

First, they are the *Israelites*. You notice he doesn't call them the *Jews*. He doesn't call them the *Hebrews*. He calls them the *Israelites*, because he is intentionally trying to draw the connection these people have to Israel, to Jacob, to the one who overcame and who was renamed and established by God.

Then he refers to their *adoption*. Now, he doesn't mean here what he spoke about earlier in the last chapter about adoption into the family of God. He's speaking of the privilege they had to be called God's people from out amongst all of the peoples. This is an outward privilege that gives context to the inward privilege of those who were God's people. We'll look more in a few weeks at the difference between an outward privilege and an inward privilege, but for now, we need to see that this is a privilege the Israelites received. They were set apart from all of the peoples.

Next Paul mentions the *glory*. By that he means Israel was the place where God's glory dwelt. We see this perhaps most easily in the journey of the exodus. God was with them every step of the way in the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire, and when they stopped the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire hovered *over* and *in* and *with* the tabernacle. When the temple was constructed, that was the place where God's glory dwelt. It was unique with Israel.

Then he refers to the *covenants*, and by that he means the unique relationship God had outlined with his people through Abraham, through Moses, and through David. No other people had such a blessing. Finally, he lists off a series of privileges Israel had. They were the ones to whom was given the Law. They had the proper worship of God in the temple, and they had the special promises of God recorded in his Word. In each of these things they were blessed and benefited from God's blessing.

So, what is Paul's point in all of this? That all of this was real, but apart from Jesus it meant nothing. He's saying that no matter what privileges you have, if you do not have Jesus you have no part of God or his blessing. So stop for a moment and think about yourself. What privileges do *you* have? Are you taking them for granted? You're hearing God's Word preached. You have the prayers of God's people. You are in the bosom of the church. All of these are privileges, but they mean nothing apart from Jesus.

Finally, Paul reminds us that Jesus came to the Jews. He was from their race according to the flesh. Paul is very clear about this. He actually says Jesus came *out* of them. What this means is the Jews of Paul's day had the gospel. It came to them first. They didn't have to go to the ends of the earth to find it. No one had to bring it to them, but they rejected it. They didn't think they needed it.

We can be in a similar place in America today. We see the gospel all around us. We're in church right now. We might think God *owes* us the gospel, that we will always have an opportunity to believe the gospel, but the Bible tells us that is not the case. The Bible calls upon you to believe *today*. It says *today* is the day of salvation. You're not promised tomorrow.

The Jews thought they were, but they were not. They rejected Jesus, and God took from them the gospel. He sent the gospel to the Gentiles, and he did away with the temple. He did away with their state. He did away with everything. The good news is that the gospel is before you right now. All you need to do is believe on Jesus. Don't presume that God will wait on you while you hesitate. Come to Jesus *now*.