

That's Not Fair!

Romans 9:6-16 (NIV)

⁶ It is not as though God's word had failed. For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. ⁷ 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." ⁸ In other words, it is not the children by physical descent who are God's children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring. ⁹ For this was how the promise was stated: "At the appointed time I will return, and Sarah will have a son." ¹⁰ Not only that, but Rebekah's children were conceived at the same time by our father Isaac. ¹¹ Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad—in order that God's purpose in election might stand: ¹² not by works but by him who calls—she was told, "The older will serve the younger." ¹³ Just as it is written: "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated." ¹⁴ What then shall we say? Is God unjust? Not at all! ¹⁵ For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." ¹⁶ It does not, therefore, depend on human desire or effort, but on God's mercy.

The Israelites are God's chosen people, but what does that mean? The descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob - a people also known as the Jews - were chosen by God to be the people from whom the Messiah would come, the one who would defeat the devil, take away the sins of the world, and overcome death for all. As Paul wrote in the verse immediately preceding our verses today, "Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of the Messiah, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen." (Romans 9:5) God made this promise of the Messiah coming from the Israelites known to them so that they could share this promise with others, to be a beacon of light in a world covered in the darkness of sin and death and evil, a beacon meant to draw others to the light of life that is the Messiah, the Christ, the Anointed One.

Even though the Israelites are God's chosen people to carry the Messiah into the world, not all of them were saved. As Paul wrote, "For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel." (verse 6) Not all of Israel has gone or will go to heaven; some descended of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob have been condemned and are spending eternity in hell.

Well, that doesn't seem fair. They are God's chosen people. Why doesn't God just save them all? In fact, why is it that God doesn't just save all of us? Why does he send anyone to hell? If God were truly good, no one would go to hell, right? It's not fair that people are condemned to an eternity of hell just because they didn't meet some arbitrary criteria – so we might think.

The same cries of unfairness come from the Gospel reading today when those who worked all day grumbled and complained when those who only worked an hour got the same wage. We say it's not fair that two people doing the same job get paid different wages. But to then suddenly equalize the wages wouldn't be conforming to the established pay that the employer and employee had agreed upon. Fair is not necessarily equal. Fair is getting what the rules say you should get.

Is going to heaven or hell determined by fairness? Should someone, namely me, go to heaven because I belong to a church and I go all the time, pretty much every Sunday? Should I go to heaven because I give of my time and my talents and my treasures, going above and beyond what other people give? Should I go to heaven because I try really hard to do good things or because I've looked around and really, in the broad scheme of things, there are people who are way worse than me? Should I go to heaven because God can't be that mean and ruthless to sentence people to an eternity of suffering in hell, to cast people away from his presence?

What is fair? Let's remember that when we use the word "fair," we are talking about something that conforms with the established rules, that this is the way it's supposed to work, the right way. Often when we talk about things being fair, we are judging the fairness primarily from our point of view, our perspective. We tend to skew our judgment in favor of us. We establish the rules of fairness. To us, it makes sense, it seems fair that if we put in a good effort of trying to live for God, if we aren't as bad as other people, then we should be rewarded. We should go to heaven. Fair is letting me make my own way, determine my own destiny.

Sometimes we confuse what's fair with forgiveness. When we have a debt that we can't pay back, that we hope to put in what we can when we can and yet the bill collector says, "That's not good enough. I demand the full repayment upon the agreed due date," we say that's not fair. We say it's not fair because we can't meet the demand.

What does God say is fair for us to get? The established rules are that God is perfect, and if you want to be with God you also must be completely perfect. There's no room for error. No room for improvement. That's the standard: perfection. If you don't meet it, you don't get to go to heaven. But that's not fair, we say. So, it's not fair that God stands by his established rule of requiring perfection to live with him in heaven? We protest that it's not fair because we can't meet the requirement.

As Paul has already written earlier in Romans quoting from the Old Testament, “There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one...all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” (Romans 3:10-13, 23) Fair is that God turns his back on us and doesn’t give us another thought because none of us are perfect, none of us meet God’s standard. We all have sinned. Fair is our damnation to hell for our imperfection.

God is not fair in the way that we think he should be fair. He is not fair because he doesn’t compromise who he is and what he demands so that we can earn our way into his favor on our terms, earn our way into heaven by means of doing a lot of good things or at least by not being as bad as the other guy.

The Jews, those descended from Israel, had the same argument for Paul. They thought that fairness from God meant that he should allow all the chosen people go to heaven, that all who are descended of Abraham, all who are Abraham’s physical, genetic children, should be welcomed into heaven. They thought fair meant being born to the right family of the right privilege should give them access to God. But that wouldn’t be fair either, that God would compromise his standard of perfection to allow people to heaven because of their physical descendants, because they were born of the right family and had the right genealogy. If that’s how God makes people his children and brings them into heaven, how many would be condemned to hell simply because they weren’t born of the right family?

So, God chooses his children, his heirs of heaven, based on mercy instead of what we call fairness. God still requires perfection from us, a requirement we cannot meet unless we downgrade the meaning of perfection and turn it into “try” or “strive.” Instead, God met his requirement in his Son, Jesus Christ, the promised Messiah. Through the Israelites, the Messiah came into the world as a baby in Bethlehem. He lived under the same commands and laws that we live under, except he was God who made those commands. We sinned and fell short of those commands, but Jesus met that standard of perfection demanded by God by living under and keeping the commands he made. Not only that, but God also required payment of the debt of sin every human being had ever racked up and ever would. So, being both God and man, Jesus took the debt of our sins on himself, an infinite payment that was more than any of us could bear. As the perfect God and Man, he suffered and died for us, satisfying and paying off the debt of sin we all owed. That was not fair to Jesus. God isn’t fair. Instead, God is mercy, and he is merciful.

In his mercy, God gave us the benefit of Jesus’ perfection and payment for sin. In mercy, God called us to be his children, children called by a promise, not based on human desire or effort or even family heritage. This is just as it was with the patriarchs of the Israelites, with Isaac and Jacob. “It is not the children by physical descent who are God’s children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham’s offspring. For this was how the promise was stated: “At the appointed time I will return, and Sarah will have a son.” Not only that, but Rebekah’s children were conceived at the same time by our father Isaac. Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad—in order that God’s purpose in election might stand: not by works but by him who calls—she was told, “The older will serve the younger.” (verses 7-12)

Is it fair that God chose us to be his children, that he chose Isaac and Jacob to be his children, without basing it on anything that we or they had done, to make this choice before Isaac was conceived and before Jacob was born? No. God’s choice wasn’t based on fairness; it was based on mercy. For he says to Moses, “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.” (verse 15)

Thanks be to God that he has had that mercy on the whole world through the perfect life and sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Thanks be to God that he chooses us to be his children based on his mercy, and not on what we actually do. What we actually do is fail at perfection. We sin all the time. We try to fight it, but we have fallen short of his standard of perfection. Yet God chose to make us his children, to bring us to faith, to save us without us ever being in a position to earn or deserve it. We are God’s chosen people, his children chosen by his mercy to belong to him.

For this reason, we rely solely on God’s mercy when it comes to being his children and heirs of heaven. God unfairly stepped in to our place and took our debt of sin. He brought us to faith in him by the work of the Holy Spirit. He saved us. He will take us to heaven. None of these things depend on our desire or effort, but entirely on his mercy. May the name of our merciful God be praised by us always and forever because he has had compassion on us and has chosen us by his mercy! Amen.