

CURSED AND CUT OFF FROM CHRIST
Sermon for the 9th Sunday after Pentecost, 2020
Romans 9:1-5

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is the first part of our Second Reading from before, Romans 9:1-5: ¹ **I am telling the truth in Christ. I am not lying, as my conscience bears witness to me by the Holy Spirit,** ² **that I have great sorrow and unceasing pain in my heart.** ³ **For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those who are my own flesh and blood.** ⁴ **They are Israelites. To them belong the adoption as sons, the glory, the Covenants, the receiving of the Law, the worship and the promises.** ⁵ **To them belong the fathers, and from them, according to His human nature, the Christ came, who is God over everything, blessed for ever! Amen.**

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

Last Sunday, we were reminded of how gracious our God is. Come what may, He is always there to bless and take care of us. This is true in our earthly lives, but it is also true regarding our spiritual life. We know we have a loving Father who has done all to receive us to Himself. Giving thanks to God, we show our appreciation by living a life of faith, and of telling others of the marvellous deeds, He has shown through the work of His Son, Jesus Christ. We work while it is still day¹, telling others living in the dark of the eternal salvation that awaits all who place their trust in Jesus.

Salvation belongs to us because someone had to pay the penalty for all our sins. God's wrath for sin had to be appeased. It is here where His only Son Jesus stood up. Jesus was willing to be cut off from His Father to suffer for our sins by paying the ultimate price of His life. We believe that and so did the Apostle Paul, yet today we find him saying, **"For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those who are my own flesh and blood."** Why did Paul write these words, and would any of us be willing to be blotted out of the book of life for the sake of someone else?

To answer, we must do a quick review of the ground Paul has covered up to this point.

Paul was writing to the Church at Rome. We could say that this letter was his greatest work on the Gospel. In this letter, he carefully explains step by step God's plan to save fallen man by the person and work of Jesus Christ, His Son.

At the beginning of his letter, Paul shows how all people are accused by God's Holy Law and stand before Him condemned and without excuse. This is true for both the Jew who has God's Law handed down by Moses and for pagan Gentiles who have never heard God's commandments because at very least they have God's Law written on their hearts in the form of conscience. It doesn't make any difference. Before God, all are sinners and are justly condemned. Paul further shows that there is no human way out of this, that there is nothing we can possibly think or do to work our own salvation. On our own, the situation is completely hopeless.

Then toward the end of the third chapter, Paul reveals that God has prepared another way that we can stand before the Lord in judgment and be declared righteous in His sight. It's a righteousness that comes not by doing but rather by believing. It is where Paul puts forth the very heart of the Gospel: how in love God has sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to be the Saviour of the world; how He, Christ, though eternal God, took on human flesh, lived a perfect life of obedience to the Law, and yet was condemned, suffered, and died as the atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world, and how He rose again from the dead on the third day as living proof that His work of atonement is complete. This is the righteousness of God, Paul declares, which is ascribed to all who trust in Jesus and what He has done to work salvation for us. Jesus does it all. He keeps God's Holy Law for us: both the part that said in order to live, we must be perfectly righteous and the part that said the soul that sins must die.²

Paul then continues to build and expand the argument, demonstrating from the Old Testament how this plan of God to save us by faith in Christ is not something new: it's what the Scriptures have been saying all along. He holds up Abraham, the father of the faithful, as the chief example. The Lord counted him righteous not because of what he did, but rather because he trusted the Word and promises of God pointing to the Saviour. He was saved by trusting in Christ and His death and resurrection just like we are. Paul then explains what this means for us: that the futile effort and constant fear connected to trying to please God by our own worthless efforts is over. Through Christ, we have peace with God. He then speaks of Baptism and how it ties us directly to Jesus in His passion, death, and resurrection. Paul explains how when Jesus died, in Baptism, we died with Him. Because Christ has been raised, we have also been raised with Him to live a new life. Freed from the slavery of sin and curse of

¹ John 9:4

² Matthew 5:48 & Ezekiel 18:20

the Law and with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we can now live as God's children, walking in joyful obedience.

But the struggle with sin isn't over. In fact, it's just beginning, as Paul explains in chapter seven. There he describes the ongoing battle between the two natures in us: the old, evil nature that inclines our thoughts and actions toward sin, and the new, redeemed nature that desires to do God's will. Paul speaks of the wretched frustration of wanting to do good but having every intent and action contaminated by the evil within him. He yearns to be freed from this struggle – and he looks to Christ to ultimately deliver him.

And Christ will. Paul describes how, in Jesus, the final victory is guaranteed for the faithful. We need not waver or fear no matter what the enemy throws at us. In all things that happen, God is working for our good, and there is nothing in all creation that will ever be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

With all that, we now arrive at our text, and Paul's presentation abruptly changes course. It's as if he's anticipating a question from his hearers – one that goes something like this: “Paul, we've been following your discussion and we see how this Gospel of Christ all hangs together. We think it's wonderful; *but what about the Jews?* What's the deal with them?”

You see, the Christian Church in Rome would have been composed mostly of Gentiles, that is, people with *other* than Jewish backgrounds. They weren't physical descendants of Israel. A few of them may have been converted to the Jewish faith, Gentiles who believed in the true God and worshipped with the Jews. Still, the vast majority would have been idol worshipping pagans before they heard the Gospel and became believers in Jesus. It's likely that there were also a tiny number of people with Jewish backgrounds among the believers at Rome, but everyone would have seen that *these poor people were in a very difficult situation*.

That's because in the early days the Jews – the majority of them, anyway – were the fiercest opponents of Christianity. They hated Jesus. They hated Paul and the other Apostles for preaching about Him. They really hated that Paul and the others were saying that in Christ, both Jew and Gentile are alike – that there is no distinction. But they especially hated it when a Jew – one of their own race – was converted to Christ and confessed the name of Jesus as Saviour. Such a person would have been disowned by their family and friends and treated with utter contempt.

So, all the Christians at Rome knew that the Jews were their enemies who despised them and spread lies about their worship and practices. The Jews were always trying to get Christians arrested with false accusations. And if one of them joined with the Christians, they were immediately cut off. But here's what doesn't make sense. The Jews were God's chosen race. They are the ones God made the heirs of His promises, the ones upon whom He placed His special love and favour. So, if nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ, what happened to them? Why is it now – it seems anyway – that they have been rejected?

The answer to this anticipated question is what Paul takes up through chapters 9 to 11 of Romans. Our text today is only the first five verses of Paul's reply, but what he says as he opens this discussion is worthy of our attention.

Paul begins by expressing his overwhelming sorrow concerning the members of his own race who are stubbornly rejecting the Gospel. He stresses, **“I am telling the truth in Christ. I am not lying, as my conscience bears witness to me by the Holy Spirit, ² that I have great sorrow and unceasing pain in my heart.”** This is saying a lot. After all, Paul himself has suffered greatly because of them. Due to their lies and constant attacks he's been threatened, beaten, imprisoned, and nearly torn limb from limb, but he's not holding any grudges. He loves his countrymen and what he wants is *their salvation*.

In order to achieve that he would be willing to do or suffer anything. *Anything*. The real proof of his love for the Jewish nation comes in his next statement. Remember that after the incident involving Israel's worship of the golden calf, God had threatened to destroy the rebellious Jewish nation and make a great people from Moses.³ At that time, Moses offered to be cut off from God's people or to even lose his life if it proved helpful to Israel.⁴ Reminiscent of Moses' offer, Paul says, **“For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those who are my own flesh and blood.”** If it were possible, Paul, like Moses before him, would prefer that he himself would be eternally lost and condemned if only the “brothers” of his own race, the people of Israel, might be saved. Paul earnestly longed for their salvation. Think about that. What he's saying is that if it would bring them to the truth of the Gospel and result in their salvation, he would be willing to offer himself to spend all of eternity in the flames of hell.

Let's now ask ourselves, “Is there anyone or any group of people we could say that about? That in order to save them – if that's what it took – we would be willing to go to hell forever for them?” Forever is a very long time.

However, we may be inclined to dismiss this statement of the Apostle as mere *hyperbole* – a deliberate exaggeration to emphasise Paul's concern for his people. But that would be a mistake. That's apparent from the oath he uses leading into the statement: **“I am telling the truth in Christ.”** Paul doesn't use that kind of language lightly. When he says something like that, we can be sure he means it. Let that settle in. Paul means that he *would* go to hell forever to save his fellow Jews. He

³ Exodus 32:9-10

⁴ Exodus 32:31-32

would prefer to be cursed by God and cut off from the Saviour he loves if that would save them.

Dear friends, if you have ever wondered what Christian maturity looks like, this is it. This is what it means to have the mind of Christ – to love someone or some group of people so completely and thoroughly that you would give yourself to damnation for their sake. How can we know that? It is because that's what Jesus did. He gave Himself to infinite torment on the cross. He could do that because He is at once true man and true God. Thinking back a bit again to what Moses said at the time of the golden calf, and to Paul, when both offered to be cut off from God if it meant their people would live, we need to remember that such an exchange is not possible. The life of one sinner is not enough to pay for another. Psalm 49:7-8 reads, "*Certainly none of them will redeem his brother or pay a ransom to God for him. For the redemption of their souls is costly, and he will always despair.*" No mere man can atone for sin. Only the sinless blood of Christ, who is both God and man, could accomplish that. That's what makes the suffering and death of Jesus able to atone for the sins of the whole world. His suffering on the cross is more than and outweighs the suffering of all humankind in hell forever.

Jesus gave Himself for us in love, and now Paul, transformed and made Christ-like by that redeeming love, would be willing to suffer the same – at least as much is humanly possible – to save his fellow Jews. Of course, Paul knows it's not possible. His going to hell could not save anyone. More to the point, it's not necessary. Paul knows that Christ was already cursed for all people. This is the Good News Paul proclaimed; the Good News that for the most part, his countrymen rejected.

But why? What is it about the Gospel the Jews in his day found so hard to receive? It was the very fact that Jesus *had to be cursed for them*. In rejecting the truth, what they were really rejecting was the very idea that they needed someone – anyone – to be cursed for them. Salvation was something they thought *they could achieve on their own*. They didn't want help. They didn't want a Saviour. That insulted them. They wanted to save themselves. They thought they could be righteous and stand in the judgment on their own merit. The very idea of what Paul said he'd be willing to offer on their behalf was what they couldn't accept.

The same is true today, and not just by those who follow the faith of Judaism. This is what's behind Islam and many other false faith systems. Any faith system that claims salvation apart from faith alone in Christ alone is a false religion.

There was no way for Paul to be cursed by God in order to save His people, nor was it necessary. But in his tireless efforts to save his fellow Jews, he was cursed *by them*. He was reviled, treated contemptuously, and physically harmed in many ways by them as they tried to silence and discredit him. And we know that some of them saw in him the evidence of Christ's sacrificial love as he continued to return kindness for their evil, as he continued to pray for them and for their forgiveness even as they attacked him, and as he continued to trust in Christ despite all the hardships, they inflicted upon him. Surely that made a powerful impression upon them, and I'm willing to bet that that opened at least some of them to see the evil in themselves, and to hear what he had to say about Jesus and God's forgiveness through faith in Him. In this sense, maybe Paul's being cursed did help to save some of his people.

This is God's desire for all people: to save them by His grace through faith in Jesus. Therefore may God give to us the mind and love of Christ that we too may share St. Paul's willingness to suffer any disgrace or indignity in order to witness to the truth of salvation to save those who are as yet the enemies of Jesus. In His holy name. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

PRAYER FOR THE NINTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Heavenly Father, we rejoice to remember Your constant love, and we join Your Church everywhere to praise Your glorious name. We thank You that Your Spirit has made us Your adopted children in Jesus Christ, so that we may truly know You as our Father, call on You confidently in prayer, and know that You will hear us.

We pray for all believers in the family of the Church. Preserve Your remnant of grace. Give Your flock shepherds whom Your Spirit teaches and leads, and who earnestly proclaim Your pure Word of life. Grant that they may lovingly feed Your sheep with Your Word, and strive to protect them from all error. Rescue Your Church from the dangerous lies of all false shepherds, so that Your children may be linked together in love, may stand firm in a common purpose and may work together to spread the Gospel.

Show Your glory and power to the nations, O God. Turn those in authority whose eyes are spiritually blind to Your light, and from the power of Satan to Christ, so that they may possess the forgiveness of sins and a place among the children of God. Look with favour on our country, that liberty, justice, and high morals may hold sway, and destroy all ungodliness and evil influences.

Heavenly Father, let Your Spirit fill our homes. Let the word of Christ in all its richness live in the hearts of children, and enable all parents to be proper examples of Christian faith and life. Protect our families in every storm of life, and keep them from all evil.

Since You have sent Your Son into the world so that no one may die in His sins, keep us pure in a corrupt and sinful world, so

that we may finally obtain the crown of life. Teach us to know better what You want for us, let us yield a rich harvest of godly deeds, make us able to stand firm in the faith. Help us to put to death the desires of our sinful nature, and to live in the Spirit, as those who will one day enjoy all that You have promised.

Heavenly Father, the source of all holy desires, wise plans, and right actions, give Your peace to all, especially to those who are facing pain, sickness, mental agony, spiritual distress, or any other burden of body or soul. Assure them of Your love and mercy, that they may place themselves in Your care, and receive from You everything they need for their lasting good.

Loving Father, You have invited us to bring our requests before You with thanks. Therefore accept these prayers in the name of Jesus Christ, our Saviour. Amen.

9 Pentecost (Proper 13)

Isaiah 55:1-5

¹ “Come! Everyone who is thirsty, come to the water! You who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come! Buy wine and milk without money and without cost! ² Why do you spend money for what is not bread and your labour for what does not satisfy? Listen carefully to Me! Eat what is good and enjoy rich food! ³ Turn your ears toward Me and come to Me! Listen, that your souls may stay alive! I shall establish an eternal Covenant with you, the long-lasting mercies shown to David. ⁴ Look! I have given Him as a Witness to the nations, a Leader and a Commander of the nations.”

⁵ Look! You will summon a nation that you do not know, and a nation that has not known you will run to you, because of the LORD, your God, the Holy One of Israel. For He has honoured you.

Romans 9:1-13

¹ I am telling the truth in Christ. I am not lying, as my conscience bears witness to me by the Holy Spirit, ² that I have great sorrow and unceasing pain in my heart. ³ For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those who are my own flesh and blood. ⁴ They are Israelites. To them belong the adoption as sons, the glory, the Covenants, the receiving of the Law, the worship and the promises. ⁵ To them belong the fathers, and from them, according to His human nature, the Christ came, who is God over everything, blessed for ever! Amen.

⁶ This does not mean that the Word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel, ⁷ and not all who are the offspring of Abraham are for that reason his children. Rather, “Isaac’s children will be called your offspring.” ⁸ This means that the children of God are not those who are children by natural birth. Rather, the children of the promise are reckoned as Abraham’s offspring. ⁹ For this is how the promise was worded: “I shall come at this appointed time, and Sarah will have a son.” ¹⁰ Not only this, but, Rebecca also conceived by one man, our father Isaac. ¹¹ For the children had not yet been born and had not done anything good or bad, that God’s purpose according to election might remain, ¹² which does not depend on works but on Him who calls, and yet she was told: “The elder one will serve the younger one.” ¹³ It is as Scripture

has said, “I have loved Jacob but have hated Esau.”

Matthew 14:13-21

¹³ When Jesus heard what had happened, He withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place to be alone. The crowds heard about it and followed Him on foot from the cities. ¹⁴ When Jesus came out of the boat, He saw a large crowd. His heart was filled with pity for them, and He healed their sick. ¹⁵ In the evening His disciples came to Him and said, “This is a deserted place, and it is already late. Send the crowds away, that they may go into the villages to buy some food for themselves!”

¹⁶ Jesus answered them, “They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat!”

¹⁷ They told Him, “We have here only five loaves of bread and two fish.”

¹⁸ He said, “Bring them here to Me!”

¹⁹ He ordered the people to sit down on the grass. He took the five loaves and the two fish, looked up to heaven, said a blessing and broke the loaves. He gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. ²⁰ All of them had enough to eat. They took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. ²¹ The number of men who had eaten was about five thousand, not counting the women and children.