

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost – Epistle

Where's The Faith? There In The Promise!

Romans 9:1-5

Eleventh Sunday After Pentecost (Proper 13)
Analysis by Eric W. Evers

1 I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience confirms it by the Holy Spirit— 2 I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. 3 For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people, my kindred according to the flesh. 4 They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; 5 to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen.

DIAGNOSIS: Where Is The Faith?

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – *Great Sorrow: Frustrated Hope*

“I have great sorrow ... for the sake of my own people.” Paul’s cry of frustration for Israel likely finds echo in many of our hearts. His hope in the power of the Gospel is frustrated by his present reality: Israel has (for the most part) rejected the Word of Christ. But of all people, they should recognize and believe! They are privileged (vv. 4-5)! How many of us know people who have heard the Gospel, even been raised in the

Church, but do not believe? Like Paul, we may pour out our hearts in sorrow over neighbors, family, and even parishioners who do not trust in Christ, and who show no signs of changing.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – *Unceasing Anguish: Tested Faith*

The unbelief of others tests the faith of those who do confess. We may wonder what God is doing, or not doing, in the lives of those we care about. We may ask how we can better welcome, better persuade, or better compel them. We may rationalize all sorts of theological schemes to explain their unbelief. But this anxiety is merely an attempt to paper over the unceasing anguish of tested faith; “anguish” because God’s power and Gospel are called into question, and “unceasing” because our efforts cannot put a stop to it. When the Word of Christ is rejected, the faith of those who confess that Word is put to the test.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – *Accursed: Cut Off from Christ*

And it is here that the pointed finger rebounds at us. “Why do they not believe” becomes “Well, why do you not believe,” that is, believe that God’s Word does not fail, and that there is no injustice on God’s part (vv. 6, 14)? “Because we cannot affect [God’s] will nor cause it to be done, this becomes an evil thing for [us]” (Luther’s Works, vol. 25, p. 387). We cannot make God produce results – at least not according to our schedules and schemes, and so we chafe. We cannot trust God to be God. But this is nothing other than unbelief – the doubt of the work done on the Cross. In this unbelief, we are cut off from Christ. For all our explanations and techniques, we cannot effect faith in others. Neither can our explanations nor our techniques save us. In our doubt, this seemingly arbitrary God becomes a curse on us.

PROGNOSIS: There Is A Promise

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal solution) – *God's Word Has Not Failed*

But Jesus Christ became accursed for us – accursed by the unbelief and rejection of Jew and Gentile alike. God gave the covenant and promises to Israel, who often put him to the test, and in Christ, God continues to give lavishly to the unbelieving, Jew and Gentile alike! “It is not as though the word of God has failed” (9:6). Amid the doubt created in the confessor's heart by the “no” of the neighbor (Jew or Gentile), there comes again God's unconditional “yes” in Christ. The Holy Spirit's response to doubt – our own and our neighbors – is to drive Christ-confessors back to the very promise of God's goodness and mercy that creates faith in the unfaithful.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – *Standing-Under The Mystery: Messiah Over All*

For Christ is “Messiah over all” (v. 5). Paul calls the Roman Gentile Christians to “understand a mystery” (11:25), and God's electing work of creating faith is indeed a mystery. Trying to reason out explanations is a response of unbelief. We are called rather to trust, and proclaim, the promise that Christ is Messiah over all. In the cross, God has spoken the final Word of mercy, and set Christ “over all,” even over the principalities and powers that cause doubt and rejection of the Gospel. Belief that God's Word has not failed (and will not fail!) leads to trust to stand under this mystery, rather than trying in vain to spy out the plans of the hidden God.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – *Standing In Awe! God Blessed Forever*

How great is this salvation! How worthy is Christ of all adoration and praise! Let us stand in awe (11:20) at the riches of God's mercy in Christ! He has elected to create faith in

those who doubt, and claims as his own those who reject him. And so the accusation that rebounded onto us is washed away by sheer mercy. When we encounter unbelief (in ourselves or others), we are driven to the Word of promise. Let us trust and proclaim the Word who does not fail, the Messiah over all, God be blessed forever. Amen.