

Romans: Vessels of Mercy Displaying God's Righteousness

Kenwood Baptist Church Spring Sermon Series

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April 12, 2026

TEXT: Romans 9:22-10:13



Good morning, Beloved. I want to say one more time, Christ is risen! Last Sunday we celebrated Easter. This Sunday the Orthodox Christian churches of the world are celebrating Easter. The reason the Western church and the Eastern churches have different dates for Easter is the *Quartodecimans* controversy and the decision to follow either the lunar calendar or the solar calendar. It's important for us this morning, as we continue in our series, *Romans: Vessels of Mercy*, to remember that we preach and proclaim Christ this morning always in light of the events of Holy Week. It is those events that changed the world.

This morning, as we continue in Romans 9, we are going to reach the controlling image of our whole series of *Vessels of Mercy*: that God, the living God, the real God, revealed in the Bible, is the One who pursues us with His mercy. If you hear nothing else in the sermon than that, that's enough. The God who is revealed in the pages of Scripture is in pursuit of you and of me with His mercy. His mercy, then, will remake us and mark us as people who cannot help but share that message of His mercy. Romans 9 to 11 is the climax of the gospel presentation in this beautiful letter. These chapters take only ten minutes to read out loud. We're going to take two Sundays to listen and learn from them.

As I have been meditating on these chapters, I have been drawn into something that I can call nothing less than a three-fold exegetical euphoria.

The first of this three-fold exegetical euphoria is that these chapters set before us an absolutely

breathhtaking vision of a merciful God. This vision of God explodes into worship at the very end. When Paul reaches the end of these ten minutes, in Romans 11:36, he bursts into praise:

“For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be glory forever.”

If you are reading these chapters well, then you will get to the end and you will just explode in praise—in a good way. There is such a vision of God and His mercy that is so inspiring for our worship.

The second thing that has happened to me in pondering these chapters and reading them over and over very carefully is that I now see with crystal clarity that Jesus Himself unlocks the meaning of the Bible. If you are new to the Bible or if you have grown old in reading the Bible, there is a fresh appreciation for the fact that the meaning of the Bible is in fact Jesus Christ. Jesus' work is anticipated in the Old Testament. It is on full display in the New. And Jesus Himself told the disciples that the Scripture was fundamentally about Himself. This is something that we can grasp this morning. It is also something that we continue to grow into in depth.

The third thing that happened to me in these chapters is discovering that the events of Holy Week are meant to be shared. Sometimes we receive these great things and we think, “That is for me and my possession of it, and retaining it is its greatness.” But truly great things simply overflow; and they become even greater as they are given away.

This section of our passage starts with tears. There are only two places in Paul's letter where he breaks down crying as he's dictating. When a person breaks down crying, that is a moment when you really want to get to know them. And you won't unless you understand those tears. If you do, then you're getting close to understanding the person. I think all of us can relate to these tears. These are missionary tears. These are the tears of someone who longs for their son or daughter to return to Christ. Do you know those tears? Do you know the tears a close, gifted friend, with whom you have had a long relationship, who just doesn't seem to grasp God's mercy in Christ? Paul longs for his people, his kinsmen, to know what he has come to know. He calls down a covenant curse on himself, as Moses did earlier. He says in Romans 10, that his heart's desire, and unceasing anguish in his heart, is for his kinsmen, that they would know Christ. As these chapters unfold, the longing to share Christ and for others to know Christ will help us all see that knowing Christ is absolutely dependent on God's mercy all along. It has been that way all along. It turns out it doesn't matter that much who your parents are. No offense to the parents, but just proximity to the things of God do not guarantee that you will see and believe.

Paul starts to retell the story of the Bible. He tells the story of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and highlights the fact that who your parents are is no guarantee that you will know and receive Christ. God often acts in unexpected ways, and His purposes move forward with the younger rather than the older. God's mercy and compassion are manifested in the events of the Exodus, as God gives mercy on an undeserving people and at the same time hardens the heart of a Pharaoh who acts violently against God.

This retelling of the Old Testament, highlighting that everything depends on God's mercy, then brings us into view, starting in verse 22. In Romans 9:22-23, Paul asks what almost feels like a hypothetical question:

"What if God, desiring to show His wrath and to make known His power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, in order to make known the riches of His glory for vessels of mercy, which He has prepared beforehand for glory—"

It is an elliptical expression in the original text. He asks the question, inviting you and me to consider: What if it is actually the case? What if this possibility is really the key to the whole thing? What if it is actually the case that God's saving purpose in the world is a reflection of God's desire out of His Holiness to show His Holiness and Power, but enduring patiently and waiting for these vessels of wrath to become vessels of mercy? What if that is the key to the whole thing?

If you were here in the fall, when you think of vessels of mercy I hope you are already thinking of this image from Jeremiah. Paul is a deeply scriptural thinker, and this image. We always hear Old Testament in the fall, New Testament in the spring, so listen for an interconnection of the books. This is it. This is the strongest link.

In Jeremiah 18, God had told Jeremiah to go to the potter's house. He told him, "Go to the potter's house, and I will cause you to hear My Words there." So Jeremiah went to the potter's house. When he goes, in this enacted parable, he sees a potter working at the wheel. As the potter is working, as Jeremiah watches, suddenly a vessel gets wrecked. Do you know what it's like to have your life get wrecked? As Jeremiah is watching this ruined vessel, the potter does something extraordinary. The potter remakes it. The potter refashions it into another vessel. God then interprets this for Jeremiah. In Jeremiah 16: 6-8, the Lord says:

"O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter has done? declares the Lord. Behold, like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in My Hand, O house of Israel. If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down

and destroy it, and if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I intended to do to it.”

God tells Jeremiah and, through Jeremiah, us, that if any time there is a declaration of God that He will pluck up, break down, and destroy a people or an individual because of sinfulness, if that nation turns, God says, “I will return.” The theological word for this turning is the important word “repentance.” Our lives can be an absolute disaster. We can walk directly opposite of God's purposes. We can grow up in church. We can be close to God and for reasons that we ourselves may not understand, we turn away from God. But if this nation or person repents and turns from this evil, God says, “I will turn.”

This is such good news. Repentance. We quoted this in the fall, but it bears repeating. *Westminster Catechism*, question 87. What is it? This is a really important word for Christians. Look at this: “What is repentance unto life?”

“Repentance unto life is a saving grace, by which a sinner, being truly aware of his sinfulness, understands the mercy of God in Christ, grieves for and hates his sins, and turns from them to God, fully intending and striving for a new obedience.”

Do you see that at the center of that definition is “the mercy of God”? If you turn and you turn toward a god who is not merciful, this has no good ending.

Paul has taken in this image in Jeremiah 18 and is applying it now. What if it is really the case that it depends on God's mercy all along and God is patient with us? That is what he said earlier in Romans 2:4, that the kindness and the patience of God is to allow time for us to turn in repentance. It's like the father in Luke 15, waiting patiently, scanning the horizon for the return of his son. It's like the parent praying for years for the son or daughter to come home, to be restored. If you know this pain, then you know what I'm going to say is true: That waiting is worth it. When you see them coming, there is no hesitation. There is no rehearsing of the wrongs. There is just the running and embracing.

What if? What if, Brothers and Sisters, it all simply depends on God's mercy and that He receives the repentant? Paul says in the rest of this passage, in Romans 9:22-24:

“What if God, desiring to show His wrath and to make known His power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, in order to make known the riches of His glory for vessels of mercy, which He has prepared beforehand for glory—even us whom He has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles?”

What if it's the case that the scope of the gospel is so broad—and this is often the conclusion of the trajectory of these thoughts—that what God has done in Christ is in faithfulness to His promises and has an open invitation for the rest of the world? There is no distinction. He loves to say that. Jews and Gentiles sin. People who grow up in church sin. People who have never been to church sin. Yet we lack the glory, and together we are made right by grace as a gift. The consequence is that people who were not called God's people are called the people of God. In Romans 9:25-26, Paul quotes Hosea and applies that quote to all who believe:

“Those who were not My people I will call ‘My people,’ and I will call her “beloved” who was not beloved. And in the very place where it was said to them, ‘You are not My people,’ there they will be called ‘sons of the living God.’”

Astonishing.

In Romans 10:1, Paul presses in a little closer to this longing, this deep longing of his. I think of so many people in my own life. I'm sure you can think of some right now in yours, of whom you think, “I like this person so much. I just really want to share eternity with them.” Do you know that feeling? That is like what Paul is saying in Romans 10:1. He says:

“... my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved.”

He continues in Hebrews 10:2-3:

“For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For, being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness.”

“They have a zeal for God.” In the Bible, that's a good thing, zeal for God. Yet they're missing something important. They're unaware of the righteousness of God, and they seek to establish their own. They want to take confidence in their own.

Where I work out, there are a lot of Muslim guys that work out there. Sometimes I go there late after everything's finished here, and they're there late, too. So it's sort of a group thing. Recently a group of them had just finished celebrating Ramadan. They know that I'm a pastor. I really like a lot of these guys. I think about what it would cost them, for their community, to receive Christ. I know it would be costly. I feel like for myself, I don't know about you, but I feel like when I received Christ, all I got was benefits. I feel like I didn't lose anything. I have a desire for these guys to know. Many of them, they do have a zeal for God as they understand Him. Paul knows his kinsmen have a zeal for God, but they're missing this crucial thing. What are they missing?

In Romans 10:4, Paul tells us. He says that Christ is the end:

“For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.”

He is the goal of the *Torah*. The word “end” here doesn't mean Christ is the termination of the *Torah*. It's the word “end” as in the first question of the *Westminster Catechism*. What is the chief end of man? It doesn't mean, “When does man cease to exist?” That would be kind of a bummer of a beginning catechism. What is the chief end of human beings? Why are you here? Why am I here?

The answer is that “the chief end of man is to love God and glorify Him forever.” So what Paul is saying is that Christ is the purpose and the point and the meaning of the Bible. The NIV says Christ is the “culmination” of the law for righteousness. And just like in this key image of vessels of mercy, Paul relies on Jeremiah 18 in which Jeremiah reflects Deuteronomy immensely, and Paul reflects Jeremiah and Deuteronomy, as we'll see.

Deuteronomy is the last book of the Pentateuch, the base storyline of the Bible. The base storyline of the Bible talks about God who is the Creator, God who is the Redeemer out of slavery, and a God who enters into Covenant. The ending of Deuteronomy sets before us the blessings and the curses of the Covenant and anticipates the whole history of Israel, even anticipating that Israel will not keep the Covenant and will end up in exile. Then Deuteronomy 30 says what is going to happen next. In Deuteronomy 30:1-3, the Lord says through Moses:

“And when all these things come upon you, the blessing and the curse, which I have set before you, and you call them to mind among all the nations where the Lord your God has driven you, and return to the Lord your God, you and your children, and obey His voice in all that I command you today, with all your heart and with all your soul, then the Lord your God will restore your fortunes and have mercy on you, and He will gather you again from all the peoples where the Lord your God has scattered you.”

There it is again: You are going to repent and come to the Lord and hear His Voice and the Lord will restore you—and here is the key word—and have mercy on you. Deuteronomy 30 predicts that the end of exile will be repentance and return and that God then will circumcise our hearts and we will love God with all of our heart and soul and we may live.

The vision of Deuteronomy 30:11-14 then goes to this profound declaration. It is among the last words of Moses. He says:

“For this commandment that I command you today is not too hard for you, neither is it far off. It is not in heaven, that you should say, ‘Who will ascend to heaven for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?’ Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, ‘Who will go over the sea for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and

do it?' But the word is very near you. It is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it."

Deuteronomy 30 hangs over the history of Israel, pointing forward that God will act again in the future. He will speak this word. This word will come about and come to pass. And what is the word? It is the word of a saving grace, of repentance unto life, and reconciliation and restoration. This passage hangs there and points us forward to God's saving purposes.

This passage is read and interpreted extensively in the intertestamental writers in Judaism. Philo of Alexandria references this passage and interprets it on four different occasions. It's mentioned in the Dead Sea Scrolls. It's explained in the Aramaic translations, the Targums. Other intertestamental writers never tire of talking about this passage and saying, "When will this come about?"

Paul sets before us that it has come about in Christ. This repentance and return to God has come about in Christ! That the word of faith is not some independent entity. The word of faith is not a power we possess. The word of faith is a word of faith in Jesus Christ who fulfills the saving mission anticipated in Deuteronomy 30. The word of faith is a word of repentance and turning to God to receive forgiveness and mercy so that God's saving purposes for all the world go forward.

As Paul reflects on what has happened in Christ, he says he realizes that what is promised in Deuteronomy 30 has actually come about. In Romans 10:6, he says:

"But the righteousness based on faith says, 'Do not say in your heart, "Who will ascend into heaven?"' (that is, to bring Christ down) ..."

Christ is the one who has come down from heaven. And then Paul continues, in Romans 10:7:

"... or 'Who will descend into the abyss?' (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead)."

It is Christ who has risen from the grave.

What does the word of faith actually say? Romans 10:9 tells us:

"... if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved."

That's it. That's the word of faith. That's the repentance. "If you say Jesus is Lord," you are turning away from self-lordship or the lordship of anyone else over your life. If you say, "I believe in my heart God raised Him from the dead," this is the central confession of Christianity that Jesus Christ, the sin-bearing Lamb, carried your sin and mine, the sin of the world, that He truly died on the cross and He has been bodily raised. And that changes everything. It is through

those events that the mercy of God moves forward for all the world. It is with the heart we believe and are declared right. It is with the mouth that we verbalize that confession. You cannot be a hidden Christian. You cannot say, "I believe, but I never say anything about it."

This mercy of God in Christ is global in its reach. That is where Paul the missionary goes. He says in Romans 10:11:

"For the Scripture says, 'Everyone who believes in Him will not be put to shame.'"

Paul says "everyone." The Greek text says "all." I want to highlight that because there are three "alls" to notice here.

The first "all" is: "All who believe." There is room for you inside of "all." There is room for the person you hate inside the all. And there is room for the person that is close by you that you love and long for. All who believe in Him will not be put to shame. If you come to Christ, you will never regret it.

In verse 12, we read that there is no distinction. Romans 10:12 says:

"For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing His riches on all who call on Him."

Paul loves to say that. And this is coming from a guy who was educated in Jerusalem, trained as a Pharisee, and was taught to learn distinctions between things, between people, between places. But in Jesus, he says, "There's only one distinction that really matters: whether you trust Jesus or not." That's it. There's no distinction between Jew and Greek. That is really quite a thing to say.

The second "all" is: "The same Lord is Lord of all."

The third "all" is: "He bestowing His riches, the riches of His mercy, on all who call on Him, for everyone, or all, who call on the Name of the Lord, will be saved." Praise the Lord.

That is the gospel implication, the vision of God: His whole purpose depends on mercy, and if you turn in faith and believe, then He, like the potter in Jeremiah, will remake your life. Some of us know this. We can remember our lives as a wreck. Do you remember that stage? Then God, in His kindness and power and patience, remade us into a display of His mercy.

Our passage begins with tears. I said those were missionary tears from a longing to share. And remember, we are all missionaries by the New Testament definition, every one of us. This

portion of Romans 9 through 11 reaches an initial climax in the verses that finish the thought. What is the conclusion of this?

Do you remember two weeks ago we learned a new word together: *anadiplosis*? It's all over the New Testament. This section ends with another one. *Anadiplosis* in Greek means "to fold over." In English we say "climax," or in Latin *gradatio*, "the reaching the climax." We sense this, we see something special is happening, but we just didn't know what to call it until a couple of weeks ago. So now we're reinforcing it. It creates a rhythmic effect. It takes the last word of a phrase or clause and makes that the beginning of the next one. Here is the Romans 5:3-5 *anadiplosis*:

"... we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame ..."

That's *anadiplosis*. That's folding over and taking that last idea and moving it forward. We had an *anadiplosis* on Easter Sunday: to call on the Lord, and those whom He foreknew, He foreordained; He called, He justified, justified, glorified. Now we have another one. It's our third *anadiplosis* in Romans.

Paul asks in Romans 10:14, with the missionary tears still on his cheeks, if it's true that everyone who calls on the Name of the Lord will be saved, if that's true—and I believe with all my heart it is—then it begs the question, how will they call? If what we need to be saved is to call out to the Lord, then it raises the missionary question, how are we going to call? And here comes the *anadiplosis* to answer that. Romans 10:14-15 says:

"How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in Him of Whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent?"

We can't call out to God unless we first believe in Him. And how are we going to believe in God if we've never heard about Him? And how are we going to hear about Him if no one heralds Him and proclaims Him? And how will anyone proclaim Him or herald Him unless they are sent out as missionaries to do that? The ending of this section is this glorious missionary *anadiplosis*: to be sent out to share Christ so people can hear Christ and believe in Christ and call on God and be saved. I just love this, that Paul's own tears end up in a longing for all of us to be engaged in the sending, so Christ can be proclaimed and heard and believed, and so people can be saved.

How do these chapters reach and impact our lives this morning? I want to do something just a little different this morning: I want to offer a trinitarian application, if you will.

The first is simply to reflect for a moment on God the Father. We know the Bible doesn't only teach us how to live; the Bible is actually God's revelation of Himself to us, seeing God clearly and seeing His character and identity. It's seeing Him that causes us to love Him. These chapters give us a breathtaking theological vision of God, God the Father, who is merciful, whose redemptive purpose is dependent on His mercy all along, that God is the Creator, He is the Redeemer, and He is the Pursuer of humanity. As David wrote in Psalm 23, "Your goodness and Your mercy will pursue me all the days of my life." Sometimes people describing their own lives, or the life of a friend, describe it as that they are "seeking." I like to hear that someone is seeking after God. But I want us all to be crystal clear that the first one who is seeking is God. God is seeking you. He is pursuing you. God wants to show His power and patiently waits to show it. What is it that is the greatest display of the power of God? The greatest display of the power of God is the sending by the Father of His Son into the world to display His mercy.

Secondly, let us consider the Person and work of the Son in our trinitarian application. Jesus says in John 5:39:

"You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about Me."

On the road to Emmaus, Jesus began with Moses and all the prophets, and He interpreted all the Scriptures about Himself. The word of faith is a word of faith in Christ. Jesus is the meaning of the Bible. It means profoundly for us this morning that when we read the Bible we are actually getting to know someone. I have grown to love reading the Bible, listening to it. It's interesting. It's challenging, and in all of its beauty, at the heart of the Scripture is the revelation of a Person.

When Christine and I were courting, I kept all her letters and I reread them. I had gone to visit my *mejor amigo*, my best friend, in Puerto Rico, and somehow, through the power of international mail, Christine wrote me a letter that arrived at my friend's house in Puerto Rico. I was not expecting to hear from her there. I got the letter in the mailbox in Puerto Rico. That was excellent! Those of you who know me know I don't usually seek out a lot of alone time, but for this I needed a little alone time. I walked away from my friend, and I was standing out under the Caribbean stars alone, reading this letter, and rereading it. I was so moved that I was moved to tears. My best friend came up to me and said, "I hope I meet someone someday that I would feel the way you feel about her." That is an illustration of what we have in the Bible. It is a pointer toward it, that the word of faith is the Word of Christ.

Number three in our trinitarian application is the Holy Spirit. By the strength and the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit, we are stirred to engage in this heartfelt, tear-soaked

mission. The Holy Spirit. If you have the Holy Spirit, Jesus says the first thing that will happen to you when you receive power, when the Holy Spirit's power comes upon you, is that you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. The Holy Spirit loves to make Christ known, and the Holy Spirit stirs us to engage in the mission. For some of us, our primary role will be sending. For some of us, it's teaching and preaching. For others it's simply allowing others to hear the Word of Christ. As that Word of Christ goes out, people believe It. And when they believe, they call on God. And when they call on God, they find mercy. Brothers and Sisters, that is why we proclaim Christ. Nothing else, no one else.

I want to challenge us in this trinitarian application to grow in our love for God the Father, to delight in Christ the Son as the meaning of the Scriptures, and to be filled with the power of the Holy Spirit so we can engage in God's great mission in the world. That is what makes sense the week after Easter.

Let's pray.

Lord Jesus, we praise You for Your Word and Its clarity and power. We thank You, God, for Your mercy and that You receive all who turn in repentance. We thank You, Lord Jesus, that You are the name above every name and that God's salvation through Christ the Son is available for every nation, for all who call upon His name. Lord, draw us in as vessels of mercy to pour Your mercy out in the world, to share Christ as You enable us to do so.

We ask in Jesus' Name, Amen.