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Have you made your “decision for Christ?” As Christians, we do and should make decisions that glorify our God in everything, whether we are eating or drinking or whatever else. However, Scripture clearly teaches that salvation comes from God’s mercy alone and not from our strivings or sincerity. Our decisions do not bring us any closer to God. Instead, God needs to make his decision for us. Today, as we look at Romans 9, God shows us that we are Saved by his Mercy, Not our Desire or Effort.

The apostle Paul wrote the epistle to the Romans and, in this lesson, he uses God’s Word from the Old Testament to teach us. He will point us to 3 different places in the books of Genesis and Exodus to show us that salvation is from God’s promise, from God’s election, and from God’s mercy.

First Paul takes us back to Abraham to show that we are saved by God’s promise. God appeared to Abraham and gave him 4 promises: 1) God would give old Abraham and his barren wife Sarah a son, 2) from that son would come a great nation, 3) that great nation would inherit the land of Canaan, and 4) from that nation living in that land, a Savior for the whole world would be born.

Throughout Abraham’s life, we see Abraham given the choice: do things *my* way or do things *God’s* way. On one such occasion, years after God had promised them that son, Abraham and Sarah were getting a little impatient, so they decided to do things their way. They thought God needed a little help moving things along. So they had Abraham sleep with Sarah’s maidservant, Hagar. Well, God gave Abraham and Hagar a son named Ishmael, but this was not the son that God had promised. Years later, the miracle son of the promise, Isaac, was born.

Paul uses this Genesis account to show us this truth: just because someone is physically descended from Abraham does not mean they are God’s people. That’s what Paul means when he says, “not all who are descended from Israel are Israel.”

Earlier in Romans, Paul makes the point that Abraham was saved by trusting in God’s promise. In the same way, we are not saved by our physical family line. Instead, we are saved by our spiritual family line. All who have faith in God are Abraham’s spiritual children because we believe God’s promise just like Abraham

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believed God's promise. In this way, we who believe are Abraham's children, even if we aren't physical descendants of Israel. We who have Abraham's faith are Abraham's children regardless of our physical family line. We become part of God's family, we become Abraham's children, and we become Israel only by God's promise.

Paul then takes us further in Genesis to the account of Abraham's promised son, Isaac to teach us about God's election. Isaac and his wife Rebekah had twins, but only one of those twins would be the ancestor of the nation God promised to Abraham and the ancestor of the Savior of the world.

So how did God choose between the two? Did he let them grow up and see which of them would be more faithful? No. Did he choose the older son because that would have been the tradition at the time? No. God chose the younger son simply because that was God's choice. It had absolutely nothing to do with Jacob or Esau. It had absolutely nothing to do with human traditions.

Paul even shows us the results of God's choice. Generations after Jacob and Esau had lived and died, the prophet Malachi spoke God's words: "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated." The descendants of Esau had largely, as a nation, rejected God and became enemies of God and his people. Jacob's descendants, however, in accordance with God's choice, remained God's people despite their rebellion and sins.

Paul uses this account to teach us about God's election. This is a difficult doctrine but it's good for us to know everything God teaches in his Word. Our salvation is only by God's choice, not ours. The Scriptures make it clear, again and again. If I am damned, that's my fault; that's because of my sin and rebellion against God. But if I'm saved, that is all on God. He chose to save me. He created faith in my heart. He sustains that faith in my heart through Word and sacrament.

Our reason doesn't fit with God on this one. We would want to say either "It all depends on us," or "It all depends on God." Naturally, we tend toward it depending on us, right? Our sinful natures want to believe that there is something innately good in us, something that makes us better than all of those unbelievers out there. But election makes it clear that this is not the case. God chose us before we were even born, before we had even done anything, before he had even created the

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world.

But what a comfort that is! Think about it. If our salvation depended on us in any way, how could we ever be sure of going to heaven? How could we ever be confident of escaping hell? What assurance could we ever have that we had done enough? Been sincere enough? Believed enough? We could never be certain. Especially at those times when our guilt and sins grip our consciences and we realize that we are just as sinful as the Scriptures say we are, when we realize that there is nothing good in us; we would be lost in despair and fear!

But the fact that our salvation is all God's doing, there is comfort there. There is assurance there. We only need to remember Jesus' decision for us when he suffered and died for sins of the world. We need only remember that Jesus did rise from the dead. We need only remember the promises God makes to us again and again in his Word, in baptism, in the Lord's Supper.

Now, again, election is a difficult teaching. So, we want to hold to all of God's Word to avoid falling into beliefs God has not told us. For example, in 1 Corinthians 10, God warns us to be careful that we do not fall. In Romans 10, God teaches us that we gain faith and grow in faith only through Word and Sacrament.

If I say, "Well, it's all God's choice anyway so I'm not going to repent," I am ignoring those Words of God. If we say, "Who needs to spend time in church or bible study?" God warns us that we are putting our souls in danger; in danger of rejecting the gospel and shipwrecking our faith. God wants our top life priority to be hearing that gospel message. God wants us to be studying that message in his Word, gathering around it with other believers, and putting his Word into practice. If we throw that message aside, we are endangering our souls.

There is so much more to say about election but for now we content ourselves with this: If we are damned, that's all our fault. If we are saved, that's all God's doing. That reminds us that we have an unbelievably gracious God who chose us and who gives us certain hope.

Lastly, Paul answers the objection of our sinful natures: That's not fair! That's not justice!

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God's answer: No! It's not fair! Because fair would be every one of us being damned. The Bible is clear. Romans 3 says, "There is no one righteous, not even one... there is no one who seeks God. All have turned away... there is no one who does good, not even one." It would be fair for God to give us all what we deserve: eternal death in hell. If salvation depended on our desires, each of us would find that our sinful desire is eternity in hell. If salvation depended on our efforts, we would find that our best efforts only push us further and further down the path toward hellfire.

Instead, God graciously saves us. Paul quotes from Exodus where God revealed his ways to Moses. God says, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." God graciously saves us, even though we do not deserve it. And we can only be thankful that he has shown us mercy.

This is what really sets Christianity apart from every other religion, ideology, or worldview. It's not something we could make up because it's not how our sinful natures think. It shows us what real unconditional love is. This gives us confidence in our salvation. This drives us back to God's sure promises in the Scriptures and in the sacraments rather than having to rely on our fluctuating feelings. It motivates us to grow in the Word so that we can better understand our God's promises instead of relying on our sinful ways of thinking.

It shows us how to show real mercy to others. If we were saved by anything we do, we would have every reason to look down on everyone who didn't do the things we did. Instead, God gives us what we don't deserve so we learn to treat others the same way. It motivates us to go with the Word so that God might show his mercy to even more people as he creates faith in them through the same gospel message that we so desperately need!

Christianity is not about making your decision for Christ. It is about God's promises to you. It is about God making his choice for you before you were even born. It is about God's mercy. Do not look to yourself. There is no certainty there, no assurance, no comfort. You will only find what the Scriptures say: that you are a sinner. Instead, hold to the sure, comforting, and life-changing Word of God. We are Saved by God's mercy, Not our Desire or Effort. Amen.