

Title: The ground is level at the foot of the cross  
Text: Romans 15:7-13  
Theme: the final basis of unity is the cross  
Series: Romans 13-15 summer 2020  
Prop Stmtnt: The gospel is the only ground and means for genuine unity.

Read Text:

I could do a sermon on racism every Sunday, just like I could do a sermon on suffering every Sunday and it would always be relevant because those are issues that are not going to go away until Jesus returns. Currently, there is a view called Critical Race Theory and a related view called Intersectionality that have generated a lot of discussion and debate. I may at some point this fall or winter, do an extended talk on this if I think it would be helpful but Critical Race Theory is the view that people in power create laws in order to stay in power and keep oppressed people oppressed. That is why you hear a lot about systemic racism. Now this idea is being applied to gender and other identities. I only have two complaints about Critical Race Theory; 1) Critical Race Theory fails to understand how deep the problem really is. And 2) since Critical Race Theory does not understand the scope of the problem, Critical Race Theory offers no solutions and therefore no hope. Are there are examples of people in power passing laws in order to keep them in power? Sure. But the heart of the problem is not power and structure, it is sin and selfishness. Critical Race Theory has no power to address sin and selfishness.

Think about this. If racism is systemic, that means that it is in the system. Are you the system? No. You are a person. This is one example of how Critical Race Theory doesn't go deep enough. It doesn't understand the problem. If the problem is the system, then that absolves me of personal responsibility. As a white guy I can blame the system. I can say, I didn't make the system. But, God's Word doesn't let me do that. God's Word is a mirror that forces me and every single one of us to look into its pages, where the Spirit of God holds up a mirror of our heart. What do we see in our hearts? We see how we think of ourselves more highly than we ought. We see our efforts to justify ourselves and look down on others. We see our hypocrisy and double standards. We see the truth about ourselves so clearly that we cannot blame the system, we have to address our own hearts. Critical Race Theory does not look at the heart, it wants to blame the system. It wants to criticize the fruit. But the fruit comes from the root. The root is the problem.

But, since it fails to understand the problem (root) it has no legitimate solutions. It wants to dismantle power structures and share that power. What happens when you do that? Here in Detroit we have a classic case of this. Years ago, Henry Ford did about everything that he could to stop workers from organizing into a union. The union eventually organized and what happened? The power structure of the Ford Motor Company and others were dismantled to a degree and that power was shared with unions. Now the common worker was empowered and what has some of the leadership of the UAW done with that power? I have a relative in the UAW and I recently told him that I was surprised that he wasn't being asked to run for president of the UAW since about everyone else was in prison or on their way. Systems reflect the hearts of the people who live in them and influence them. What can we do about racism? What can we do about looking out for the little person who is so easily trampled by the powerful? Is Marxism the answer? Are you kidding me? Look at Russia and China. What do they do to the people who try

to speak up? They poison them or kill them. Is Socialism the answer? Look at Venezuela. There the little guy is starving to death because there is no food. No, a thousand times no. But guess what? Capitalism is not the ultimate answer either. The answer is the gospel put on display through healthy churches because healthy churches are a preview of the kingdom of Jesus Christ where people from every tribe, language and nation are part of the one people, one nation, one body who share in the one and eternal hope of life together with God forever and ever. Only the gospel is able to get to the core of the problem of our sin with a solution that goes even deeper than our deepest sin. The gospel starts with you recognizing that your sin is as sinful as anyone else. We ALL have a problem we cannot solve. The ground is level at the foot of the cross. Only Christ can save us and only Christ provides salvation by faith in his death for us. But the gospel that saves us, no matter where we came from is the gospel that puts us into the family of God and forges us into a new people. This is so evident in this text and I want you to see this and be convinced of this so that you will develop a deep conviction about what the life of the church is supposed to look like. There is nothing supernatural about loving people who are just like you. But loving, enjoying and meshing with people who are not like you and even with people that you disagree with on minor issues makes the gospel visible. And this text is very helpful for us because the first point gives us a vision for it and the second point shows us the resources to carry it out.

I. **Christ came as a Jew to demonstrate God's truthfulness.** (8-12)

The Bible is a thousands of years' account of God telling us what is going to happen and doing it, but also God showing us why what is going to happen is so important.

A. **Christ came to confirm God's promises to the Jews.** (8)

The 1<sup>st</sup> coming (advent) of Christ demonstrated that God is faithful because the 1<sup>st</sup> coming of Christ was undeniable evidence that God kept his promises that he made to the Jews. For thousands of years and in all sorts of ways, God repeatedly told the Jews that a Messiah was coming. We see this in Exodus how the Passover lamb points to Christ. We see this in the Tabernacle how the design and function of this centerpiece of Israel life pointed to Christ. We see this in the book of Ruth, where Boaz, the kinsman redeemer rescues people who otherwise had no hope. We see this in David, who, though he came from obscurity, and was a lowly shepherd, against all odds, became the King, Warrior, Shepherd and Worship Leader of the nation of Israel and began a dynasty from which the Messiah was born. The entire OT law not only prefigured Christ in its symbolism, the OT showed how desperately the people needed a savior since the law continually revealed how sinful and fickle God's people were. They had the law but could not keep the law. They needed a savior to rescue them. They needed a King who would reign perfectly over them and not die. They needed a prophet who would tell them the truth and they needed a priest who could offer a perfect sacrifice. All of these things set the stage for the coming of Christ and when he came he fulfilled all of this in a way that amazed everyone.

Think of the prophecies. The Messiah was supposed to be born in Bethlehem. He was going to be called out of Egypt. He was going to be despised and rejected and he was going to rule and reign forever. Christ came to confirm God's promises to the Jews. Everything God said he would do he did. Christ came because God is truthful. He will not lie to you. He cannot lie to you. But,

there is more to the story. Christ not only came to the Jews, as a Jew in order to fulfill God's promises to the Jews, but this was the means that God had chosen to provide salvation to the rest of the world. God's plan for the salvation of the Gentiles came right out of Israel.

Here is the irony of it all, and the irony was also prophesied. God would send Israel the Messiah they desperately needed and they would reject him because he wasn't what they wanted. That was prophesied explicitly in Isaiah 52 and 53. But, their rejection of Christ and their condemnation of him and ultimately execution of him, which he cooperated with, was the means by which the entire OT sacrificial system was fulfilled. Christ died on the cross at Passover because he was the perfect lamb of God who came to take the sin of the world. John the Baptist said this about Christ. John the Baptist, a Jewish prophet told his Jewish audience that Jesus was the lamb of God who came to take the sin of the world. Jesus came first for the Jews (Matt. 15.24) because that was the means by which he could provide salvation for people from every tribe, language and nation. Notice that verse 9 begins with the word "and."

#### **B. Christ also came to fulfill God's promises to the Gentiles. (9-12)**

- 1) There are all sorts of OT examples that give us a preview of God's plan. I will review a few with you.

Rahab was a very unlikely convert. Rahab was the prostitute from Jericho who feared God and hid the spies and was rescued from the city before it was destroyed. Do you realize what this means? A Canaanite and former sex-worker and idolater became a member of the nation of Israel and became part of the tribe of Judah. Rahab had a son by the name of Boaz and Boaz married another non-Israelite when he married the Moabitess, Ruth. Their son Obed was the grandfather of David. Obed was 75% Gentile and only 25% Jew. That means that David was at least 25% Gentile. God's plan has always been to use Israel as a means to bless other peoples.

One of most interesting examples of Gentiles in the OT of being believers is the account of Ebed-melech (Ethiopia). Ebed-melech was from Ethiopia and he served in the palace as a trusted official. When he heard that Zedekiah, king of Judah had put Jeremiah the prophet into a cistern and left him there to die, Ebed-melech intervened and saved Jeremiah's life. Look it up in Jeremiah 38. Here is an Ethiopian eunuch, who is a palace official who for some reason is drawn to Yahweh, fears Yahweh, and helps save Jeremiah's life. What is that a picture of? Well, about 600 years later another Ethiopian eunuch is riding in his chariot on his way home from Jerusalem and he is reading Isaiah 53 and Philip, one of the deacons in the church at Jerusalem ends up explaining the gospel to him from that, baptizing him and sending him back to Africa in order to share the gospel and plant churches. Christ told the disciples to make disciples of people from every ethnicity and then God provides them with the opportunities to do that, because God is going to build a kingdom for his Son and have one flock, one nation out of many which will be his people and the church is means to accomplish that. This is our mission. Even though the NT makes this mission very explicit there are some OT passages that promise the impossible. This has always been the plan.

- 2) There are explicit OT prophecies that promise the "impossible."

Jews and Gentiles will worship the one true God as one people. In verse 9, Paul quotes David's song from 2 Samuel 22.50 and Psalm 18.49. Look at this promise from God in the form of a song of David. "I will praise you among the Gentiles!" David anticipated the day when he, as a Jew would praise God in the midst of Gentiles. Verse 10 is taken from the song of Moses in Deut. 32. Here the promise/prophesy pictures Gentiles rejoicing about God with Israel. Verse 11 (Psalm 117) makes it clear that the vision of Gentiles knowing and worshiping God is a universal vision and verse 12 (Isaiah) says that the Messiah will be the one in whom the Gentiles hope. God's plan for Israel centered on giving them the Messiah who would not just be their Messiah, but would be the Messiah of the world. That has always been the vision. That has always been the plan. But, one church, one people made up of many peoples is hard, but it is worth it. We all struggle with relationships, making good friends and being good friends. But, it starts with realizing that I am in the family only by grace.

The church is one because of our positional unity in Christ. The church is to be one and live out that unity because God is one. While we are unified positionally, we do not enjoy a perfect unity yet. One day we will, but right now we have to fight for unity. The only way we are going to be unified is if we are in the habit of giving up our rights and dying to ourselves. Unity is hard work. We get hurt. We feel disconnected. We get disappointed and we are so tempted to pull up our roots and move on. This happens in marriages. It happens in neighborhoods. It happens on jobs. It happens to kids in school and players on teams. But in the church, we have something that is so sticky that it can hold us together, not only in spite of some surface differences internally, but when we are under pressure externally. But, let's be honest. Most of us do not deliberately engage with people we do not know. In fact, many of you do not engage like you should with the people you do know. When you choose to isolate yourself from others, or cram your schedule so full that you do not have time for fellowship with others, you are letting this world squeeze you into its mold and it is squeezing the life out of you. Look at v.13.

## II. God is our hope. (13)

Note the connection between v.5 and v.13 What is Paul doing in both of these verses? He is praying for and blessing them. Paul knows that there is no way that we can have this unity, enjoy this unity and pursue this unity in our own strength. Left to ourselves we only think of ourselves. But, let's ask the Lord to help us take this vision to heart, and then let's lean on the Lord and ask him to help us. We can look at our history in Detroit, and tensions in Minnesota, Baltimore, St. Louis, Louisville, Portland, Seattle, Los Angeles, etc. We can get accusatory and hopeless that things will ever get better. I don't know if things will get better with race relations in this world, but I know that one day, the people of God will enjoy a perfect unity with one another and that one day will be for eternity. In spite of our masks, will you join with me and make it a goal to talk with, engage and take time with people that you do not already know. I want you to enjoy good relations with the people you know, but widen your heart and widen your circle. God did that for you. (SEC commercial) (Musicians return)

If you only love someone who is exactly like you, then your heart will never have to stretch very much. But if you choose to love someone whose world is a little different than yours, it will stretch you and make you look more like Jesus.

Earlier this year my daughter returned from her deployment in Afghanistan. This is a war that we have been fighting longer than any other war in the history of our country. We have sacrificed many lives and poured billions of dollars into this for what? Our hope is that the Taliban and the Afghan government can exist peacefully. This week as they were coming together for talks, another car bomb killed 28 Afghan policeman/soldiers. The consensus is that this mission will be a failure. It was a valiant try, but it really in the end will make no difference. Here, however, is a mission that is guaranteed to work. God is going to make his people one and we are going to enjoy a unity with one another because we will enjoy it in Christ. Working out disagreements, working on unity, being ready to forgive, seeking to understand one another, giving each other some room for their opinions on disputable matters, is all worth it. But, we need to ask God for help to think like this and help to pursue this.

Pray for our church.

Pray for yourself (ask God to help you be intentional about widening your heart and circle)

Pray for those who feel like they are on the fringe

(Watching on-line? You have the same mission)