

Evergreen Presbyterian Church

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Sermon Title: Love and Hate

Sermon Text: Romans 9:10-13

Rom. 9:10 And not only so, but also when Rebekah had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac,

Rom. 9:11 though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad—in order that God’s purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of him who calls—

Rom. 9:12 she was told, “The older will serve the younger.”

Rom. 9:13 As it is written, “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.”

Main Point: God’s choice of Jacob over Esau is not a display of divine malice, but of holy, covenantal priority that calls us to humbly trust His sovereign wisdom over our own limited logic.

Outline:

1. God’s Love
2. God’s Hatred
3. God’s Care for Esau
4. God’s Secret Things

Introduction

One of the questions that I am most frequently asked about Romans chapter 9 is about this difficult statement that is made in v. 13: “Jacob I have loved, but Esau I

hated.” Two weeks ago, we spent a lot of time talking about how Paul answers objections to election and predestination by arguing that God is free. He can do what he pleases, and he’s absolutely free.

So Paul’s answer to the offensiveness of election isn’t “we’ve misunderstood God when he claims the right to give grace to any as he sees fit.” He doesn’t say, “No, no no you misunderstood me. God doesn’t elect, he doesn’t make choices. *We* do.” He doesn’t take any of that back. Instead, he doubles down by explaining that the best way he can help us is by helping us understand God’s freedom.

And all of this is profound because it makes us realize that the universe is a radically God-centered place instead of an “us-centered” place. (“God does what he wants the way he wants because this is his world!”) But the way Paul answers us with God’s freedom is to quote this passage from Malachi 1(:2-3) where the prophet writes,

“I have loved you,” says the Lord. “But you ask, ‘How have you loved us?’ ‘Was not Esau Jacob’s brother?’ declares the Lord. ‘Yet I have loved Jacob, but Esau I have hated...’” (Mal 1:2–3)

And this is where the questions start to come: does God really *hate*? The text says it, so what does it *mean* that God hated Esau? Does it mean that God had *no* love for Esau in any sense? We sort of read this and at first glance that’s what God is saying and what Paul is affirming.

Fundamentally, the reason we might be worried about this passage is really a question of God’s character. Is he really good? Deep down is he not really loving? And with a sincere question like that, which this passage raises in some who read it, I think it deserves our attention.

1. God’s Love

First, we have to understand what is meant by God’s love.

When we read that God “hated” Esau, we have to let the Word of God define its own terms. And honestly, it is incredibly hard to understand what this “hate”

means if you don't first understand what God's love means. So we need to start there.

To begin with, as we think about God's love, we should know that God is not made up of these pieces that all come together. A little justice here, a little providence here, a little omnipresence over here... he's whole, he's one, he's not a put-together entity. He is who he is, and He is fully Who He is.

The theological term for what God is like is "simple." Meaning he's not made of a body or parts or passions. He's not a list of attributes sort of put together. He *is* those things, he doesn't *have* those things.

That's why, for example, the Bible says, "God is love" instead of "God *has* love."

It's why 1 John 1(:5) says "God is light," not merely that he has light.

It's why in John 4:24 Jesus says, "God is spirit," not "God *has* spirit."

It's why Hebrews 12:29 says, "Our God is a consuming fire," not merely that he *has* "fire-like attributes."

It's why 1 John 5 can say, "He is the true God and eternal life."

You see, the Scripture identifies God's essence with his attributes. These things are him. His love is his own self, his spirituality is who he is, not something he has and so on. And so when the Bible says, "God is love," we can know that it's not like he has these warring characteristics within him, like his love is at war with his hate or something like that. He is love.

So let's ask this question. God is love. But what is love? At its most basic, you could say that love is to will the good for yourself or for another.

When John says "God is love," he is not saying God possesses a soft, fluctuating sentiment that is finicky and changing. John is saying God is an eternal, overflowing fountain of goodness. God's love is not a needy reaction to His creatures; it is the active, holy, Trinitarian fellowship that existed before time began. We do not have to wonder if God's love for us will run dry, because it is not drawn from the shallow well of our performance. It is drawn from the infinite, unchangeable depths of His own glorious nature.

So here's what we're getting to: how can a being who is love even be said to "hate" at all? I actually think the best answer is that even God's hate is really an expression of his love. Let me explain.

When the Bible says that God loves, you need to know that first and foremost he loves and honors himself. That might seem self-centered of God, and in us it would be. But for God, it's a different situation. You see, to love anything above God is idolatry. But there is no one greater than himself for God to love. God is not an idolater. Just like any human being, God would also be an idolator if he loved anything more than the greatest being in all of the universe, which is him! And so he is bound to love himself.

This is why you have passages like Isaiah 48(:9-11) where he explains his motivations to his people. So there he explains what it is that motivates him to be merciful to Israel in this case. Listen to God's underlying priority here for himself:

"For my name's sake I defer my anger; for the sake of my praise I restrain it for you, that I may not cut you off... For my own sake, for my own sake, I do it, for how should my name be profaned? My glory I will not give to another."

What drives him? It's HIS glory. It's HIS name. It's HIS praise. And in this case, if he doesn't defer his anger, then he is concerned that his name and praise and glory will be at stake.

In Ezekiel 36(:22-23), God says he's going to give his people a new heart and put his spirit within them. Why? He says this:

"Thus says the Lord God: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came. And I will vindicate the holiness of my great name."

Why does God save Israel? For the sake of his own name. His name and his holiness was seemingly at stake. He put his name on these people, and if they perished or vanished or would be destroyed, then his own name would be in question. ("Maybe he can't save." "Maybe he's limited.") God cannot bear to have his own name questioned or dragged through the mud. And because of that he is motivated to act. Which also shows us that God's self-centeredness is good news

for us! So for us, when we are self-centered, it is bad for others. With God, it's actually good news that he cares about his name. Because it means he shows grace to undeserving people because He put his name on us, and now if something happens to us, his name will be dragged through the mud. And so His glory means our good and our joy!

So don't give in to the thought that it's somehow bad news for us that the universe is God-centered instead of man-centered.

Or think of Isaiah 43(:6-7), where we are told the reason why humanity was created in the first place:

“Bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the end of the earth,
everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I
formed and made.”

I mean, here God is just openly telling us the meaning of life. We were created for his glory. But notice: it's His glory. The world is profoundly God-centered. And God himself is God-centered, too.

And Paul even keeps up this God-centered theme when talking about why God would predestine us to adoption as sons in Ephesians 1(:4-6):

“In love he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus
Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious
grace.”

What I want you to see is that the love of God is who he is in himself, it isn't merely something he has. And that his love begins with him, and radiates out from himself. So when he loves us, know that it is because he is committed to himself... to glorifying himself.

And so when the Bible tells us that God punishes sin, or even that he sends people to hell, or that God hates Esau, you should know that even *those* things are expressions God's love too. It is good to receive justice. It is good for evil to be punished. And yes, it is good for God to hate Esau. But what does it actually mean that God “hates” Esau?

2. God's hatred

Let's clear that question up in our second point, which is God's hatred.

What we've seen is that God doesn't have these warring impulses within himself that are at odds with each other, and sometimes one wins out.

God doesn't have some kind of inner hatred that needs to be given occasional expression. Instead, it is all one with his essence and person, whatever he does. And because God is love, we are able to see that this phrase in Romans 9 is not some kind of declaration of divine malice, it's a declaration of covenantal priority. Hate isn't something he has or even something that he is. It's another expression of his very self as something that he does in space and time, always within the bounds of his own good, holy, and wise character.

Maybe that language ("hate") still makes you uncomfortable. But consider that it get used quite a bit in the Bible. Let me show you.

You can actually see this sort of love hate distinction in practice from the life of Jacob himself in Genesis 29. The text tells us plainly that Jacob "loved Rachel more than Leah." Yet, the very next verse translates that lesser love with a startling word: Leah was "hated." To be hated in this biblical sense is not to be despised. It's a term of comparison: to be loved less—to not be chosen as the primary favorite.

God has a particular love for all his creatures as creatures, but that doesn't mean that he shows the exact same love to all of us.

Jesus tells us that a true disciple has to "hate" his own family (Luke 14:26) and even his own life in this world (John 12:25). He warns that a servant with two masters will inevitably "hate" the one and love the other (Matthew 6:24). Christ is not commanding us to harbor literal hostility toward our parents or ourselves. Instead, He is demanding that every earthly allegiance be subordinated to the glory of His kingdom.

So what we see is this repeated idea that "hate" in Scripture is often used as a form of comparison. One person receives this incredible expression of love, and another receives less. And so the authors call this "love" and "hate."

What this means is that we shouldn't think of "hate" here as a sort of burning, emotional hostility that God has toward Esau and his descendants. Scripture calls us to see it as a sovereign choice for the sake of redemptive history and the glory of His own name.

In the same way, God did not cast Esau off in some kind of fit of divine hatred. What happened in this passage in Malachi is, God simply subordinated Esau's lineage to elevate Jacob's line. Jacob was chosen for the specific, sacred vocation of bringing the Savior into the world. It is not a matter of malicious rejection, but of holy subordination, so that the grace of Christ might freely come to mankind. That's what it means that Esau was hated.

3. God's Care for Esau

Third, as we were thinking about this idea of love and hate, I want you to consider the care that we see God showing for Esau in the narrative of scripture.

I want you to see that God may have a lesser love for Esau, but he also still shows grace and mercy to him in other ways.

Genesis chapter 36 dedicates an entire chapter to Esau's flourishing lineage. Genesis 33 tells us about Jacob and Esau's peaceful reconciliation, and it is never treated as if Jacob had compromised.

Then look at this: Deuteronomy 2:5 shows God giving Mount Seir to Esau as his own "promised land," forbidding Israel from taking it. Deuteronomy 23:7 even explicitly commands Israel: "You shall not [hate] an Edomite, for he is your brother."

You start to see that even as God doesn't give Esau the blessing of the family line, he still shows a kind of love and mercy for Esau.

And God isn't even done with Esau. If you look at the book of Amos, what you see is that even in Esau's rejection, there is an incredible bigger promise. Speaking about Israel and its restoration, God makes this promise where he says that one day Esau's people would even be included in the covenant. This is just incredible. Listen to this (from Amos 9:11-12):

“In that day I will raise up
the tent of David that is fallen
and repair its breaches,
and raise up its ruins
and rebuild it as in the days of old,
that they may possess the remnant of Edom
and all the nations who are called by my name,’
declares the LORD who does this.”

And if we had the time we could trace Esau’s line (the Edomites) to the very end of the redemptive story. While Edom fades away as a distinct political nation, the book of Amos (9:12) prophesies the restoration of David’s tent so that Israel may “possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations.” Esau’s family will have their opportunity to be folded back into the blessings of Jacob after all!

And in fact, in Acts 15(:16-17), the early church uses this exact promise from Amos to justify the inclusion of the Gentiles into the church. So the fact that God “hated” Esau actually ends up turning into a blessing for all the rest of us, including Esau’s descendants.

This is why I’ve tried to labor to help us understand in a richer way what is meant by “hated” here in our passage. Because the very people God supposedly “hated” are specifically named by the prophets as being drawn into the final, eternal covenant blessing of Abraham. What we’re seeing here is that no one is beyond the reach of God’s grace: even “hated” Esau. There is no background, lineage, or past sin puts anyone outside the scope of the gospel. The only thing that can keep you from the blessings of the gospel is if you refuse to come to Christ by faith.

So again, I just want you to notice that when the scripture says God hated Esau, it is not an absolute hatred, but it’s only in comparison to the favor that God showed to Jacob. God is free to show different degrees of mercy and different degrees of love to his creatures. He didn’t have to show any mercy to Jacob and he did. He owed nothing to Esau, and he still gave him much more than he deserved.

Does God owe anything to us? As fallen people, does he owe us life, does he owe us a Savior? Does he owe us anything? No. We are his creatures. We’ve broken his

law. And so every breath you draw is a breath of grace. Any comfort you know is a gift that he didn't have to give.

4. God's Secret Things

Fourth, I want to briefly acknowledge the whole point of this discussion before I wrap us up. And that is God's Secret Things.

To use the language of 1 Cor. 4(:7), why does God cause one person to differ from another? Why does he make one person for honorable use, and another for dishonorable use? Why does he make some people wiser than others? Why does God make some men blind, and others with sight?

The overarching answer we've already seen: for his own glory. He does it to protect and uphold his own name.

But the particular answers are not always easy to arrive at. Our own ideas and reasoning eventually falls short. "Lord, why did you grant me eternal life, but not my childhood friend, Matt? Lord, why do I walk with you, and this family member I love doesn't?" And you think, "Well if I were God I'd do this and this and this, and I would find a way to make it all work out." We can maybe even imagine that we'd be wiser and better and more loving than God. And at some point we have to realize what a horrible sinful arrogant thought that is.

You see, there comes a point where if we try to answer the questions... we try applying our own logic and knowledge to God's choices, we will eventually have to end up putting our hand over our mouth like Job did when God confronted him. We end up hearing Paul's words later here in Romans 9(:20): "But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, 'Why have you made me like this?'"

What we've really been talking about here is election. Why does God do the things he does, and make the choices that he does? Why does he show such incredible covenantal love to Jacob, and show less love to Esau? Why does the rain fall on Esau, and yet not God's saving redemption? Why does he give some blessings, but not others?

This is one of those things that we really try to understand. We want to know the rhyme and reason for God's choices. And yet the doctrine of election is hard for us to accept and grasp because the answers lie in the will of God and the deep wisdom and knowledge and plans of the Lord, not with us and what makes sense to us.

And I want this to sort of set the tone as we move further into this difficult subject of election and predestination, because this question is going to continue to follow us throughout the rest of Romans.

Going back to the book of Job, think about this: Job has these horrible experiences: loses his children, loses his property and wealth... he gets totally wiped out. And Job is very logical and reasonable. And so are his friends. They aren't stupid. All things considered, I always find myself agreeing with Job's friends and their arguments. Which is funny because at the end when God appears and tells Job and his friends off, he's also telling us off as well!

But when Job tried to explain the decisions of God to his own satisfaction, God appeared in the whirlwind and totally destroyed all of Job's supposed human wisdom that previously sounded so pious and logical. I want you to listen to Job's response (in Job 42:1-6):

Then Job answered the LORD and said:

"I know that you can do all things,
and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.

'Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?'

Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand,
things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.

'Hear, and I will speak;

I will question you, and you make it known to me.'

I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear,

but now my eye sees you;

therefore I despise myself,

and repent in dust and ashes."

In his divine encounter, the overwhelming attitude Job experiences is “humility.” (“What made me think, O God, that I could possibly figure you out?”)

And so what I’m calling for as we move further into this series on Romans (and especially Romans chapter 9) is humility. Because over and over again, this passage is going to raise questions which cause us to eventually run into a wall, behind which is the will of God; the hidden things of God; the thing that God is doing that we don’t have access to.

Conclusion

As we close, I want to mention a passage of Scripture that every Christian should be familiar with. This is from Deuteronomy 29:29:

“The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.”

God has both a private will *and* a public will. The “secret things” are His hidden decrees, His unrevealed reasons, and the intricate workings of His providence. The things he is doing that we do not see and cannot know. Those things are His property alone, and it is arrogant for us to try to pry into them. We are not supposed to obsess over the hidden decrees we cannot understand because he hasn’t given them to us. Instead, we are supposed to rest in the “revealed things”—His law, His clear commands, His promises, and the gospel of Christ.

God does not give us some kind of exhaustive knowledge of His sovereign plans; He gives us enough light to trust Him and obey Him today. We are not called to figure out the secret counsels of heaven; we simply have to faithfully walk in the light He has revealed to us.

Even as we think about the doctrine of election (“why does God make the choices that he does?” “Why does God do things the way he does?” “Why does God cause one person to differ from another?”)... even as we are thinking about these questions which can easily trouble us, we are going to be bound in our answers by what God himself has told us, not by what we think we can figure out.

And so you'll notice as we work our way through Romans 9, that Paul's answers are very God-centered, not man-centered. You'll notice that the priority in everything for Paul is God himself and his honor and defending his name. And you'll also notice that Paul isn't willing to guess about God or speculate. He's bound by Scripture, and you'll notice Paul stopping where Scripture stops.

And what I want is for us to have the same attitude. "I'm willing to accept God as he presents himself to me, and I'm not willing to judge God by my own frail ideas and attitudes."

I would love for us to adopt the attitude of William Cowper, who wrote in his hymn,

"Judge not the Lord by feeble sense/
but trust him for his grace/
God is His own interpreter/
and He will make it plain."

Let's pray.