

# All-Inclusive Grace

Presented By Pastor Scott Walters on 08-02-20  
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Who says the game of golf isn't theological? Each year The Masters Golf Tournament is played at the famed Augusta National Golf Course in Georgia. Augusta is home to some of the most beautiful golf holes anywhere.

Three holes in particular—the 11<sup>th</sup>, 12<sup>th</sup>, and 13<sup>th</sup>--are known not only for their beauty but also their difficulty, and collectively are called "Amen Corner."

Personally, I would say that the "Amen Corner" of the New Testament is the 9<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>, and 11<sup>th</sup> chapter of Paul's Letter to the Romans. These are pivotal chapters in trying to understand what Paul was trying to communicate to those Roman congregations, and at the same difficult to understand.

The great 19<sup>th</sup> century preacher Arthur McLaren, during the course of lifetime, preached through the whole Bible. His sermons have been published in 17 volumes.

However, when McLaren arrives at Romans 9-11, he goes straight from Romans 8 to Romans 12 as though there were nothing in between.

But we can't do that anymore. We have to deal with these three chapters because we have to come to terms with the failure of Christians to protect Jews during World War 2.

I am convinced that these three chapters, as difficult as they may be, have some amazing Good News for everyone.

As I have mentioned to you before, I grew up in the Methodist Church in Wisconsin Rapids, in central Wisconsin. One summer I attended Vacation Bible School at church and had a great time. Then one of my close friends invited me to attend their VBS program at their church. It was the Baptist Church in town.

I went and I discovered that they believe in God and prayed and sang about their faith in much the same way that I did in the Methodist Church. THE STORY IS A LITTLE BIGGER THAN I REALIZED.

A couple of years after that I went to Summer Church Camp for the first time. I was there along with about forty other kids. I made friends with kids I never knew before, from towns and cities I never heard of before. There were Methodists in towns like Viroqua and Racine and Wild Rose and Antigo. And when it came time to go home at the end of the week, we cried and exchanged addresses. THEN THE STORY GOT BIGGER.

Then I went to University of Wisconsin at Stevens Point and participated in events and programs of the Ecumenical Campus Ministries that, at the time, were led up by Pastor Dick Steffen. He was a United Methodist Pastor but the participants were Episcopalians and Presbyterians and Lutherans and Methodists among others. And we served together. And we worshipped together. AND THE STORY GREW STILL LARGER.

Then I went to Boston University School of Theology and while it was a United Methodist Seminary, only a plurality of the students were United Methodist. We had Episcopalians, a couple of Lutherans, a Southern Baptist, and Armenian Orthodox, several Roman Catholic women were there in hopes of being ordained, Congregationalists, Unitarian-Universalists. There was at least one Jew; a Muslim woman and a Hindu woman, Shuma who, I'm guessing would have been regarded as the most gracious, the most saintly, of anyone of that campus. And there were a couple who weren't sure about their faith yet.

They were of different races and different sexual orientations. We all learned from great

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professors, but we also learned a lot from each other. THIS STORY, AS YOU CAN IMAGINE, JUST GOT EVEN BIGGER.

So goes the Christian story, right? It's a bigger story than we could have ever imagined, with our limited imaginations.

And I hate to say it, but in our limited imaginations, there are those who hate that this story keeps getting bigger and bigger. We do our darndest to limit it. This is nothing new. This is exactly the thing that Paul's getting at in Romans, chapter 9.

Just as soon as Paul has proclaimed that nothing in all of creation can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ, then he makes this transition into an argument in defense of his people – the Jewish people.

And in this argument, there is first, deep pain coming from Paul, that his people who raised him up, don't share the same beliefs about the Messiah that he does.

So he writes this: "I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people." He holds this deep regret and pain. But then he continues in the defense of his people.

Here he gets away from his deep regret and toward what seems to be this tension, because there was some talk going around that there was this new Covenant in Jesus Christ and now, therefore, Paul's people, the Jews, are cut off from this New Covenant.

Christianity has all too-often twisted Romans 9-11 to affirm this misreading of Paul's words. This misreading has led to the justification of all kinds of ugly, exclusive acts throughout history. Exclusive acts like slavery, racism, the Holocaust among others.

People may use these sort of texts to make us feel okay about excluding others, but that is not what Paul is doing here.

Paul is actually making an argument that God made a promise to his people that goes as far back as Abraham, and God doesn't break promises. God's promises don't have endings or conditions.

There is no "start over" button. God makes a promise and another promise, doesn't mean that the 1<sup>st</sup> promise doesn't exist anymore. It's both/and for God.

And so Paul goes on to say that the Promise of God to the Jews has laid the foundation for Jesus Christ. And then he goes on to say, "And by the way, Jesus is Jewish – he came from a Jewish family."

And what's even more, Paul then concludes this portion by assert that the Messiah is OVER ALL.

And so what Paul is saying is this: he's saying that the STORY is always bigger than we imagined. It's always bigger than we realize.

Paul's claim is that no one is "out;" neither the People of Israel for not accepting the Christian message nor the non-Jewish people for not being part of Israel's story. No one is out. There is room for all of them.

God's story is a far greater story. One that is able to hold all the stories and characters and complexities. This is what Paul is pointing towards. And we, who claim to follow the God of Jesus Christ in our baptism, we join the ever-widening story.

We have to think about our story as all those little moments and events that make up our lives as I shared with you earlier about my life. But in our baptism, we join the Story that transcends my story.

It's a story that runs as deep as God's Promises to Abraham and Sarah and as far in the future as we can bring our minds to understand.

And today, in the 9<sup>th</sup> chapter of Romans, Paul has butted up against one of the greatest problems that the church has ever had to deal with. It is our tendency to sometimes consciously and sometimes unconsciously, write certain people out of the story. That is what we are butting up against.

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And this is precisely what is happening when our behaviors and our systems and even our churches organize themselves in such a way as to say who's out.

Please hear this: God, through Jesus Christ has the capacity to hold all of these stories and all of the complexities. We, as disciples of Jesus, must never lose sight of the love of God for all people AND for each person.

So, if you've ever felt rejected by the church, by a place that you love, or by your family – please know this: You are loved and accepted for whom you are.

Your story is loved. Maybe it is a little story, or you feel an insignificant story—but it is a vital part of the Story of God. And God holds your story and God holds you – even now.