

August 30, 2020 at St. Matthew, Port Washington, WI

God's mercy is always for all!

Twelve-year-old Tommy was getting pretty lazy during the summer. The summer before, he received a bicycle for his birthday. He loved it and rode it for hours each day. That was last year. Now, he just played video games and complained that he was bored. Without exercise, he was getting grumpier and grumpier. His mother knew that exercise would be good and she suggested that he could ride his bike around the neighborhood. "That's boring," he argued. "I've already seen everything in this neighborhood. Besides, I don't really like my bike anymore." Instead of engaging in the argument, mom simply shrugged, "OK." Tommy kept playing his video games. A bit later, at lunch, Tommy's younger sister talked excitedly about how much fun it was to ride a bike and see all the dogs around the neighborhood. "But you don't have a bicycle," Tommy snapped. "Oh, mom said I could ride yours." "What? But that's my bike! You can't ride my bike!" After lunch, Tommy left his video game behind and rode his bicycle, just so that his sister would not use it. Mom got Tommy to exercise by making him jealous of his sister. Maybe Tommy's story can help us understand what the Apostle Paul is saying here in Romans 11.

Jesus lived and worked among the Jews. Before he ascended into heaven, though, Jesus told his disciples to take the good news of salvation to the whole world, not just the Jews. The Lord even called Paul especially to do mission work. Paul traveled to many nations telling people about Jesus. In each city, he started at the Jewish synagogue and told the Jews about Jesus. In each city, the Jews by and large rejected Jesus.

It might seem surprising to us that the Jews rejected. Each day, faithful Jews prayed for the Messiah to come. All of their Old Testament sacrifices pointed to the special, one-of-a-kind, sacrifice the Messiah would make. The Jews had a special diet and wore different clothes than other nations as reminders that they were God's special people. They worship at their local synagogue and supported it with their offerings and their efforts. They said their prayers and chanted their psalms. All of those things were supposed to remind them about Jesus, the Lamb of God who was coming to take away the sin of the world. And yet, when Paul told them about Jesus, they rejected him. It seems that the Jews started focusing on the outward things of faith instead of the heart of faith. They were living like good Jewish people were supposed to live and so God must be pleased with them. If anyone would get into heaven, it would be people like them. They forgot all about confessing their sins and trusting in God for forgiveness. Outwardly, they looked like very religious people, but their hearts were far away from God. And so, when Paul told them that Jesus came to be their Savior, they rejected him.

In each city that Paul visited, when the Jews rejected Jesus, he worked among the Gentiles, the non-Jews, and many of them became believers in Jesus. Before Paul could visit Rome, a small group of Christians started meeting together. There were a few Jews in that congregation, but most of the members were non-Jews. Paul wrote a long letter (which we call the book of Romans in the Bible) to those early Christians in Rome to encourage them in their faith and to encourage them to worship and work together. It did not matter that there were Jews and non-Jews in that congregation since God's mercy was always for all.

All of you have friends or relatives who are not Christian. Few things are as sad as realizing that someone near and dear to you might not be in heaven with you. Paul felt the same way. The Lord called Paul to be a missionary to the Gentiles, but always in the back of Paul's mind was his desire that his own people, the Jews, be saved. It troubled him deeply that so many Jews rejected Jesus. Paul hoped to do what Tommy's mother did with his bicycle. Paul wanted the Jews to get jealous of the Gentiles.

This section of Romans 11 is a bit thick. There is a running commentary of these verses at the end of this sermon for you to read as if you were in Bible class. A short summary of what Paul said in these verses might be:

You Gentiles who make up most of the congregation in Rome believe in Jesus. That's great! I hope that the Jews get jealous of your joy over salvation and learn more about Jesus and that they become believers too. That would be like them rising from the dead. Careful not to boast, though, because no one, Jews or Gentiles, deserves to be saved. Everyone is a sinner, yet God has mercy on all.

So what? What does this talk about Jews and Gentiles 2000 years ago in Rome have to do with us today? My friends, there is a real danger that we can end up like those Jews who rejected Jesus. There are a lot of similarities between us. Just like the Jews grew up with the Bible, most of us did. We know the plan of salvation. We come to church and support the ministry with our offerings and efforts. We live a different lifestyle than the unbelievers around us. We say our prayers and sing our hymns. There is a real danger, though, that, just like the Jews at the time of Paul, we get focused on the outward things of faith and miss the focus of faith – Christ. It is very easy to go through the motions of religion instead of sincerely confessing our sins and clinging firmly to Jesus as our Savior.

Here in Romans 11:32, Paul said that God "**bound everyone over to disobedience.**" That is, God has seen to it that everyone – both Jews and Gentiles and German Lutherans – have ended up in a dark, dead end. We are locked up because of our sins. We are doomed. God wants us to remember that we are sinners. Indeed, in each of our lives, there are some things that we should not do be doing, some things that we should change. But we often shrug off our sins. "So what? Jesus, loves me, right? So, it does not matter if I hold on to that grudge, or let those lustful thoughts linger in my mind, or continue lying, or swear once in

a while, or gossip, or fail to show the love of Jesus to others, even my enemy, or ... But at least I go to church.” Maybe there have even been times in your life when you did not go to church, when you wandered away from God, times when you did not live like a sincere believer should live. Every one of our sins, including every time we have gone through the motions of worship instead of engaging our hearts, makes us just as bad as those Jews at the time of Paul. We need help.

“**God has bound everyone over to disobedience,**” Paul continues in verse 32, “**so that he might have mercy on them all.**” Mercy is similar to love and grace, but it especially focuses on the emotion that God has when he looks at us. When he looks at you and me, he does not get angry. He looks on us with pity. He feels sorry for us. God sees us trapped in our sins and unable to help ourselves. He shakes his head in sadness as he sees us continuing with our sins of habit and sins of choice. His heart is stirred with sorrow when he sometimes sees that our hearts are not really connected to him. Instead of reaching out his hand to slap us into hell as we deserve, he reaches out his hand to help us. He shows mercy.

Paul hoped that the Jews would see the Gentiles rejoicing in Jesus as their Savior and get a little jealous. Sometimes, the Lord uses others to make us realize how important Jesus is, to make us jealous in a way. I read a few articles in the newest Forward in Christ that are available for you this morning. One that really grabbed me was from our missionary, Paul Nitz, in Africa. He wrote (FIC, Sep 2020, p. 10), “During my years preaching in churches, not a week went by when I did not see that eureka of the gospel in an adult’s eyes.” People were excited as the good news about Jesus touched their hearts. When is the last time that we got excited for salvation, that our eyes lit up with joy to know Jesus? Such stories from Africa and other places remind us what a precious gift salvation through Jesus is, how blessed we are to know Jesus. When we see others get excited about salvation, we are reminded not to take Jesus for granted, but to sincerely concentrate on the core of our religion – our sin and our forgiveness.

Neither the Jews nor the Gentiles deserved anything good from God, but he kept offering them salvation. God does not owe us anything today either, but Paul explained that (:29), “**God’s gifts and his call are irrevocable** [they can not be taken back].” God can not stop offering salvation to people. No one and nothing can change the historical fact that Jesus already died and rose again. Even when we sin again and again, even when our hearts are not tuned in to Jesus, salvation is still there for you. God loves you as an individual. You are specially chosen by God. When God looks at you, he smiles with joy. And one day, you are going to rise again and live forever in heaven. The message that touched hearts in Rome 2000 years ago and that touches hearts in Africa today is the same message that we have here this morning. God did not give up on the Jews and he is not going to give up on you.

What we see here in Romans 11 is God’s ardent, burning, fervent, passionate, urgent desire to save all people. God does not love us because we are lovable. He loves because he is love. His love never quits. His love does not depend on us, who we are, or what we do or don’t do, or how often we sinned, or how often or how far we wandered away. God’s mercy is always for all. And that means that his mercy is for you, today and eternally. Amen.

“¹³**I am talking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch as I am the apostle to the Gentiles, I take pride in my ministry** [I point with excitement to how lots of Gentiles are coming to faith] ¹⁴**in the hope that I may somehow arouse my own people to envy and save some of them.** [Paul hoped that the Jews who rejected Jesus would see the Gentiles rejoicing in Jesus as their Savior and would get a bit jealous. Paul hoped that the Jews would say, “Hey, we are supposed to be the one’s rejoicing in salvation,” and would reconsider Jesus.] ¹⁵**For if their** [the Jews’] **rejection** [of Jesus] **brought reconciliation to the world** [when the Jews rejected Jesus, Paul then shared Jesus with the Gentiles. People throughout the world were reconciled with God as they came to faith and rejoiced in the forgiveness of sins.], **what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?** [When the Jews see the Gentiles so happy about Jesus as their Savior and they listen again to the good news of Jesus and are brought to faith, it will be like a dead person being brought back to life.]

“²⁸ **As far as the gospel is concerned, they** [the Jews] **are enemies for your sake** [Unbelievers are enemies of believers. They keep fighting back against them.]; **but as far as election is concerned** [Even though most Jews were rejecting Jesus at that time, God would not be denied the people he chose to be saved. God would still convert some Jews.], **they are loved on account of the patriarchs,** [The patriarchs are the founding fathers of the Jews – Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. God promised to send a Savior to their nation and God was going to keep offering them salvation.] ²⁹ **for** [Paul concludes,] **God’s gifts and his call are irrevocable.** [Just because God offered the Jews salvation once and they rejected it, did not mean that he would not offer it to them again and again and again. God’s mercy is always for all – Jews and Gentiles.] ³⁰ **Just as you** [Gentiles] **who were at one time disobedient to God** [unbelievers] **have now received mercy as a result of their disobedience,** [Because the Jews first rejected Jesus, the gospel ended up going to the Gentiles who were brought to faith.] ³¹ **so they too have now become disobedient in order that they too may now receive mercy as a result of God’s mercy to you.** [Now that the Jews were unbelievers, they could receive the same mercy that God showed to the Gentiles and be brought to faith.] ³² **For God has bound everyone over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all.** [God made it clear to both Jews and Gentiles that they were sinners who were condemned to hell. They were helpless. They could not be good enough to earn their way into heaven. Nor could they bring themselves to faith. Everyone – both Jews and Gentiles – realized that they needed a Savior and then God brought them to faith in Jesus. He had mercy on them all.]