

I am talking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch as I am the apostle to the Gentiles, I make much of my ministry¹⁴ in the hope that I may somehow arouse my own people to envy and save some of them.¹⁵ For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead? ...²⁸ As far as the gospel is concerned, they are enemies on your account; but as far as election is concerned, they are loved on account of the patriarchs,²⁹ for God's gifts and his call are irrevocable.³⁰ Just as you who were at one time disobedient to God have now received mercy as a result of their disobedience,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.³² For God has bound all men over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all. (Romans 11:13-15, 28-32)

Only God Could Have Mercy Like This!

While I was on vacation, my wife and I went to Missouri to see the total eclipse of the sun. When we got out there, we had to find a place to view it. One place we tried was a state park overlooking the Missouri River. We thought there might be a nice open space there where you could get a good view. But that part of Missouri is really hilly and the park was heavily forested. The road was winding and unfamiliar and I was feeling some pressure to either find a spot there or move on to the next place we were going to try. So as I was heading out of the park, I looked up and saw a park ranger following me with his lights flashing. When I stopped, he told me he had clocked me doing 37 in a 20 mile per hour zone. Naturally, I wasn't happy to hear that. But I kept my mouth shut and produced my license and registration and answered his questions respectfully. But all the time I silently wondering how much the fine was going to be.

You know what? He decided to have mercy on me. In fact, he was downright friendly. He let me off with a warning and even suggested some places we might like to explore and he invited us to come back the next day for the eclipse. Why did he decide to show me mercy? I don't know and I didn't ask. Maybe he does that for everybody. Maybe they don't like to give tickets to tourists because they don't want their parks to get a bad name. Maybe he saw that I had a clean record and figured that I was distracted and not a big risk. Maybe he was just in a good mood that day, I don't know. But I was really glad he did.

What's a bigger deal: getting a warning for a speeding ticket or being forgiven for all your sins? Obviously, being forgiven is a much bigger deal. I mean, what's the penalty for speeding? What's the penalty for sin? A couple of hundred dollars is nothing compared to eternity in hell. But how often do we get excited about God's mercy? How often do we tell a story about how much we deserved to be punished but God let us off? We experience his forgiveness so much that we can begin to take it for granted. So this morning, St. Paul tries to get us to see just how amazing God's mercy really is. **Only God could have mercy like this!**

I.

Paul is talking to us when he says these things. **Only God could have mercy like this on us!** What mercy is St. Paul talking about? In Romans 11, he's talking about the relationship between the Jewish people and the Christian Church. He points out that Israel is the people of God. He called them and rescued them from Egypt. He set them apart and gave them the Old Testament scriptures. For generations, they passed the faith down. God gave them the Old Testament promises that a Savior would come to forgive their sins. But when Jesus came, the vast majority of the Jewish people in his time and ever since rejected him. By rejecting Jesus they were rejecting God and all the promises he had given them for thousands of years. So it looked like God's people were finally coming to an end.

So what did God do? He didn't rain fire and brimstone down from heaven on them. And he didn't just shrug his shoulders and sadly walk away. He didn't curl up into a ball and weep over how much it hurt to be rejected. We could understand any of those reactions. But God turned to us. God sent the gospel out to the Gentiles and then he declared that every person who came to faith in Christ is part of his people. God revealed that Israel is not a physical people but a spiritual people. The true Israel of God is everyone who trusts in Jesus. That includes all those Old Testament people who heard the promises and waited for the Savior to come. And it includes all of us who were baptized as babies and who have heard and believed in Jesus. We are one people.

That was an amazing action because Gentiles generally speaking were generally hostile to Jews. Jews didn't like them much either. Some Jews didn't even consider Gentiles to be fully human. They thought we

were outside of God's love. But God had other ideas. In the face of Jewish sin and rejection, God showed us mercy. The Bible talks about the fact that on one level that Jewish rejection opened the door for the Gentile church. Jesus tells a parable about a king who invited people to his son's wedding banquet but they won't come. So he sends his servants out into the streets and highways and brings in anyone he can find. He insists on filling his house and sharing his feast, even when he has to invite beggars in to do it. We are those travelers and beggars that he brought in to the wedding feast of Christ. We had no claim on him. We weren't even looking for him. But he reached out and he found us. He made us his.

And he always planned to do that. Again and again, in the Old Testament, God told his people that the light of Christ would shine over all the earth, that the Gentiles would come in, that it was too small a thing for that coming Savior to just save this one tiny people in this one postage stamp sized country. Jesus would die for the world. He would pay for all our sins. That is exactly what God did. He had mercy on us before we were even born. He chose us from all eternity and he adopted us here and now when he gave us faith. Only God could do that. Only he would.

II.

But that's not the end of his mercy. **Only God could have mercy like this on Israel.** In the Old Testament God calls Israel his wife, just like he calls the New Testament Church Jesus' bride. But in the Old Testament, he often says that Israel was unfaithful. She slept around. She sold herself. He wasn't talking specifically about physical adultery. He used that as a picture for them worshipping one false god after another. Finally, God sent Israel into exile as punishment. But he always promised to preserve a remnant, a torn off scrap of the people who would be faithful to him. He brought that scrap back from exile and rebuilt his people from them.

In many ways, they were more faithful after that. They never again openly worshipped idols. But the pattern never stopped. Just as we can call ourselves Christians and even come to church, but really be all about money or popularity or personal comfort, God's people, too, found it easy to let something else take his place in their hearts. So when they rejected Jesus, they were just doing what they had always done. Using that marriage image that God uses, what would you do if your wife or your husband cheated on you, not once, but over and over again? What would you do if you never knew where he or she would be sleeping tonight or with whom? How long could your marriage last? How many times would you take that cheater back?

Paul says today, **"As far as the gospel is concerned, they are enemies on your account; but as far as election is concerned, they are loved on account of the patriarchs, for God's gifts and his call are irrevocable."** They are loved. Even though the Jewish people have rejected the promised Savior, even though the house of Israel was unfaithful again and again, even though they persecuted the early church and to this day have very little positive to say about conservative Christians, God still loves them. He still holds out his hand to them. And until Christ comes back, God will show mercy to them. Jesus died and paid even for Jewish rejection and persecution. God wants them to see their Savior and believe in him. God still will preserve a remnant of believers from that ethnic people. In fact, throughout this chapter, Paul calls us to rejoice in the possibility that Jewish people can still come to faith. He reminds us what a fantastic blessing it is every time the Holy Spirit overcomes 2,000 years of cultural prejudice and bad relations between Jews and Christians and he gives a physical child of Abraham faith in Christ.

What a wonderful promise that holds out for us, because we, too, can be unfaithful. We, too, can betray our Lord by making money or popularity or personal comfort more important than living for Jesus. We can make those things into our gods and be just as evil as Old Testament Israel was. But God's love and his call are irrevocable. In Christ, there is always forgiveness. As long as we live on this earth, he holds out his hands to us and calls us to return to him. Only God could have mercy like that.

III.

God loves the whole world – you and me, Jews and Gentiles, men and women, all races, all nationalities. Jesus came for us all. **Only God could have mercy like this on all people.** Paul said, **"For God has bound all men over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all."** The point here is God's justice. All people are under the law. All people are guilty because we all sin and deserve to die and go to hell. God condemns us in his word. He strikes our hearts, so that we know our guilt and so that we long for pardon.

I did a quick internet search the other day about death row. There are almost 3000 people waiting to be executed in the United States today. Some of them will ask the governor of their state or the president for

mercy. Some may even get it. But no president or governor pardons all the criminals in their state or country. They deny the vast majority of requests that even reach their desk. But God had mercy on the whole world. God sent his Son to die and pay for every sin that every sinner has ever committed. That includes you and me. God raised his Son from the dead to declare that we are all free and forgiven.

I don't have to list all your sins for you today, because you know them far better than I ever could. You know the things just this week that you've felt guilty for and deservedly so. All those sins deserve God's punishment in death and hell. That's what God tells us. But that's what Jesus died and paid for. It's so important to understand that he did that for the whole world because that means it can't possibly miss us. Jesus died and paid for you. Jesus rose and God has forgiven you. Jesus came to you and made sure that you know that. He baptized you and sent pastors and teachers and parents to make sure that you hear that every time you need it. By his grace, you now trust in Jesus, so all that sin is gone for you. God's mercy to the world is God's mercy to you and me.

I don't know why that park ranger chose to show me mercy. But I do know why God chose to show us mercy: because he loves us. He loves the children of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and he wants their descendants to reach eternal life. He loves us and our children, too, and he wants us all to reach eternal life. But there is a mystery in his mercy: why does he love us? I mean, we don't deserve it. We prove that every time we sin. We were born addicted to sin and if we're faithful, we spend our whole lives fighting that addiction. Yet, all too often, we don't come close to the life he calls us to lead. We give in to sin over and over again. But he loves us anyway. He comes to us over and over again and forgives us. What human being could ever do that? Even parents will eventually become exhausted. But God's mercy is new every morning.

I've told the story of the park ranger having mercy on me repeatedly since our vacation. It was such a relief. What greater joy and relief is there than God's mercy? Why wouldn't we want to share that? That's how God shares his mercy – through us. St. Paul was called to share that good news primarily with people like us, with Gentiles. But he says that he made a big deal out of that ministry and out of God's mercy on the Gentiles in hopes that his own people would be jealous. He wanted them to want God's mercy, to come back and hear the good news. He understood that jealousy doesn't make believers. The gospel does. But he wanted them to hear it so that the Holy Spirit would give them faith and life.

That would take a miracle. And it's a miracle God has done for you and me. It's a miracle he still does through us and our ministry. Treasure the mercy that God has shown you. Trust his power to change hearts. Share the good news of Jesus' endless mercy with each other and with the world. Amen.