

Romans 11:1-2, 29-32
Disobedience and Mercy

Main idea: God desires for all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

As I sat down to begin working on this sermon a few weeks ago, reading Romans 11, I really struggled at first as to how to preach it. When I sit down to begin working on a sermon, some sermons just kind of write themselves because the Scripture passage is so incredibly clear in its meaning and application. Today's sermon did not write itself, not because the Scripture isn't clear, but because it's so clear that we can easily be offended by what it's saying.

And make no mistake: when you understand what God is saying to you through Scripture, it will offend you.¹

Scripture offends us because Scripture is perfect, and true,² and we are not. We're sinners.³ So if we cling to our ideas, and our lifestyles, rather than humbling ourselves before God, we'll be offended by His word.⁴

Scripture is like a perfectly clean window. Have you ever seen a window that's so clean and clear that you can't even see the glass at all? There are many videos online of animals and even people running into glass and falling backwards because the glass was so incredibly clear. And in the same way, Scripture is a dangerous thing. Through Scripture, we can see the world as it is and see ourselves as we are.⁵ And through our Scripture today, God is clearly telling us a huge truth both about us and His plan.

And we can take it one of two ways: we can be offended by it, and stumble over the stumbling stone,⁶ or we can praise God, who is far beyond our comprehension.

Anyway, as I was trying to think through how to best preach on Romans chapter 11, I came up with this thought exercise. Imagine a world in which our children never disobeyed. Imagine a world in which our children never got sick, and never got hurt, and never had to learn things the hard way.

Sounds pretty ideal, right? Sounds kind of like heaven. I mean, if it were possible, I would be willing myself to cut off from the presence of God if it meant that I could be sure that my kids would be safe from harm.⁷

But imagine a world in which children never disobeyed or got sick or got hurt or had to learn things the hard way, even though there is real evil in the world, and they were just oblivious to the possibility of these things. We might say that ignorance is bliss, but in that world, they would never learn to trust you, or lean on you or God, or even to really love and be loved because they just took everything for granted.

Well, that sounds kind of like hell.

But, strangely enough, it also sounds kind of like the garden of Eden.

¹ John 6:60-61

² John 17:17, 2 Timothy 3:17

³ Romans 5:12

⁴ 1 John 1:8-9

⁵ James 1:23-25

⁶ 1 Peter 2:7-8

⁷ Romans 9:3

You know, we often think of the garden of Eden as this idyllic, perfect place where Adam walked with God, and had no sin, and everything was perfect, and yet the garden of Eden was also a place where Adam would never have known what it meant to be forgiven, and therefore, he would never have really known God's love. So, in a way, God never wanted them to stay in the garden of Eden forever. He planned from the very beginning to kick them out.⁸

But how do I preach something like this without sounding like a heretic?

Well, first, we need to be clear that God is not the author of evil.⁹ He didn't cause us to sin, and yet God did allow us to sin so that we would be able to know what it means to be forgiven. It's like God wanted us to experience the terror of His wrath, which we feel as rejection, so that we would truly be able to rest in His grace.

And second, we need to remember that what happened in the garden wasn't just about Adam and Eve. Adam and Eve had to be kicked out of the garden because God didn't want all of mankind to stay in the garden forever. The garden of Eden was never God's permanent plan for us. God had something even better in mind for us, and it could only be given to us through Jesus.¹⁰

So it's true that our sin offends God and that because of our disobedience, God's wrath will come and is coming.¹¹ But maybe we're wrong in saying that this means God will reject us forever. In fact, I think Scripture teaches that it's just the opposite.

Romans 11. Please turn there. Romans 11. And please stand with me for the reading of God's word. Starting in verse 1.

I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! For I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew.
(Romans 11:1-2a)

Now skip down to verse 29.

For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. For just as you were at one time disobedient to God but now have received mercy because of their disobedience, so they too have now been disobedient in order that by the mercy shown to you they also may now receive mercy. For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all. (Romans 11:29-32)

The word of God for the people of God. *Thanks be to God.*

I encourage you to read all of Romans chapter 11 this afternoon. What we read this morning is kind of like just the beginning and climax of a book, but there's a whole story in the middle there about how God accomplishes these things.

You know, sometimes the beginning of a story is discouraging, almost hopeless. At the beginning of the story, the author describes the problem. And if it's a good story, it's usually a big problem. At the beginning of

⁸ Revelation 13:8

⁹ James 1:13

¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 15:22

¹¹ Colossians 3:6

Cinderella, we find that she has a wicked step-mother, and that she has no hope of a normal, happy life. At the beginning of *Les Miserables*, Jean Valjean is released from prison, and wanders from town to town, having no place to lay his head. And at the beginning of the Bible, Adam and Eve sin and are cast out of the garden, and all of mankind is cast out with them.¹²

But the beginning of a good story anticipates its end. In the end, Cinderella finds her prince, and her prince finds her, and they live happily ever after. In *Les Miserables*, Jean Valjean devotes his life to doing good, and rescues an orphaned girl from a life of misery. And the Bible goes into great detail about how God rescues mankind from sin.¹³

That's what the book of Romans is all about. And we might say that chapter 11 is the climax of the story.

The book of Romans is both intensely theological and powerfully practical. It explains the gospel in strikingly simple ways, almost unbelievable ways, and then encourages us to live consistently with faith in the gospel. So it's no surprise that an extremely popular method of sharing the gospel message comes from the book of Romans. It's a series of verses which we call the Romans Road to Salvation.

Romans 3:23.

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. (Romans 3:23)

Romans 5:8

But God demonstrates His love toward us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:8)

Romans 6:23

For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 6:23)

Romans 10:9, which we looked at last week

Because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. (Romans 10:9)

And finally, Romans 10:13

For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. (Romans 10:13)

I love the Romans Road because in just a few very clear verses, we see the problem of our disobedience, and yet the greatness of God's mercy.

About 7 years ago, an 18-year old man named Kyle Gamboa committed suicide by jumping off of the Golden Gate Bridge. An average of 31 people die by jumping off of the bridge every year. But in construction now is a

¹² Genesis 3:24

¹³ John 3:16-17

net that will catch anyone who attempts to jump off of the bridge. Because of how it's being constructed, anyone who would attempt suicide would not see the net until it caught them, and yet they would be saved even in spite of their disregard for their own lives.¹⁴

And in the same way, we've all disregarded God's plan for our lives, which was really for our good. And yet, God has constructed a net of grace for us.

You see, God's plan is not that we would be cut off from His presence and experience His wrath forever. God's plan is not to reject us. His plan from the very beginning was to send Jesus.¹⁵ In order to amplify God's glory and love, He sent Jesus to die in our place, so that we would be saved.¹⁶ That was God's plan from the foundation of the earth.¹⁷

And yet, sometimes it's hard to see that at the beginning of the story. And sometimes it's even hard to see that when we're in what we consider the middle of our stories, which from God's perspective, are really just the beginning.

But this is a common feeling. It's part of the very story that God is telling through His people.

Verse 1.

I ask, then, has God rejected his people? (Romans 11:1a)

Maybe you've felt rejected by God. Maybe it's because of something you did, or because of how you were born. Or maybe you feel like your relationship with God just gradually deteriorated to the point that you can't see Him working around you, and you wonder, "Has God rejected me?"

That's how the Jews must have felt for many years. In fact, it appears that God did reject them. At one point, God even declared that He divorced Israel.¹⁸ When they turned their backs on God, and sinned against Him, God allowed them to lose their land. The nations around them took them into captivity as exiles,¹⁹ and they lost the land that God promised them and had given them. In fact, I'm sure that many Jews even today feel like they've been rejected by God. But I would argue from Scripture that that's only the very beginning of their story.

Paul gives us a hint about where God's going with all this in verse 2.

God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew. (Romans 11:2a)

So even if the Jews felt rejected, and even were rejected for a time because of their disobedience, God had a bigger plan. And the beginning of our stories may seem hopeless, and yet God gives hope to the hopeless.²⁰

God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew.

¹⁴ <https://namisanmateo.org/golden-gate-bridge-barrier-offers-relief/>

¹⁵ Genesis 3:15

¹⁶ Romans 5:8

¹⁷ Revelation 13:8

¹⁸ Jeremiah 3:8

¹⁹ 2 Kings 17:1-6

²⁰ Psalm 42:11

God's foreknowledge in the Bible is not merely a word that means that God knew something beforehand. No, it's the same concept as how a man knows his wife. It's an intimate knowledge. It's a relationship of love, even unconditional love, that therefore completely rules out the possibility of God's rejection.²¹ That's what Paul wrote in verse 29.

For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. (Romans 11:29)

God made a promise to the Jews. God promised to bless Abraham and his family²² and to give them the promised land forever. That's what it says in Genesis 13:15. When Abraham saw the land of Canaan, God said to him:

all the land that you see I will give to you and to your offspring forever. (Genesis 13:15)

And God isn't flippant about His promises. He says what He means. He doesn't take His promises back.²³ Sometimes it can seem that way for a time, maybe because of our disobedience, or because God has something up His sleeve, but by the end of the story, we see that God has always been faithful to keep His promises.

2 Timothy 2:13 says:

If we are faithless, he remains faithful- for he cannot deny himself. (2 Timothy 2:13)

What I'm saying is simply that all of our confusion, and all of our disobedience, and all our feelings of rejection are resolved in Jesus. Jesus is faithful and true.²⁴ He's the Friend of sinners.²⁵ He knew no sin, and yet died for our sin.²⁶ And if you've trusted in Jesus, and love God, you can be sure that God has an awesome plan for you. Romans 8:28 says it like this:

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. (Romans 8:28)

Now, that doesn't mean that everything always goes smoothly for those who love God. But it does mean that everything will work out for your good and God's glory. So even when our lives seem hopeless and like they don't make sense, we can rest in God's promise of mercy.

Verse 30.

For just as you were at one time disobedient to God but now have received mercy because of their disobedience, so they too have now been disobedient in order that by the mercy shown to you they also may now receive mercy. (Romans 11:30-31)

²¹ Jeremiah 1:5,

²² Genesis 12:1-3

²³ Numbers 23:19

²⁴ Revelation 19:11

²⁵ Matthew 11:19

²⁶ 2 Corinthians 5:21

If you're familiar at all with the history of Israel, you know that things haven't always gone smoothly for them. As we already saw, the Old Testament describes that they were kicked out of the promised land because of their disobedience. But that doesn't mean can't be or won't be saved. It just means that they needed to see their disobedience, and believe the good news of God's salvation.

You probably know a lot of people who have consistently rejected the gospel. There's still hope for them. God's desire is to show them mercy. That's what Paul wrote in verse 32.

For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all. (Romans 11:32)

Paul also wrote in 1 Timothy 2:4 that:

[God] desires for all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. (1 Timothy 2:4)

When a child rebels and goes their own way, a good parent will show them discipline. Maybe it's a hand, or a word spoken in love, but usually the child will see it as your wrath. But even while you discipline them, your desire is for them to repent.

So maybe what we take to be God's wrath isn't a rejection, but an invitation. Maybe God's wrath isn't the opposite of God's mercy, but is merely a precursor to receiving His mercy,²⁷ so that you would see your disobedience to Him, and turn to Him with faith and repentance.

You see, in a world where there are real evils all around us, and yet we ignore them, or shield our children from them, one would hope that ignorance is bliss. And yet, as much as we often don't like the information that we might hear, ignorance isn't good. God is the God of truth,²⁸ and knowledge, and wisdom,²⁹ so to think that ignorance is bliss is actually kind of blasphemous.

I think hell is partly what it is because it's full people trying their hardest to be ignorant of God. People in hell experience the wrath of God toward sin, yet they continue to reject the God they're undeniably against.

But if you know you've been disobedient to God, and you think that maybe you've experienced a little bit of God's wrath because of it, you're actually in a very good place.³⁰ Because I hope that you see this morning that God's mercy is exactly what God desires to give you.

And I'm kind of glad that this sermon didn't write itself, because it reminded me that God was very intentional about how He wrote His story. Every word of Scripture matters, and He's not flippant about His promises. So if you've ever been disobedient to God, know that God extends His mercy to you, so that you might be saved.

Trust in Jesus, and receive the mercy of God.

²⁷ Habakkuk 3:2

²⁸ John 14:6

²⁹ Romans 11:33

³⁰ Ephesians 2:1-9