

Romans 11:13-15, 28-32

¹³I am speaking to you Gentiles. For as long as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I am going to speak highly of my ministry. ¹⁴Perhaps I may make my own people jealous, and so save some of them. ¹⁵For if their rejection meant the reconciliation of the world, what does their acceptance mean other than the dead coming to life?

²⁸In regard to the gospel, they are enemies for your sake. But, in regard to election, they are especially dear for the sake of the patriarchs, ²⁹because God's gracious gifts and call are not regretted. ³⁰For just as you were once disobedient to God, but now have been shown mercy due to their disobedience, ³¹so also now they have become disobedient, so that by the mercy shown to you they may be shown mercy too. ³²For God imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may show mercy to all.

The Paradox of God's Mercy

I.

Thousands and thousands of people had come to Jerusalem for the Passover. It was one of their most important festivals, and they were understandably excited to be there in the Holy City. News about a famous Rabbi reached their ears. They gathered by the thousands to line the city streets to welcome him in. After all, he was said to be much, much more than a Rabbi—it was said that this Jesus was, in fact, the long-awaited Messiah. They cheered. They spread palm branches and even their clothing in front of the young donkey that was carrying him through the streets into the city. Excitement permeated the air.

Days later the mood was altogether different. The shouts were no longer cheers, but taunts. The cries were no longer the happy throng gathering to welcome a king—*the King*. The crowd had become a mob and had been whipped into a frenzy by the Chief Priests and the religious leaders of the people who started the chant and encouraged the people to pick it up and amplify it: “Crucify! Crucify!”

The crowd gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate God's special deliverance to them at Passover rejected the Savior. They rejected the very means by which God was bringing a much more important and much more special deliverance. There was no question about it.

The rejection of Jesus by the Jews was not confined to Holy Week. All through Jesus' ministry there were murmurs of discontent from the religious establishment. Time after time when his preaching and his teaching cut a little too close to home, the detachment of many who had once followed was utterly apparent. People left Jesus in droves.

The thought was—they were *entitled* to God's grace. It was theirs by default, because *they* were the Chosen Nation of God. Theirs were the patriarchs—the fathers of the faith like Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God had promised to restore the throne of David; this Jesus was not fitting in to *their* plan as to how that should happen.

II.

How much does Jesus fit the plans of modern-day people?

Outright heathenism occupies a central place in society. The false gods of money and property, of social causes that trump sin and grace, of sexual immorality permeate our society in entertainment and far too many of the personal lifestyle choices people make. Even some who call themselves Christian gravitate to these false gods as the Israelite people

gravitated to Baal and Ashera long ago.

You can also notice a condition in today's culture I'll call "Ethereal Spirituality." By ethereal I mean "lacking in substance." There are all kinds of people who profess to have "spiritual" feelings. They speak about "the man upstairs," but don't have any solid understanding of who that might be. There is some sort of "God" concept without knowing who God is—without any seeming interest in learning anything about him, or what he has done.

But how much does Jesus fit the plans of even modern-day people who call themselves religious?

Perhaps one could call many of the people who flocked to Jerusalem for a Passover celebration casual Jews. It wasn't necessarily a dedication to their spirituality, but a cultural event—an opportunity for a celebration. Casual Christians do exactly the same thing. They celebrate Christmas—and maybe even Easter—but not with many—or any—religious thought. Those holidays are just cultural events—opportunities for celebration and parties.

The crowd gathered at Jesus' trial on Good Friday showed the fickle nature of people who claimed a religious heritage. A few days before, they claimed to be welcoming the promised King; that night, rejecting him as heir to the throne of David, they chanted for his execution. There are fickle Christians, just as there were fickle Jews. If it seems there is some advantage to religious fervor, they will flock to the church; but when Christianity is under attack, they crawl into the nearest hole and deny any connection to Christ.

III.

Long before Holy Week, right after the Feeding of the 5000, Jesus had identified himself as the Bread of Life. He said: "I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If anyone eats this bread, he will live forever. The bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh" (John 6:51, EHV). His message to them was that *he* was ultimately the path to the Heavenly Father—*he* was the path to heaven itself. This was *unthinkable*. "When they heard it, many of his disciples said, 'This is a hard teaching! Who can listen to it?'... ⁶⁶After this, many of his disciples turned back and were not walking with him anymore" (John 6:60, 66, EHV).

The groundwork was laid. God's mercy is a paradox. Paul says in today's Second Lesson: "Their rejection meant the reconciliation of the world" (Romans 11:15, EHV). It was absolutely essential for the whole world that Jesus be put to death as the sacrifice for sin God required. That would be difficult if throngs of people chanting their Hallelujahs would intervene at the Good Friday trial. The difficulty of Jesus' teaching for many to understand and the fickle nature of the crowds permitted God's plan of salvation to move to its conclusion.

Jesus died on the cross. The sacrifice was complete. The disobedience of the Jewish people paradoxically led to the completion of God's plan of salvation.

As difficult as it might be to think this way, thank God that the crowd chanted "Crucify! Crucify!" rather than putting themselves between Jesus and the authorities and preventing his execution.

Isaiah said in today's First Lesson: "This is what the LORD says.... My righteousness is ready to be revealed.... ⁶⁶Then the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD, to minister to him and to love the name of the LORD and to become his servants... ⁷I will bring them to my holy mountain, and I will make them glad in my house of prayer.... For my house will

be called a house of prayer for all the peoples of the world” (Isaiah 56:1, 6-7, EHV). What Jesus did was for all the peoples of the world. It was for you and me—Gentiles—the very kind of people Paul spoke to in our text. *We* are happy recipients of the paradox of God’s mercy. His plan of salvation was completed for *us*.

IV.

The paradox continues. “In regard to the gospel, they are enemies for your sake. But, in regard to election, they are especially dear for the sake of the patriarchs, ²⁹because God’s gracious gifts and call are not regretted” (Romans 11:28-29, EHV). Paul speaks about God’s attitude toward the Jews who do not believe. They are enemies because they persecuted the church. Any and all who persecute the church are enemies of the church.

It is a paradox, but God, in his great mercy, sent Jesus even to pay for the sins of the enemies of the church. “God’s gifts and call are not regretted,” says Paul. God has no regrets that he chose the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to be his special people and the ancestors of the Savior.

Paul says: “Perhaps I may make my own people jealous, and so save some of them. ¹⁵For if their rejection meant the reconciliation of the world, what does their acceptance mean other than the dead coming to life?” (Romans 11:14-15, EHV). In the paradox of God’s mercy Paul holds out hope for the Jewish people. They might get jealous when they see the happiness of Gentile Christians like you and me who trust confidently in Jesus as the Savior.

There are plenty of unbelievers and casual Christians and ethereal spiritualists who have no idea who the true God is. Hold out hope for them. The paradox is that even though they are right now rejecting him, God loved them; Jesus paid to redeem *them* from sin along with all the rest of humanity.

Perhaps your happy, pleasant demeanor as you face the trials and tribulations of life in this world can make some of them jealous. They might want to learn more about what makes you tick. You might get the opportunity to share with them just who the true God is and what he has done. “By the mercy shown to you they may be shown mercy too” (Romans 11:31, EHV).

The sermon theme for today is: **The Paradox of God’s Mercy**. The theme comes loosely from the heading in the Evangelical Heritage Version at verse 28 in today’s lesson: “The Paradox of How God Shows Mercy.”

Does all of this make sense? Do you understand it? It’s pretty difficult for us to understand. After all, it is a paradox. Paul doesn’t understand it, either. In the verses after our text, Paul writes: “Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how untraceable his ways! ³⁴For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his adviser?” ³⁵“Or who has first given to God that he will be repaid?” ³⁶For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen” (Romans 11:33-36, EHV).

We won’t always understand God’s plan. In fact, his plan is pretty incomprehensible and unsearchable. Rather than trying to fully comprehend all he has done for us, we spend a lifetime learning more about God’s salvation in Jesus and appreciating the paradox of God’s mercy. Share the paradox, that “some” may learn of their salvation. Amen.