

“Imprisoned In Disobedience”

Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32

I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means!
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.
for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.

Just as you were once disobedient to God
but have now received mercy
because of their disobedience,
so they have now been disobedient in order that,
by the mercy shown to you,
they too may now receive mercy.

For God has imprisoned all in disobedience
so that he may be merciful to all.

Imprisoned In Disobedience

Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32

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I.

This is one of those sermons where I just stared at my computer screen for 15 minutes waiting for a clear direction to appear toward which we might move the discussion. Alas, and is often the case, such a course of action (sitting and staring) brought little discernment. Hence, I am going to resort to utilizing the last remaining tool in my homiletical kit. Namely, to just start typing. Right off the bat I can tell you that in hindsight, I should have picked a better sermon title.

Owing to having to do double duty in the summer with preaching at the Canton First *and* Brick Chapel churches, I must prepare the bulletins some months in advance. Which, of course, includes a sermon title. In hindsight, “Imprisoned in Disobedience” is about the worst title *ever*. If I can hardly stand to write such a sermon, your regret at having come to worship today and read such a title is quite understandable. A *far* better sermon title would be, “Merciful To All!” Or, even better, “A Spin on Sin.”

II.

That said, in order for mercy to be given or shown to all there must be *something* about which one is choosing to be merciful. Which brings us right back disobedience, and our imprisonment within it. As countless a record executives have discovered, however, choosing the correct “A Side” makes all the difference in the songs popularity and profitability. I certainly am willing to wager, and I am sure you would agree, “Merciful To All” would undoubtedly get more airtime than “Imprisoned in Disobedience.”

Still, though, the song remains the same, as Led Zeppelin sang many years ago (*California sunlight, Sweet Calcutta rain, Honolulu starbright, The song remains the same.*). Seen in this light, it seems our sermon text from Romans 11 is nothing less than what Aerosmith called the same old song and dance. (*Fate comes a-knockin', doors start lockin.' Your old-time connection change your direction. Ain't gonna change it, can't rearrange it. Can't stand the pain when it's all the same to you, my friend It's the same old story. Same old song and dance, my friend.*)

III.

All of which is to say that today's scripture passage, as well as today's sermon subject, is all about *my* favorite topic, sin! While I say that to you a bit tongue-in-cheek, regardless of if we like it or not and regardless of if we don't want to hear it (and we most probably do not) the theological concept of Sin, when correctly understood and applied, is quite frankly (and deliciously, I may add) the answer to *all* of our questions.

Today's sermon text is but one of the great many different ways in which the Apostle Paul has formulated and reformulated the Doctrine of Sin through a slightly different lens to yield yet another interpretation of this life changing and universe shaping concept. After studying the matter for well over three decades now, I can tell you it is my opinion that if one does not have a firm grasp on sin, one fails to understand Christ and the life of faith. Simply put, Sin must be our first domino to fall.

IV.

As I said, Paul talks about Sin *all* the time, and in a variety different ways. One of his more basic formulations of the concept of Sin can be found in Romans 6:23: "*For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*" For me, personally and as a visual learner, there are two images which best express the Doctrine of Sin. The first understands that we are not talking here about sin, small "s," as having us reach in and steal cookies from the cookie jar. Instead, this is Sin, capitol "S," which understands that the cookie jar *itself* lies broken in shards on the ground. Whether we steal from it or not is rather superfluous, both to us and to the world. The second is to understand Sin as a gigantic tear or rip in the very fabric of the cosmos which is affecting *everything* all the time and without exception. Moreover, the tear continues to amplify both in terms of its deepening reach and its growing consequence.

V.

Today's specific spin on Sin is the juxtaposition of disobedience and mercy. Which, on the face of it, really is not such a difficult correlation to make or challenging concept to grasp. Though it is amazing how many in this world simply fail to do so. However, if you are sitting here today listening to or reading this sermon Paul is literally preaching to the choir as you, necessarily,

are deemed mature in your Christian faith and have a good grasp on such a basic concept as sin which is made manifest in disobedience, and in the mercy which is to be found in grace.

The real work, the graduate level stuff, is in understanding the ramifications of the whole world being imprisoned to disobedience. Maybe you see it differently, but every time *I* look around the world seems to have taken yet another turn for the worse. You can almost hear, and feel, the universe being ripped further, again.

VI.

Given this, for those of us who purport to be the followers of Christ, the only real solution to the problem of disobedience, that is to say Sin, is to deepen our understanding of God's mercy which is to be found in the grace of Christ's cross. However enormous and persuasive the problem of disobedience and sin, the solution that is God's mercy and grace is even more so. Recognize that there is no measured approach here, and no exceptions to the rule. Either we believe and allow grace to solve sin or the entire cosmos is lost. Sorry to be an extremist, but that's the truth of the matter. We can either wallow in what is wrong or we can revel in a God who makes all things right. There is no middle ground, no compromise, no excuses, and no other way around it. Which, while it may not seem like it at first, is the (extremely) Good News of Jesus Christ. The only question is do we believe this to be the case?

VII.

While this might have been the perfect moment for the "Amen" to signal this sermon's conclusion, I am afraid there is yet another part to all of this. Something of which Paul also speaks repeatedly and in a variety of different ways throughout his writings. Namely, what will be *our* response to God's grace? Or, as it is expressed here in our text from Romans 11, do we believe the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable? If so, will we respond to such grace in heeding the voice of God when our own name is called? Will we seek to make manifest and share those gifts of grace which have been irrevocably given to us by getting off the cosmic sideline and getting into God's game plan for our world? And that, my brothers and sisters, is today's spin on Sin. Amen.