Romans 11:32 For God imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may show mercy to all.

 One of the charges that I have heard over the years concerning the Christian church is the accusation that the Christian Church is simply a bunch of hypocrites. “You Christians claim you are follows of Jesus and yet you disobey and easily turn aside from what Jesus has commanded. You are hypocrites!” It is an interesting charge to make. I don’t blame people for that charge. After all, when you see so-called Christians behaving worse that the unbelieving world you just might conclude that Christianity is a church full of hypocrites. It is an interesting charge to make but it is the accusation of those who do not have or have not yet grasped the real truth of the Christian faith. In other words, I am happy to report that the charge that Christians are nothing more than hypocrites is false.

 Now, please don’t get me wrong. There are hypocrites in the church. There are some really good hypocrites for that is the whole point of many of the parables of Jesus. Parables like the wheat and the weeds, the ten virgins, the Pharisee and the tax collector, and the like. That shouldn’t surprise us. When one has a genuine product, the real McCoy so to speak, it can be expected that the product will be imitated. This is true not only in general society but it is especially true in religion. The treasure of God will certainly be imitated or counterfeited just as surely as people will try and counterfeit the dollar.

 Yet please note that the presence of hypocrites does not nullify the truth of God any more than counterfeit money nullifies genuine currency. We need to make sure we get this straight. The hypocrite will be found in the church. What is it that makes a hypocrite? The word itself is a word that means “those who pretend to be believers.” Here is the important part. How does one measure who is and who is not a believer? If we are going to measure faith solely on “works’, in other words by how a person lives and by how well they obey God in thought, word and deed, then I will have to confess that I don’t know a single believer. Everyone I know disobeys God on a regular basis, kicks him in the pants and has sins of horrible measure in their lives. Everyone I know disobeys God and if we measure by works then our numerous sins prove we are hypocrites!

 If we measure faith by works we make a horrible mistake. If we think that the Christian faith is about doing this or being that, striving for this or spiritually reaching for that then we too have missed the boat and then in truth we are hypocrites. But if we understand that faith is about the grace and mercy of God, that our Christian faith is based on Jesus and what he has done, then and only then are we using the proper measure. Faith is to be measured in Christ. Faith is not measure in works. Faith is measured by what the object of faith is.

 If the object of faith is works, the good life, the obedience factor and the like, then we don’t understand the Christian faith. If the object of faith is Jesus and what he has done for us then we have it right. But be careful! Don’t confuse things. People seem to confuse the object of faith and the results of faith. How true it is that faith impacts our lives. For example: if we truly believed that the air outside was poisoned we would then act in accordance with that faith. We wouldn’t go outside without the right stuff, like protective clothing and air purifiers. Faith impacts our lives. Yet be careful that you don’t make the impact or result of faith the object of your faith.

 Think about this for a moment. Let’s say we believe the air outside is poisoned. You can run around with air purifiers and special clothing on (signs of your faith in the poisoned air) and you can even get involved in all the rituals that would surely come about because of your faith in poisoned air. But if the air is not poisoned, as you believe, your actions amount to nothing. In other words, a false belief can have just as much impact as true faith. What counts is the object of faith. A false faith will still have results in your life but that’s what hypocrisy is. It is a false faith, a faith where the object is wrong. Do you see why I say we need to be careful?

 We need to understand what faith is about. Our verse for today directs us to consider just that. What is faith about? That leads us to our theme: **THE MERCY OF GOD.**

 I’ll tell you that the section of God’s Word we are looking at right now, our Epistle reading, is a most difficult one. One has to read and carefully follow what the Apostle Paul is saying or one will come away with the wrong understanding. Paul is giving a lesson on the object of faith. Paul (really the Holy Spirit) is trying to impress on everyone that faith is not about us by rather is about the mercy of God. A good way to make sure you got right what Paul has said in chapters 9-11 is to measure everything by what his concluding verse says. That concluding verse is the one before us, the one that says, “**For God imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may show mercy to all.”**

 In the life of the Jewish people what was it that brought about salvation? The answer is simple. It is the mercy or grace of God. Not a single Jew would ever be counted a believer, not a single Jew would ever get to heaven except for the mercy and grace of God!

 Consider Jewish history. It is one example after another of false faith, hypocrisy, disobedience and rejection of God. Yet please note that throughout Jewish history there was always a small remnant of believers. Do you recall how last Sunday Elijah thought he was the only one left and yet God revealed that there were 7.000 believers in Israel! A small group of faithful believers was always to be found among the Jews. Believers who trusted what God said and revealed. Believers who knew they weren’t going to get to heaven because of what they did but rather because of what God had promised He would do. The true Israel were those who believed in the mercy of God as God had promised it would come through the Messiah. In other words, true Israel understood that the priesthood, the sacrifices, the rituals were not the means of their faith but rather signs pointing to the Christ, the Son of God to come. They kept the object of their faith the Messiah and his works not the religious rituals and things they did!

 Don’t you understand that this is what God’s law revealed? No one can keep the law of God perfectly. The Jews didn’t. They were totally and absolutely disobedient to God. And even when outwardly they looked like the most pious of people inwardly they were rotten to the core. Because the majority of Jews, even in Jesus day, made the object of their faith their lives and works rather than Jesus. But, for some, because of the mercy of God they believed and received salvation. The true Israel is saved by mercy.

 Consider the Gentiles of the world. The gentiles, that is, non-Jewish people were also a people disobedient to God but at least they were ignorant of God. They could not and did not believe in the true God. Thus the simple point of our text is made: **“God imprisoned all in disobedience.”** Yet despite their disobedience and ignorance, the Gospel of God brought them salvation. Paul was the Apostle to the Gentiles. Paul watched as people heard of the mercy of God in Jesus and believed. They believed what God had done in Jesus.

 Why doesn’t the world get this? Why doesn’t the world understand it is not our goodness, ability, intent or anything we do that brings about salvation? Every single human being is a rotten sinner, condemned of the law. Romans 3 says, **“There is no one righteous, not even one.”** If you think faith is about your works, then you have missed the point of these words.

 The point of these words is the mercy of God. Nowhere is that mercy more clearly seen than in Jesus. Jesus, the Son of God came into our world to be our substitute. He not only lived the perfect life we could not he also suffered the eternal damnation we deserved. Here is how God’s mercy impacts us. We are disobedient and God has mercy on us all.

 I don’t care who you are or what you think of yourself, please note what God says about our spiritual condition. Our spiritual problem is that we are disobedient to God. We have been that way ever since Adam and Eve brought sin into the world. But God, God in mercy, promised and sent a Savior named Jesus.

 All who believe in Jesus will be saved! But to believe in Jesus is not a matter of focusing on works, it is a matter of grasping God’s mercy. We totally disobedient rotten people are offered the mercy of God in Jesus. What God wants of us is that we should simply believe the facts. In Jesus our sins are paid for. In Jesus our salvation is made sure. In Jesus we are made alive to God. Jesus, Jesus, only Jesus!

 Here is what the Christian church is all about. It is about Jesus and God’s mercy. It is not about our obedience for clearly this verse and this entire section of God’s Word warns and encourages us not to think in this work righteous way. We are sinners though and through and we will be that way until we are called home to God’s forever kingdom of heaven. We are going to heaven because of God’s mercy in Jesus!

 Let’s go back a moment to that example I mentioned before, the whole thing about the poisoned air. How many of you would still be alive today if you had to wear at all times this protective gear and stuff just to go outside? Mind you, we are talking about air so poisoned that just to let it touch your skin, it will kill you. I know I couldn’t do it. I know that because I have many instances of sinful mistakes in my life. For that matter I have instances of where the great darkness of sin ruled because I didn’t get what faith is. I would die in such a world and probably would die rather quickly!

 What God has done is made the air pure in Jesus. We can go outside, we can live our lives, we can set and fill goals but only because of Jesus. That is what God’s mercy has done. He has done it for all people, Jew and Gentile, Old Testament and New, yesterday, today and tomorrow. God has provided the solution in Jesus.

 But don’t be misled. The air is still poisoned. When God calls you to His kingdom and He finds out that you didn’t know the air was poisoned, that you didn’t know that the only reason you were alive in the first place is because of Him and His Son you are going to have a serious problem. God is going to be looking for poison in your heart. The air has poisoned you inside. God told you it was happening, but you did not believe that the air was poison and so you lived your physical life by the grace of God, doubting, disregarding, sneering at, yes, you made it clear that Jesus is nothing to you! On that day, you will learn that all along you were a dead man walking. You are not getting into his kingdom.

 But when you come before God and you know how He purified the air in Jesus and how you are alive only because of God’s mercy you will be granted all the more the mercy of God and live with Him forever in His perfect world. This is faith. Faith is about believing what God says. God told us that spiritually the world is poison to us but that He has given you Jesus to purify you. Faith is putting on Jesus.

 Also think on this. What is to be said to you when you appear before God decked out in all sorts of gear and filters and things you declare are necessary in a poisoned air world? You lived your life in fear of the poisoned air, and you took every step you considered to be lifesaving except putting your trust in Jesus. Oh it is true, you wore your own gear “In the name of Jesus” but the gear and stuff betrays your lack of trust in Jesus. I think you know the answer. And yes, that is what hypocrisy is!

 Please pay attention to what this verse says. **“For God imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may show mercy to all.”** The object of faith is the mercy of God. A mercy that sent the Savior and paid for our sins. A mercy that does not rely on us and our efforts but rather on God and His grace. A mercy that changes our lives. When you understand this verse then you can know that your faith is the right one. Right because Jesus is right. Amen.