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 followers 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 but it is the accusation of those who do not or have not grasped the real truth of the Christian faith. In other words, the charge that Christians ae nothing more than hypocrites is false.

 Now please, don’t get me wrong. There are hypocrites in the Christian church. There are some really good hypocrites and we know that because such a teaching is the point of many of the parables of Jesus. Parables like the wheat and the weed, 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 to counterfeit the American dollar.

 Yet please note that the presence of hypocrites does not nullify the truth of God any more than counterfeit money nullifies genuine currency. Make sure you get that point. The presence of hypocrites does not nullify the truth of God any more than counterfeit money nullifies genuine currency.

 So, I will admit, there will be hypocrites found in the church. But let’s ask, “What is it that makes the hypocrite the hypocrite?” The word means, “Those who pretend to be believers.” This is an important point. A hypocrite is someone who pretends to be a believer. Next question: “How does one measure who is and who isn’t a believer?” We can’t read hearts. Note that if we are going to measure faith solely by works, in other words, by how a person lives, acts and speaks then I will have to confess that I don’t know a single believer. Because everyone I know has sin. Everyone I know disobeys God in thought, word, and action and on a pretty regular basis. Everyone I know kicks God in the pants and has sins of horrible measure in their life. Everyone I know disobeys God and if we are measuring faith just by works, then everyone proves their hypocrisy on a daily basis.

 But to measure faith solely by works is 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, or about being perfect and good on our own, then we have missed the boat and in truth, yes, we are indeed all hypocrites. Yet, 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 measured in works. Faith is measured by what the object of faith is.

 If the object is works, the good life, the obedience factor and the like, then we don’t understand the Christian faith. For that matter, if this is truly the case, then the Christian faith is no different than the thousands of “work righteous” religions out there. If the object of our 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 with the results of faith. Here is what I mean.

 How true it is that faith impacts our lives. In other words our faith, what we believe, will show itself in our lives. Think about this. Let’s say we believe that the air outside is poisoned. If we truly believe that we would act in accordance with that belief. We wouldn’t go outside without the right stuff on, protective clothing, and air purifiers on our face. We would follow all the rules, all the rituals that would surely come about because of our belief in poisonous air. We believe that if we don’t have this stuff on, we are going to die, maybe not right away, but that poisoned air we believe in, we believe is going to kill us!

 But if the air is not really poisoned, as you believe, your actions amount to nothing. Yet you won’t stop your false faith. You always wear your protective clothing and air purifiers, even though you see and observe many others who don’t. My point is simple. A false faith will have results just like faith will. But if it is a false faith, a faith based on the wrong object of faith, that is also hypocrisy. Again, it is a false faith, a faith where the object is wrong. So we need to be careful.

 We need to understand what faith is about. Our text today directs us to consider just that, the object of faith. What is faith about? That leads us to the theme: **THE MERCY OF GOD.**

 I will tell you that the section of God’s Word we are looking at right now is a most difficult one. It is difficult because one has to read and carefully follow what the Holy Spirit has moved the Apostle Paul to say in its entirety or one will come away with the wrong understanding. Paul is giving a lesson on the object of faith. Paul is trying to impress on everyone that faith is not about us but rather is about the mercy of God. A good way to make sure you got what is said right, is to read and measure everything found in chapters 9-11. Read carefully. Understand they are chapters speaking of the same thing. And then understand that our verse today is really a concluding verse to this lesson, yes to what is said in chapters 9-11. That concluding verse says, **“For God imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may show mercy to all.”**

You see, God has not given his Law to show you how to be righteous so you could earn salvation. God has given his law so that you might grasp the depth and nature of sin. It is deadly! It is a working against God! It is imprisoning! Your disobedience to the Law brings about imprisonment. Here I think we can grasp and understand spiritual imprisonment. It is this imprisonment that caused Paul to lament the unbelief of the Jews, his own race, because Paul knew the consequence of disobedience: imprisonment or eternal imprisonment in hell!

 Now, in the life of the Jewish people what is it that brought salvation? The answer is simple. It is the mercy and 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. Abram is pointed out here in this. Gen. 15:6 says, **“Abram believed in the Lord, and the Lord credited to him as righteousness.”** Faith in God’s mercy was and still is the key.

 Consider Jewish history. It is one example after another of false faith, hypocrisy, disobedience and rejection of God, for the majority. Yet please note that throughout Jewish history there was always a small remnant of true believers. Do you recall last Sunday how 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 has said and revealed. Believers who knew that the sacrifices of the ceremonial law were given to foreshadow the promised Savior, to remind them that a time would come when God would give the one sacrifice to end all sacrifices for the sins of the world. Believers knew they weren’t going to get to heaven because of what they did, not by works or ceremonial rituals, but rather because of what God had promised He would do. The true Israel are those who believe in the mercy of God as God had promised it would come through the Messiah.

 Consider the gentiles of the world. The gentiles, that is, non-Jewish people, were also a people ignorant and disobedient to God. They could not and did not believe in the true God. Yet despite their disobedience for centuries, the Gospel of God brought them salvation. They believed what God had done in Jesus. They believed their sins were forgiven and heaven was their home because of Jesus. But they got there because they came to understand the truth of the law: **“God imprisoned all in disobedience.”**

 Don’t you understand that this is what God’s law reveals? No one can keep the law of God perfectly or even get close to it. The Jews didn’t. The gentiles didn’t. They were all totally and absolutely disobedient to God, yet because of the mercy of God there were those, who when called, believed and received salvation. Everyone is saved by God’s mercy. Why doesn’t the world get this? Every single human being is a rotten sinner, condemned by the law. Romans 3 says, **“There is no one righteous, not even one.”** If you think your faith is about your works, then you have missed the whole point of Jesus.

 Because the point of this section is the mercy of God! Nowhere is that mercy seen more clearly 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 all imprisoned in disobedience and God has mercy on us all by faith.

 All who believe in Jesus will be saved. To believe in Jesus is not a matter of focusing on works, it is a matter of grasping God’s mercy and love. We are offered the mercy of God in Jesus. In Jesus our sins are paid for. In Jesus our salvation is made sure. In Jesus we are made alive to God. In Jesus we become heirs of eternal life and children of God. What God wants of us is that we believe the facts, believe in the salvation provided by God’s mercy in Jesus.

 Here is what the Christian church is about. It is about Jesus and God’s mercy. It is about forgiveness granted by God because we believe in mercy. Again that mercy is clearly seen in the cross of Jesus, the resurrection of Jesus from the dead and the fact that the Holy Spirit has been sent to grant us this gift of faith through the Gospel in word and sacrament.

 Let’s go back for a moment to the example I mentioned before, the whole thing about the poisoned air. Let’s say the air really is poison. So poisonous that even to let the air touch your skin, it will kill you. How many of you would still be alive today if you had to wear at all times protective gear and go through all of this “get properly dressed” stuff to go outside? I know I couldn’t do it. I know that because I have many instances of that one silly mistake, that foolish slip, that careless motion, yes, that clumsy accident. I believe without a doubt that I would die in such a world and probably do that rather quickly on my own.

 What God has done is made the air pure in Jesus. We can go outside, we can live our lives. We can set and fulfill goals but only because of Jesus. That is what the mercy of God has done. Here is the kicker, the real wonder of this. God has done this for all people, the entire world: Jew, Gentile, Old Testament, New Testament, yesterday, today and tomorrow. God has purified the air in Jesus and we do not have to die. God freely and graciously grants the entire world the gift of Jesus.

 But…..The air is still poisoned. God grants you his mercy and grace in Jesus, surrounds you with his love and care in this world with the hope that you will grasp his mercy, believe in that mercy and to the best of your crummy ability, give thanks for his mercy in Jesus. What God has done is said, that when it comes time to leave this world, if you have the filter of Jesus in your heart, in other words faith and thanks for the mercy of God for life, you get to continue life, eternal life with Jesus. But if it is found you have used the goodness of God, reveled in your life, used the resources of God and yet have rejected the truth of God and what God has done in Jesus, God then reminds you that in the next phase, you get to have your wish to live without Jesus. He will grant you your desire and send you to a life of eternal death. Don’t blame Him! He showed you the truth. He granted you his blessing free and sure and you determined to ignore, reject and spurn God’s gift of Jesus. You decided you didn’t need God!

 Please pay attention to what this verse reveals. **“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 or works but rather on God and his grace. A mercy and grace that surrounds your life now. When you understand this verse, then you can know that your faith is the right one. Right because it is about Jesus and his gift of life. Amen.