

Romans 11:32 – 12:1

God's Mercy

I. Review

II. Preview

III. In View

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

The Word of God for our consideration this New Year's Eve is found in Romans 11:32 – 12:1:

For God has bound all men over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all.

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!

How unsearchable his judgments,
and his paths beyond tracing out!

“Who has known the mind of the Lord?
Or who has been his counselor?”

“Who has ever given to God,
that God should repay him?”

For from him and through him and to him are all things.
To him be the glory forever! Amen.

Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. (NIV)

This is the Word of our Lord.

Dear Beloved People of God:

It's list time again. Not Christmas lists — those aren't needed anymore (unless you're *really* organized or *really* looking ahead to next year). No, it's the end of the year, so the magazines and newspapers, and quite a few websites and blogs, are full of lists like “The Best of 2007”, “The Worst of 2007”, and “What We Have to Look Forward to in 2008”. It's an annual tradition — the year in review, and the next year in preview.

It can be kind of interesting to compare those lists. One pundit's list of the best of 2007 may match perfectly with another's list of the *worst*, and it's always fun to compare one person's predictions for this year with what actually happened — and how he or she is spinning the results right now. But no matter how many different “experts” and no matter how many years' worth of reviews and previews you compare, you're always going to find one constant in their lists: an attitude or a point of view. The liberal Democrat will show his politics in both his “best and worst of 2007” list and his “Predictions for 2008” and the conservative Republican will show hers in her lists — even though their interpretations and conclusions might be completely different. In the same way, a cynical social critic will always make pessimistic predictions for the year to come and a humorist will always mine the events of the previous year for laughs — and look for more in the next.

Did you notice a similar constant in the verses we just read? That point of view is also there in our lesson from Isaiah 51 and our reading from Luke 13. There's a constant when God invites us to look back on what has gone before, whether a year or a century or a millennium, and to look forward to what's coming, whether another year or another

world: mercy. That's the Lord's attitude toward us — his point of view as he looks over human history, and over your and my life. Mercy. Thank God — the almighty Lord of Heaven chooses not to treat us as our sins deserve — he chooses not to use his power over us to punish us, but to bless us! Praise the Lord!

But as we are thanking and praising, let's get in the spirit of the season and make our own lists or write our own columns. Let's review and preview God's mercy and see what happens.

I. Why don't we start by looking back not just to the beginning of 2007, but the very beginning? What do we find there? We find God in the Garden of Eden treating our first parents, Adam and Eve, not with the wrath they deserved for their disobedience in doing the one thing he said not to do, but with ... mercy. Yes, they would still die — exactly what God had said the consequence of such sin would be — but not right away, and even more importantly, he promised them a Savior who would take away their sin and restore their relationship with their Creator, so they could live forever, after all, in heaven.

And what about your beginning? Go back beyond your childhood, beyond the maternity ward, and into your mother's womb. Even there you were steeped in sin, and after you made your entry into this world you joined everyone else in making the acquaintance of all kinds of sin — selfishness, pride, disobedience, covetousness, and so much more. And where was God's mercy? Waiting for you, every sinful step of the way. Whether you received God's grace in baptism minutes after your birth or didn't come to know it until you were well into adulthood, his mercy was always active in your life, as it has always been active in the world, keeping you from suffering all that your sins deserved, and giving you the forgiveness and salvation that you — that none of us — deserved when the Spirit-given faith in your heart took hold of God's greatest gift.

And that is the great wonder of grace that has Paul so excited in our text tonight — he just goes on and on about how great God's grace and mercy is. Our human minds cannot understand it — how could the perfectly holy and righteous God, the Lord and Judge of all the universe, willingly, lovingly, unhesitatingly, give his own Son as a Sacrifice for the sins of all the world's willful, unbelieving, disobedient, and hostile people? And how could he then, on top of that, give the salvation that Sacrifice won free of charge to any and all who believe, without any conditions to be met or deeds to be done to earn it? It is an amazing grace!

In the verses just prior to those of our text, Paul outlines how the physical nation of Israel — his own Jewish brothers and sisters — had for the most part rejected Jesus as their Savior, while the Gentiles had lived their lives in disobedience to God's laws and in ignorance of the gospel. Then he draws this amazing conclusion: God even used the disobedience of sinners to result in the salvation of other sinners — the gospel message that the Jews didn't have time for was taken to the Gentiles who then believed, and then, perhaps even in envy, the Jews listened when they saw what the Lord was doing among the Gentiles. That's how great and gracious God is — he has mercy on all sinners, both those who have rejected him and those who never knew him, and gives them salvation and peace and makes them all his children, though they never deserved even one of his blessings.

But of course, that's not the only way that we see his mercy at work. This is when we look back on the year that's now in its final hours. Though we deserve nothing good from God, still he kept our land for the most part peaceful and prosperous. He took that loved one to a place where there is no more pain, only bliss. He gave you the good news of a negative biopsy. He released you from the grip or consequences of that sin that held you captive. He fulfilled one of your

dreams. He helped you get that project done, or pass that class. He gave you a roof over your head and nice clothes on your back. He kept you awake on the highway late at night when sleep was calling. All these things, and so much more, he did for you out of his wonderful, great mercy.

We may not always have seen things that way. Sometimes his works are not at all what we want, sometimes they baffle us, sometimes they even seem to be the exact opposite of what we think is obviously best for us or for the world. But in the end, whether we come to see it or not, what God ordains is always good for us. We can count on it — the God who would do something so unexpected as save us can be expected to bless us, and that's what he did, in countless ways, even hidden ways, for every day of 2007.

Did our church construction project begin as we expected or when we expected? No. Did we foresee all the red tape and other delays and difficulties we encountered? No. But God did, and in his love, wisdom, and power he made sure that everything lined up just as he wanted it to and just as we need it to — and our long-awaited building has risen from the ground and is now only months, perhaps just weeks, from completion. Praise our mercy-full Lord for Christ Lutheran's 2007!

II. And we can already start to praise him, now, for 2008.

In the coming year he will still be our Savior — in fact, we can be quite sure — I will guarantee it, in fact — that we will, despite our best intentions, sin again in 2008. In January. Tomorrow. Almost as soon as we get up, if not before. Again and again and again. And God's mercy will be right there — ready to assure us of his forgiveness, which Christ won for us on the cross, as soon as we repent. Don't look at 2008 as another year full of sin — look at it as another year full of God's grace in Christ.

What about your personal preview of the coming year? What other mercies can you count on him showing you? The great depth of his riches of wisdom and knowledge and love will be there for you every day, guaranteeing that every last thing that happens will be for your benefit. Wow!

And our church! Another wow! What can we not just count on God for, but test him in? What amazing things can we pray for and work for and expect from his hands? Right now it's not too hard to imagine a completed building — but what about the things God will accomplish in and through it? He is waiting with his mercy and his power to act — so let's pray and work to reach our community with the gospel, to share his love, to worship him heart, soul, and mind, and grow together in every way we can — you know, all the things in that mission statement on the back of our bulletin every week

III. So we've had our review of God's mercy in 2007 and our preview of God's mercy in 2008. But there's something more — what Paul follows his little hymn of praise that ends chapter 11 with in the first verse of chapter 12: (review, preview...) In View of God's mercy. We don't just marvel at or appreciate it — because of it, we respond, and we respond with everything we are, do, and have.

Are you making any new year's resolutions? Our text suggests one to us — one to repeat every year, and every day: "in view of God's mercy, ... offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God — this is your spiritual act of worship." That's pretty thorough and complete, isn't it? There's nothing half-hearted or insincere about that kind

of commitment. That's a call to a whole-life, no-holds-barred determination to do and be everything God wants you to be. Sounds exciting, doesn't it? So, in view of God's mercy, let's do it!

Now, are we going to succeed ... perfectly? Let's be honest: no – we're not perfect, and won't be until heaven. And even when we're talking about much less comprehensive commitments — even pretty simple non-spiritual things — the likelihood, or repeated experience, of failure leads many people to be rather cynical about the whole idea of resolving things and making those kinds of commitments.

I read about one poor guy who decided one year to only make resolutions he could actually keep. He resolved to gain weight, to stop exercising, to read less and watch more TV, to procrastinate more, to quit giving money and time to charity, to not date any member of the cast of Baywatch, and to never make New Year's resolutions again. I wonder if he succeeded in keeping those. There's nothing like aiming low.

But there's also an old saying: if you aim at nothing, you hit nothing. Christians? We are called to aim high.

You see, our repeated failures to keep our resolutions don't mean we should give up resolving to give our lives and give ourselves for God. In fact, it gives us every reason to keep on repeating those resolutions. Because we know that whenever we do fail — which, of course, we always seek God's help to keep to a minimum — the constant of God's grace and mercy is right there to not only give us forgiveness for our failures and pardon for our sins, but also then to lift us up and comfort us and strengthen us to get back out there and try again, and do better.

And that's what we see when we look back on 2007, and what we can count on for 2008: God our God, we his people, his love unbounded, and his mercy for us, forever. In view of that, we give, we live, and we love for him. To him be the glory forever! Amen.

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts. Amen.

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