

## **In His Mercy** **Romans 11:29-32**

### **INTRODUCTION**

I want to begin by telling you a story. Perhaps you have heard it before. It goes like this:

A young girl grew up on a cherry orchard just north of Traverse City, Michigan. Her parents were a bit old-fashioned. For example, they sort of overreacted to her decision to get a nose ring ... and the music she listened to ... and the length of her skirts. They grounded her several times, and each time she would seethe on the inside. One night she even screamed "I hate you!" at her father when he knocked on the door of her room after one of their many arguments.

That was the night she decided to act on a plan she had mentally rehearsed dozens of times. She stuffed a few clothes in her backpack, grabbed her cell phone and the cash she had been saving ... and she left in the middle of the night without saying goodbye. You might say she was running away from home, but that's not what she called it. In her view, it was more like a jail break. She was escaping.

She has visited Detroit only once before. Her church youth group had taken a bus trip to watch the Detroit Tigers play. She had no special attachment to Detroit, but because the newspapers in Traverse City constantly reported in graphic detail stories about the gangs, the drugs, and the culture of violence in downtown Detroit, she concluded that was probably the last place her parents would look for her. California, maybe, or Florida, but not Detroit. They would never think their good little daughter would never go to Detroit.

She managed to catch a ride with a nice older couple from Tennessee who had met her at a diner along the highway. They believed her story about hitchhiking back to college in Detroit and since they were headed in that general direction, they offered to take her the rest of the way. They even dropped her off in front of her dormitory. They were so gullible!

On her second day in the big city, she met a man who drove the biggest car she had ever seen. He offered her a ride, bought her lunch, and arranged a place for her to stay. He told her was worried about how stressed she looked and offered her some pills to help her relax so she could get a good night's sleep. Those pills made her feel better than she had ever felt before. "I was right all along," she thought to herself. "My parents have been keeping me away from all the fun."

The good life continued for a month, two months, even a year. During that time the man with the big car – she called him "Boss Man" – taught her a few things that men like. He also taught that since she was underage, those men would pay a lot of money to spend time alone with her. The Boss Man even moved her into a penthouse suite and let her order room service whenever she wanted. It was great! Occasionally she would think about the folks back home, but their lives now seemed so boring and provincial that she could hardly believe she grew up there.

One day she was at a local convenience store and had a brief scare. She saw her picture printed on a flier with the headline, "Have you seen this child?" But by that time, she had dyed her hair blonde, and with all the makeup and body-piercing jewelry she now wore, nobody would ever mistake her for a child.

It was shortly after that first year on her own that the first signs of illness started to appear. It amazed her how quickly the Boss Man turned mean. One night he just kicked her out of the apartment and moved another girl in. She had to start living on the street without a penny to her name. Oh, she was still able to turn a couple of tricks each night, but they didn't pay much. What little money she did get went to buy more of those little pills that made her feel so good.

When winter came, she found herself sleeping on metal grates outside the big department stores. "Sleeping" is the wrong word. A teenage girl alone at night in downtown Detroit can never relax her guard.

One night as she was lying awake, listening for footsteps, she suddenly realized how different her life was from the life she had dreamed it would be. She no longer felt like a woman of the world. She felt like a little girl, lost in a cold and frightening city. She wiped the moisture forming in her eyes. Her pockets were empty, and she was hungry. And most of all she needed a fix.

She pulled her legs tight underneath her and shivered under the newspapers she had piled on top of her coat. Her mind started to drift and soon it was filled with a single image: the month of May in Traverse City, when a million cherry trees were blooming all at once. And she saw her golden retriever dashing through the rows and rows of blossoming trees in chase of a tennis ball.

"Oh God, why did I leave," she said to herself. "My dog back home eats better than I do now." She started sobbing, unable to hold back the tears. And she knew in that moment ... that more than anything else ... she wanted to go home.

She took out her cell phone. Three phone calls. Three straight connections to voicemail. On the first two she hung up without leaving a message. But on the third time she mustered the courage to say, "Dad, Mom, it's me. I was wondering about maybe coming home. I'm catching a bus up your way, and it'll get there about midnight tomorrow. If you're not there, well, I guess I'll just stay on the bus until it hits Canada."

It takes about seven hours for a Greyhound bus to make all the stops between Detroit and Traverse City. During those seven hours she realized the flaws in her plan. What if her parents are out of town and missed the message? Shouldn't she have waited another day or so until she could talk to them? And even if they are home, they probably wrote her off as dead long ago. She should have given them some time to overcome the shock.

Her thoughts bounced back and forth between those worries and the speech she was preparing for her father: "Dad, I'm sorry. I know I was wrong. It's not your fault; it's all mine. Dad, can you please forgive me?" She said the words over and over. For seven long hours she rehearsed that speech. Her throat got tighter every time she repeated it. Apologizing wasn't going to be easy for her. She had never apologized for anything before.

Once they got through Bay City, she could see the headlights of the bus shining on the road. She had forgotten how dark it gets at night. It's never dark in downtown Detroit. Out of that darkness a deer darted across the road and the bus swerved. She read every billboard, watching for the first mention of Traverse City. She read the mileage signs too. Traverse City, 75 miles. 48 miles. 22 miles.

When the bus finally rolled into the station, its air brakes hissed in protest. The driver announced in a crackly voice over the microphone, "Fifteen minutes, folks. That's all the time we have here."

Fifteen minutes. Her whole life would be decided in the next 15 minutes. She quickly checked herself in a compact mirror and ran a brush through her hair. As she did, she noticed the tobacco stains on her fingertips, and wondered if her parents would notice it too. That is, if her parents were even there.

She slowly walked into the terminal, not knowing what to expect. But not one of the thousand scenes that had played out in her mind prepared her for what she saw. There, among the concrete-walls-and-plastic-chairs in the Traverse City bus terminal stood a group of forty people. Her brothers and sisters and great-aunts and uncles and cousins and even her grandmother. And taped across the entire wall of the terminal was a banner that reads, "Welcome Home!"

And then, out of that crowd of cheering well-wishers, stepped her Dad. When she saw him, her eyes filled with tears. Her knees quivered. Her mouth went dry. Somehow, though she was able to begin her well-rehearsed speech: "Dad, I'm sorry. I know...."

Before she could say another word, her dad wrapped his arms tightly around her. "Hush child," he said. "We don't have time for that. There's no time for apologies. We are going to be late for the party. Your mother has fixed a banquet, and it is waiting for you at home."

To those of us who have sinned or otherwise disappointed our heavenly Father, the Apostle Paul pens these words of hope and peace:

For God has bound everyone over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all. (Romans 11:32)

Those words will serve as our memory verse for this week. And this is our foundational truth:

The mercy of God has no limitations.

### **#1: IT IS NOT LIMITED TO SPECIFIC PEOPLE**

The key word for God's mercy is "All."

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. (Romans 3:23)

In our memory verse the writer makes it clear that mercy is extended to all who have disobeyed. It is not a mercy for the Jews, or for the Gentiles. Not just good girls from Traverse City or bad boys from Ypsilanti.

We learned in our Bible study this week that the language of the memory verse paints a picture of God casting a large fishing net and scooping up all those who have who have disobeyed.

### **#2: IT IS NOT LIMITED TO SPECIFIC SINS**

As you probably (hopefully) realized, my opening illustration was a modern rendering of the parable of the Prodigal Son. If you read that in Luke 15, you will see that it begins like this:

There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, "Father, give me my share of the estate." (Luke 15:11-12)

There were two sins. The younger one gets all the press, but there was an older boy.

- The younger son did all the "bad" sins (as we are prone to label them). The text offers a G-rated description of "wild living."

Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. (Luke 15:13)

- The older son did only "respectable sins." He was merely self-righteous and judgmental. He wanted to protect what was rightfully his. And he certainly wasn't going to show up at a bus station in Traverse City at midnight to celebrate the return of someone who did the bad sins like his brother.

Good sins or bad sins, God's mercy covers them all.

### **#3: IT IS NOT LIMITED TO A SPECIFIC NUMBER**

Back when I umped high school baseball, the limitation was clear. The batter got three strikes and only three. And when that third strike happened, I sent him back to the dugout. Three strikes you are out.

- One day I was officiating with a young man, a first-year ump. He was behind the plate; I was on the bases. He lost track of the strike count. And when the pitcher threw a beautiful fastball right down the center of the play, my umping partner

launched into a dramatic “Steeeeeee-rike three.” It was awesome! But it was only strike two. The rules say a batter gets three strikes.

But God doesn't use the rules of baseball on us. We don't have a “three sins and you're out program.”

- If He did, the people of Israel would be forever trapped in their disobedience. The Old Testament story is filled with sins to numerous to count!
- And if God did count the sins, we too would be forever trapped in our own disobedience.

The Apostle Peter wanted to know what the limit was. Remember that story? He asked Jesus if the cap on forgiveness was seven times. That seemed generous enough.

Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?” (Matthew 18:22)

Instead Jesus taught Peter that there was no limit. Even if someone comes 77 times, you extend mercy like it was the first time.

Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times. (Matthew 18:23)

Sometimes people feel like they have reached the limit of God's willingness to extend His mercy. God shows up at the bus station every time you want to come home.

### **APPLICATION**

Now, lest you think I wrote that opening story, it was actually written by a wonderful Christian author named Philip Yancey. Several of you have read some of his books, and we have even used a few of them in our Sunday School classes.

At the end of this story, Yancey adds the following comment:

We are accustomed to finding a catch in every promise, but the promise of God's extravagant mercy includes no catch. There is no loophole that will disqualifying us from receiving it. Whenever we “come home,” to God it is a reason to celebrate.

And so with King David we say:

Oh, give thanks to the Lord, for *He is good!*  
For His mercy *endures* forever. (1 Chronicles 16:34)

Amen