

Romans: A Warning Against Arrogance

Romans 11:17-22

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If you have your Bibles I'd invite you to turn with me to Romans chapter 11 to the 17th verse as we continue to work our way through this great book. We are right in the thick of it now in one of the most difficult chapters in one of the most difficult sections of one of the most profound books of the Scriptures. Fear not, we are coming up for air soon. Next week we come to a chapter which is climatic in the declarations that it makes about God's purposes. After that Paul is going to sing the doxology and enter, in chapter 12, to the practical portion of the book.

Beginning in chapter 12, to the end of the book, he then takes all of these glorious truths that he has been setting forth in Romans chapter 1 through 11 and he says, now this is how this works out in the living of the Christian life. So, if you're cross-eyed with ideas that boggle your mind, there is hope and help on the way.

But we are now in the midst of this chapter where Paul has been speaking to Christians, both Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians about their relationship to Israel. He has been explaining how the church is to view and relate to present day Israel. He is speaking to Romans, some of whom would have been Roman Christians, some of whom who would have been Gentile Christians who were living in a society which had a general contempt for all things Jewish. The Romans looked down their noses at Israel. Israel was a conquered, surrogate state, and there was some Roman contempt for all things Jewish. Perhaps Paul had caught in the attitude of the Christians in Rome, something of the flavor of that general secular attitude toward Israel and he wanted to very quickly nip it in the bud. How wise it was of Paul to speak to these things pastorally because this issue would become a standing issue of the Christian church of the west over the next twenty centuries.

But as we begin to look at a subject like this again, you may be asking yourself, "Look, I came here today and I've got so many problems, I've got business problems, I've got family problems, what can this message possibly have to say to me?" Well, it has a lot to say to us my friends. Paul is not only going to teach us what our attitude ought to be to Israel, an important point enough in and of

itself in terms of the great scheme of God's salvation, but he's also going to teach us about humility. He's going to teach us about faith, and he's going to teach us about what God is like. Those three things my friends are never impractical. In fact, we really could outline the passage, humility, faith, and God. We'll come back to that in a moment though. Let's turn to God's word here in Romans 11 beginning in verse 17.

But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, being a wild olive, were grafted in among them and became partaker with them of the rich root of the olive tree, do not be arrogant toward the branches; but if you are arrogant, remember that it is not you who supports the root, but the root supports you. You will say then. "Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in." Quite right, they were broken off for their unbelief, but you stand by your faith. Do not be conceited, but fear; for if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will He spare you. Behold then the kindness and severity of God; to those who fell, severity, but to you, God's kindness, if you continue in His kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off. Amen. This is God's holy and inspired word, may He add His blessing to it. Let's pray.

O Lord, we ask that You would teach us by Your word, humble us by Your spirit, increase and focus our faith as we attend to Your word and teach us of Yourself for Jesus sake. Amen.

You know, Paul's theology about Israel and about Jesus the Messiah and about Christianity has been blamed for spawning twenty centuries of Christian anti-Semitism. Many people go right back to Paul and say, "Paul, you're the problem. It's this cursed exclusivism of yours, it's this cursed focus on Jesus Christ, it's this blaming of the Jews for all things wrong in the religious scene of your day that has spawned countless acts of injustice and oppression and immorality by ostensible Christians on the Jewish people." The same thing has been said about Martin Luther's' theology. You know, when you look at what Paul says, you have to pronounce him not guilty, because had the Christian church been listening to what the Apostle Paul had to say, not only about the Israel of the past, but the Israel of the present, our attitude would have been entirely different from those dark scenes which have so often populated the past history of our peoples. Now, Paul not only gives us a glimpse into this theology in this passage, he also teaches us that grace produces humility, that grace produces faith, and that grace always carries with it a large view of God. It's those things that I'd like to attend with you this morning.

Let me outline the passage for you. In verses 17 and 18 we see Paul here teaching that a proper view of God's grace will bring about humility in Christians and not arrogance. In verses 19 through 21 we see Paul saying, that an understanding of how God has saved us in His grace will produce the response of faith. In verse 22, he lets us know that if you have the right view of the God of grace, that is in and of itself a product of God's grace for you. That having tasted

of God's grace, you realize both the justice and mercy of God to the exclusion of neither. I'd like to look at this passage with you, first in verses 17 and 18.

I. A proper view of God's grace will produce humility, not arrogance.

Paul first starts by speaking of the need of Gentile Christian humility in view of the fact that its spiritual root is found in Israel, in the patriarchs, in the promises that God has given to Israel. Look at what Paul says, "if some of the branches were broken off, and you being a wild olive were grafted in among them and became a partaker of the rich root of the olive tree, do not be arrogant toward the branches." Now, let's stop right there and say a couple of things. First of all, when Paul trucks out the olive tree illustration, he knows that everyone in his hearing with an inkling of Old Testament teaching, in the synagogue or in the local house church where he was meeting and teaching them, or in the church which was listening to his letter being read, that everyone who hears it with any inkling of Old Testament prophetic teaching will know that the olive tree is an illustration of Israel. Haggai uses it. Habakkuk uses it. Other prophets use it to talk about Israel. Israel is the olive tree, and God is the gardener. It's an illustration that everyone with any biblical literacy would have understood when Paul was speaking, so he knows that when he brings out the olive tree, everyone is going to be thinking, "Ah ha, Paul is getting ready to talk about something that the prophets often talked about." How God tends and cares for His people. The body of His people.

Now, the second thing to note is that Paul knows that the illustration that he is giving here is horticulturally strange. In other words, Paul knows that it is not common practice to take a wild olive branch, and graft it into an old cultivated olive root. He knows that normally it's the other way around. He knows that the olive farmers of his time would normally have taken a branch from an older, cultivated olive that was becoming less strong and less fruitful and more vulnerable to disease and would have grafted it into a wild olive root, which would have produced good fruits. He knew it was normally that way, but the illustration itself is designed to show you what a surprising thing God had done by bringing the Gentiles into His people. In fact, if you let your eyes run down to verse 24, you will see Paul explicitly says that he knows that this is not natural, to take a wild olive branch and graft it into a root of an old cultivated olive tree. He says what? That this is contrary to nature. You see, then, that's his whole point. God's showing of grace to the Gentiles was mind blowing. We think of it as, "Oh it's the plan of God," and it is. We've grown accustomed to it and perhaps we've taken it for granted. Paul is reminding us again what a surprising thing God has done to the Gentile Christians.

So, he's got this olive tree illustration, which reminds everyone of God's teaching about His people in the Old Testament, and then he has an illustration, which is sort of unusual. It's contrary to nature. Now, he uses this illustration in order to

emphasize what the attitude of the Gentile ought to be to present-day Israel, and he's basically telling them three things. First, in this illustration he is telling Gentile Christians that they must always be mindful of the root of the Church. They are never to forget where the promises originated, where the hope was first set forth in the world and from whom they have inherited their legacy. They are never to forget their roots.

I remember meeting a professor who was from Pumpkinville, South Carolina. He was teaching outside of the South, and he was ashamed that he was from Pumpkinville, South Carolina. I remember another friend who was from another city in South Carolina saying, "I don't like a man who is ashamed of his roots." The apostle is saying, "You Gentile Christians, don't forget your roots. Your roots are found right back there with Abraham and the promises of God and they are bound up with and every promise you have received is a promise originally given to Israel. So, be mindful of where you came from. Don't forget where you're from son," he's saying.

Secondly, he's saying they should remember the way they entered into the body of God's people. They were grafted in unnaturally. It's the most surprising thing in the world that they would have been included in the people of God. You never would have guessed it. This pagan, idolatrous, polytheistic, animistic, sub-cultural Gentiles engrafted into the people of God. He says, "You remember how you came into this, sheer grace of God it was."

Thirdly he says, "And be humbled." Remember your roots, remember how you were brought into the people of God, and be humbled. You've inherited something that wasn't promised to you when you weren't a people. You've been brought in unnaturally. You ought to be humble about that. Don't look over at Israel and gloat. Be humbled by the fact that God has included you in His purposes.

Now, I want to apply that, but before I do, I want you to understand that underneath Paul's illustration are several important theological assumptions that he is making which are essential to understanding his argument. The first one is that the Church is one with Israel. The Church may be able to be distinguished from Israel. The Church, as the new covenant people of God which includes both Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians as distinct from the old covenant people of God, which was represented in the nation state of Israel, they may be able to be distinguished, but they are all part of one body. You see, he doesn't say there is the olive tree of Israel, and then there is the olive tree of the Church. They are all part of the same tree. Everybody who heard the illustration would have understood that, but there are very Godly Christians who believe that the Church has absolutely nothing to do with Israel. There are some Godly Christians that don't even think the Church was provided of or known of in the Old Testament. It was the result of the Jews surprising God by rejecting the Messiah and God had to fall back on plan "B" and "pop" the church came out. Then one day, God will

be finished with the Church and he'll get back to Israel. No, Paul's conception is that the Church and Israel are all part of the one people of God. That's the first assumption in Paul's illustration. He emphasizes it elsewhere like Ephesians 2, and we could look to many other passages.

The second assumption is this. Paul indicated that Gentile Christians are to view themselves as united with the old covenant people of God, as sharers by grace in the same inheritance. It's not that the Jews were promised the Abrahamic covenant, and I was promised something else, it's that we are both the recipients, the inheritors of the Abrahamic blessings by faith. All those, whether Jew or Greek, male or female, share in those blessings by faith. So, he's pointing to the legacy that we need to recognize and acknowledge.

You know, if your sixth grader was in a history class and had been given an assignment by the history teacher, to study a European nation, and they looked back at their old atlas and they decided, "We're going to study Romania." They really go into the study of Romania and really loved Romania, and felt a kinship with Romania, and came home one day and said, "Mom, dad, I'm a Romanian, we are Romanians." You would say, "No you're not, there is not a drop of Romanian blood in us." You know when your children come home from Sunday school, and talk about the stories of the Old Testament as if they are the stories of their own people, what do you think? You're exactly right. Those are our people. That's us. That's our people. We are sinful like they were, and reconciled like they were, and recipients of God's grace like they were. Those are our people. We shouldn't take that for granted. But Paul is laying the groundwork for that understanding right here.

Paul is also saying that Gentile Christians are beneficiaries of the covenant promises that were first given to Abraham, to the patriarchs, and so we are to view old Israel as the view as the root of the blessing. We are to think of present day Israel in view of the fact that it is descended from that root. You see, there have always been times in Christianity when people have attempted to expunge the Jewish-ness from Christianity. Did you know that within one hundred years of the writing of the New Testament, some called Gnostics, some called Marcionites, that literally went through the New Testament and tried to take out every bit of the New Testament that referred to the Old Testament? You know, you don't have much of the New Testament left when you try that. You can't expunge the Jewishness of Christianity. Christianity is Jewish inherently, and the Apostle Paul is warning these Gentile Christians to understand that and think of the present Israel in view of the root of God's word.

Then, finally, Paul wants Gentile Christians to remember and take stock of the surprising way called them into union with God. They were, as it were, a wild olive branch that was grafted in. It shouldn't have happened, it just shouldn't have happened, but God in His grace and mercy did so. Therefore, Paul says, "This is how I want you look at present day Israel. I want you to thank the Lord for the

patriarchs and the promises God has given to them, and why was I a guest." See, those are the two things that we ought to think. Thank the Lord for what He has said and what He has done in Israel, and Lord, I don't even deserve to be here. That's how I want you to think. Take your hymnals out and turn to 459. You know the hymn, *How Sweet and Awesome is the Place*. I've even got a verse that you don't have in your hymnals. You may be relieved that you don't have it in your hymnal because we'd probably sing it, but let me give it to you. Hymn 469, How sweet and awesome is the place with Christ within the doors, while everlasting love displays the choicest of her stores. Here's the verse you don't have, "Here every feeling of our God would soft compassion rolls, where peace and pardoned bought with blood is food for dying souls, while all our hearts and all songs join to admire the feast, each of us cry with thankful tongues, 'Lord, why was I a guest?' Why was I made to hear Thy voice and enter while there is room, when thousands make a wretched choice and rather starve than come?"

Do you see the humility that has been wrought in the heart of Isaac Watts? I hope of us, as we sing that song, have the realization that God has, against all odds drawn us into the fellowship with His people. Yet, so often the world thinks of us as arrogant. Sometimes it's because of that doctrine isn't it? You think you're chosen, you think you're pretty special. There is a suspicion to that. Sometimes though, it's because we are. O my brothers and sisters it should not be so. You can be proud or you can be Presbyterian, but you can't be both consistently. If you've really seen God's grace it always has the quality of humbling you in the dust.

I'll never forget a pamphlet that I read many years ago by Al Martin in which he was describing the practical implications of the doctrines of grace, and I was expecting him to say something else, and he said this, "A man who has seen God is humbled to the dust." O my friends, grace humbles you. Paul is saying that to these Gentile Christians, and it colors the way they relate to other people, even Israel.

II. Grace produces faith.

Secondly you'll see in verses 19 through 21, Paul teaches us about how grace is productive of faith. Paul has someone in his audience who is arguing with him. He disagrees with him. He thinks Paul is wrong. He's got to quibble with Paul's argument. You see the quibble in verse 20, and the quibble is basically this, "Well Paul, I understand that God used the people of old, you know, Israel back then, but Israel today has rejected Him. In fact, by your own theology, Israel has been cut off so that I can be grafted in. So why, Paul, should I have any care whatsoever for present day Israel? Present day Israel has been cut off. The root may have been a part of God's plan, but the branches have been cut off."

The Apostle Paul basically responds in one of his typically Pauline ways. "Well,

you know, you have a point there, but you know how Israel got cut off? They got cut off by not believing. Do you know how you'll get cut off? You'll get cut off by not believing. Instead of sitting over there and gloating about the fact that Israel in this time has by and large turned its back on the Messiah, you be careful to stand, lest you fall, for you were saved by faith. And should you reject the Messiah, you to will find out you are rejected."

What a tremendous warning to nominal Christianity. You know, we can go to church and go through the motions and never be trusting in Christ. We can have a grandmother that has been a member here since 1856. We can memorize *The Shorter Catechism* seven times; force-fed to us at Sunday dinner. We can have an aunt who has prayed for us for years, a father who is an elder, and they can't believe for us. We, you individually, have to believe in Christ, nobody can do it for you. You must put your faith in Jesus Christ. You have to trust in Him. You have to respond to the gospel claims. You have to live in His grace. You have to walk in the life of faith. The Apostle Paul is saying to these Gentiles, "Instead of looking over there at those who have been cut off, you need to do a little self examination and ask yourself, 'Gentile Christians, are you trusting in Christ?'"

Now, what an important lesson for us to learn in the American style, where all nice people still go to church. You know, I love that. I'm glad that all nice people are still in church in the American South. But all that is, is a gospel opportunity, because just because you are in church doesn't mean that you know Jesus. I like it that you are in church, but I would even more like it if you knew Jesus. And that's what Paul is remaining these Gentiles.

III. A right view of God is in and of itself a gift of grace.

Then one last thing. Look at verse 22, he says, "Behold the kindness and severity of God; to those who fell, severity, but to you, God's kindness." He's saying, Gentile Christians, think about it for a moment. In the salvation of God and in the judgment of God, you have seen two aspects of His character, two attributes of God. You have seen His love and His justice, and both have been served to the full. Seeing His love and His justice ought to make you tremble, because we serve an awesome and living God, a consuming fire.

I want to say that the Apostle Paul's God is so politically incorrect. The God you've been hearing about on CNN and MSNBC and FOX news over the last two months, you know, the god who is the same for everybody, the god who is the god of the Muslims, the god of the Christians, it's all the same god. The god who is totally beneficent, he wouldn't judge anybody; he's just kind and good and loving. That god has no relation to Paul's God. God, the god of Paul is a God of kindness and severity. How out of step can you be Paul? And that's how most people look at it. You believe in a God who judges, you believe in a narrow minded, mean spirited small hearted, shriveled up God. It's the other way around.

How do I mean that? A god who is beneficent and nothing else cannot deal with the injustice that exists in this world. That's the first thing. It's like somebody comes along side of you and your world's falling apart and all that they have to offer is, "I really feel for you. That must be really tough." But there is absolutely nothing constructive they can do for you. That's a shriveled up god.

Secondly, a god who is nothing but benevolent and is not holy and is not just and does not judge, it doesn't cost him anything to come into relationship with sinners. But a God who is holy and a God who is just, and a God who is awesome, and who is loving beyond your capacity to conceive, it cost Him everything to come into fellowship with you. It cost Him the outrages of the injustices suffered by His own Son so that you could experience the outrages of His love. And that's the God of the New Testament. Not a sterile grandfather, omni-beneficent figure in the sky, distant from our injustice, and indifferent towards our sin. But a God who loved us enough to become involved in our condition and to shed the blood of His own Son so that we could taste of the lavishness of His mercy. That God may not be politically correct, but I'll serve that God anywhere, anytime. Paul is saying to these Gentile Christians, look at your God. Look at what He's done to bring you into fellowship with Him. Don't you have a heart of longing that everyone out there, Israel included would know the greatness of that love? Let's pray.

Our Lord and our God, we can't describe You. We mumble words, and we can't do justice, but we love You. Show us Yourself and then give us the grace to believe, in Jesus name. Amen.

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