



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Romans 11:16-24

Fr. William Klock

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We're retuning to Romans this morning and looking at 11:16-24. It's been several weeks, so it's probably helpful to have a reminder of where we're at and where Paul's been heading. Chapters 9, 10, and 11 so far have been where Paul gets to some of the practical out-workings of his long discussion about justification. He laid the groundwork in Chapters 1-8 and now he's circling back over that territory to show what it means. Specifically, what he's interested in is the relationship between God and his people and how we, his people, relate to each other in light of that. Remember that Paul was writing in the early or mid-50s of the First Century. The Emperor Claudius had expelled the Jews from Rome, which meant that after the Jews were gone, the smattering of small churches in Rome had been strictly made up of Gentiles. It was easy for Gentile believers to think that God was done with Jews—that they were sort of cursed for rejected Jesus as Messiah. But Nero had then reversed Claudius' edict and the Jews had returned. Some of those Jews were believers. Most of them probably set up their own churches, apart from the Gentiles believers. It was an awkward situation with all sorts of potential for problems. Addressing this situation and the wrong attitudes and teachings that it involved was Paul's main reason for writing this letter.

So, writing to these Gentile believers in Rome, he's explained what it means to be the people of God. Something profoundly new has happened in Jesus and the Spirit, but as much as it's new, it has continuity with the old. To be in Jesus the Messiah by faith is to be part

of the *one* people of God. It's for Jewish believers to see the law and prophets fulfilled as God breathes life into the dry bones of Israel and, through the renewing work of the Spirit, turns hearts of stone into hearts of flesh, putting in them a love for God and a love for neighbour so that Israel can finally fulfil the law. For Gentile believers—for people who never knew or cared about Israel's God or about his law or his promised kingdom—they—*we*—have now in Jesus been swept up into Israel's story. The problem that Paul's been grieving, however, is that while uncircumcised Gentiles have now been caught up into Israel's story by faith in Jesus and are fulfilling the law in a way most Jews had never considered, the vast majority of those Jews rejected Jesus, rejected the kingdom he inaugurated, and were happily marching straight into God's coming judgement on the nation. What about them? What about the Jews who do believe in Jesus? And what does it look like for Jews and Gentiles to be one people in Jesus? These are the questions Paul is looking at. These were the questions at the heart of many of the struggles that took place in the First Century church. It wasn't just Gentile believers in Rome. Jewish believers like Peter and James struggled with—and argued with Paul over—how to relate to and live with Gentile believers. We need to hear Paul afresh today, because these problems never really went away. So long as there are churches that identify themselves primarily by their ethnicity, so long as there are churches that exclude Jews—or any other people, for that matter—whether deliberately or not, and so long as we have movements like the contemporary Messianic Jewish movement that lead people to go off and establish churches specifically dependent on Jewish identity and practise—so long as these sorts of things continue—we need to let Paul speak to us and correct us today.

The reason for Israel's unbelief was laid out by Paul in the last passage we looked at in the first half of Chapter

11. Just as Jesus was rejected in order to bring redemption to his people, so his own people, Israel, had to be rejected to that the good news about Jesus could go out to the nations. Israel's unbelief isn't an accident. And it's not a sign that God has been unfaithful to his promises. Paul is saying to the Gentiles, "You are here, because they are not and that means that rather than thinking yourself somehow better than Israel according to the flesh, you should be committed to praying that unbelieving Jews will turn to Jesus as Messiah.

Now, starting in verse 16, Paul illustrates all of this with two agricultural metaphors. Here's the first:

If the dough offered as firstfruits is holy, so is the whole lump, and if the root is holy, so are the branches.

What Paul is referring to is the Old Testament festival called the "Feast of Weeks", or as we know it from the New Testament, "Pentecost"—"pente" because it fell fifty days after Passover. As their crops grew, farmers would mark the first of the grains and fruits to ripen and then, when harvest time came, they would cut those "firstfruits" first and take or send them to the temple in Jerusalem as an offering. Like the tithe, devoting that first part of the harvest to the Lord was a way of devoting the whole of it to him—acknowledging that we live because he is good and faithful to us and that he deserves our thanks and gratitude. So the first bit of dough made from the wheat, the first bundle of barley, the first bunch of dates or olives, offered to the Lord in the temple marked the entire harvest as holy. In the same way, Paul then says, the root of the tree, which sprouted first, if it is holy, marks out the branches as holy even though they came later.

God called Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He called Moses and the prophets. He called David and Solomon. They were his people and he marked them

out as holy—as set apart for his use to bring redemption to the world. They weren't always faithful, but they were still the people through whom God chose to work. So with Israel as a whole. Even though many in Israel chose to walk apart from the Lord, even though the nation eventually ended up in exile, even though in Paul's day most of Israel was marching straight into judgement and destruction, this was still the people through whom God had chosen to work. The root was holy and that means the branches are holy in some sense, too, even if many are destined for destruction. And, as we saw last time, just as God was using the rejection of Israel in order to include the Gentiles in his people, so he was using believing Gentiles to provoke jealousy amongst the Jews. As they saw unclean, uncircumcised Gentiles claiming and living in the promises that God had given to the root—to the patriarchs, prophets, and kings of Israel—some would be drawn to faith in Jesus as Messiah.

As the root is holy, so are the branches.

Now, what would that mean for the Gentile Christians in Rome? What does it mean for Gentile Christians in Canada today? Paul expands on the root and branches metaphor in verses 17-24. I think it's easiest if we read the whole thing through all at once.

But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, although a wild olive shoot, were grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing root of the olive tree, do not be arrogant toward the branches. If you are, remember it is not you who support the root, but the root that supports you. Then you will say, "Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in." That is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand fast through faith. So do not become proud, but fear. For if God

did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you. Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God's kindness to you, provided you continue in his kindness. Otherwise you too will be cut off. And even they, if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in, for God has the power to graft them in again. For if you were cut from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these, the natural branches, be grafted back into their own olive tree.

Have you ever grafted a branch onto a tree? My dad was inspired by a huge cherry tree our friends had. When it was young, someone had grafted five or six different kinds of cherries onto it. I remember watching as Dad brought home what looked like little twigs. He carefully cut into the branches of one of our trees and spliced in the freshly cut ends of those "twigs" and wrapped them up. Eventually, the ones that "took" produced fruit. They took life from the tree, but grew something different.

But having different kinds of fruit on a tree isn't the only reason for grafting. In the 1850s, aphids carrying Phylloxera made their way from North America to Europe and wiped out huge portions of France's vineyards. American grape varieties were immune, but when infected with Phylloxera, European grapes died from the roots up. The only solution, which changed European wines forever, was to graft European grape varieties onto root stock from the Americas.

Paul has something like that in mind here. Olive trees were and still are common all around the Mediterranean and people knew them well. Olives played a major part in their economy. Olive trees live practically forever.

There are trees in Greece and Italy that have been alive for over two thousand years. They're extremely hearty trees. If you want them gone you've got to dig them out by the roots or burn them right down below the ground. Sometimes they go wild, but that doesn't make them any less vigorous. In Paul's days, a farmer might sometimes decide to take advantage of the vigour of a wild olive tree by grafting in branches from a cultivated tree. The wild tree wasn't producing olives anymore, but its life could be harnessed by grafting in some good branches.

Paul draws on this image of the wild olive harnessed to produce good fruit through the grafting in of good branches and says that God has done just the opposite in bringing the Gentiles to faith in Jesus. Israel is the cultivated olive tree. The root is the patriarchs and prophets and kings called by God down through the centuries. Some Bible scholars see Jesus as the root Paul is referring to. Either way, the root and the tree are Israel and God has done something that ordinarily would have been crazy and nonsensical: He's taken worthless, non-producing branches off the wild olive tree and grafted them onto the cultivated one. Even seemingly crazier: to make room for them, he's cut off the cultivated tree's own branches.

Paul makes three points here. First, Paul is reiterating what he's been saying all along about his fellow Jews according to the flesh. If they reject the good news that Jesus, crucified and risen, is Lord, if they rejected this royal summons to submit in faithful allegiance to the King, they really are cut off. Paul leaves no room for our modern ideas that we sometimes apply to Jews. Whether it's the idea that all paths lead to God, so Jews can go their way and we can go ours and we'll all eventually meet up, or it's the more common idea amongst Evangelicals that God has a separate plan for Jews,

Paul cuts them all off at the knees. God only has *one* tree and that means he only has *one* people. There is only one way into the life of the age to come and that is through Jesus the Messiah. On one hand, this is why Paul grieves over ethnic Israel's rejection of Jesus, but it's also why he prays so fervently for them. If the root is holy, so are the branches. There is hope, at least for some. If God can do the impossible, grafting wild branches into the tree to cause them to bear fruit—something he says here is contrary to nature—he can sure do the easy thing and graft back in some of the natural branches.

This touches on Paul's second point: There is only *one* people of God. Paul's been hammering away at this since Chapter 4 and his point all along is that there is only one covenant family. It began with Abraham and Israel's great mistake was to think that this family was defined by works of the law—by circumcision, diet, and sabbath, by the things that separated them from the Gentiles. Paul has stressed that this was never the point. Right from the beginning, membership in the family was defined by *faith* in the righteousness of God. This family has now been reconstituted around Jesus, but it's an essentially Jewish family in the sense that it is centred on faith in Israel's God and in the story of redemption played out in Israel's story. Jews—even though most have rejected Jesus—are the natural heirs of this inheritance, but it belongs *equally* to *any and every* Gentile who, by faith in Jesus, has been swept up into it. Brothers and Sisters, if we are in Christ, Israel's story is our story.

Finally, third and most important, Paul warns Gentile believers. He warns us not to think that we have *replaced* ethnic Jews in God's plan. He warns us not to think of that the Church is a Gentiles-only family. He warns us not to think that God has now chosen us because we're *not* Jews. To start thinking in any of these ways is to fall

into serious error. It's to fall into the same error that the Jews had fallen into when they thought that God had chosen them *because* they were Jews. It's to fall into the same error the Jews did when they believed that membership in God's family was marked out by ethnic identity rather than faith. The natural branches were pruned off because they lacked faith and woe to us if we should fall into the same error, if we should ever presume that we've been grafted in by anything other than faith in Jesus the Messiah. If God pruned of the natural branches for a lack of faith, we are fools to think he won't cut us off if we presume upon his grace as they did.

Paul goes so far as to tell Gentile believers to *fear* rather than being proud and he holds up unbelieving Israel as a warning. God is kind, but he is also severe. He has poured out his grace in Jesus, sending his Son to die on behalf of a faithless and unbelieving people, but—again—faith is required. Faith is the mark of membership in the covenant family and without it we are cut off. Without faith we reap the wages of our sin: death. Now, let me say, that I don't think this is so much a warning to individual Christians—a warning that if we lose our faith we will fall under God's judgement. Paul is clear elsewhere—for example, in Philippians 1:6—that when God begins a work of grace in a person, he will see it through to completion. As individual Christians we sin, we get things wrong, we make mistakes, but God's word is powerful to bear fruit and his Spirit does not fail in what he sets out to do. No, Paul is talking to a whole church and his point is that a church that begins to boast the way that Israel had boasted, forgetting that our redemption is based solely on God's grace, is a church destined to die. Remember that, Brothers and Sisters, and let us always be a church that knows we stand only by God's grace. Let us never lapse into the pridefully thinking that the tree stands

because of us. The fact is that we stand only because the tree supports us, only because it's life flows through us.

It was easy for the Gentile believers in Rome to fall into this sort of thinking when Nero allowed the Jews to return to Rome. He let them come back, but nobody really liked them. People looked down on the Jews and it would have been easy for the Gentile Christians to do the same. It also would have been very easy for Gentile Christians to misrepresent Christianity. It might start with excluding Jews from the Church—something Paul would have been aghast at—but then, when people saw that Christians were reading the Jewish Scriptures and worshipping a Jesus, a Jew, it would have been very easy for Gentile Christians to distance themselves from the very story into which Jesus had brought them. “Well,” they might say, “we've borrowed some things from the Jews, but Christianity is really something totally new and different.” Romans were into new religions and religious fads. But to present the faith that way was to sell out the root, the tree, into which we Gentiles have been grafted.

This was Paul's warning, but as with so many of his warnings, it didn't take long for Christians to ignore them. As I've said before, we've often forgotten this lesson. Some, out of fear of offending Jews, have taught that Christianity is something totally new and different and that Jews have their path to God and that we have ours. There are sort of “liberal” and “conservative” versions of this idea, but neither one squares with what Paul tells us here. Others have written off the Jews entirely. Paul stresses that something new has happened in Jesus and that there is a new Israel that has been constituted around him, but he also stresses the continuity between the new Israel and the old. God has only one family and has always had only one family, whether we want to

talk about it in terms of “Israel” or “Church”. The defining mark of that family is and always has been faith in the righteousness of God, now revealed in the death and resurrection of Jesus. This is precisely why Paul can look forward with hope for his people here. They’ve been cut off because of unbelief, but if God can graft in wild branches and give them life, he can certainly graft back in the natural branches. That’s easy by comparison. But not everyone has grasped this continuity. Some Dispensationalists like to throw the term “Replacement Theology” at anyone who disagrees with them that God has a separate plan for Israel. They are wrong to do that. But some people have and still do make this mistake of thinking that the Church *replaced* Israel. Paul shows that they’re just as wrong as the Dispensationalists. Both need to acknowledge that God has one and only one covenant family made up of both Jews and Gentiles marked out by faith in Jesus the Messiah.

Brothers and Sisters, Paul reminds us here to live out the unity Jesus has given to his body. Unity isn’t something we create. Jesus does that. But unity is something we can undermine. We undermine it when we start thinking or acting as though we are part of God’s covenant family because of anything other than faith in Jesus—because of who we are, because of some aspect of our heritage, because of things we’ve done. That was Israel’s great error, but over and over it has been the error of many groups of Christians too. I’ve found that it helps to remember—contrary to so much of the popular teaching out there, both liberal and conservative—that there is only one story in the Bible—one story, on people, one family, and one Saviour. The more we remember that the biblical story, not just the gospel and the book of Acts, but the story that goes all the way back to Abraham—the more we remember that this is *our*

story the more we will be reminded that it is our story because of Jesus. We were once dead wood, but Jesus has grafted us into the living tree. And, Friends, to remember that is to be reminded constantly that we are part of God’s family solely by his grace. To remember that without Jesus we would be dead wood is to be stripped of all pride in self and in works. It is to be humbled. And it is to be reminded of the love of God for sinners, for rebels, for idolaters. We who were not his people are now called his own.

Let us pray: Father, we rejected you, but in your great love for us, you have brought us back to yourself. You have given your own Son as a sacrifice for sin and, through him, you have restored us to your presence and made us your people. Let us never forget, we pray, that it is only through Jesus that we have life. Let us never presume upon your grace and let us never become prideful, thinking that you have chosen us because of who we are or what we have done. Keep us humble we pray, that we might live out and witness the unity you have given to your family—one people, born of grace, and united in Jesus our Lord and Saviour. Amen.