

THE LETTER THAT CHANGED THE WORLD - The Biblical Theology of Romans - Part thirty

Sunday, June 9th, 2019 - 6:00 p.m. - Teaching #2138

Pastor Don Horban - Cedarview Community Church, Newmarket, ON

THE KEY ROLE OF HUMAN FAITH IN THE SOVEREIGN PLAN OF GOD

Romans 11:17-24 - “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, [18] 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. [19] Then you will say, ‘Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in.’ [20] That is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand fast through faith. So do not become proud, but stand in awe. [21] For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you. [22] 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. [23] 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. [24] 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.”

We started last week to unfold Paul’s very involved image of the olive tree, the root of the olive tree, and the two types of branches being nourished by the root system of the olive tree. The root of the olive tree *isn’t* ethnic Judaism. The root of the entire tree, the root which nourishes *all* the branches for *all* time is single. And that root is the *faith* of Abraham in the promise of God. If there is one sentence that is repeated over and over in the Bible - both Old and New Testaments - it is this one - “**Abraham believed God and it [that faith] was counted to him as righteousness.**”

All the **Jews** had to do to **continue** in the olive tree was continue in their natural father Abraham’s faith. It is in *this* sense that they are the *natural* branches of the olive tree. They had nothing additional to do. Their own national father laid down the pattern of faith. **Gentiles**, on the other hand, had no such father in their history. They have no natural relationship to the patriarchs. They had to come to share in Abraham’s faith *externally*, as it were - from the *outside*.

This is the sense in which Jesus can say “**Salvation is from the Jews**”(John 4:22). It was never the case that ethnic Jewishness saved anyone - *including* the Jews. But rather, it was always through the *root of the olive tree* - the *faith of Abraham* in the promise of God - that God made His saving entry point into human history. His entrance point was a **Jewish** entry point.

But Paul tells us something has, at least on the outward surface of things, gone terribly wrong. The Jews *didn’t* continue to receive the life-giving power of their natural root system. They abandoned the faith of their father Abraham.

This is why Paul needed *two* pictures to show Israel’s history accurately. *First*, there’s the lump of dough - the “**first fruits**” - which formed the whole salvation people of God (**Romans 11:16**). Salvation is now and forever from the Jews. Then, *second*, there’s the *olive tree from which natural branches have been broken off because of their unwillingness to abide in Abraham’s simple trust in God* (**Romans 11:16-17**). Just because salvation is *from* the Jews doesn’t mean all the Jews have been *faithful* to their salvation heritage in Abraham.

In today’s text it is primarily to this second picture - root, tree, and branches - that Paul turns his attention:

1) IT IS VITALLY IMPORTANT GENTILES UNDERSTAND WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO THE JEWISH PEOPLE AND WHY

Romans 11:17-18 - “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, [18] 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.”

As Paul introduces this new image of natural branches being broken off the olive tree he knows it can lead to a terrible misunderstanding among Gentiles who have responded to God’s saving grace and been planted into the root of Abraham’s covenant of faith. Paul doesn’t want Gentiles interpreting God’s favor on them as a ground for boasting or ill-will to those Jews who have been judged for their unbelief - “**Don’t be arrogant toward the branches....**”(11:18).

It would be sadly misinterpreting events to think God had somehow come to love the Gentiles more than the Jews. And it would also be pathetically blind to attribute their current standing in grace as somehow *earned* by their moral

superiority. Thus, Paul reminds the Gentiles they weren't really standing on their own at all. There is a "**root**" that "**supports**" them - "**....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**"(11:18).

This idea of Gentiles being "**supported**" by the same root as faithful Israel needs explanation. The supporting root **isn't** ethnic Jewishness. If that were the case none of the original Jewish branches would have been severed from the root. Ethnic Jewishness can't be undone.

No, the supporting root - the **shared** supporting root - of all the living branches is the faith of Abraham - **Galatians 3:7-9** - "**Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. [8] And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "In you shall all the nations be blessed." [9] So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.**"

This great truth carries more than mere doctrinal weight. And it's the **practical** fruit of this great truth that Paul drives home in the eighteenth verse. Once this root of faith is entered into, and once it is understood, pride in accomplishment or position is an impossibility.

2) A WARNING TO THE GENTILES TO CONTINUE IN HUMBLE FAITH

Romans 11:19-22 - "**Then you will say, 'Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in.'** [20] That is true. **They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand fast through faith. So do not become proud, but stand in awe.** [21] For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you. [22] **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.**"

In **verse 19** Paul repeats the very same thought from verse 18. Here are Christians who insist on seeing the story of the Bible without seeing its **meaning**. "**Then** [in the same way we just covered in verse 18] **you** [Gentile Christians] **will say, 'Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in.'**" We should take note of this. Paul has the Gentile Christians voicing the same thoughts he just dismantled in the verses immediately before.

Why does Paul repeat this part of his argument? Is he trying to tell me how persistent my own blindness and prejudice can be when I read the account of God's work in the Bible? Am I this prone to see the tree but not the whole forest? Do I this repeatedly stack the deck in my own favor when I study God's revelation? This is the very personal issue I'm being called to confront in this text.

How will I know for certain when I've grasped the account of the Jews being broken off from their own root in Abraham and myself, as a Gentile, being grafted in through nothing more than faith in God's grace? Paul tell me. When I "**stand in awe**" (11:21).

Paul's main concern in these verses seems to be a dismantling of a sense of **entitlement**. After all, this is the very reason the unbelieving Jews were broken off. They began to say to Jesus, "Don't You lecture us about God. We have Abraham as our father!" They felt **entitled** to audience and standing with God Almighty. And Paul says God sovereignly snapped them off the tree of life for that very reason! So **stand in awe** is Paul's wise counsel to you and me.

3) THE CONDITION OF ABIDING IN THE ROOT OF THE TREE IS FAITH AND FAITH ALONE

Romans 11:20-24 - "**....They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand fast through faith. So do not become proud, but stand in awe.** [21] For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you. [22] **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.** [23] **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.** [24] **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.**"

The summary statement is right up front in **verse 20** - "**....They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand fast through faith. So do not become proud, but stand in awe.**" Why were they broken off? It was because of their own **unbelief**. And why can Gentiles share in the life of the root? Only through their **faith**. Neither the breaking off nor the grafting in is the result of blind election.

In fact, if words mean anything at all, Paul piles up **conditional phrasing** all through this great summary passage to his whole argument in Romans 9 through 11 - **Romans 11:22-23** - "**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. [23] 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.**"

Yes, God has **power** to graft them in again. But they're being grafted in **isn't** merely predicated on God's sovereign power. It's predicated on whether they will or will not "**continue in their unbelief**"(11:23).

4) **IF ABIDING FAITH IS ESSENTIAL FOR ABIDING LIFE, HOW IS FAITH SUSTAINED AND NOURISHED?**

Romans 11:20-22 - "**They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand fast through faith. So do not become proud, but stand in awe. [21] For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you. [22] 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.**"

There are only two phrases in this clump of verses that give us something to do. In other words, there are only **two commands**. The first is "**Do not become proud, but stand in awe**"(20b). The second is "**Note then the kindness and the severity of God**"(22a). And since the whole subject is how to stand in faith and resist unbelief, I assume these two commands are **how** Paul wants us to do this.

Then I break it down a bit further. I think not becoming proud and then standing in awe of God is the **fruit** Paul is after in my life. But I can't **shut off pride** with a switch and I can't **make** myself feel **awe** toward God. So how will I accomplish these two things?

Well, on my own, I can't and I won't. I'm too proud and too weak and too enamored with the tinsel of this world to stay in awe of God for very long. But God has made provision and come to my rescue. And Paul says I must fight pride and stand in awe of God by doing something else first.

I'm to begin by taking **note** of something. That means I must give large blocks of uninterrupted time to examining something in great detail. This won't happen while I'm focused on work, or the financial markets, or my golf game. I will have to turn off the television and probably the computer. Hollywood won't provide this for me.

So what am I to study if I want to fight pride and stand in awe of God? Paul tells us: "**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.**"

The **kindness** and the **severity** of God. Those are the subjects if I want to stand in **awe** of God. And the order can't be that important because Paul reverses them right in the same verse. His point is I can't fully appreciate his **kindness** if I just study His kindness **alone**. God's kindness is magnified when it's set in the context of His severity. And conversely, His **severity** helps me not to take His kindness **for granted**. His severity keeps me from turning His kindness into **mere tolerance of sin**.

If you don't see the importance of this you're missing something wildly beautiful and life giving. Consider the way in this very passage Paul directs his **Gentile** readers - the ones already enjoying and standing in rapturous grace - to stop and study God's severity in breaking off the unbelieving Jewish branches. Why? Because Paul knows people can't "**stand in awe**" of God without grasping **both** the kindness of God **and** the severity of God. A God who is nothing **but** kindness will, in the end, only spoil His children. People may **enjoy** a doting old Santa. But they don't **stand in awe** of him.

5) **THROUGH THE POWER AND BEAUTY OF CHRIST GOD IS ABLE TO OPEN THE HARDENED HEARTS OF UNBELIEVING JEWS TO HIS GRACE ONCE AGAIN**

Romans 11:23-24 - "**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. [24] 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.**"

This we should actually all understand. If God has already performed the **greater** miracle - grafting in **wild** olive branches into the natural olive root - then He can surely graft back the **natural** branches, providing they don't continue in unbelief - because God only saves through faith, right from the covenant with Abraham onward.

Paul actually writes in more detail about this in **2 Corinthians 3:12-18** - **“Since we have such a hope, we are very bold, [13] not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face so that the Israelites might not gaze at the outcome of what was being brought to an end. [14] But their minds were hardened. For to this day, when they read the old covenant, that same veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away. [15] Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their hearts. [16] But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. [17] Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. [18] And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.”**

The veil of unbelief is only taken away through Christ. And the Holy Spirit can do miraculous work through pulling men’s eyes to see Jesus with fresh clarity and sweetness. Paul says God can do it for the unbelieving Jews as surely as He has done it for any of us. Let’s pray for this great redeeming work!