

Sermons through

Romans

The Goodness and Severity of God

Romans 11:19-22

With Study Questions

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You will say then, “Branches were broken off that I might be grafted in.”²⁰ Well *said*. Because of unbelief they were broken off, and you stand by faith. Do not be haughty, but fear.²¹ For if God did not spare the natural branches, He may not spare you either.²² Therefore consider the goodness and severity of God: on those who fell, severity; but toward you, goodness, if you continue in *His* goodness. Otherwise you also will be cut off (Romans 11:19-22)?

Introduction

The context in which the above passage sits is one which addresses the faithfulness of God – Paul is answering the accusation that the word of God has “**taken no effect**” or “**failed**” (Romans 9:6). And to say this of the word of God is the same as saying it of God Himself for His word is an extension of His own being (see Galatians 3:8; Hebrews 4:12, 13).

An Eternal Covenant

God had made glorious and eternal promises to Israel. He had made the promise of a new covenant where He would put His law within them and write it on their hearts. His covenant included a promise that there would be such vast knowledge of Him that no one would need to teach his neighbor or brother “**saying, ‘know the Lord,’ for they shall all know (him) from the least to the greatest**” (Jeremiah 31:34).

And the heart of this promise is found in Jeremiah 31:34:

For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more (Jeremiah 31:34b).

God emphasized the surety of this promise by comparing it to the certainty of the sun giving light, the fixed order of the moon, the stars shining in the heavens and the waves of the sea (Jeremiah 31:35). It is a boundless and eternal covenant to Israel.

Thus says the Lord: “If the heavens above can be measured, and the foundations of the earth below can be explored, then I will cast off all the offspring of Israel for all that they have done, declares the Lord” (Jeremiah 31:37).

When you get to the end of measuring the heavens, that’s when that’s when I will abandon my people – in other words, ‘never’! Yet the vast majority of Israelites found themselves excluded from the promises of this covenant. The parables of Jesus often revolved around the judgment of those who would have viewed themselves as the recipients of those covenant promises.

When Jesus told the Parable of the Tenants which resulted in the “**miserable death**” of those who killed the son of the owner – the chief priests and Pharisees “**perceived that He was speaking about them**” (Matthew 21:45).

It was in the context of that parable that Jesus taught:

Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits (Matthew 21:43).

Taken away!!? But it is an eternal covenant. How can it be taken away? Is God going back on His promise – His covenant? That was the accusation. Some still think it to be a legitimate accusation.

What Paul is explaining in these three chapters is that the promise is still good – it is a sure promise. It is made to Israel. But “**they are not all Israel who are of Israel, nor are they all children because they are the seed of Abraham**” (Romans 9:6, 7). The problem isn’t the promise or the faithfulness of God to keep His promise. It is a matter of understanding to whom the promise is actually made.

Paul has been laboring to show that God has not cast away His people. He viewed himself as an example of God’s faithfulness – he was an Israelite (Romans 11:1). There was always a remnant of true Israelites (Romans 11:4). But the true Israelite would be the Israelite of faith.

The Mystery of Jew and Gentile

Add to this that the great mystery (Romans 11:25) of which Paul wrote was that the kingdom of God would include both the faithful Israelite and the faithful gentile.

This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel (Ephesians 3:6).

It may be worth reading the very strong covenantal and political language used by Paul as he expressed the unity of the gentile Christian and Jewish Christian forming one new man (Ephesians 2:15).

**Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called “the uncircumcision” by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands –
¹² remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. ¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴ For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility ¹⁵ by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, ¹⁶ and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. ¹⁷ And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. ¹⁸ For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. ¹⁹ So then you are no longer strangers and aliens (*paroikoi* – foreigners), but you are fellow citizens (*sympolitai*¹) with the saints and members of the household of God, ²⁰ built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, ²¹ in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. ²² In him you**

¹ The of Jeremiah 31:34 (“no longer shall each one teach his neighbor”) “neighbor” is politen—the same root word.

also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit (Ephesians 2:11-22).

It is also worth noting that these words were written to **“the saints who are in Ephesus, and the faithful in Christ Jesus” (Ephesians 1:1)**. I mention this that we might see the letter is not addressed to the temple or the Pharisees or Sadducees or Scribes but the church. In other words, we have a new institution of this new covenant – it is the church that is the body of Christ.

Branches Removed

How does this speak to the passage before us this morning? The gentile Christians would have made the observation that branches (the majority of ethnic Israelites) were broken off the olive tree – removed, as it were, from that covenant community which was now the church. And now they were the ones enjoying the **“fatness of the olive tree” (Romans 11:17)**.

They were the ones sitting in church and enjoying the privileges of God’s covenant people – they had the Spirit (Ezekiel 36:26, 27; Romans 8:4), the promise of the resurrection (Ezekiel 37; Romans 8:10, 11), the designation of sonship (Exodus 4:22; Romans 8:14-17), the inheritance (Isaiah 60; Romans 8:17), the promise of never being forsaken (Deuteronomy 31:6; Romans 8:39).

In all of this they began to entertain a notion of personal superiority over the branches which had been cut off (the ethnic Israelites). Paul issues a warning against boasting (Romans 11:18). He now brings it to a much deeper level. He writes of the potential consequences of a haughty disposition.

He begins by addressing they had rightly surmised:

You will say then, “Branches were broken off that I might be grafted in.”²⁰ Well said. Because of unbelief they were broken off, and you stand by faith (Romans 11:19, 20a).

Well Said

The branches were broken off because they did not have faith. We are not told they lost their faith but that they did not have faith. As

discussed last time, this is not an argument against the perseverance of the saints, it is merely addressing a community of outwardly religious people who had no true faith – “**whitewashed tombs...full of dead men’s bones**” (Matthew 23:27). The gentile Christians were accurate thus far.

They were also accurate regarding the means by which they were grafted in – they stood “**by faith**”. But here is where the passage becomes a bit chilling. Branches were broken off due to faithlessness and the wild olive trees were grafted in due to faith. You might think this would be followed by a halleluiah – and in some other context it might. But Romans 11:20b says something quite the opposite:

Do not be haughty, but fear (Romans 11:20b).

Fearless Faith

This hardly seems to be the predominant attitude among western evangelicals. We tend to approach the Lord very casually. At the risk of sounding overly critical it very much appears we have embraced complacency in our faith. Instead of assurance we have become smug – like a marriage filled with negligence or a household filled with blind assumptions rather than love and care. One or both of the spouses wake up one day having forgotten they were part of a covenant and the marriage crumbles.

We have no fear of walking close to the edge of the precipice. We flirt with heresy and licentious, sinful behaviors as if there will be no consequences. As one person, who had engaged in egregious sinful behavior which shattered the lives of numerous people, so carelessly asked me “Well, there’s grace right?” Like teenagers who want to know how far they can go rather than what is the best and most godly way to conduct a relationship.

There is a healthy fear and an unhealthy fear of God (Matthew 10:28; 1 John 4:18). We see this sometimes with the way kids talk about their dads. Some children will speak of their dads almost bragging about their fear because he’s a big, strong, strict disciplinarian. They’ll say these things will a twinkle in their eye – “He didn’t let us get away with anything!” But there were other kids who didn’t engage in that conversation because their fear was the fear of an abusive dad – not a dad who disciplined but one who vented.

What I fear we are losing in an effort to be relevant is the worship of a God who is irrelevant rather than a God who is to be feared. Perhaps one of the unintended consequences of contemporary worship is a God who becomes a contemporary. Certainly Jesus said **“I have called you friends” (John 15:15)**. But you never hear the apostles refer to Jesus that way. No, they generally refer to themselves as **“bondslaves”** or **“servants”**.

Contend For The Faith

I would strongly encourage the brethren to avoid being unnecessarily quarrelsome (Romans 13:13). Yet the docile Christian must equally repent. We are called to **“strive”** *synathlountes* (to struggle together) **“side by side for the faith of the gospel” (Philippians 1:27)**; to **“contend for the faith” (Jude 3)**. We are warned that there are those who will **“pervert the grace of our God” (Jude 4)**.

I find myself occasionally in conversations with people who will ask if I think certain churches or people (that I might disagree with on certain doctrinal issues) are still preaching the gospel – are they still Christians or Christian churches? I generally say ‘yes’. This is often followed by a statement along the lines of **“If we’re all going to heaven, why argue?”** Though I appreciate the sentiment it must be said that the road to hell is not a cliff. It’s a little step here a little step there.

This short passage is reminiscent of what Paul wrote to the church at Corinth. He brought up the example of the natural branches in the wilderness – how they had all been baptized into Moses, at spiritual food, drank from the Rock which was Christ, yet God was not pleased with most of them (1 Corinthians 10:1-5).

Paul warns the church not to follow their examples of idolatry, sexual immorality, grumbling dispositions – so many things which lead souls to shipwreck (1 Timothy 1:19) and destruction – leading to the admonition **“Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall” (1 Corinthians 10:12)**.

In this passage Paul offers a similar caution. Instead of a feeling of superiority over those in darkness, we must recognize that these types of chinks in the armor of the church expose them to a similar fate.

For if God did not spare the natural branches, He may not spare you either. ²² Therefore consider the goodness and severity of God: on those

who fell, severity; but toward you, goodness, if you continue in His goodness. Otherwise you also will be cut off (Romans 11:19-22)?

Goodness and Severity

Christians are counseled here to “**consider**” *ide* – literally to look upon “the goodness and severity of God.” “**Goodness**” *chrestoteta* being His acts of kindness – that which is beneficial to the recipient; “**Severity**” *apotomian* being an act of harshness. Perhaps this is another example of his quest to declare “**the whole counsel of God**” (Acts 20:27). It’s been said:

The kindness of God cannot be truly appreciated as a gift of his grace unless the severity of God is contemplated as the just penalty for forsaking him.²

Paul had earlier taught that the “**goodness of God**” leads us to repentance (Romans 2:4). And the “**severity**” of God should certainly do the same. And this leads us to answer the final and perhaps most difficult question brought forth from this passage: To what extent should we fear being cut off? Isn’t it God’s great desire that we be assured of the love He has for us?

I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life (1 John 5:13).

Are we being encouraged here to doubt – to daily fear that we might be cut off? Does the conditional conjunction “**if**” and the subjunctive “**you continue in His goodness**” (add to this the numerous other conditional statements and warning passages in Scripture – Colossians 1:23; Hebrews 2:1-4; 4:11; 6:4-8; 10:26-31; 12:25-29) necessarily imply the possibility of a true regenerate believer turning their back on Christ?

Let us seek to answer this while not losing the impact of the warning. First, it has been said that Paul’s words are a “**warning, not a prediction.**”³ It might be said that in the same way that the gospel is the means by which God saves His elect, these warning passages are the means by which He preserves them.

² Schreiner, T. R. (1998). *Romans* (Vol. 6, p. 608). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

³ Schreiner, T. R. (1998). *Romans* (Vol. 6). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

When my oldest child was barely a toddler, I locked us both out of the car and had to walk about a mile home in a storm. I put her under my jacket and she held my neck. As the rain fell and the wind blew I instructed her not to let go but hold tight – instructions she gladly obeyed in light of the torrent. Had I given the same warning to some random pedestrian I might not have received the same response. As Jesus taught:

My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me (John 10:27).

Simply put, the regenerate person will ever (though checkered with weaknesses and failures) heed the call to trust and obey. As Calvin rightly taught: **“it is not indeed enough for thee to have once embraced the favor of God, except thou followest his call through the whole course of thy life.”**⁴

And yet for the unregenerate, the warning – like the gospel – may very well contain the power to save. It is quite easy and dangerous for members of a church to fall into the same error as the Israelite who assumed a right standing with God by merely being part of a redeemed community. It is not an unhealthy question for us to ask ourselves whether we truly **“stand by faith.”**

And finally, viewing this from a wider context, when there are sufficient numbers in a covenant community who embrace the trappings of religion but deny its content – those who have **“the appearance of godliness, but denying its power” (2 Timothy 3:5)**, it may very well be that that church (as we have seen with many mainline denominations in past 150 years) is no longer a church at all.

So let us behold the goodness and severity of God that we might ever walk in His goodness.

⁴ Calvin, J. (1998). *Romans* (electronic ed., Ro 11:22). Albany, OR: Ages Software.

Questions for Study

1. What is the context of Romans 11:19-22? What is Paul defending (pages 2, 3)?
2. What is a covenant? How long is the covenant? To whom was the covenant made (pages 2, 3)?
3. Did God take away an eternal covenant? Explain (pages 3, 4)?
4. What is the “mystery” that involved the Jew and the Gentile (pages 4, 5)?
5. What does it mean that branches were removed? How did the Gentiles begin responding to this (page 5)?
6. Discuss fear and the Christian faith. When is it good? When is it bad? What does good fear produce (pages 6, 7)?
7. Why is important that we contend for the faith (page 7)?
8. What does it mean to behold the goodness and severity of God and why is it valuable for us to do so (pages 8, 9)?
9. Explain the warning to continue in God’s goodness. Does this mean Christians can lose their salvation? What does it mean (pages 8, 9)?