



HICKORY GROVE

BAPTIST CHURCH

Kindness & Severity

May 10, 2020

Romans 11:19-24

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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 fear. 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.

(Pastor prays)

It's hard to talk about hard things whether it's race or religion or politics or feelings because so often talking about hard things leads to hard words that sometimes create hard feelings. And as Christians we have this sense that we need to avoid the hard topics because it comes off as divisive and sectarian and unloving, when really it's almost never the *topic* that is unloving; more times than not it's reaction and defensiveness and accusation about the topic that's unchristian. And that's what happens when we don't take the Gospel and apply it to everything.

And it certainly feels like what Paul is doing in this passage as he addresses two different races under one Christian roof. I want you to see it now, as he talks about Jews and Gentiles in this passage. He doesn't focus on either race but takes each race to the grace of God and the power of the Gospel. Now we have just experienced a murder in America of a young black man caught on video. I don't know all the details but I know what I've seen and I know that a Gospel that saves souls but doesn't control racism is a half-hearted partisan religion and not the Gospel of the crucified resurrected Messiah. And the only hope for our hearts and for our brothers and

sisters of other colors than you, the only real shot that we have at living in peace, is found at the cross of Jesus, and that's just where Paul takes us today.

But his gospel in this passage is not for the faint of heart and not for the box-checker or the cocky Christian and not for those who aren't willing to be uncomfortable in your Christianity. Here in this passage Paul confronts us with alarming grace and fearful judgment. As he speaks to the Gentiles who are now belonging in a place where they naturally don't belong, that's what Christ does for all of us at the cross. He makes us belong in a place where we don't naturally belong. Naturally, we are sinners with bad attitudes and checkered pasts. But supernaturally we have been changed, adopted by faith, saved by grace and now, through the cross, although we were once *enemies* of God we are *children* of God. All of that is by grace. *Real* grace.

Real Grace is Lasting Grace, and Lasting Grace is in Christ

I've been thinking about how to best get at this passage. How do I best open it up? I think we need to look at two different things, then talk about how to live. So look, look and live. Here's the first one.

Look at God

There is a lot to see about God but in this passage Paul narrows our focus in a way most prosperity preachers won't. You'll never hear a preacher who owns a Gulfstream jet preach on this passage! Look with me at the setup and then the statement in verses 20 through 21. Paul instructs the Gentiles to live in a holy fear, and in verse 22 he tells us how to stand fast in faith and how to live with a holy fear. *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.* Kindness and severity. Here is a fuller picture and more accurate description of the doctrine of God, a doctrine that is seen most clearly at the cross of Jesus. There, the severity of God is seen as the cup of His righteous wrath is emptied on His son Jesus and the fullness of grace and forgiveness is given to all who will believe. Let's keep looking at verse 22. You see that first phrase there, "note then" or consider. I thought this was to meditate on and mull over and think deeply about, but really the phrase just means "to look at." You don't have to be deep to get this one; you just need eyes to see that God is loving and kind and severe. God is kind and severe. God is full of mercy and God is full of wrath. It is the tenderness of God to receive broken sinners and the toughness of God to punish the unrepentant. There is **salvation** that God gives to those who turn from sin and put their faith in

the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and judgment of those who hear the Gospel and yet remain in their sin. **Help.** God gives to the hurting and humble and faithful. And the opposite, God has for the proud and sinful and those who don't think they need God.

You get the idea of what Paul is saying here when you look at verse 22 where Paul speaks of the severity of God. In verse 22 the severity of God toward those who have fallen. Fallen. To fall down is to be completely ruined. Here is the extremely serious spiritual condition of someone who is completely ruined and will spend eternity in Hell. God is a righteous and holy judge who shouldn't be trifled with, but that's not all He is. In verse 22 Paul invites us to look at the kindness of God, kindness to the Gentiles. To *us*. We are people born in sin, prone to rebellion, given to laziness and full of selfishness. But while we were yet sinners, Christ *died* for us.

Here in this passage, the kindness of God is that He grafted the Gentiles into the people of God and He did it by grace at the cross of Jesus. It is God's judgment that makes us aware of our need for Christ, but it is God's kindness that leads us into repentance. It's good for us to look at God. The whole Bible is about God, our holy creator. He created man in His own image, yet sin has separated man from God. God sent Christ to live the perfect life on earth and die on the cross in the place of sinners. And all man needs to do is to believe and repent and receive forgiveness through faith. Look at God. I think there is another necessary place to look.

Look at ourselves

Listen to the feel of warning in verses 20 through 21 and also at the end of verse 22. Let's read it. ²⁰ *That is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand fast through faith. So do not become proud, but fear.* 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.* Look, this is a warning to the easy "believism" of the American church not to presume on God's mercy. The way Paul says it in verse 21 is if God didn't spare the natural branches, the Jews, His chosen people, He certainly won't spare Gentiles who don't belong there in the first place.

This is a hard thing for many Southern Baptists to hear because we believe in the beautiful doctrine of eternal security. This is a caution to the "once saved, always saved" security blanket that creates such a sense of complacency in the church. And here Paul is offering a warning against the false sense of security that cultural Christianity gives. Salvation isn't dependent on a

one-time act that you've written down somewhere but on a lifetime of humble dependence on God and a pursuing faithfulness. Isn't that what Paul said in Romans 8:13: *For if you live according to the flesh you will die but if by the spirit you put to death the deeds of the body you will live.* In 2 Corinthians 13, Paul says, *examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith.* We certainly hold unto the perseverance of the saints but it's reflected in God preserving us by grace and us reflecting that in living out a humble Christianity.

The words of Jesus in John 15 seem to give us the template for Biblical Christianity. Especially John 15: 5-6. ⁵ *I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.* ⁶ *If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.*

And the whole point of what Jesus said in John 15 and what Paul is saying in Romans 11 is that the miracle of grace that happens in us at salvation will produce fruit. It will be evident and powerful and changing and it will last. I don't want to be one of those preachers who has you doubting a salvation that's real. But, the last thing I want to do is have you trust a salvation that's false.

And the way the New Testament has given us to discern our own salvation is the presence of or the lack of fruit in our lives. And if there is no fruit, why would we think there is a genuine root? Christ is the "true vine" and by grace invites us to live as branches bearing fruit that remains. *Real* grace is a *lasting* grace. We look at God, His kindness and severity. We look at ourselves.

Let me give one last thought before we go.

Live in hope

This section ends with a real sense of hope embedded in verse 23 as Paul turns for a moment from talking about Gentile Christians to talk about Jews. 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.* Let's look at why and how that happens. For God has the power to graft them in again. We live in hope because God can do it! God has the power. Don't stop praying, trusting, believing, growing and striving. *Real* grace is *lasting* grace and lasting grace is in Christ. Look at God. Look at yourself. And live in hope.

(Pastor prays)