

Romans (11:22-24)

Safely Afraid of God

Part 54 - November 13, 2005

OLIVE IMAGERY

The Roman church was filled mostly with non-Jews. Paul has just taught them that if-and-when they believe in the *Jewish* Messiah (Jesus Christ), they become part of God's chosen people: Israel.

Paul illustrated this with an olive tree. And this tree has an all-supplying root (representing God's covenant with Abraham).

There are many branches on this tree; some natural (representing Jewish believers) and some unnatural, wild branches which had to be *grafted* in (representing non-Jewish, Gentile believers). And finally, there are broken branches (representing those Jews who have rejected their own prophesied Jewish Messiah: Jesus).

Interestingly, olive farmers don't graft wild, poorly-bred branches onto cultivated trunks. Just the opposite - they graft cultivated, fruit-bearing branches onto hearty wild trunks.

Paul had the limitations of the town-bred man ... and he had not the curiosity to inquire what went on in the olive-yards which fringed every road he walked. -
CH Dodd (theologian)

Q: What do you think; was Paul just an ignorant city boy?

Before we answer that, let's get to last week's cliff-hanger:

Do not be arrogant, but be afraid. For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either. - *Romans 11:20b-21 NIV*

Q: I asked: so, how do we keep from getting ourselves *pruned*?

Obviously it has something to do with being "afraid"; but afraid of what? And doesn't perfect love cast out all fear?! I said that the answer was in the very next verse; and it is.

KINDNESS and STERNNESS

Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God: sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you, provided that you continue in his kindness. Otherwise, you also will be cut off. And if they do not persist in unbelief, they will be grafted

in, for God is able to graft them in again. After all, if you were cut out of an olive tree that is wild by nature, and contrary to nature were grafted into a cultivated olive tree, how much more readily will these, the natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree! - *Romans 11:22-24 NIV*

Did you see the answer? It's right up there at the top. How do we keep from getting arrogant? How can we be appropriately "afraid"?

Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God (11:22)

We tend to emphasize one aspect of God's nature over the other. Would you ever tell a child *only* that the stove is our friend? It makes yummy cookies, and pops popcorn. It's our pal! Or, would you ever tell a child *only* that the stove is fearsome? It's just waiting to burn you with hot oil and boiling water! My awareness of one balances my awareness of the other.

If I focus *only* on God's *tender* side, I'll come to see Him as a softy on sin, and fail to notice how powerfully he opposes it.

If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God. - *Hebrews 10:26-27 NIV*

All kindness, and I'll be liberalistic and self-condoning. Yet, if I focus *only* on God's *tough* side, I'll fail to find forgiveness, and intimacy, and the joy of my salvation. All sternness, and I'll be legalistic and self-condemning.

There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death. - *Romans 8:1-2 NIV*

God is love. And love is something more stern than mere kindness. Kindness alone cares only that suffering is alleviated, not that righteousness is achieved.

C.S. Lewis' "The Chronicles of Narnia" comes out December 9th. And there's a great line in the books regarding Aslan (the lion who represents Christ). The magician in "The Voyage of the Dawn Treader" says: "It's not as if he were a *tame* lion." The lion of Narnia makes uncomfortable and extreme demands, and he cannot be manipulated or controlled or bent to anyone's will.

He's not a *tame* lion; He's a *loving* lion. And people want a *tame* God - a kindly figure who'll jump through their hoops, and grant them forgiveness without demanding change. But it would not be a loving act, for God to let us off the hook when our desire for comfort causes us to avoid Him.

Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God (11:22a)

... sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you, provided that you continue in his kindness (11:22b)

Q: Did you notice what Paul just said?

- Though I *consider* his sternness, I “continue in his kindness”

There’s a reason people flee from a tornado, but then go to the movies to experience the same terror. Have you heard about the glass-floored Skywalk being built 4000 feet above the Grand Canyon?¹ Terror becomes “awe” when viewed from a safe and secure position. As believers, we don’t “continue in” God’s sternness. but, our awareness of His sternness causes us to run to, and embrace the security of His kindness (that He offers so freely).

- We were created to be safely afraid of God.

PRUNING & GRAFTING

God doesn’t want His children terrified; He wants us awe-struck.

Otherwise, you also will be cut off (11:22c)

There are two main reasons an olive branch will get pruned off: 1) It is no longer fruitful. 2) It inhibits fruitfulness.

Diseased and/or shaded branches eventually stop “fruiting.”

Consider the kindness and the sternness of the olive farmer. He lovingly cares for his fruitful branches, while pruning those that spread disease or block the sun from the others. We must readily receive His love, acceptance, and forgiveness, while we steadily reject the disease of sin, and egotistical acts that eclipse the Gospel.

Paul isn’t saying that believers should fear God’s rejection, but that bearing fruit, and spreading the light of the Gospel are hallmarks of safely-afraid kindness-continuers.

And if they do not persist in unbelief, they will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again. (11:23)

The olive tree is an incredibly slow-growing plant, requiring both persistence and patience from the determined farmer. Our God is a forgiving grafter and a patient pruner. After grafting, the farmer must wait about seven years for the olive berries to begin growing.

¹ See Skywalk website at: <http://www.destinationgrandcanyon.com/indexe.html>

After all, if you were cut out of an olive tree that is wild by nature, and contrary to nature were grafted into a cultivated olive tree, how much more readily will these, the natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree! (11:24)

A couple final comments: First, Gentiles are: “wild by nature”

Wild (uncultivated) olive branches don’t bear functional fruit. Wild olive berries are underdeveloped, oil-deficient, and bitter. Without the intervention of the farmer, they are hopeless. That’s why the olive farmer only grafts cultivated branches onto hearty, wild trunks and not the other way ‘round.

And this brings us back to our first question:

Q: Was Paul just an ignorant city boy who didn’t understand the principles of grafting olive branches?

I don’t think so.

First, I’d give him poetic license just because he’s teaching theology and not horticulture!

Second, look at his remark: “contrary to nature”. Those “wild” Gentile branches are grafted into the cultivated tree, “contrary to nature.” I think Paul might be letting us know that *he* knows.

But there’s a third.

According to Nobel Prize winner Sir William Ramsay, on rare occasion when a cultivated tree ceases to produce *any* fruit, it can be “reinvigorated” by grafting a wild shoot into it.

- Though our belonging is “contrary to nature” it is fulfilling the farmer’s sovereign purpose and plan.
- And if these *unnatural* grafts can bear fruit, just imagine what’ll happen when the *natural* branches come into their own!