Called to Mutual Acceptance

Spring Quarter: Discipleship and Mission
Unit 3: Call to Life in Christ

Sunday school lesson for the week of May 19, 2019
By Dr. Hal Brady

Lesson Scripture: Romans 11:11-24
Key Verse: Romans 11:18

Lesson Aims

1. To realize how easily pride can destroy effective Christian discipleship.
2. To understand the components of Paul’s analogy of the olive tree and why they are important today.

As Paul’s letter to the church in Rome moves into Chapter 9, a new issue occupies his thoughts: the problem of Israel.

We are informed that fewer than 1 percent of Christians today come from a background of Judaism. But that was not the case in Paul’s day. Initially, the majority of Christian believers were of that background. The church in Rome had a mix of Jews and Gentiles. There were apparently significant numbers of both, with evidence supporting that those of Gentile background were in the majority (Romans 1:13; 15:11).

But in Romans 11, Paul addresses God’s relationship with both Jews and Gentiles. Paul wants to stress the fact that his having become the Lord’s apostle to the Gentiles did not mean that God had rejected Jews.

Paul began this chapter, “So I ask you, has God rejected his people? Absolutely not! I’m an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, from the tribe of Benjamin. God hasn’t rejected his people, whom he knew in advance” (Verses 1-2). Paul offered himself as an example to prove his point.

After all, Paul was a Jew who had been brought into a right relationship with God. Therefore, the rejection of Israel was partial rather than total. There was a remnant of Jewish believers, and Paul was one of them. Although Israel had been disobedient and stubborn, she had not been totally renounced as a nation. If God had rejected the entire nation of Israel, then Paul would not have been able to claim a right standing before God.

For his understanding of remnant, Paul took to the experience of the prophet Elijah. At a time of national crisis, Elijah had complained to God that he was the only one who had remained faithful. God then reminded Elijah that there were 7,000 others who had not bowed the knee to Baal (1 Kings 19:18).

It was from this event then that came the Jewish idea of “the remnant.” While there was never a time when every Jew was faithful, there would always be some, a remnant, who would remain true to God (see Romans 9:27).
Paul used the story of Elijah to argue that the concept of the remnant still applied. While most Jews seemed to be rejecting Jesus, there was a remnant, including him, who were not. “So also in the present time there is a remaining group by the choice of God’s grace” (Romans 11:5). In other words, we do not become part of God’s remnant through our efforts; it is a gift of God. And since the remnant has been secured by the grace of God, the remnant stands as a pledge that God will continue to show favor toward Israel as a whole.

**Result of Stumble**
**(Romans 11:11-15)**

At this juncture, Paul turns his attention from the remnant to Israel as a whole. In Romans 11:8, Paul quotes from Deuteronomy and makes an astounding claim: “God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes so that they could not see and ears so that they could not hear, to this very day.” Now, in verse 11, he asserts that the Jews have stumbled so that salvation could come to the Gentiles. Paul insists that the Jews have temporarily stumbled but not permanently fallen. He explains that while the Jews are rejecting God, God will sow the gospel seed among the Gentiles to make the Jews envious. Consequently, they will see God’s blessing upon the Gentiles and they’ll get jealous and eventually return to faithfulness.

Paul doesn’t really explain how the Jews’ failure to believe led to the salvation of the Gentiles. However, he may have had in mind the idea that the rejection of the Jews encouraged early Christian evangelists to take the gospel to those who were willing to believe. And still, the idea that Jews would become jealous and turn back to God has not happened in the 2,000 years since. Apparently, this was a hope Paul held onto that has yet to become a reality.

Paul goes on to say that if the “failure” (11:12) of the Jews brings riches to the Gentiles, their return to God will bring even greater riches to the world. While the rejection of Jesus by most Jews has led to the salvation of many Gentiles (thought certainly not all), the world will be even more blessed when the Jews returned to faithfulness. Paul’s hope lay in his belief that nothing can defeat God’s love and hinder God’s ultimate plan.

Next, Paul addresses the Gentiles in his readership with a direct appeal: he intends to do everything in his power to “arouse my own people to envy” for the sole purpose of saving “some of them.” His technique will be to use his “ministry as the apostle to the Gentiles” in any way possible to win as many Gentiles to Christ as possible. By implication the Gentiles’ part is to live in such a way that Jewish unbelievers will want to have what they have.

By their rejection (Verse 15), Paul refers to the Jewish refusal to believe in Christ. As he has already shown, the Jewish unbelievers deserve blame for this, but it also fits into God’s plan for the reconciling of the world, the inclusion of Gentiles into the people of God (see Romans 5:11; 2 Corinthians 5:19). What a great marvel it would be if as a result, Jews come to faith! It would be miraculous, like “life from the dead.”

**Outcome of Brokenness**
**Romans 11:16-21**
Here in Verse 16, Paul uses two examples tied to Jewish history. First, bread-making is considered. The “part of the dough” in his illustration is the final dough ball that is ready to be baked. This process begins with grinding grain to make flour. Moses had commanded the people of Israel to take the “firstfruits,” a portion of this flour, and make a loaf that was to be offered to the Lord (Numbers 15:17-21; compare Nehemiah 10:37; Ezekiel 44:30). Paul considers this act of offering to be making the firstfruit loaf “holy,” and by extension, this holiness can be applied to the whole batch of flour and its resultant bread loaves.

Paul’s second illustration has to do with a tree, its “root” and its “branches.” Branches are dependent upon the health of a tree’s root system. If the root dies, so will the branches. Branches detached from the main tree and its root will die (John 15:4-6). Paul is thinking here of a family tree, the tree of the nation of Israel. In a sense, Israel is continually blessed and made holy by the covenant God made with its great patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (see Exodus 2:24; Leviticus 26:42). Therefore, if the essential root of the tree (the patriarchs) is considered holy, this holiness extends to any branches attached to the tree.

The olive tree is a familiar and beautiful part of the landscape in Israel. It is a symbol of both strength and blessing. The psalmist wrote in Psalm 52:8, “but I am like an olive tree flourishing in the house of God; I trust in God’s unfailing love forever and ever.”

Paul uses the branch of an olive tree to picture what God has done in grafting the Gentiles, the “wild olive tree” (Romans 11:17), into the cultivated olive tree, Israel. In Paul’s picture, some of the olive tree’s branches were broken off and wild shoots were grafted into the tree. This description fits the Gentiles will, for they have been growing wild, apart from the supervision and care of God given to Israel for hundreds of years.

These new, grafted branches will be productive only if they tap “the nourishing sap from the olive’s root.” These new branches have been given a huge upgrade from their scrubby wild-tree origins. They flourish because of the new tree, not the other way around. So Paul’s word to the Gentile believers is to remember that their inclusion in the church allows them to be recipients of the great blessings the Lord has lavished on Israel for centuries. They, with faithful Jews, are now fellow heirs of God’s promises (Ephesians 3:6). Thus, there is no justification for boasting about status (compare John 4:22).

Now, Paul continues to warn his Gentile readers to consider God’s purpose in all of this. The word “granted” (verse 20) indicates that those who made the argument that “branches were broken off so that I could be grafted in” are correct up to a point. What they overlook is the reason those Jews were broken off: it was “because of unbelief.” This is not a cause for being “arrogant,” as if the Jews have been humiliated by God so Gentiles can feel superior. Rather, this is a cause to “tremble,” realizing how dire their situation was and how gracious God has been to them.

Verse 21 points out how arrogance displeases God. If the Gentiles let go of their dependence on God, God can just as easily break them off of the tree as he broke off the self-reliant Jews. What has been grafted in (the Gentiles) can just as easily be removed.
Possibility of Restoration
Romans 11:22-24

Paul now reflects that this situation reveals a paradox: God is good and severe at the same time. While the analogy of the olive tree is still clearly visible here, it has been suggested that this is more akin to presenting God as a parent. Parents know that there is a time to demonstrate great love and kindness to a child, but also a time when discipline is necessary. Discipline does not negate the love of a good parent, but to receive kindness the child must be obedient. Continuing in God’s goodness is a matter of continuing in the faith. As with the unbelieving Jews, unfaithfulness risks being cut off for the in-grafted Gentiles.

N.T. Wright reminds us that “faith remains the only valid badge of membership; anything else will inevitably lead to boasting.”

But in addition to the warning to the Gentiles, Paul also offers a word of hope for the Jews. If the wild branches, the Gentiles, have been grafted in, how much more possible is it that the original branches, the Jews, can be grafted back in.

Thus Paul’s vision is not just Gentile inclusion, but a return of fellow Jews. The tree would then thrive as new before. What a magnificent tree it would be! What a glorious church we would see!

Action Plan

1. Considering Christianity’s roots in Judaism, how should this text influence our view of the value of the Old Testament?
2. From today’s text, how can we describe the inclusive nature of God’s grace?
3. Do you think the church in general has a reputation for being a place of generosity and love? Please explain!

Resources for this lesson:


“The NIV Application Commentary, Romans” by Douglas J. Moo, pages 362-368

“Adult Bible Studies, Spring 2019, Discipleship and Mission, Teacher, Uniform Series,” Gary Thompson, pages 109-116

“The Book of Romans, The Smart Guide to the Bible Series,” Gib Martin and Larry Richards, pages 165-171

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