

Romans: The Mystery of Righteousness (part 6 of 7)

Grafted into Grace

Romans 11:1-24

Mark Vroegop

¹ I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! For I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. ² God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew. Do you not know what the Scripture says of Elijah, how he appeals to God against Israel? ³ "Lord, they have killed your prophets, they have demolished your altars, and I alone am left, and they seek my life." ⁴ But what is God's reply to him? "I have kept for myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal." ⁵ So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace. ⁶ But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace. ⁷ What then? Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking. The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened, ⁸ as it is written, "God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes that would not see and ears that would not hear, down to this very day." ⁹ And David says, "Let their table become a snare and a trap, a stumbling block and a retribution for them; ¹⁰ let their eyes be darkened so that they cannot see, and bend their backs forever." ¹¹ So I ask, did they stumble in order that they might fall? By no means! Rather through their trespass salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous. ¹² Now if their trespass means riches for the world, and if their failure means riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their full inclusion mean! ¹³ Now I am speaking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry ¹⁴ in order somehow to make my fellow Jews jealous, and thus save some of them. ¹⁵ For if their rejection means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead? ¹⁶ If the dough offered as firstfruits is holy, so is the whole lump, and if the root is holy, so are the branches. ¹⁷ 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 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. Romans 11:1–24 (ESV)

Today is Mother's Day, and I must confess that there were a few times growing up that my father said to me, "You have no idea what your mother does for you!" His exhortation was often precipitated because of some way that I took my mother for granted. Whether it was not picking up my clothes, complaining about a dinner, being annoyed that we ran out of milk, or commenting how late I was picked up from an event, my words revealed an entitlement mentality that is all too common.

Do you know what I mean by an “entitlement mentality?” I’m sure that every mom in this room knows what I mean. But just to be sure that we are all on the same page, let me define it for you. An entitlement mentality is the mindset rooted in the belief that you are inherently deserving of privileges or special treatment. It is a frame of mind where you take for granted or assume that you have certain things which should be seen as gifts and they are instead viewed as a right.

Rather than thanking your mom that she has cleaned your dirty laundry since January without you even noticing, you complain or (worse) berate her with your tone when you open your sock drawer and rudely say “Why don’t I have any clean socks?!” An entitlement mentality is not impolite; it is dangerous because your mom might just introduce you to the washer and dryer. Or (as I think every mom should do) get away for a long weekend or for a week, and you’ll learn how much it actually takes to run a household.

Spiritual Entitlement?

An entitlement mentality is not only something that kids struggle with. It is common for any group of people who become accustomed to certain blessings. As Paul turns the corner in Romans 9-11, he is concerned that Gentiles not fall into the trap of spiritual entitlement.

Given what has happened to Israel and the way that the blessings of God has been poured out on the Gentiles, they might be tempted to become judgmental of Israel and become spiritually complacent. They could make the same mistakes as Israel if they are not careful.

We could make the same mistake too, couldn’t we? We could read Romans 9-11, develop a haughty heart when it comes to Israel, miss the point of God’s offering of grace beyond the people of Israel, and place ourselves in a very spiritually dangerous situation.

We need to look carefully at the warning in this text and be advised about the potential problem of a spiritual entitlement mentality.

What Happened to Israel? (vv. 1-12)

Once again we are reflecting on the problem of Israel’s unbelief. This has been a theme through our journey through Romans 9 and 10, but Paul picks it up again in order to make his point about spiritual entitlement very clear. The information that we read in verses 1-12 is not given to us in order to be a history lesson or a rehearsing of the bare facts. Rather, it is ultimately a warning. Paul is setting the ministry of grace to the Gentiles in the context of what happened to Israel.

When my sons took a driver’s training class, there was a module on the danger of distracted and impaired driving. And beyond the statistics and the facts, they had to click through picture after picture of terrible car accidents. The point of the exercise was not to stare at the damage done to the cars, but to be warned – even shaken – by what they saw.

In verse 1 Paul begins with another question: “Has God rejected his people?” He is asking this question in light of 10:21 – *“All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people.”* The tone of this statement and others in Romans 9-10 might cause one to believe that God has

entirely, absolutely, and definitively cast His people aside. The word for reject means to push back, to drive away or to remove. Is that what happened with Israel? Has God washed His hands of them?

Paul clearly answers that God has not rejected his people. He says, "By no means!" and then provides a number of positive statements designed to support his assertion:

- He appeals to his own personal example (v. 1b). Paul is an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, and from the tribe of Benjamin. So he is a personal example that God still saves Jewish people.
- In verse 2, Paul once again appeals to God's sovereignty: *"God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew."* God has set his love on His people and He is working out a plan. To "foreknow" is more than just knowing who will choose him; it means to set one's love upon and to draw to himself. Israel was not totally rejected because of God's sovereign plan.
- To illustrate this point Paul cites the example of the prophet Elijah in 1 Kings 19 when the people of Israel were disobedient and rebellious. And yet there are 7,000 who have not bent the knee to Baal. Even though things look bleak, God is still at work. That's the point.
- Verse 5 grounds the hope for Israel solely on God's grace and His mercy: ⁵ *So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace.* ⁶ *But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace (Romans 11:5–6).*

These statements are meant to be reassuring. God has not rejected His people entirely but has preserved a remnant by divine election. In other words, in the midst of the overall rejection of Israel God's grace is still at work. The situation with Israel is not hopeless.

But there are also some warnings here. God's dealing with Israel is instructive. What do we find here?

Verse 7 re-emphasizes the reality of what Paul is saying while also adding another sobering dimension: hardening. ⁷ *What then? Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking. The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened... Romans 11:7 (ESV).* The story of Israel is not just that the people of Israel rejected their Messiah by seeking righteousness in the wrong place (Rom 10:2-3), but also that they were hardened. We heard this concept previously in Romans 9:18 where it says that God has mercy or hardens whomever He wills. The reference to hardening here is to emphasize an important warning that there have been many times in history when in response to sin, God creates a spiritual hardness in people. In other words, there is a point where a person or a nation is marked by unwillingness to listen. Biblical truth lands on an unreceptive heart. The hardness of heart is a sign of God's judgment.

The condition of a hard heart is caused by unbelief. The writer of Hebrews warns the readers about this condition which can temporarily take hold in some (Mark 6:51) and can permanently characterize others (Rom. 9:17).

¹² *Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God.* ¹³ *But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today," that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. Hebrews 3:12–13 (ESV)*

Sin has a hardening effect on the heart, and there comes a point where God gives people over to their sin such that they become "futile in their thinking and their foolish heart becomes darkened" (Rom.

1:21). While I do not think that this can happen to true believers, it certainly can happen to unsaved individuals and on a widespread scale this entire group is characterized by the hardness of heart.

The possibility of the hardness of heart should remind us that sin is not just wrong; it is dangerous. Unbelief and sinful actions create a calcification of the soul. What used to make you feel guilty becomes easy. Being blatantly hypocritical or outright judgmental becomes a part of your persona. And the Word of God just bounces off your heart and soul. Be careful! If Israel missed her Messiah and if the people of God were hardened, do not assume that you, your family, our church or our nation is immune. If it happened to Israel, it can happen anywhere.

Now to make that point even more evident, Paul cites of combination of three Old Testament passages in verses 8-10: Deut. 29:4, Isaiah 29:10, and Psalms 69:22.¹ Listen for the heavy tone regarding God's judgment.

⁸ as it is written, "God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes that would not see and ears that would not hear, down to this very day."⁹ And David says, "Let their table become a snare and a trap, a stumbling block and a retribution for them;"¹⁰ let their eyes be darkened so that they cannot see, and bend their backs forever." Romans 11:8-10 (ESV)

The warning about hardness of heart now becomes even weightier because God is the acting agent. He is the one who pouring out judgment upon the people. God has turned against his own people.

Charles Spurgeon said the following in a sermon delivered in 1887:

Hardness of heart is a great and grievous evil. It exists not only in the outside world, but in many who frequent the courts of the Lord's house. Beneath the robes of religion many carry a heart of stone. It is more than possible to come to baptism and the sacred supper, to come constantly to the hearing of the Word, and even, as a matter of form, to attend to private religious duties, and yet still to have an unrenewed heart, a heart within which no spiritual life palpitates, and no spiritual feeling exists. Nothing good can come out of a stony heart; it is barren as a rock. Pharaoh's hard heart was a prophecy that his pride would meet a terrible overthrow. The hammer of vengeance is not far off when the heart becomes harder than an adamant stone.

So the story of Israel is cautionary lesson for all of us about the danger of a hardened, gospel-rejecting heart. There is a remnant of believers thanks to God's grace, but the overall story of the hardness is one that should be a warning to all us. It cautions us about not taking sin seriously. It warns us not to assume that we can always change in the future. It compels us to trust in Christ today. And while no true believer can be permanently hardened, the example of Israel's failure shows us the possibility of a large group of people whose over-arching characteristic is a hardness of heart.

¹ Each passage has historical significance. Deuteronomy 29 is a passage that foretold the Israel's judgment by exile, yet promising a future forgiveness and restoration. Isaiah 29 is a strong judgment text that also promises future restoration in verses 17-24. And Psalm 69 is often viewed by the New Testament authors as a passage referring to the life and ministry of Jesus (e.g., Matt 27:34,48), and the enemies of Psalm 69 are contextually the Jews of Jesus' day.

What is God doing? (vv. 11-16)

However, there is still hope for the people of Israel. Verses 11-12 show us the context of a bigger plan that God is working out and how it involves the Gentiles.

¹¹ So I ask, did they stumble in order that they might fall? By no means! Rather through their trespass salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous. ¹² Now if their trespass means riches for the world, and if their failure means riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their full inclusion mean!
Romans 11:11–12 (ESV)

Is the situation hopeless for Israel? Is God finished with them? Has God totally and completely given up on them? No. According to Paul, the plan was for Israel to be made jealous by God's graciousness to the Gentiles, and to look forward to the future when Israel will be characterized by "full inclusion."

Now we will look at the inclusion of Israel in more detail next week, but for today I simply want you to note both the judgment of God and the future hope for the people of Israel. God has dealt with her severely, but the final word has not been spoken. God is not finished with the people of Israel. There will be a day when they are as characterized by belief as they are unbelief right now.

We hear the shift very clearly in verse 13 as Paul speaks directly to the Gentiles and identifies himself as "an apostle to the Gentiles." Having spent so much time talking about Israel, Paul returns to addressing the Gentile believers who are his primary audience for the book of Romans. But even in his ministry to the Gentiles, Paul does not lose sight of the mission to Israel.

In fact, Paul hopes for the expansion of his ministry ("I magnify my ministry") with the goal of making the Jews jealous. Verse 14 is a restatement of verse 11 and verse 15 is a restatement of verse 12.

¹³ ...I magnify my ministry ¹⁴ in order somehow to make my fellow Jews jealous, and thus save some of them. ¹⁵ For if their rejection means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead? *Romans 11:13–15 (ESV)*

Paul believes that if the gospel is gloriously displayed right now through the Gentiles, how much greater will the glory be when Israel is characterized by "life from the dead." For Israel to turn from their unbelief and embrace the gospel of salvation by faith would be well described as a "resurrection."² And it would be a glorious demonstration of God's glory and mercy to not only save the Gentiles but also to use the salvation of the Gentiles to bring about the salvation of Israel.

Now to make the point about Israel's future salvation clear, Paul uses two illustrations in verse 16: dough and an olive tree. Both are biblical metaphors with same basic point. Namely, that a portion of something affects the whole.

The dough metaphor comes out Numbers 15 and the Old Testament offering system. When bringing an offering of bread from the Promised Land, part of the bread was offered as symbol of gratitude to

² Mounce, Robert H. *Romans*. Vol. 27. Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995. Print. The New American Commentary.

God. And this portion of the bread was viewed as consecrating the whole. The other metaphor is related to the branches of a tree and the roots. Paul says that the roots make the entire tree holy. The roots are the patriarchs, and the promises made to them. These are a preserving force in the life of Israel. What's more, there is coming a day when the whole tree will reflect the roots. God's rejection of Israel is neither complete nor final.³

Paul is trying to help us see the hardness of Israel and the inclusion of the Gentiles in the context of a much broader plan. He wants us to see how what the future looks like and to feel the hope. Paul's ministry to the Gentiles and his rejection by the Jews could be seen in this context, and it served as a great motivator.

I don't know if you have watched any of the TV series called A.D., but I have been very interested and have watched with great interest. So far it has been a fairly accurate account of the book of Acts, and there have been two things that have been very striking to me. I have been struck by the struggle and the hope of the disciples. They are often in situations where they have no idea if they are going to live or die, and yet they know that Jesus is alive. And knowing that death cannot defeat them gives them great confidence to face their fears, struggles, persecution and even death.

Knowing the outcome or who has won the final victory gives them a fearless hope. There is a reason why texts like Romans 11, Romans 8 and the entire book of Revelation are in the Bible. They show us what God is doing so that we can have hope and preach the gospel with even greater boldness.

What Does It Mean? (vv. 17-24)

This focus of this final section is entirely on the Gentiles, and it takes us back to the theme of an entitlement mentality. Paul is a good pastor and a wise man who knows what human beings tend to do. We tend to think that we are the exception to the rule, and we can quickly forget how much like everyone else we really are.

One of the shocking realities of going off to college is that if you were top in your class in High School, you are suddenly confronted with the reality that in college there are many people who are better than you. You may have been a standout in High School but in college you are just average. And the further you go "up" the less exceptional you tend to be.

From a spiritual standpoint, Paul wanted to tell the Gentiles to be very careful about how they viewed themselves and the Jewish people. So he gives them an explanation and a series of cautions.

Paul begins by identifying in verse 17 that the Gentiles needed to view themselves correctly. While it is true that some of the Israelite branches were broken off, the Gentiles were grafted into the olive tree so that they "now share in the nourishing root of the olive tree." It is a remarkable image. The grafting of a tree branch involved the forced attachment of an "unnatural branch" to a tree such that it derives life and nourishment from it. The Gentiles have become part of the people of God whose roots are

³ Mounce, Robert H. *Romans*. Vol. 27. Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995. Print. The New American Commentary.

Jewish. Those who are not Jewish become recipients of the salvation blessings, which were first promised to Israel. The promise of the New Covenant has come, not just for Israel but for the Gentiles, both of whom are now part of the people of God. So I do not believe that the church has replaced Israel. Rather, it appears to me that Jews and Gentiles are both part of this olive tree whose chief characteristic is belief. I still think that there is a plan for the people of Israel as a whole, but for now the miracle is that this olive tree has an unnatural branch attached to it. And that branch is me! God has grafted me into the spiritual promises of redemption. Grace looks like the preservation of a remnant in Israel, the grafting in of the Gentiles, and a future ingathering of believing Israelites.

It is an amazing story, but it would be very easy for the Gentiles to forget who they are. They could become so accustomed or enamored with the spiritual blessings that they would look down on Israel and actually fall into the same spiritual mistake. Notice Paul's warnings in verses 18-24:

1. Don't be arrogant. In verses 18-19 Paul warns the Gentiles about becoming prideful as they survey the history of redemption. They might be tempted to look disparagingly at the Jewish people as they consider the extension of God's grace to them. The Gentiles could be tempted to conclude that they are superior, better, or more spiritual. In being grafted in, they could become arrogant and ironically fall into the same trap as Israel.

Listen! Arrogance, pride, and a sense of superiority over others are embedded deeply in the sinful heart of man. It surfaces in socio-economic status, racial issues, and even in regards to spirituality. To be human is to struggle with arrogance. And Paul warns the Gentiles to think biblically about themselves and the grace of God in their life. They need to be reminded who they are and where they fit in the plan of God. They were grafted in, but only because of God's grace. They needed to remember that there is a rich history and a future reality as it relates to God's grace and mercy.

C.S. Lewis called this chronological snobbery – the uncritical acceptance of the present age and the assumption that our contemporary viewpoints are more insightful. That is why he recommended reading people from another century. J.I. Packer articulated this heretical mindset with the following play on words:

the newer is the truer,
only what is recent is decent,
every shift of ground is a step forward,
and every latest word must be hailed as the last word on its subject.⁴

The warning here to Gentiles is one that we need to heed in more than just a historical sense. We also need to heed this personally. Here's my challenge: Do not get used to God's grace. Don't stop marveling at the shocking reality of what God has done for us. Remind yourself often about who you were, who you still are, and what God did to conquer your heart.

⁴ <http://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justintaylor/2012/04/23/chronological-snobbery-and-the-spirit-of-our-age/>

The test comes when you see someone stuck in sin or fall tragically. Do you think, "I'm glad I'm not like that." Or do you think, "Without God, that's what I would do." There are few things more disgusting than spiritual pride. Remember who you were before God's grace entered the equation.

2. Don't be overconfident. The other caution is found in verses 20-24. The Gentiles should not only avoid any sense of superiority, and they should also be warned about becoming too confident in themselves as it relates to their spirituality. They should tremble at how Israel was judged by God, and never stop trusting in God's mercy. The Gentiles should watch out for spiritual presumption.

In verses 20-22 the tone is sharp and direct. Unbelief was the cause of Israel being cut off, the Gentiles should learn from that example, and they should "stand fast in faith." Belief is what grafted them into the people of God, and they should never retreat from that position by starting to trust in themselves or their heritage.

Verse 22 is particularly important as we read about both the kindness and the severity of God. As the Sovereign over the universe, He is full of mercy, grace, and kindness for those who believe in Him, and He is equally full of justice, wrath and judgment against those who have not submitted to His righteousness (Rom. 10:3). The Gentiles should not make the mistake that so many people make – thinking that God is not equally just and merciful.

The dividing line between mercy and justice is belief. Our passage concludes in verses 23 and 24 with another emphasis on the hope for Israel's future faith. If they believe, they too can be grafted back into the people of God. The offer for anyone, including Jews, to come to faith in Christ stands wide open right now. Unbelievers should believe. And believers should read this text and keep believing.

As human beings there is a very strong tendency in our hearts to develop an entitlement mentality. It happens in nearly every area of life and culture. But when it comes to spiritual matters, it is especially important – eternally important – for us to consider very carefully.

If you are not a Christian, you need to know that all the beautiful things that you enjoy every single day of your life, the success that you may have had, and the fact that you are alive today are not a part of your life because of you. The reality is you do not deserve all the kindness that you have received. And I would imagine that somewhere in your heart you know that. The Bible says that the goodness of God is meant to lead you to repentance (Rom. 2:4) – to point you away from yourself and toward a relationship with your Creator through the finished work of Christ. I say this gently but with conviction: hell will be populated with people who are surprised they are there. Don't be one of those. Put your faith and confidence in Christ.

If you are a true follower of Jesus, this passage should make you tremble. While I do not think that anyone can lose his or her salvation, it is a sober warning that there is great danger in assuming that you are a believer. This passage is a good place for self-examination. As Paul said in 1 Cor. 10:12, "the one who thinks he stands should take heed lest he fall." Romans 11 calls us to not be arrogant or presumptuous. It cautions us about becoming so familiar with spiritual truths that we lose the centrality of belief.

This text reminds us that everything we have is only because of faith in Christ. There is only one hope for our past, present and future regardless of our spiritual heritage, ethnicity, or our story: believing in Christ. So never let believing in Christ become something you take for granted. Because belief in Jesus is everything and without it we have nothing.

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