

**The Secrets of the Olive Tree:
The Tree and Its Branches
Romans 11: 16 – 24**

- In chapter 11, Paul has been talking about how God is at work saving Jew and Gentile alike. And now as we come to verses 16 – 24, Paul gives us an illustration to help us understand all of this.

Romans 11: 16 – 24 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 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.

1. A review of the tree's structure

Romans 11: 16 if the root is holy, so are the branches

- As we consider this part of verse 16, we arrived at two conclusions.
 - One is that, in the most basic sense of the word, to be holy simply means to be set apart for God. Oftentimes we equate holiness with sinlessness.
 - As people holy to God, we should strive to live sinlessly, but being holy, in and of itself does not make us sinless. It merely sets us apart for God.
 - ♦ Think about Old Testament Israel. They were a sinful people, constantly complaining, grumbling, sinning, and rebelling against God. Yet listen to how God described them:

Deuteronomy 7: 6 “For you are a people holy to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth.”

- ♦ After years of grumbling, sinning, and rebelling, God still called Israel holy. Why? Because God, in His sovereignty, set them apart for Himself. Now listen to what Paul says about us.

Ephesians 1: 3 – 4 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, ⁴ even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him.

- Holy and blameless are two different words; describing two different aspects of who we are as God's chosen people in Christ. We are holy—set apart, called out from the world just like ancient Israel, and because Christ has taken all of our sin at the cross, we are blameless or sinless.

- So now that we understand the word holy, we need to ask, “Who is the root and who are the branches?” Well in this chapter, and in this illustration of the olive tree, Paul is talking about Israel, the Jewish people. They are what Paul refers to as the natural branches on the tree.
 - In the verse from Deuteronomy 7:6 we already saw that God designated Israel as being His holy (set apart) people, so we can deduce from Romans 11: 16 that the holy branches are the Jewish people, God’s chosen people.
 - But Paul said it is the root that made them holy, so who is the root? Most commentators think that Paul is talking about Abraham here. He is the root that Israel grew out of.
 - ♦ Remember when God designated Israel as holy to him in Deuteronomy 7: 6, Jesus hadn’t come—hadn’t died on the cross yet.
 - What was it that made Israel holy?

Deuteronomy 7: 6 The Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth.

- ♦ When and how did God choose Israel? When he chose Abraham.
- So, Abraham is the root, and the nourishment that the root feeds the rest of the tree are the promises that God made to Abraham:

Genesis 12: 3 in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.

- In Genesis 17, we learn what the nature of that blessing is.

Genesis 17: 7 I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.

- How would that happen? How could people living under the curse of sin ever be blessed? How could God be God to sinful people? Jesus.

Galatians 3: 7 – 9 It is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. ⁸And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “In you shall all the nations be blessed.” ⁹So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.

- Is Abraham in heaven today? There is no doubt about that. Just as you see there in Galatians 3, Abraham is held up constantly for us as the model of a faith that saves. The bigger question is what was the object of Abraham’s faith that saved him?
 - ♦ Abraham wasn’t saved simply because he believed that God would give him the Promised Land or give him a son or make his name great. Abraham was saved because he believed God’s promise that through his family would come one who would bless all the families of the earth by making a way for the curse of sin to be reversed and making it possible for God’s people to dwell with him forever.
 - Abraham, and every other Old Testament saint from Adam to Zechariah, from Moses to Malachi, from Joshua to Jeremiah, from Elijah to Ezekiel, from David to Daniel, from Isaac to Isaiah was saved by a faith. Taking what God had revealed to them

and looking forward in faith to God making a way for the curse of sin to be reversed.

- They didn't know that it would be accomplished by God's Son dying on the cross, but they believed God would make a way.

- So, even though, in this illustration of the Olive Tree, Paul does not come right out and say that Jesus is the trunk of the tree, he clearly is. He is the one that all of God's covenant promises center on. The shoot that grew out of Jesse's stump.

Isaiah 11: 1 There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit.

- If you are a little rusty on your Old Testament history, Jesse was the father of King David, and in 2 Samuel 7, God promised David that He would make David's family line a dynasty, ruling and reigning over God's people forever.
- By the time Isaiah was a prophet, Israel and David's family line were in decline. In fact they were about to be cut down by the Babylonians, as a judgment for their sin.
- But through Isaiah, God was saying that out of the stump of Jesse, there would come a shoot, that would grow and bear branches and fruit. If you keep reading in Isaiah 11, it is clear that the shoot is looking forward to the coming of Jesus.
- Unquestionably, Jesus is at the center of the olive tree. He is the one that Abraham's faith pointed to; the one faith must center on. Every branch both the natural Jewish branches, that is the Old Testament people of faith, and the grafted in branches, the Gentiles, must be attached to Jesus by faith like Abraham.

Galatians 3: 26 – 29 So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, ²⁷for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

- The tree, that Paul talks about here in Romans 11, has Abraham as its root, and the sap running through the tree is faith in the promises of God and all of those promises run through the trunk, which supports the whole tree, which is Jesus. Attached to that trunk are natural Jewish branches, grafted in Gentile branches, and Paul tells us that one day there will be Jewish branches that had been previously cut off, but will once again be grafted in by God.

2. What the tree symbolizes and why it matters

- Some people look at this tree and all they see is the Jewish people. For them the tree represents Israel. But that can't be what it is.
 - Along with Abraham, Jesus, who by the way was Jewish, and the faithful Jewish natural branches, like Moses, David, Isaiah, etc. what else do we see as part of the tree? Gentiles grafted in.
 - It is not just a Jewish tree. I'm a gentile. I didn't have to convert to Judaism to be a Christian. There was a movement in the early church to try to make that happen, but it was settled once and for all at the first church council held in Jerusalem, and we find a record of that council in:

Acts 15: 1 But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.".... some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, "It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses."

- But that judgment of that first council was that Gentile converts did not have to be circumcised and become Jews. There could be both Jewish and Gentile Christians and they would all be part of the same tree. It wasn't just a Jewish tree.
 - ♦ In deciding this what they were saying was that circumcision would no longer be the mark of God's covenant people, instead, it would be baptism.
- There is one tree that has both Jew and Gentile branches, but they are all baptized into Christ as one.

Ephesians 2: 12 - 16 remember that you (Gentiles) 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.

- Jew and Gentile are one. Part of the same tree. The dividing wall of hostility is torn down, in Christ, we are one.
- Some people look at the tree and they say that the tree represents God's elect.
 - That's close, but almost true isn't true. Why can't this tree be God's elect?
 - We need to think about two things to see why the tree can't be representative of the elect of God.
 - ♦ First, remember what Paul has already taught us:

Romans 8: 30 those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.

- ♦ If you are elect, you will be saved, and you cannot lose that salvation. Those who God predestined (that is chose, elected) for salvation, will be called by God, and if they are called by God, they will be justified by God, and if they are justified by God, they will be glorified. Do you know what that means? It is an unbreakable chain. If you are God's elect, then you will be saved. There is nothing that can undo it. Because it is God who is doing it, not man.

Romans 9: 16 So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy.

- Our salvation is a work of God in us from beginning to end, so therefore an elect person can never lose their salvation. But look what is happening here with this olive tree in Romans 11.

Romans 11: 17 some of the branches were broken off

Romans 11: 20 They were broken off because of their unbelief



Romans 11: 22 Otherwise you too will be cut off.

- Now, if an elect person cannot lose their salvation, then how can this tree represent the elect? Branches are being broken off. If this tree represents the elect, then that would imply that a person can indeed lose their salvation, but that goes against everything Scripture teaches. Everything Paul has been teaching us here in Romans.
- I would argue that the only thing it can represent is what we refer to as the visible church. The terms visible church and invisible church are terms that are maybe new to some, so let me just take a quick moment and define them.
 - To define them, we need to start with the word church.
 - The word church is a translation of the Greek word ecclesia that we find used throughout the New Testament. Ecclesia literally means the “called out ones.” “Called out ones” sounds like “set apart ones” doesn’t it? And, remember, set apart means holy.
 - So, in the New Testament the church was called the ecclesia or called out ones. But isn’t that the exact same concept that we already saw in the way that God described Old Testament Israel. As a people holy to God, weren’t they also the called out? The set apart?
 - In fact, interestingly enough, look how Stephen, the first martyr of the New Testament church described Old Testament Israel in his speech to his accusers.

Acts 7: 37 This is the Moses who said to the Israelites, ‘God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers.’ ³⁸ This is the one who was in the ecclesia (congregation) in the wilderness with the angel who spoke to him at Mount Sinai, and with our fathers.

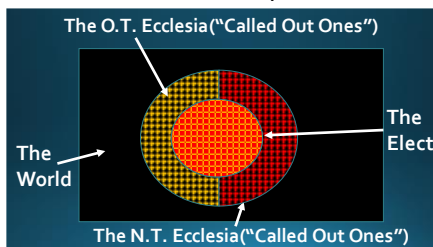
- Old Testament Israel and the New Testament church are both the called-out people of God. Both holy to God. Called out to live in covenant faithfulness to God and marked with the covenant sign (circumcision in the Old Testament, baptism in the New Testament).
- The visible church is what we see here on earth—a people set apart for God. It is Israel, the Old Testament people of God, and the New Testament people of God who bear the sign of the covenant and live in the covenant community.
 - But is everyone in the visible church saved, the elect of God? The answer is no. The elect of God are certainly part of the visible church, but so too are those who:

1 John 2: 10 went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us.

- The visible church is all of the elect of God, both Old and New Testament, but it also has a part of it that is not saved, non-elect, who may have professed faith, may live as part of the covenant community, and even promise to live in covenant faithfulness to God, but, in the end, do not.

- Those who by faith live in covenant faithfulness to God are a subset, if you will, of the visible church, that we call the invisible church. The invisible church is only comprised of God's elect, those who are truly saved.

Paul already pointed this out to us earlier as he spoke about Israel in:



Romans 9: 6 – 7 not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel,⁷ and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring,

- For example, and I am giving just what I think are probably obvious examples, because with human eyes it is really hard for us to see who is in the invisible church and who is not, but consider a man named Korah, who was part of the Old Testament visible church. He was an Israelite, lived as part of the covenant community, during the time of Moses. He enjoyed all the blessings of being part of that community, but he raised a rebellion against Moses and when God arranged for a showdown between Moses and Korah, the earth swallowed up Korah and he was broken off or excommunicated from the covenant community.
- Or Achan. Achan lived during the time of Joshua and the conquest of Jericho. He bore the sign of the covenant and was part of the covenant community, part of the visible Old Testament church, Israel. Achan disobeyed God direct instructions that no Israelite was to take any of the spoils of war from Jericho. God ordered Achan to be stoned and broken off, excommunicated from the covenant community.
- How about the New Testament? Maybe Judas is a prime example. He was part of the covenant community of the Old Testament, a circumcised Israelite, he was also one of the twelve disciples. He was the ultimate insider, part of the visible church, but I think I can pretty safely say, that he was not part of the invisible church. He was broken off, and in essence when he hanged himself after betraying Jesus, he excommunicated himself.
- Throughout its history, both Old and New Testament, the visible church has been filled with unsaved people who, for a time, were marked as part of the covenant community, lived among the covenant community, enjoyed the blessings of the covenant community, but did not take the blessing of the covenant into their soul in a way that caused them to live in covenant faithfulness.
- Think of the blessing that came to a person in the visible church, of Old Testament Israel. Paul listed them out for us.

Romans 9: 4 – 5 They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises.⁵ To them belong the

patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is God over all, blessed forever.

- They had it all, everything to point them right to Christ, and they rejected Christ. Their rejection of Christ proved that they were only part of the visible church, not the invisible church. As a result, they were broken off, excommunicated by God from the covenant community.
- What about us in the New Testament visible church? We have everything Israel had, plus we have Christ crucified and raised from the dead. We have the preaching of the word, the Lord's Supper, baptism, prayer, the fellowship of believers. But we can have all of that and still not have Christ, and the result of that will be that many who are part of the visible church will find themselves cut off. Don't you see that is what Paul is saying here?
- Jesus expressed this exact same thought in:

Matthew 22: 14 for many are called but few are chosen.

- So, as you sit here this morning, which are you? Are you merely part of the called, the visible church, or are you part of the chosen, the invisible church? How can a person know?
 - It is hard. John Newton, the slave trader who got saved and later penned the hymn Amazing Grace, once said, "When I get to heaven there will be three things that will amaze me. First, I will be amazed at who I thought for sure would be here but was not. Second, I will be amazed by who I thought for sure would not be there but was. And finally, most of all, I will be shocked and amazed to find myself there."
- It's hard to know who is part of the invisible church, but there are telltale signs, and we see them on prominent display, here in Romans 11: 16 – 24. These telltale signs point to the difference between those who merely called and those who are chosen. Those who are merely part of the visible church, and those who are the elect, the invisible church.

3. The difference between being broken off and abiding in

Romans 11: 20 They were broken off because of their unbelief,

Romans 11: 23 if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in

- If unbelief is what causes branches to be broken off, then what is it that will cause a branch to abide or remain? Belief—Faith.

Romans 11: 22 provided you continue in his kindness

- What does it mean to continue in kindness? It means to trust, to have faith in the kindness of God shown to us through Christ and the cross
- There are a lot of people who are part of the visible church who think they have faith, but it is not the right kind of faith. It is faith in their faith. "I've been baptized so I am saved. I go to church, and it is the right church, so I am saved. I know the catechism inside and out, so I am saved."
- That is faith in your faith, but it is not saving faith. That is a faith of arrogance and pride in yourself. "Look at me and who I am and what I know." That is the kind of faith that Old Testament Israel that caused them to be broken off.

- Go through the Gospel accounts and Jesus' interactions with the Jews and what you see over and over again is the Jews rejecting Jesus because they had faith in their faith. Faith in the pedigree from Abraham, faith in Moses and the law.

John 9:29 We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from."

- That faith made them part of the visible church but not part of the invisible church. That faith made them proud and arrogant, and, as a result of their pride they were broken off.
- Along with unbelief, look what Paul warns us about in this passage.

Romans 11: 18 do not be arrogant toward the branches

Romans 11: 20 do not become proud, but fear.

- What is the opposite of arrogance and pride? It is humility.
 - You can not have real faith without humility. Why? Because the starting point of real saving faith is to know that you are a sinner in need of grace. To know that your own righteousness, your own good works, the church you go to, the things you know, is not what will save you.
- If you are proud and arrogant in yourself then your faith is in yourself. Saving faith is in Christ. Saving faith starts with a humble recognition that you are sinner who desperately needs grace. That is why Paul said:

Galatians 6: 14 far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.

- It is easy for us to boast and be arrogant in our faith, isn't it? To look down on those who aren't where we think we are. Theologically, morally, you name it, we do it all of the time, and Paul is warning to be especially careful to guard against this. We were nothing when Christ found us. We were dead in our sins. There is nothing to be proud of except for the cross of Christ.
- The branches that remain on the tree, are those who humbly receive that grace, mercy and righteousness of Christ freely offered in the Gospel.
 - Are you humbly abiding in that grace?

"This is faith: a renouncing of everything we are apt to call our own and relying wholly upon the blood, righteousness and intercession of Jesus."— John Newton

- Is your faith humbly abiding in Christ alone, or is your faith in your theological and moral uprightness? Think what Jesus said in:

Matthew 18: 3 – 4 "Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."

- The truly elect of God are those who by the grace of God have a humble child like faith that rests in the mercy and grace of God alone, as shown to us in Christ Jesus.