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The Kindness and Severity of God

Romans 11.21-24

Series: The Pure Gospel

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The Village Church

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I. Introduction

- A. I have attended dozens of conferences
 - 1. Theological conferences, biblical conferences
 - 2. And in those conferences I have heard hundreds of sermons
 - a. By some of the finest expositors anyone could find
 - 3. And coming from those fine expositors, I've heard many truly great sermons
- B. But I have to admit, I remember almost none of the details of those great sermons
 - 1. Those sermons have become, for me, more like the relative humidity in which I live
 - a. They have become my dominant environment; the environment which has prospered and grown me, almost without me being aware of that transformation
 - b. They have been absorbed in me
 - c. They have impacted me
 - d. They have shaped who I am, and what kind of pastor and preacher I have become
 - 2. Even though I remember almost none of the details of many great sermons
 - 3. But there have been exceptions
 - a. There are some details that are etched in my memory
 - b. And probably always will be
- C. One of those occasions occurred a number of years ago – probably at least 20 years ago
 - 1. I was at a conference and it was one of the first times I heard Sinclair Ferguson preach
 - a. And I've come to love Sinclair
 - b. He always speaks with such a pastoral heart and concern that theological truth pierces my soul with such clarity and conviction that I am always moved and edified
 - 2. And one of the first times I heard him it was at a conference that focused on the character of God
 - a. And Sinclair was given the task of preaching two messages
 - b. One about the omniscience of God, or the knowledge of God
 - c. And the other about the simplicity of God
 - 3. The first time he spoke he repeated his assignment

- a. And then he said – and this is what I remember the most – the following with characteristic humility
 - 4. “I am too ignorant to speak of the knowledge of God”
 - a. Ok, I get this; I can certainly relate to that
 - b. But it was what he said next that arrested my attention and changed my whole perspective on the nature and character of God
 - 5. He said, “I am too complex and complicated to speak of the simplicity of God”
- D. Wait. What?
 - 1. Sinclair – and by implication – me –
 - a. I am the complicated one?
 - b. I am the complex one?
 - c. And God is the simple one?
 - 2. At that time in my life, every theological bone in my body wanted to protest!
 - a. No!
 - b. That can’t be!
 - c. God must be the complicated one!
- E. We talk about the attributes of God
 - 1. We speak about His omniscience, His omnipotence, His omnipresence
 - 2. We explore in Him such aspects of His nature as His love, His righteousness, His mercy – even His wrath
 - 3. We talk about His self-existence, His unchangeableness and His eternity
- F. And envision that God is this cosmic machine, made up of all these parts
 - 1. And His attributes are somehow held together by divine superglue
 - 2. And when God shows up on the stage of history, He shows up in different forms
 - a. Sometimes He’s a God of love
 - b. Sometimes He’s a God of justice
 - c. Sometimes a God of wrath
 - 3. And for our part, we like to pick and choose which God we like
 - a. Like moving through the buffet line at the Vue
 - b. Picking up green beans and prime rib and the potatoes au gratin
 - c. But passing by the Brussel Sprouts (or in my case, asparagus)
 - 4. We conjure up a god of our choosing
 - a. A little love, a little mercy
 - b. Occasionally justice when it suits us, especially when it’s applied to somebody else
 - c. Omniscience is ok, as long as he doesn’t do anything about what He finds in the deepest recesses of my soul
 - 5. But God is complex; He’s complicated
- G. But it turns out – as Sinclair wonderfully explained – it’s the other way around
 - 1. **Deuteronomy 6:4–5** (ESV) —
 - a. 4 “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.

- b. 5 You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.”
 - 2. You see, it turns out, there is only one God – not many
 - a. And more importantly, God is not divisible
 - b. He cannot be divided up into parts
 - c. He is pure unity
 - d. He is one
 - 3. God, you see, is the quintessential **integer**
 - a. An integer is a whole number, and cannot be expressed in fractions
 - b. He has **integrity** – He is the foundational integer
 - c. He is one
 - d. He cannot be divided
 - 4. We are the ones who are complex and complicated
 - a. We are changeable and confused
 - b. We are dysfunctional
 - c. We are the ones who are **dis-integrating** (dis-integrated)
 - d. We are the ones who struggle with integrity
 - 5. Our theological surmisings about the attributes of God, as valuable as they are in understanding who God is, are mere human attempts to break down the deity into bite-sized portions
 - a. But in the final analysis, God is not divided
 - b. He is who He is
 - 6. In the burning bush encounter, Moses asks God, “Whom shall I say sent me?”
 - a. And God says, “I AM WHO I AM”
 - b. “Say, I Am sent you”
 - 7. Moses was faced with the stark simplicity of His Being
 - a. “I Am” is the verb form of the Hebrew noun for “Is”
 - b. God simply “Is”
- H. Now, the reason I raise the issue of the simplicity of God – and our relative complexity – is that our text this morning raises this issue
 - 1. **Romans 11:22** (ESV) —
 - a. 22 **Note then the kindness and the severity of God...**
 - 2. That sure seems like a divided God
 - a. We can’t imagine kindness and severity existing in the same person at the same time
 - b. But God is not like us
 - c. **God is holy; He is other**
 - d. And all His attributes are holy attributes
 - e. His love is holy love
 - f. His kindness is holy kindness
 - g. His justice is holy justice
 - h. And His severity is holy severity
 - 3. When you encounter God, you encounter the One God

- a. And it turns out that if you find Him to be kind to you, or if on the other hand you find Him to be severe with you
 - b. It is you who are complicated and changeable
 - c. God is who He is
- 4. **Romans 11:22** (ESV) —
 - a. 22 Note then the kindness and the severity of God:
 - b. severity toward those who have fallen,
 - c. but God's kindness to you, provided you continue in his kindness....
- I. So, it's not a divided God we encounter
 - 1. He is One God; the holy God
 - 2. And our response determines whether we find Him to be kind or severe

II. Text

- A. **Romans 11:21-24** (ESV) —
 - 1. 21 For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you.
 - 2. 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.
 - 3. Otherwise you too will be cut off.
 - 4. 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.
 - 5. 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.

III. **The Olive Tree**

- A. Let's rewind and put all this in context
 - 1. Paul is concerned in Chapters 9-11 with the response of his own Jewish kindred to the gospel
 - 2. In fact, he is so concerned, that after a glorious doxology, in which he exclaims that nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ
 - a. That he plunges into a kind of spiritual depression
 - 3. **(Romans 9.2-3)** "I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut of from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh."
- B. That leads Paul into a discourse in which he deals with whether the promises of God for Israel have failed
 - 1. And he offers a number of arguments that, indeed, no, God's promises for His covenant people could never fail
 - 2. He says that not all who are descended from Israel are true Israel
 - 3. He says that all of those who are elect of Israel are certainly saved
 - 4. He says that the Hebrew Bible clearly teaches that not all Jewish people will be saved, but that some Gentiles would be

5. He says that, even in times of widespread unbelief and disobedience in Israel, there has always been a remnant who have believed, so God's promises to Israel are sure
 6. He says the Paul himself is an Israelite, so in fact God's promises to save Israel are satisfied even if no other Israelites are saved – though many more Jews have, in fact, believed
 7. And he says that Jewish unbelief is their own fault, for they have supposed that obedience to the law of God would save them, when in fact, no one can be saved by the law
 - a. And that only by faith in the promises of God is anyone saved, Jew or Gentile
 8. And of course, Paul lays out all of these arguments with text after text after text from the Hebrew Bible, the OT
- C. That's the essence of Romans 9-11 so far
1. In less than five minutes, we have reviewed 15 sermons!
 - a. (Why didn't you do it that quickly the first time?)
- D. Now, as we move toward the end of this section, Paul is using an illustration to bring together the truths that he has been weaving
1. He speaks of an **Olive Tree**
 2. The olive tree is a familiar OT metaphor for Israel
 3. But Paul uses the olive tree to speak to Gentiles
 - a. And he indicates that Gentiles who are saved by faith in Jesus Christ alone have been grafted into the olive tree
 - b. And that by virtue of being grafted into the Jewish olive tree, Gentile believers must not become arrogant
 4. **Romans 11:17–18** (ESV) —
 - a. 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,
 - b. 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.
- E. So, as the olive tree represents the people of God – predominantly Jewish people under the Old Covenant
1. Some of the Jewish branches have been broken off due to unbelief
 2. And Gentile believers, although wild olive branches, were grafted in the one olive tree through faith in Jesus

IV. **Broken Off and Grafted In**

- A. Paul uses this great truth, however, as a warning to Gentile believers
 1. He warns them not to be arrogant toward the Jewish branches that have been broken off
 2. For even Gentile believers are themselves supported by the one root of the one olive tree
- B. **Romans 11:19–20** (ESV) —

1. 19 Then you will say, “Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in.”
 2. 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.
- C. That brings us up to today’s text, where Paul continues in this same vein
1. That is, a warning to Gentiles

V. The Unsparing God

- A. **Romans 11:21** (ESV) —
1. 21 For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you.
- B. Wow
1. Watch your step, Gentile believers
 2. You play fast and loose with your salvation
 - a. And begin for a moment to think that somehow you’ve been saved because you’re smarter than the Jewish people
 - b. Or wiser than the Jewish people
 - c. Or more righteous than the Jewish people
 3. You will end up in the same condition as your Jewish neighbors
 - a. The condition of unbelief
 4. For you contribute nothing to your salvation – save the sin that required a savior in the first place
 - a. That your salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone
- C. And if you slip from your believing condition, your branch will be cut off just like any other branch, Jew or Gentile
1. “For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you.”
- D. God is the unsparing God
1. He is no respecter of persons
 2. **Romans 2:11** (ESV) —
 - a. 11 For God shows no partiality. (Or God is no respecter of persons)
- E. Peter affirms the same thing through his encounter with Cornelius’ Gentile household in Acts 10
1. **Acts 10:34–35** (ESV) —
 - a. 34 So Peter opened his mouth and said: “Truly I understand that God shows no partiality,
 - b. 35 but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.
 2. Jew or Gentile – God is not partial toward either
 - a. And if He didn’t spare one group through their unbelief, neither will he spare you!
- F. **1 Peter 1:15–19** (ESV) —
1. 15 but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct,
 2. 16 since it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy.”

3. 17 And if you call on him as Father who judges impartially according to each one's deeds, conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile,
 4. 18 knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold,
 5. 19 but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot.
- G. Nothing but the blood of Christ can take away our sin
1. Nothing but the grace of God accounts for our salvation
 2. And if you slip away from that great truth – be warned
 3. For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you.
- H. But wait – does that mean that those who have believed, they can lose their salvation?
1. Not at all
 2. If you've truly been born again, the Spirit of God births in you the very opposite desires and inclinations
 - a. The Spirit of God provokes in you a contrite heart
 - b. A heart that humbly casts oneself on the mercy of Christ alone
 3. But dear friends – there are plenty of people, plenty of church-going people, who would say that they are believers
 - a. Who profess faith
 - b. But who do not possess saving faith
- I. So, the test is, do you consider that there is even an ounce of moral superiority in you compared to another group, Jewish or otherwise
1. Then, be warned
 2. Come to Christ and be saved
 - a. Cast yourself on His mercy alone
 3. "For, if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you."

VI. The Kindness and Severity of God

- A. Romans 11:22 (ESV) —
1. 22 Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen,
 2. but God's kindness to you, provided you continue in his kindness. Otherwise you too will be cut off.
- B. The Severity of God
1. What makes you think that a just and holy God would countenance the presence of one who dismisses the love of God in sending His own Son?
 - a. His own Son, who took our nature upon ourselves, lived a life we could never live
 - b. Who died on the Christ, experienced in your place the just wrath of Almighty God
 - c. And who rose again, conquering death
 - d. Vindicating His person and work

- e. And who sits now at the right hand of Almighty God reigning and ruling
2. What makes you think that such a God as that would countenance your presence
 - a. When you play fast and loose with His unbelievably gracious and merciful redemptive act?
3. We often hear from critics that there are two different Gods – one OT God and a different, kinder and gentler, NT God who is Jesus Christ
 - a. Nothing could be further from the truth
 - b. Jesus said with great clarity, “I and the Father are one”
4. No one spoke more about hell in the NT than Jesus
 - a. Jesus was the one who said there would be hell for those who reject God’s redemptive plan
 - b. That hell is characterized by fire
 - c. That hell is a place of conscious torment
 - d. That hell is where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth
 - e. That hell is of everlasting duration
5. That’s severe!
 - a. No wonder Paul was overwhelmed with grief over his kinsmen’s rejection of the gospel
6. But the critics say, “Oh, those are just metaphors”
 - a. Yes, but the biblical pattern is that the metaphors are not as severe as the reality that they represent
7. So, not the severity of God
 - a. (Romans 11.22) “Severity toward those who have fallen”
8. To be “fallen” means to have rejected the grace of God in unbelief
 - a. Which was characteristic of most of the Jews in Paul’s day
 - b. But which is also characteristic of Gentiles too – should they fall away from believing

C. **The Kindness of God**

1. But then note the kindness of God
2. Kindness – the astonishing blessings of His grace for all who believe
3. **Ephesians 1:3–14** (ESV) —
 - a. 3 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,
 - b. 4 even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should **be holy and blameless** before him. In love
 - c. 5 he predestined us **for adoption to himself** as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will,
 - d. 6 to the praise of **his glorious grace**, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved.
 - e. 7 In him we **have redemption through his blood**, the **forgiveness of our trespasses**, according to the riches of his grace,
 - f. 8 which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight

- g. 9 making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ
- h. 10 as a plan for the fullness of time, **to unite all things in him**, things in heaven and things on earth.
- i. 11 In him we have **obtained an inheritance**, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will,
- j. 12 so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be **to the praise of his glory**.
- k. 13 In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, **were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit**,
- l. 14 who is **the guarantee of our inheritance** until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.
- 4. That's a stark contrast, isn't it
 - a. Severity v. kindness
- 5. What's your choice?
 - a. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ?
 - b. Or your imaginary self-righteousness?
 - c. Kindness?
 - d. Or severity?
- 6. God doesn't change
 - a. He's always the same, Holy God
 - b. But whether you experience kindness or severity depends on your casting yourself on His grace
 - c. Or not...

VII. **Continuing in Kindness**

- A. **Romans 11:22** (ESV) —
 - 1. 22 Note then the kindness and the severity of God:
 - 2. severity toward those who have fallen,
 - 3. but God's kindness to you, **provided you continue in his kindness**. Otherwise you too will be cut off.
- B. Continuing in kindness
- C. I once did a funeral for a young man; a man in his 20's
 - 1. He was killed in a boating accident for which he was responsible
 - a. Responsible because alcohol was involved
 - 2. According to his parents, he had grown up in church
 - a. Had gone to youth group
 - b. And had made a profession of faith as a teenager at a church camp
 - 3. But once he was out of the house, he never concerned himself with spiritual things
 - a. He showed not one iota of evidence that his faith was genuine
 - b. Whatever faith he presumed to have possessed did not continue
- D. **John 8:31–32** (ESV) —

1. 31 So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him,
2. “If you abide in my word, [continue in my word] you are truly my disciples,
3. 32 and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”
- E. You are truly disciples of Jesus if you continue in faith
 1. Continue in His kindness
- F. I had a doctor one time who told me, “You know, these conditions will either get better or worse”
 1. I said, “Brilliant! You went to medical school to learn that!”
 2. But it’s even more true spiritually
- G. If you are truly a disciple of Jesus, you will get better
 1. You will grow
 2. You will be changed from glory to glory
 3. You will be transformed, little by little, into the image and likeness of Jesus Christ
- H. How?
 1. By worshiping with your brothers and sisters
 2. By hearing the scriptures read
 3. By studying the Bible
 4. By listening to the proclamation of the Word in sermons
 5. By praying with your brothers and sisters
- I. If you don’t do those things...
 1. Well, “provided you continue in his kindness. Otherwise you too will be cut off.”

VIII. The Great Grafting In

- A. What does this mean, however, for the Jewish people?
 1. After all, that’s where all this began – with Paul’s anguish over their salvation
- B. Romans 11:23–24 (ESV) —
 1. 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.
 2. 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.
- C. If the Jewish people do not continue in their unbelief, they will be saved!
 1. There is great hope for the Jewish people
 2. And we will see more of that in our next message
- D. In the meantime, follow Paul’s argument
 1. God has the power to graft them in
 - a. Into what?
 - b. Into the original olive tree – the cultivated olive tree
 2. If God can graft in Gentiles – those wild olive branches – into the olive tree, it is easy for Him to graft in the fallen natural branches into the native, cultivated olive tree
- E. This prefigures the great grafting in

1. The grafting in of Jewish people who believe in Messiah Jesus
 2. Who, by faith alone, will find themselves abiding in the original olive tree
 - a. The tree that represents the true people of God
- F. At this stage in Paul's exposition, we're getting a tease
1. A tease that something very special is bound to happen
 - a. Happen to the very Jewish people who are Paul's own kinsmen
 - b. The very people that Paul is such anguish about
 2. In the next message we'll see where this tease leads us
 - a. And it will be a glorious revelation of God's plan of redemption

IX. Conclusion

- A. In the meantime, let's remember what this text is all about
1. Gentiles, there is no place for pride in the place of the Jewish people
 - a. There is no sense of superiority
 - b. If you are saved, you are saved by grace alone through faith alone by Christ alone
 2. And if you suppose that there is any ounce of credit that you contribute to your salvation, be warned
 - a. If God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you
- B. God is God; He is holy; He is One
1. And if you experience Him in His kindness, it is because of His grace to you
 2. But if you experience Him in His severity, it is because you have concocted some scheme by which you believe you earned salvation, that you worked for it, that you achieved it
 3. But only God can achieve salvation for you
 - a. And He will only graft you in because of faith in His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ
- C. Jew or Gentile – the choice is clear
1. Kindness or severity
 2. Faith or self-righteousness