

May 19, 2019

## Lesson 12: The Call of the Gentiles

Scripture: Romans 11: 11-24

### Context:

We continue on with our series on call with a continued look at the book of Romans. This week's section moves to one chapter that is part of longer section in which Paul explains God's grace and how it works in the lives of all God's people. For Paul it is imperative as the church in Rome seems to be struggling with people thinking they are better than others with the way they understand faith.

Chapter eleven is the climax of Paul's discussion of human sin and the redemption found in Jesus Christ. There has been a narrative of blessing that began with Abraham and his descendants, which came to a culmination with redemption in Christ.<sup>1</sup> The story began with Israel and now concludes with them being offered the same opportunity as the Gentiles. Now, all can be chosen people without origin of faith being a major factor.

Paul begins this part of the letter by reminding both the Gentiles and the Israelites that they have failed in the sight of God. He is quite forceful as he reminds the readers that he is an apostle to the Gentiles and he is even addressing them in this letter as well. They are to have life just as the Israelites are to have life. And Paul plays on the fact that he knows that his attention to them will make the Israelites jealous and upset.

To emphasize his point, Paul moves to the allusion of an olive tree. It is clever way to help his audience imagine where they are on the tree and what that says about grace. The basic gist of his allusion is that grace may be free, but it is not to be presumed upon, is not to lead to arrogance, and is not cheap.<sup>2</sup> For this olive tree, all branches have been grafted and the wild branches (Gentiles) have no claim on the tree.<sup>3</sup> The natural branches (Israelites) have been broken off as they reject Christ, and if they are regrafted, they will hold the same status as the Gentiles.<sup>4</sup> There is a choice that can be made with this free gift of grace.

Paul also wants this passage to help people understand human responsibility and grace. As those individuals accept it, there is a change that comes from God within them. For if grace summons a response from the graced, it is also grace alone that makes the response meaningful.<sup>5</sup> Thus, those who brag or try to use grace as some kind of elevated

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<sup>1</sup> Paul J. Achtemeier, "Romans," *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (John Knox Press; Louisville, KY, 1985), 176.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 182.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 183.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 183.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 184.

badge have missed the point that has been given.

### **Application**

An important note for any conversation about the olive tree analogy and how it correlates to faith concerns our relations with our Jewish brothers and sisters. In no way is this passage to be used to say that the Jews are being grafted out of a relationship with God. When we talk about early Christianity, we are actually talking about early Christianities, with an emphasis on the plural. In the first and second century, people were still trying to figure out the differences between Judaism and Christianity and it was messy.

When we are reading this text, we are to imagine that these are people figuring out who Jesus is in their lives and how that will play out. The Jews are not cut off from God, but have a different understanding of who God is to them. The differences are clear, but it does give us a right to say they are “not saved” and are wrong. When we do so, we step right into Paul’s admonition to not brag about our faith.

What we do hear make pretty clear for life application today in this passage is that pride can blind us even in our faith journeys. Paul makes it pretty clear that there are people within the early church who think they are right about everything, all the way down to their understanding of what it means to be Christian. They think they have every detail figured out and they know all the right answers. They have all the answers to the test and they ace the class as everyone else fails.

Yet what happens when we claim to know everything and that we are the authority on who is in and who it out is that we mess up the very thing we seek to protect. We lose our relationship with God when we claim to have all the answers. We cease to learn more about God and we cease to learn how to love others who are different from us.

Pride is perhaps one of the most dangerous sins in that it can be covered up in different ways. It usually comes as a slippery slope that we cover up with humor or with our sense of self. We earned the right to say what we think because of our age. We earned the right to treat people that way because we are in a position of authority. We were the ones to be voted team captain, so we clearly are the most valuable player.

There is nothing wrong with a healthy sense of accomplishment or self-confidence. Age does hopefully lead to wisdom. Positions of authority do mean that we hold power that can be used for good. Being selected by peers and colleagues does mean others have faith in us. Those are good things.

But as we’ve learned in this scripture, this does not make us better than others. It does not mean we can treat people however we see fit. It does not mean that our pride should blind us from the fact that we are all sinners and that none of us deserve the grace we are given.

How do you see yourself being prideful? How do you treat “the Gentiles” in your community or in your church? Who needs to be included more in how you do life together? How does power play a role in pride? Who do you need to extend grace and empathy to in your daily life? What can you do to make sure that you are not puffed up with pride but are instead gifted with grace?

Rev. E. Hunter Pugh  
Associate Pastor

First United Methodist Church  
1380 W. Main St.  
Dothan, AL 36301  
E-mail: [hunter@fumcdothan.org](mailto:hunter@fumcdothan.org)

