

Honesty Without Arrogance  
Romans 11:15-24

Have you ever needed to do some kind of chore around the house and you were pretty sure that doing it would cause you to get dirty, so you felt like you should change your clothes?

But at the same time, you didn't really want to stop to change. You thought, "*Well, maybe I can do this and just keep from getting dirty?*" But then, sure enough, you got something on your good clothes! Some dirt or some grease.

It's hard to handle dirt without getting dirty, or to cook without getting ingredients on you. It's difficult to work on a greasy car without getting grease on you. And in a similar way, it can be difficult to deal with the sins of others without falling into some kind of sin yourself.

When we recognize sin in other people, we easily become self-righteous. When we call out sin in others, we have the tendency to do so pridefully. We do this naturally, and we're all guilty of it.

But in Romans 11 the apostle Paul goes so far as to say that if self-righteousness bubbles up from within you and remains – if, as you identify sin in another person, arrogance surfaces and continues – it could actually be a sign that you are not truly born again.

However, we can reject self-righteousness and arrogance. God has dealt with it through the person and work of Jesus and made a way for us to move past it. Then we can recognize and call out sin with humility and love.

But it's so easy to become haughty. How can we speak honestly about another's sin without becoming arrogant?

Paul helps us here, and in the context of his explanation about Israel, we find guidance. Notice the outline on page 6 in the WG. Honesty without arrogance. How? Consider God's great kindness (vv.15-20) and His great severity (vv.21-24). We have to set our minds on these two attributes of the living God.

Now, many Jews had rejected Jesus. But Paul longed for more of them to believe in Christ. He hoped that through his gospel ministry to the Gentiles, that more and more Jews would recognize the glory of Christ and the freeness of God's grace. Paul previously explained how their unbelief in Christ was God's means of opening the gospel to all the nations of the world.

And this was a wonderful thing! But how much more wonderful (Paul reasons) for more Jews to now come into and be part of what Paul describes as the "true Israel" – members of God's family not by birth or through works, but by grace through faith. This is why he says, in verse [15], "*For if their rejection (that is, the non-believing Jews) means the reconciliation of the world (that is, salvation for the Gentiles), what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead?*"

In other words, spiritual regeneration for so many of these Jews – that they would be born again, trust in Christ, and one day participate in the glorious resurrection of all believers. This is the ultimate goal of the promises to Abraham; this is the grand result of Israelite history and the law of Moses.

And Paul makes this interesting statement in verse 16. He talks about dough and a root being holy. These are examples of the start or the origins of something. If the origin of something is set apart and consecrated before God, then what comes from it will be also.

The history of the Jews (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) was a holy history. They are the dough; they are the root, along with all the OT history. Believing Gentiles and even non-believing Jews share this common history.

It's important to recognize that he's addressing Gentiles in this letter. The Roman church consisted mostly of those of a non-Jewish ethnicity. And Paul reminds them that the way they were brought into the covenant community of God was not natural. Unbelieving Jews were like branches of a tree broken off, and these Gentiles believers are like branches grafted in.

Grafting is a process where a branch from one tree is made to grow onto another tree. There's an exposed end on the branch pressed against an exposed place on the tree, and something is formed to hold the branch in place until it bonds to the tree. The branch and the tree grow together. The branch becomes part of that tree.

Gentiles being brought into the covenant of grace is something comparable to that. We are like branches from a wild olive tree grafted onto this cultivated, cared-for tree. Compare how God cared for and cultivated Israel, vs. the wild, pagan history of Gentiles.

However, notice verse [17], Paul says, *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.* These Gentiles shouldn't be haughty toward those Jews who have rejected Christ. Apparently, there had been some of that.

Look further, Paul says, *"If you are, remember it is not you who support the root, but the root that supports you."* The root is the rich history of Israel, the foundation of the patriarchs, of Moses and the prophets. This family of God into which they've been adopted through Jesus is sound and healthy. Gentiles should just be thankful to be included.

Verse [19] *Then you will say, "Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in."* This is said with (most likely) a conceited tone. Paul replies, verse [20] *"That is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand fast through faith."* This is more evidence that faith is totally a gift from God. Faith is not something to boast about. It is received as a result of unmerited favor – by grace.

Therefore, Paul says, *“So do not become proud, but fear.”* But fear. That’s interesting. They should be afraid. You may think, *“Oh Stacey, look that one up in the Greek manuscript. Do what you do there where you tell us some synonyms to help us understand.”* I did, and I will. It means be afraid.

Be alarmed. If you feel conceit welling up, be worried. If you notice your chest starting to puff out with boastfulness, be scared. Take those feelings seriously, because if you start taking credit for God’s mercy toward you – if you start basking in some self-glory or feeling better than others, you don’t get it at all.

If another person’s rejection of Christ causes pride in you, such that you look down on them and feel smug and self-satisfied, you need to go back to the source. If seeing some kind of sin in another person causes arrogance in you, you should consider God’s great kindness toward you, that He didn’t leave you in your pitiful, godless state. Instead, He came to you.

You weren’t looking for Him; God came looking for you. You weren’t interested in what He had to give. You wanted a reward you could earn. Or maybe you thought you were beyond ever being able to earn what God had to give. But He surprised you with His grace.

In Titus 3, Paul describes our natural state without Christ. He says, *[3] For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another. [4] But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, [5] he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, [6] whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, [7] so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.*

The daily life of a Christian must involve letting that truth sink in deeply. That reality must envelop our hearts and flood our thoughts each day. It has to be central in every worship service. Every sermon should lead to it, even as we are instructed in other aspects of God’s Word. It must be always before you every day. And as we consider God’s great kindness in our salvation, arrogance will dissipate.

Where the great kindness of our gracious God is enjoyed, pride has no hold. Have you lost sight somehow of the great kindness of God? We’re here for you to see it again. But His kindness is only half of God’s remedy for arrogance.

In this next section, Paul makes a startling claim. Look at verse *[21]*, *“For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you.”* Now we understand, of course, that someone who is born again cannot lose their salvation. God secures to the end those whom He saves. In that sense, a true believer shouldn’t be concerned about God not saving him or her.

So why does Paul use this conditional language? He's speaking to the whole church. In every church, there's a mixture of those who are saved and those who are not. There will be some who think they are saved when in fact they are not.

Remember that the Jews who were rejected by God were rejected because of their unbelief. Among other things, they were proud and arrogant. They thought they knew God. They thought they were "in." But if they knew God, they would've recognized Christ. They would've believed He was God-come-to-earth. And many Jews did as time went on. But pastors must often use this kind of language in an effort to compel every person present to search their hearts and to examine themselves to see if they are truly in the faith.

So I urge you now to do the same. Is there anyone you won't forgive? Is there anyone to whom you refuse to show mercy? Anyone you've given up on? If so, well then why would you expect God to show you mercy and forgive you? Shouldn't God judge you with the same measure you're using to judge someone else? That's what Jesus said.

And God will judge. Look at verse [22], Paul says, "*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.*" We have to humble ourselves before God again and again.

The Christian life is filled with ups and downs, successes and failures as we try to walk by faith. No one is perfect. And repentance contributes nothing to salvation, but repentance must be displayed in the lives of those who are truly saved. Your growth may be very slow, but those who receive God's kindness will display growth.

We have to remain in the Lord. We have to continue in His kindness.

We have to return again and again and again to Him. And He will always receive us.

He will even receive those Jews who have previously rejected Christ. Look at verse [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.*

Some have pointed out that this is abnormal and they claim that Paul's illustration breaks down because you don't see branches grafted back on the tree from which they were cut. Those branches are discarded and they die. They can't be grafted back in. But notice what Paul says in verse 24. What God is able to do here is "contrary to nature." It's not normal or natural. It's otherwise impossible. But God can do it. He can open the eyes of those hardened by unbelief.

To those who He brings in by grace through faith, God shows His kindness. And to those who are not, He shows His severity. There's something of a play on words there, because those people are severed from God. They are literally cut off from life in Him.

This is a side of God that many people choose to deny. Perhaps, to an extent, we all do. But Dr. James Boice makes a good point here. He writes, *"We tend to treat God as a benevolent old man who will never do anything as harsh as judge someone. We are especially prone to this if we are only cultural Christians and not truly regenerate. We need to disabuse ourselves of such fantasies. God is love, but He is also a God of strict justice. His rejection of the Jews should be a warning to us never to presume on His goodness but rather always to strive to make certain we are truly saved."*

God is kind; He is also severe. He grafts many in, but He also cuts many off. And this should spur reverence within us. It should cause fear and trembling as we work out our salvation. God's grace is not a license to carry on in sin with no remorse or desire to change. For us to identify and even call out sin in others without arrogance, we must also consider God's great severity.

You have to face the fact that if you are arrogant and uncaring toward those without Christ, then perhaps, in the end, you too may find yourself cut off from the living God. If we don't take our own sin seriously, we may one day discover that we never knew Jesus.

And you see, Jesus is where we must look for God to change us into people who can be honest about the sin of others without becoming arrogant. Nowhere else do we see the fullness of God's great kindness and His great severity as we see it displayed in the person and work of Christ.

Consider the kindness of God in sending Jesus to live a perfect life in your place. Christ displayed complete honesty without arrogance as He dealt with the sins of others. He was firm and yet compassionate. He was unwavering and yet understanding. And He offers His perfect record to you by the grace of God.

Also, consider the severity of God in sending Jesus into the world to die a sinner's death in your place. The prophet Isaiah described the suffering of Christ. He wrote, *"By oppression and judgment he was taken away; and as for his generation, who considered that he was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people?"* Jesus absorbed the full severity of God for sins.

Nowhere is both God's kindness and severity exhibited as in the suffering Messiah. Look to His cross and His tomb. Your arrogance will disappear. See His glorious resurrection. Your haughtiness will melt away. Trust and rest today in Jesus and His finished work. His grace is deep and wide.

Let's bow in prayer.