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Series: Romans: The Just Shall Live by Faith
Message: Holy Dough and Holy Branches

Transcribed Message
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Romans 11:16-22

We come to a section in Romans 11 in which Paul does something that your English teacher taught you to be very careful about. He mixes his metaphors. Yes, the dreaded mixed metaphor. Do you know what a mixed metaphor is? It's called different things sometimes. It's called a mixaphor, but more commonly is called a malaphor. I imagine that you already knew that because it's not like it's rocket surgery or something. We're going to begin with a review this morning so that we have all of our ducks on the same page. That was my last intentional malaphor, I promise. Don't encourage me. I've got a whole bunch more just waiting.

In this review, let's step back into Romans 11. If you haven't been with us, this is what we're doing. We're going through what is called Paul's magnum opus, the book of Romans, the greatest of all of the letters Paul wrote. In this particular section that we're in, chapters 9 through 11, we're in a magnificent section that is challenging but also incredibly encouraging. As we've made our way through the chapters, we've seen at least these three things. These chapters are all about Israel. This is Paul stepping back from those first eight chapters and then pressing into a lot of questions that no doubt have been raised. All of this centers around God's plan and purpose for Israel. It started off in that 9th chapter and verse 1 with Paul pouring out the anguish of his heart for his fellow believers.

Then we noticed as well that these chapters tell us that God is not finished with Israel. That question was percolating in the minds of many. It may seem as if God is not doing anything because so few Jews are coming to faith. So few Jews are responding to the gospel that maybe God is finished and it is over. Paul's ministry has been moved towards the Gentiles and so there were those that were saying and suggesting these things and Paul takes that on.

Then he says thirdly in these chapters that Israel's rejection is not total and it's not permanent. It's partial and it's temporary. We noted in our last time together in Romans that the blindness that is now covering the eyes of the Jewish people, this stupor as Paul called it, is a part of God's discipline. In that discipline, God is opening a door to Gentile inclusion. On the one hand, God is disciplining His people but in so doing He's opened the door for us, which is most of us, to Gentile inclusion. It also has done something else, and that other thing that it has done is what he takes on in this chapter and these verses that are before us this morning.

In verses 16 to 22 he's going to say to us there is no place for pride in the Christian life. There just is no place for pride in the Christian life. Never forget that everything we have is all of God's grace. We step away from Paul dealing primarily with the Jewish issue to do a side note here and speak to primarily the Gentiles. Let's notice that. An important word to Gentiles. I want to begin with just a basic lesson in theology. If you ask most people today what is the first attribute of God that comes to mind, I think the answer both in the church and outside of the church is probably the love of God. There's nothing wrong with that answer. The love of God is absolutely amazing, isn't it? The way that He has demonstrated that to us and does demonstrate that to us, it would be a very good answer to say the love of God.

I think though that if you step back into the Old Testament days and you said to the average Israelite what is the first attribute of God that comes to mind, I have a pretty strong feeling that most of them, a majority of them, would say the holiness of God. The holiness of God. Remember, we've referenced this verse before. Back in Deuteronomy chapter 7 and verse 6 when God talks about the fact that He has called these people out, he says in that 6th verse, "For you were 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 of the earth." He underscored right from the beginning this matter of holiness.

As you read and study the Old Testament especially but all of Scripture you realize that this word "holy" is attached to a lot of things. It's attached to ground. Remember to Moses, He said Moses, take off your sandals. The ground you're standing on is holy. They were a holy nation. The homes that they lived in were holy. The ground that they planted their crops in were described as being holy. They observed a holy

Sabbath. There was holy oil. There was holy water. Almost everything could be described as being holy to God because it underscored the fact that it was set apart to God. As Paul steps into this, reminding us as Isaiah said holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty. Now interestingly, he takes that word and he attaches it to two other things – to dough and to branches, two different extremes. Let's look at that.

There are two vivid pictures in these verses. They speak about Israel's past and they speak about Israel's future salvation. Note three things briefly by way of a introduction to this section. This illustration is challenging. I think when I first put the outline together I had said this illustration is difficult. When you pull a Romans commentary off of your shelf and there are six different ways that you can understand this section, then you have to go okay, this is going to be challenging. This is going to be difficult. That's exactly what we have in these verses. When you read verse 16: "If the dough offered as firstfruits is holy so is the whole lump, and if the root is holy so are the branches." What do you think Paul means? Most of us are asking that question. What is going on here? What do you have in mind, Paul? So this is a challenge to us as we step into this.

Secondly, it's always important that you do not press the details of an illustration like this beyond their intent. It is almost like coming to a parable. The parables were designed to give a primary lesson and if you get focused on all the minutia, all the details, you very quickly find yourself in some trouble. We don't want to assign more meaning than these details require. We're going to try and simply focus on the big picture.

Then thirdly Paul's concern is church unity. That's what's behind these verses. Paul's concern for church unity. Paul had no doubt heard in reports coming from the church at Rome that there was percolating a divisive spirit between the Jews and the Gentiles. We've touched on this before. Remember the church at Rome as it began was largely Jewish. The persecutions came. They were driven out of Rome. Then the churches were primarily Gentile. The persecution subsided. The Jews came back. The congregation is mixed again. But there is a natural tension there that has historically always been and continues to this day. It reminds us that even in our own culture there are struggles between ethnicities and it isn't always to be underscored or understood on

the basis simply of race. It is primarily to be understood on the issue of sin in the heart of every person. That's just the nature of who we are. We oftentimes have our prejudices and our discriminations against other people for whatever the reason. Paul is speaking to that here. There's a conflict that goes on between these two groups and he wants them to understand this truth. He is going to step into this in fact a lot more in chapters 14 and 15 as well. All of that to say, if unity was on Paul's heart in the 1st century it should be on our heart in the 21st century as well.

At our elder meeting last Tuesday night, the elders spent a significant amount of time talking about the fracturing that is going on, not just in our country but primarily in the churches. The church very much reflects what's going on in the broader culture in the divisiveness of spirit because of so many different issues of the church itself. We just underscored the fact that if we're going to fight against that, it is going to be because the gospel is always at the center. It is the gospel that is the centerpiece of the gospel that changes hearts. It's the gospel that unites. We're united around Jesus. We're not united around a political persuasion or political viewpoint or political party. A part of our concern was just to be able as a body of believers to create an environment in an atmosphere where everybody is welcome. Wouldn't it be wonderful if Republicans felt welcome here at Covenant? Wouldn't it be wonderful if Democrats felt welcome here at Covenant? Wouldn't it be wonderful if Independents felt welcome here at Covenant? Wouldn't it be wonderful if people who didn't have any interest at all in politics felt they could sit here together with us on any given Sunday morning or in any small group that meets and feel absolutely accepted because it always centers around the gospel and it centers around Jesus? That's really what's going on here. We're not any different. That's the point. 1st century or 21st century. Paul's heart is for unity.

Now look at this first metaphor. A picture from the kitchen. Or maybe better yet, a picture from the bakery. "If the dough offered as firstfruits is holy so is the whole lump." This is a very brief but kind of fascinating picture that Paul gives us here. What I think Paul is illustrating is underscored by that word "firstfruits". My sense is that as a Jewish reader hears this book being read, and then later as they read it themselves, and they come across that word firstfruits, to a lot of the Gentile audience maybe that did not resonate immediately, but I can assure you that every Jew that heard Paul use the word

firstfruits knew exactly what he was talking about. If they really knew their Bible, as we should, their mind immediately went to Numbers 15. In Numbers 15, God told the children of Israel when you go into the land this is what you're supposed to do. It centered around this matter of firstfruits and the offering of firstfruits to God. So you go into the land. You plant your crop. You harvest your wheat. You press it and grind it into wheat and then you prepare to make bread. You get your dough made. You put it in your bread making machine. They didn't do that. That's what we do. But they made that dough.

My mom loved to bake. The biggest bowl that she had she would prepare her dough in that bowl. The yeast mixture would rise up and she'd punch it back down. Then she'd let it rise some more and punch it back down. I don't know how many times you're supposed to do that. You ladies may know. Some of you guys might know. But anyway, the process was happening. In this picture Paul is saying you reach into that ball of dough and you take out what literally becomes the firstfruit. That first loaf of bread is baked and it is then given to the priests. It is offered as a firstfruit. It's offered in dedication, in the setting aside, in the recognition, in thanksgiving to God, in gratitude to God. But it is also this. It is also the recognition that a portion of something affects the whole. A portion of something affects the whole. The dedication of that one loaf, the firstfruits, whatever it was, in this case it's a lump of dough, communicates the dedication of the whole lump. It's all the Lord. It's all set apart.

I think in this picture it's fair to say because of what he is going to talk about later that Abraham is most likely in Paul's mind viewed as that first lump that comes out of the dough. Abraham and the patriarchs represent the beginning of the nation. It is the looking forward to the descendants that are going to come out of the seed of Abraham that is envisioned here. God has a plan for Israel. He is going to do it. There is more to come. Just as that loaf of the firstfruits said there's more to come. We can thank God in advance that He is going to provide for us and take care of us. He will do it. Abraham was set apart. The first lump. The whole lump of dough is set apart because the one comes from the other.

The second metaphor he is going to step into with a lot more detail. Let's look at the second one. Now we go from the bakery in the kitchen to the garden and we go

specifically to this matter of horticulture. I was at Lowe's a couple weeks ago on a Saturday, that really cold Saturday. The garden section of course was open. They had a table there with gardening experts. On this particular Saturday, all of these gardeners are sitting there with hats, winter coats, and gloves, and I couldn't help but go up and ask is this the new gardening attire in Oklahoma. I think they thought it was funny. I'm not sure. But in this particular case, let's look at the parts of this tree because I think this is what Paul wants us to see.

The root first of all that he describes. "And if the root is holy so are the branches." The root again is Abraham. That's the corollary between these two illustrations. That lump of dough that was first and the root which is first. They represent Abraham. They represent the patriarchs. They represent Genesis 12. In Genesis 12 what did God say? Abraham, I'm promising you three things. I'm promising you land, seed, and a blessing. Out of you, Abraham, is going to come a nation and through that nation there is literally going to be the blessing to all the nations of the world. That is important as we unfold the rest of the story. The promises of God to Abraham began right here in the root system.

The second thing that we notice is the natural olive tree is Israel. The natural olive tree is Israel. In the Old Testament on a number of occasions, it is actually linked together that the olive tree was representative of the nation of Israel. The root is Abraham. Up out of the root comes the trunk and branches and the olive tree. Broadly speaking, this is important when he talks about the olive tree, this natural olive tree. He's talking broadly about the Jewish people. I think in this illustration as it unfolds he is talking about those who believe and those who do not believe. He's talking about the national identity of God's chosen people. The nation of Israel, the Jewish people, in that sense. That is what is in view.

Then the third element is mentioned in verse 17. I'm not going to read that verse yet but just look at that 17th verse and in the middle of that verse there's a description of a wild olive shoot. The wild olive shoot. Who do you suppose the wild olive shoot is? Take a guess. Gentiles. It's us. We're the wild olive shoot. What does that look like? What does that mean? it means that we're like a wild olive tree growing out randomly in the field. It's not been cultivated. It doesn't get trimmed up. It doesn't get cared for.

Nobody fertilizes it or prunes it. That is us as Gentiles. We were not originally a part of the Abrahamic line. We were Gentiles. God called the Jews as His chosen people. That's what Paul is underscoring in that 9th chapter along about verse 4. He lists all of the blessings that have come to the Jewish people. They have the commandments. They have the promises. They have the patriarchs. They have the Sabbath. They have it all. They are the blessed people of God. We're over here. We're just growing wild. We're out there in the field. Nobody cares. Nobody's cultivating. Nobody's paying any attention. We're in this sense outside of that blessing.

The outcome does bring us to verse 17. Look at verse 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 of the olive tree." Paul takes us into the olive grove. Even today in Israel, olive trees and olive oil is a big part of their economy. They have thousands upon hundreds of thousands of olive trees all through Israel. It's a big deal and this resonates immediately with the Jewish people as they're reading that these trees live to be not just hundreds of years. They estimate that there are olive trees in Israel that are thousands of years old. This is a beautiful picture.

What is Paul describing here is this matter of grafting? He is describing grafting. Now some of the branches are broken off. notice that. "But if some of the branches were broken off..." What was one of the first things you see in that sentence? The word "some". Some. Some of the branches were broken off. Not all of the branches. It can't be all of the branches because there's always a remnant. Some of the branches are broken off. Think of the Jews. You can go to any particular timeframe but think specifically of the Jews in Jesus's day. Think of men like Caiaphas or Ananias the high priest. Think of these men leading an entire nation away from the Messiah. Think of that which is described here, that they will be broken off because of unbelief. Think of those who followed and on that eventful day cried out, "Crucify Him! Crucify Him!" A heart of unbelief against the revealed Son of God, the Messiah of Israel. They're broken off. They're cut off. He came to His own and His own received him not. That's one piece. Some of the branches are cut off.

Notice the other part. Some branches are grafted in. I have never grafted a branch into a tree. I can mow my yard but I have never grafted a branch into a tree. I

know just looking at this group some of you have done that. I watched this on YouTube and it's pretty cool how they work that new branch into the side of that trunk and they nurture it. They get it to where it begins to receive the nourishment of that trunk. That's what he says. He speaks of this nourishing root. I have to tell you when I read that the wild olive shoot that is grafted in, you know one of the first verses that came to my mind when I read that was in 1 Corinthians 6 when Paul is describing the believers at Corinth. He goes into that list of some really not very attractive behavior and at the end of that he says, and such were some of you. Such were some of you. That's where we were. We were that wild olive tree. Uncultivated. Uncared for. Unattended. And then Jesus comes along and He grafts us into the tree. He grafts us into this nourishing root and the sap of this life-giving tree begins to flow into your life and you become a part of the olive tree that is giving you life and sustaining you spiritually.

This is a side note. I don't think we stopped becoming Gentiles. Some people read this differently, depending on your perspective as we've talked about numerous times. I don't think we stop being Gentiles. I don't think Jews stop being Jews. I don't see how this passage plays out in that way that it does if that happens. But Paul does talk in Galatians 3 and in Ephesians 2 about how God broke down that wall of partition. He made it possible for Jews and for Greek and Gentiles to come together and be one in Christ, to receive the nourishment of the tree, to be brought together to experience the unity that Jesus prays for in John 17. That's a beautiful picture.

So far in the story, we've got this beautiful olive tree. The sad part is some are cut off in unbelief. We have a beautiful part in that some are grafted in and given life. Human nature being what it is, look at point number four. A warning to heed. We begin in verse 18 and it to me just can't be any more clear than the way Paul says it. "Do not be arrogant toward the branches." Do not be arrogant. he's talking to Gentiles and he's saying do not be arrogant toward the branches. "If you are, remember that it is not you who supports the root but the root that supports you." How foolish is that! How in the world can you be arrogant when the very life-giving sustenance is what you're drawing from out of this tree to which the branches are originally a part! Do not be arrogant. This is an imperative. This is a command. This is in the present tense. He is basically saying stop it. Stop being arrogant. What was the very same thing that caused Israel to

stumble? What was the very thing that caused the Jewish people to stumble and fall? Pride. Arrogance. Presumption. We have what we have because of who we are. We have what we have because we're so special. We have what we have because we deserve it. He says to us be careful that you do not become arrogant. Gentile Christians, be careful that you don't think you're more worthy than those Jewish people who've been cut off. You're dependent on the root. We're the ones who have been invited in to Abrahamic blessing. Our Christian faith has a distinctly Jewish heritage.

I've addressed this before and I'll address it every time we come to it. There is absolutely, positively, unequivocally no place for anti-Semitism in the church of Jesus Christ. It is a sad historical picture that at various times and even still to this day within the Christian church there is the foolishness, the absolute insanity biblically speaking of anti-Semitism when we realize that the very Scriptures from which we read come to us from Jewish authors. Our Savior is Jewish. Jesus is a Jew. Jewish jokes should never come out of your mouth. You might as well be making a joke about Jesus when you do that. We should not be stereotyping Jewish people in any way. Our heritage is that we have been invited in to this tree of Abrahamic blessing. We would have nothing if it were not for that blessing.

It can happen again. Paul says in verses 19 to 21 it can happen again. "Then you will say branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in – that is true." It's almost like Paul is talking again to this objector. We've seen this many times in Romans. It's this person standing up in the room and he's speaking to Paul in this dialogue. So you say the branches were broken off that I might be grafted in. And Paul says that's right. "— that is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand fast through faith. So do not become proud but fear. For if God did not spare the natural branches neither will He spare you." Israel was disciplined because of their unbelief. That's what this whole section is telling us. You stand fast because of your faith. Persevere in your faith. Press on in your faith. That's the difference.

My friends, church history again is filled with illustrations of it can happen again. Verses 19 to 21. All you have to do is pick up a church history book to realize that verses 19 to 21 are played out just as Paul spoke of. In fact, here's Paul writing the book of Romans in 57 AD. John writes the apocalypse, the book of Revelation about 95

AD. What does he do right at the beginning of the book? He gives Jesus's word to the seven churches. Most of them have yielded to apostasy. Most of them have departed from the Word. Most of them he brings a rebuke to. We're 45 to 50 years after this word.

Look at what is today the modern nation of Turkey. What was Turkey in Paul's day? It was the place that he went on all these missionary journeys planting churches all throughout Turkey. The light of the gospel has basically been quenched in Turkey. I know there's churches and other believers, but Turkey does not stand as a beacon of the gospel. Today think of North Africa. North Africa was once a vital part of Christian church history. Augustine, Clement, Origen, Athanasius. All of these amazing church fathers came out of North Africa. Where is the gospel in North Africa? It is extinguished. Look at Europe, where Paul may have actually made his last missionary venture all the way as far west as potentially Spain planting the gospel. Look at Europe today and they have one cathedral after another that stands as a museum to unbelief, darkness throughout the continent, the place where the Reformation broke out in 1517 now cannot articulate the gospel in a consistent manner. Then you come to the West, to America. Look at the church in America today. Look at what we're grappling with in the church today. Think of how few churches gather. This is not a point by the way of patting anybody on the back. It's a point of sadness to think of how many churches gather all across this nation where there are literally tens of thousands of churches with one goal in mind – to open the Word of God, to read the Word of God, to study the Word of God, to hear the Word of God, to lift voices in praise to Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Think of the minuscule number percentagewise of churches today in America that are committed to that.

There's an article that I printed at the welcome booth called "How to Renew a Decadent Evangelical Culture". The title is sad enough just to say. That the evangelical church in America could be connected with the word "decadent"? Why would that be? Do you think it's possible because we spend most of our time trying to be like the world? It is insanity. The church that is holy and set apart is in such pursuit of the world and the successes of the world that we raise up these celebrity pastors who become untouchable, unaccountable. What does it lead to? It leads to decadence. It leads to

decadence. How we need to listen to the warning of Paul! It can happen again. It can happen again.

Now look at something to remember. Verse 22. “Note then the kindness and the severity of God, severity towards those who have fallen but God's kindness to you, provided you continue in His kindness otherwise you too will be cut off.” What is going on here? The very first word of the verse is the word we need to note. ESV says “note”. The American Standard says “behold”. That word is used is about 1000 times in the Bible. It means just what it says. Stop. Take note. Give consideration to. pause and think about this. Don't hurry past. And what are we not to hurry past? It's easy to note, to behold, to pause, to think about the kindness of God. It is easy to do that with the love of God. That's why we say God is love first because that's an easy, welcoming concept. It is not nearly as easy to behold and to note the severity of God.

By the way, just as we get further into this verse that word “severity” comes from the Greek root word for cut off. They're one in the same family. It is not so much that we want to think and pause and think about the severity of God. What is the severity of God? In the minds of many, it is something that you aren't even supposed to consider. That speaks to the decadence in the church today. There are large numbers of people who simply discount the idea that there would be a God who could be linked to severity. That sounds a lot like judgment. That sounds an awful lot like wrath. We've advanced beyond that kind of God in the 21st century. But not so in the mind and the theology of the apostle Paul. There is a severity that Paul wants us to consider.

What is in view here when he talks about we could be fallen and that we could be cut off? Let me tell you what is not in view. In my opinion, what is not in view is loss of salvation. Paul did not forget what he wrote in Romans 8 verses 28 to 39. He didn't spend 12 verses talking about the absolute surety of our salvation, the absolute confidence that we have that God is going to do what He has promised. It's not what I have promised Him but what He has promised me. Paul did not have a mental lapse from chapter 8 to chapter 11. There is no contradiction here. Begin once again by noting what we know clearly and we step into what we need to understand better.

Throughout these verses Paul, as I said at the very beginning, is speaking broadly. He is speaking broadly about the nation of Israel as the people of God, as a

chosen people, including believers and unbelievers. That is the tree, the olive tree. God is dealing with them in severity. They are under discipline. Not permanently. Not totally. Partially, because of unbelief. They have rejected the truth. They have turned from it. They have not believed. Gentile believers are grafted in. That is a picture of God's kindness. We stand in this place of blessing. Right now, God is using Gentiles to bring the gospel to the world. The Jewish people are not at the forefront of worldwide evangelism. Certainly God is using Jewish people in advancing the gospel, but if you look at church history and you look at what's happening right now, it's the Gentiles that God is using as the point of the spear. This is the time of the Gentiles the Bible speaks of. This is God's blessing, the Gentile nations, because they have been brought in to this place of Abrahamic blessing.

That, my friends, is going to end. This is not just a word of warning. This is also a word of prophecy. That prophecy is going to be fulfilled when we get into the tribulation and God raises up 144,000 Jewish witnesses to be the point of the spear and take the gospel to the nations. But for now, Paul's word to us is stay in this place of blessing as the collective Gentile representatives. This is not speaking of individual salvation. This is not threatening you with the loss of salvation. He is not saying God will cut you off from the tree if you do thus and so. He's talking in these two broad categories, the place of severity and discipline to Israel, and the place of blessing because we've been brought in to the blessings of the Abrahamic covenant. But if we do not remain in belief, Paul says we too could be cut off and we will be cut off. That is in fact the case. There's no place my friends for pride in the Christian life. Everything that we have, everything we have is because of God's grace.

What do we take away? The answer to the question – How to renew a decadent evangelical church – the only way Christians make a difference in this world is to live distinctly holy lives. Holiness and humility always go together. God tells us He resists the proud but He gives grace to the humble. Church, stop pursuing the world. Stop pursuing the things of the world. Stop desperately wanting the affirmation of the world. Stop patterning your lives after the world. We are a called-out people. We're a holy people. We are set apart unto God. The gospel by definition requires a brokenness and a humility. The gospel requires that you and I say to God I have nothing to offer You. All

I can do is receive what You have promised to give to me. I believe that what Jesus did was all that needed to be done. I put my trust in that alone. And God says He gives us the gift of eternal life. My friend, I implore you this morning to humble yourselves before a holy and righteous God. Acknowledge that you have sinned and fallen short of His glory. Receive what Jesus did for you and for me as payment for our sin and live forever.

Let's pray. Father, thank You for this amazing reminder of all that You have done for us, all the blessings that have come to us because of Abraham and Your including us in this place of favor, in this place of blessing. Father, thank You for Jesus. We thank You for the gospel. We thank You for the church. We pray that You would strengthen us Purify us. Cause us to consider deeply the kindness, but also the severity of God. We pray in Jesus's name, amen.