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GUARDING AGAINST SPIRITUAL PRIDE

Romans 11:16-24

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Romans Lesson 70

Guarding Against Spiritual Pride Romans 11:16-24

Years ago, Dr. H. A. Ironside, who was pastor of the prestigious Moody Church in downtown Chicago, felt that he was not as humble as he should have been. So he asked an older friend what he could do about it. The friend suggested, "Make a sandwich board with the plan of salvation in Scripture on it. Put it on and walk through the business district of Chicago for a whole day."

Ironside followed his friend's humiliating advice. After he got home, as he took off the sandwich board he caught himself thinking, "There's not another person in Chicago that would be willing to do a thing like that."

Spiritual pride is an insidious enemy that we all continually must guard against and fight. It was one of the main sins of the Pharisees. They thought that they were a notch above their fellow Jews (John 9:28-34) and far above the despised Gentile dogs. To confront such pride, Jesus told the parable of the Pharisee and the publican who went up to the temple to pray (Luke 18:9-14). The Pharisee thanked God that he wasn't like the publican. But how many times have you read that story and thought, "Thank God that I'm not like that Pharisee!"

The apostle Paul apparently knew from some of his contacts in Rome that there was a problem with creeping spiritual pride on the part of the Gentile Christians against their fellow Jewish believers (he deals with this more in chapters 14 & 15) and also against unbelieving Jews. Left unchecked, this attitude would lead to division in the church, to anti-Semitism that would choke out witness to the Jews, and to the spiritual ruin of those who continued down that path.

In our text, Paul counters this problem with an illustration of an olive tree and its branches. He shows the Gentiles that they are not the root, but rather are branches from a wild olive tree that have been grafted into the cultivated tree, supported by the root. Three times (11:18, 20, 25) Paul directly warns Gentile believers

against spiritual pride. They were no better than the Jews, but were grafted into the tree by God's grace alone. And if the Gentiles do not curb their pride, they could be broken off as the unbelieving Jews were. He also encourages evangelism toward unbelieving Jews by showing that in God's sovereign plan, the branches that were broken off because of their unbelief will be grafted back in when they believe (11:23). In fact, God is moving salvation history toward that end (11:25-26). Applied to us, Paul's message is:

Guard against spiritual pride by remembering that salvation is by grace alone and by maintaining faith and fear before the God of kindness and severity.

Illustrations ought to make the truth clearer, but sometimes they can have the opposite effect, especially if we try to figure out the details beyond the intent of the illustration (James Boice, *Romans: God and History* [Baker], 3:1343-1344). It's easy to get mired in the details of Paul's illustration here and end up with all sorts of problems. For example, some authors say that the olive tree represents Israel and at first glance this seems reasonable. But if the tree is Israel and Gentile believers are grafted into that tree, then we become Jews. Also, some point out that when a wild olive branch was grafted into a cultivated olive tree, it was to reinvigorate the old tree. But that would mean that Gentile believers give new life to Israel, when Paul states that the unbelieving Jews have been temporarily broken off the tree.

On the other hand, if the tree represents believing Jews you have a problem, because then Paul would be teaching that believers can lose their salvation. Some of the branches were broken off. Some solve this by saying that Paul is talking in terms of nations, not individuals, which is partly true. But that weakens Paul's exhortation against spiritual pride, because it's easy for individuals to shrug off national warnings by saying, "That may be true generally, but it doesn't apply to me." Also, if Paul is only talking in national terms, it would imply that the Gentiles have now replaced Israel in God's program, which could result in the anti-Semitism that Paul is combating.

So we need to be careful not to press the details of this illustration too far. The olive tree represents in the broadest sense the people of God. In the Old Testament era, this was Israel, made up

of both believers and unbelievers. It now is composed of the church in the broadest sense, made up of believers, but also of some that profess to believe, but are not true believers. These are the ones that Paul warns may be cut off. God is able to graft the Jews back into the people of God if they do not continue in their unbelief (11:23). But we need to stay focused on Paul's main purpose for this illustration, namely, to confront any spiritual pride on the part of Gentiles in the church; and, to confront any anti-Semitism stemming from such pride that would choke out zeal for evangelizing the Jews. Since the root of both problems was spiritual pride, we'll focus on how to guard against this dangerous sin.

1. Guard against spiritual pride by remembering that salvation is by grace alone.

Spiritual pride creeps in when we forget that salvation is by grace *alone*, not because of anything good in us. God is in charge of salvation history, working according to His sovereign, gracious choice (9:11-24; 11:7, 28). No one, whether Jew or Gentile, deserves salvation. It is always by God's grace alone.

- A. God's grace toward Abraham was the basis of the Jews' privileged position as God's chosen people.

You may be wondering, "Where in the world does Steve find Abraham in these verses?" I confess, I didn't see him here at first, but virtually all commentators agree that the root (11:16) refers to Abraham or also to the patriarchs Isaac and Jacob. In 11:28, Paul says that from the standpoint of God's choice the Jews "are beloved for the sake of the fathers." This goes back to Genesis 12:1-3, when God called Abram out of Ur of the Chaldees and told him to go to the land He would show him. God promised to bless Abram and make from him a great nation, so that in him all the families of the earth would be blessed.

Later, Moses told the Israelites (Deut. 7:7-8), "The Lord did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any of the peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but because the Lord loved you and kept the oath which He swore to your forefathers, the Lord brought you out by a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt." In other words, God didn't

love the Israelites and choose them because of something worthy in them. Rather, He chose them and loved them for the sake of His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And He chose those men not because of anything meritorious in them, but simply by His sovereign grace alone (Rom. 9:11-13, 16).

So in Paul's illustration, Abraham is the root and the branches are the people of God in the broadest sense, descended from the patriarchs. But we need to back up and figure out what Paul means by the first piece of dough and the lump (11:16). Paul is referring to Numbers 15:20-21, where Moses tells Israel to offer the first of their dough to the Lord. Although the Old Testament never explicitly states it, Paul infers that if the first piece of dough is holy, then the rest of the lump is consecrated, too.

But what does he mean? He may be referring to the Jewish remnant of believers as the first fruits that signify that eventually the entire nation will be set apart unto God. But most commentators agree that the two illustrations in 11:16 are parallel. The first piece of dough and the root both refer to the patriarchs. The lump and the branches refer to the nation of Israel.

"Holy" in this context does not refer to personal or inward holiness, but rather to the fact that Israel as a nation was set apart to God in an external and relative sense (Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* [Eerdmans], p. 701). As such, Israel had been adopted as sons, they saw God's glory in the wilderness and in the tabernacle, they had received God's covenants and His law, and through them the Savior had come to earth (Rom. 9:4-5). Paul's point in 11:16 is that God will keep His promises to the fathers by keeping their descendants as His people and saving the bulk of them at the culmination of history. And if any Jews were inclined to boast in their privileged position, they needed to remember that their privileges were not due to anything in them, but only to God's grace shown to their forefathers, who didn't deserve it either.

B. God's grace toward the Gentiles is the basis of our receiving the blessings of salvation.

Paul deflates Gentile pride in several ways. First, in 11:17 he calls them a wild olive and says that they were grafted in among the Jews so that they became a partaker of the rich root of the olive

tree. Normally, a branch from a cultivated olive tree would be grafted into a wild olive tree, but Paul's illustration goes against nature, as he later states (11:24). God's grace in grafting the "wild olive" Gentiles into the cultivated tree is obvious. It was contrary to expectations. They didn't do anything to deserve such blessings.

Paul also deflates Gentile pride by saying (11:18), "But if you are arrogant, remember that it is not you who supports the root, but the root supports you." We only can receive God's salvation because He chose to be gracious to Abraham and He promised to bless all the nations of the earth through him. As Jesus said, "Salvation is from the Jews" (John 4:22). For 2,000 years virtually all of the Gentiles around the globe were shut out of God's covenant promises to the Jews through Abraham. But through Christ and because the Jews rejected Christ, the gospel has now gone out to the Gentiles (9:11-12).

But Paul anticipates how a spiritually proud Gentile might respond (11:19-21): "You will say then, 'Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in.' Quite right, they were broken off for their unbelief, but you stand by your faith. Do not be conceited, but fear; for if God did not spare the natural branches, He will not spare you, either." That leads to a second strategy to guard against spiritual pride:

2. Guard against spiritual pride by maintaining your faith.

Paul is talking in national terms in the sense that the Gentiles as a whole could be cut off from God's grace, just as the Jews were. But we would be remiss if we did not apply this personally: We receive God's grace by faith alone and we forfeit His grace by unbelief. And so we must make sure that our faith for salvation is in Christ alone, not in anything that we have done or promise to do. Faith in Christ, by its origin and nature, cripples our pride.

We are responsible to exercise faith, but it doesn't originate within us. In the flesh, no one is able to please God (Rom. 8:8). Faith is pleasing to God (Heb. 11:6). So where does saving faith come from? Ephesians 2:8-9 says, "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, *it is* the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast."

Faith is not a wage that we earn and can demand payment for, or we could boast in it (Rom. 4:3-5). Rather, as Paul says (1 Cor. 1:30), "But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption, so that, just as it is written, 'Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord.'" Or, as he later asks (1 Cor. 4:7), "What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?" We can't boast in our faith as if it came from us, because we received it from God (Rom. 12:3).

Also, by its nature faith excludes boasting. Saving faith means that I rely on Christ to do for me what I never deserved and what I never could do for myself. He took my penalty for sin on the cross. How can I boast in myself for that? If I were guilty of a serious crime and the judge imposed a penalty of \$10 million that I could never repay and some rich benefactor stepped in and paid it for me, would I go around boasting about how great I am to get such a gift? No, it was shameful that I was guilty of the crime and even needed such a gift. If someone else paid my penalty, I could only boast in how kind and merciful *he* was. So maintaining faith before the God who shows mercy on whom He wills and hardens whom He wills guards us against spiritual pride.

But how do we maintain such faith? Focus daily on the cross and preach the gospel over and over to yourself. After writing to refute the Judaizers who boasted in their outward keeping of the law, Paul concluded (Gal. 6:14), "But may it never be that I would boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ...." To battle spiritual pride, maintain your faith by exulting daily in the cross.

So to guard against spiritual pride, first remember that salvation is by grace alone. Second, maintain your faith in the gospel.

3. Guard against spiritual pride by maintaining fear before the God of kindness and severity.

Romans 11:20b-21: "Do not be conceited, but fear; for if God did not spare the natural branches, He will not spare you, either." Many Christians today would cast off the notion of fear as an Old Testament concept. They would cry (1 John 4:18), "Perfect love casts out fear...." True, but our love isn't perfect because our obedience isn't perfect. As long as any bent toward sin remains in us,

we need to fear God and fear our own propensity to sin. "Let him who thinks he stands take heed that he does not fall" (1 Cor. 10:12). Here are four reasons why we should maintain fear:

A. We should fear because spiritual pride is a constant, insidious danger.

"Insidious" means, "1. (a) awaiting a chance to entrap: treacherous; (b) harmful but enticing: seductive; 2. (a) having a gradual and cumulative effect; (b) of a disease: developing so gradually as to be well established before becoming apparent" (*Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* [Merriam Webster, 1988], p. 626). As I said, Paul saw spiritual pride as dangerous enough to repeat his warning three times here (11:18, 20, 25). If anything should humble us, it should be the gospel of God's grace. But our flesh is so prone toward pride that it just keeps oozing out of any crack that we don't repair.

Let me mention just one insidious trap of spiritual pride: the pride of being doctrinally correct. I believe that sound doctrine is essential for a healthy spiritual life, so I am not in any way saying that we should give up seeking to be doctrinally correct or striving to understand biblical truth more accurately. You will be spiritually unstable if you do not grow in sound doctrine (Eph. 4:13-15). But make sure that you maintain the fear of God as you grow in sound doctrine or that doctrine will puff you up with pride (1 Cor. 8:1). Remember that if you are doctrinally correct, it is only because God graciously opened your eyes to the truth.

B. We should fear because we are so prone to compare ourselves with others rather than with God.

Paul says (11:18), "Do not be arrogant toward the branches . . ." "*The branches*" refers to the Jews who had rejected the gospel and were temporarily cut off from God's mercy. It's easy for us who believe to look down on unbelievers with disgust and to think, "Stupid people! They deserve to be judged!" (As if we didn't!) Have you noticed that when we compare ourselves with others, we always pick those who in our minds are worse sinners than we are? We rarely compare ourselves with the godly. And what if we compare ourselves with God? If He had not chosen to have mercy on us, we would be darkened in our understanding, excluded from the life of God, and hardened in our hearts (Eph. 4:18).

- C. We should fear because we are prone to drift from justification by faith alone into justification by works.

One reason the Jews were cut off from salvation is that they sought to establish their own righteousness by keeping the law (9:31-32; 10:3). But now that the Gentiles have graciously been grafted into God's promise to Abraham, they turn around and are arrogant towards the unbelieving Jews. They were forgetting that if God had not been merciful, they would still be in their sins. And they were forgetting that they only stood by faith (11:20), not by their works. As we've seen, if salvation is by faith then it is not of works, or we would boast. Spiritual pride subtly creeps in and makes us want to take at least some of the credit for our salvation, so that we even boast in our faith. Finally,

- D. We should fear because we behold the kindness and severity of God.

Romans 11:22: "Behold then the kindness and severity of God; to those who fell, severity, but to you, God's kindness, if you continue in His kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off." We tend to skip over *behold*, but it occurs over 1,000 times in the Bible as a flashing warning light to say, "Slow down! Open your eyes! You need to think about this."

We're all prone to behold God's kindness, but we aren't so apt to behold His severity. "To those who fell" refers to the Jews who were currently cut off from God's mercy due to judicial hardening (11:8-10, 25). But Paul says that if the Gentiles do not continue in God's kindness, they too will be cut off. As I said, this is a warning to all Gentiles, but we need to take it to heart individually.

Some use verses like this to argue that believers can lose their salvation. But the same man who wrote Romans 11:22 also wrote Romans 8:28-39, which is one of the strongest passages in the Bible in favor of the security of believers. He isn't contradicting himself. Rather, Paul consistently taught that by God's strength, genuine saving faith perseveres over the long haul. But one way that we persevere is through the many warnings in Scripture not to fall away (1 Cor. 10:1-12; Gal. 5:2-4, 21; Eph. 5:5-10; Col. 1:23; 1 Thess. 3:1-5; Heb. 6:4-12; 10:26-31).

H. C. G. Moule explains (*The Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges, Romans* [Cambridge University Press, 1903], p. 197, italics his),

Grace imparts *perseverance* by imparting and maintaining *faith*, (1 Pet. 1:5) and it freely uses *all* means by which such faith is properly animated and energized. Amongst such means are these *warnings* of the results that must follow *if* faith loses hold of its object.

Thomas Schreiner comments (*Romans* [Baker], p. 609), “Those who brush aside the warnings as unnecessary, concluding that they are protected from God’s wrath no matter how they behave, are presuming upon God’s grace.” If someone falls away from the faith and is cut off from God’s mercy, it is evidence that he never truly had believed in the first place (1 John 2:19; Matt. 7:21-23). If we do not judge our spiritual pride it shows that we never really understood or trusted in God’s grace.

Conclusion

Martyn Lloyd-Jones wisely observed (*Romans: To God’s Glory* [Banner of Truth], p. 125), “The best corrective against pride ... is to know God, His character and the truth about Him.” And the main place to behold the kindness and severity of God is at the cross. There the severity of His righteous judgment did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all (Rom. 8:32). There the kindness of His tender love forgave all our sins and adopted us as His beloved children the instant we trusted in Christ. Guard yourself against any form of spiritual pride by remembering that salvation is by grace alone and by maintaining faith in Christ and fear before the kindness and severity of God.

Application Questions

1. The pride of doctrinal correctness is one form of spiritual pride. What are some other forms of it to be on guard against?
2. Discuss: All racial prejudice is an expression of sinful pride.
3. If final salvation depends on perseverance in faith, how can anyone have assurance, since we might fall into unbelief?
4. Is assurance of salvation something that we should share as soon as a person trusts in Christ or should it grow over time?

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