

**No Place for Arrogance**  
*Romans 11:11-24*

Eugene Peterson grew up in a good Christian home in a small town in Montana. His mother taught him about Jesus and how to live his life. He had plenty of friends and lots of space to run wild. Peterson said it was basically like living in the Garden of Eden – until he went to school and encountered Garrison Johns, the school bully. About the third day of school Garrison Johns, a second grader, discovered Eugene. Eugene became his “personal project” for the year. Almost every day after school, Garrison would stalk out Eugene and beat him up on the walk back home. And somehow Garrison found out that Eugene was a Christian, so he started calling Eugene “Jesus-sissy.”

Eugene had been taught to “turn the other cheek” so he just took what Garrison was dishing out. His mother told him that Christians had been treated that way throughout history so he better get used to it.

Then came that fateful day the following March when Garrison caught up with Eugene and seven or eight of his friends walking home from school. Garrison began taunting and jabbing Eugene, working his way up to a full-out pounding. Here are Eugene’s own words of what happened next:

Something snapped within me. Totally uncalculated. Totally out of character. For just a moment the Bible verses disappeared from my consciousness and I grabbed Garrison. To my surprise, and his, I realized that I was stronger than he. I wrestled him to the ground, sat on his chest and pinned his arms to the ground with my knees. I couldn’t believe it – he was helpless under me. At my mercy. It was too good to be true. I hit him in the face with my fists. It felt good and I hit him again – blood spurted from his nose, a lovely crimson on the snow. By this time all the other children were cheering, egging me on. “Black his eyes! Bust his teeth!” A torrent of vengeful invective poured from them, although nothing compared with what I would, later in life, read in the Psalms. I said to Garrison, “Say Uncle.” He wouldn’t say it. I hit him again. More blood. More cheering. . . And then my Christian training reasserted itself. I said, “Say, I believe in Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior.”

And he said it. Garrison Johns was my first Christian convert.

*(Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places, pp. 134-136)*

That story is humorous because that’s exactly the opposite of how people become followers of Christ. None of us are following Christ because somebody else physically or verbally beat us into submission. Rather, we follow Christ because we have become convinced of the truth of the gospel and because we’ve seen the fruit that the gospel produces in the lives of people we respect. And typically we respect people because they are humble (as opposed to arrogant) and kind (as opposed to mean) and compassionate (as opposed to being self-centered).

This morning I want us to think carefully about our calling to live humble, kind, compassionate lives. I want us to think about the influence of such lives upon others. Our text today is Romans 11:11-24.

Paul's discussion of Gentiles and Jews in this passage serves as a case study for us about the influence we can/should have in the lives of others. Paul's reasoning in these verses is somewhat complex; he uses imagery that is a bit obscure. But the point he is making in these verses is crystal clear: there is no place for arrogance in the body of Christ. It is only when we live humble, transparent lives that others get an accurate picture of what a relationship with God is really like.

**An Historical Perspective: Israel's unbelief, the Gentiles' salvation, Israel's jealousy and faith.** (Romans 11:11–16)

I'll read this paragraph and then we'll talk about Paul's argument.

11 I say then, they did not stumble so as to fall, did they? May it never be! But by their transgression salvation has come to the Gentiles, to make them jealous. 12 Now if their transgression is riches for the world and their failure is riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their fulfillment be! 13 But I am speaking to you who are Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle of Gentiles, I magnify my ministry, 14 if somehow I might move to jealousy my fellow countrymen and save some of them. 15 For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead? 16 If the first piece of dough is holy, the lump is also; and if the root is holy, the branches are too.

Notice in verse 13 Paul says directly, "But I am speaking to you who are Gentiles." Paul addresses the Gentiles directly because he wants them to understand an historical perspective that would change the way they thought about the Jews.

In verse 11 Paul acknowledges that the Jews had definitely "stumbled."

11 I say then, they did not stumble so as to fall, did they? May it never be! But by their transgression salvation has come to the Gentiles, to make them jealous.

At the end of chapter 9 Paul developed the truth that as the Messiah, Jesus was the cornerstone of the temple God was building in Israel. Jesus gave life to those who believed in Him, but Jesus became a "stumbling block" to those who rejected Him. Here in 11:11 Paul says that even though they stumbled over Jesus they didn't "fall" in the sense of being completely rejected by God. For the tenth time in Romans Paul writes, "May it never be!" that God has rejected them.

He points out that because of "their transgression" - because of their rejection of Jesus - "salvation has come to the Gentiles." We could speculate on how the early church might have grown differently if the vast majority of Jews had believed in Jesus immediately after the resurrection. But we read in Acts 8:1 that after Stephen had been stoned to death, "On that day a great persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and

they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.” Because of the Jews’ hostility toward Christians, the church was dispersed. Because the church was dispersed, it fulfilled Jesus’ commission recorded in Acts 1:8, where He said, “. . . you shall be my witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.” In the sovereignty of God, the Jews’ rejection of Jesus was the stimulus for the message to be proclaimed to the Gentiles.

When they travelled to various cities, Paul and his companions typically took the gospel to the Jews first; they went to the synagogue and taught from the Scriptures about Christ. When/if those in the synagogue rejected the message about Jesus, Paul turned to the Gentiles (see Acts 13:44-47).

In verse 11 Paul says that the Gentiles’ salvation was supposed to make Israel “jealous.” As well, look at verses 13 and 14:

13 But I am speaking to you who are Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle of Gentiles, I magnify my ministry, 14 if somehow I might move to jealousy my fellow countrymen and save some of them.

When his “fellow countrymen” (i.e., the Jews) saw how God was pouring out His blessings on the Gentiles, some of them might conclude, “Wait a minute! Those are the blessings God was supposed to give **us**! We want what they’ve got!” We see a great reversal here: Whereas Israel was meant to be a “light to the nations” - showing them what a relationship with God looked like - the nations/Gentiles were now a light to Israel. The **Gentiles** demonstrated what a relationship with God looks like under the new covenant in Jesus’ blood (Jeremiah 31).

Paul has laid out a progression that the Gentiles needed to understand if they were to think about the Jews as God does. Here’s the progression: Israel’s unbelief lead to the Gentiles’ salvation; the Gentiles’ salvation would lead to Israel becoming jealous; Israel’s jealousy would lead to their faith and salvation.

In verses 17 through 24 Paul makes his application. He tells the Gentiles that there is therefore no place for arrogance toward unbelieving Jews.

***An Application: There is no place for arrogance.*** (Romans 11:17-24) Again, I will read the entire paragraph and then comment on individual verses.

17 But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, being a wild olive, were grafted in among them and became partaker with them of the rich root of the olive tree, 18 do not be arrogant toward the branches; but if you are arrogant, remember that it is not you who supports the root, but the root supports you. 19 You will say then, “Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in.” 20 Quite right, they were broken off for their unbelief, but you stand by your faith. Do not be conceited, but fear; 21 for if God did not spare the natural branches, He will not spare you, either. 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. 23 And they also, if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again. 24 For if you were cut off from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and were grafted contrary to nature into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these who are the natural branches be grafted into their own olive tree?

Paul uses [what is to us] obscure imagery here. The olive tree represents the people of God down through history, "stretching back to Abraham and now including both Gentiles and Jews" (Wright). Notice again verse 17:

17 But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, being a wild olive, were grafted in among them and became partaker with them of the rich root of the olive tree,

Unbelieving Jews were "the branches [that] were broken off" (v. 17). The Gentiles were branches that were "grafted in among them and became partaker with them of the rich root of the olive tree" (v. 17). Down in verse 24 Paul emphasizes how unnatural it was for God to allow the Gentiles to be grafted in:

24 For if you were cut off from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and were grafted contrary to nature into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these who are the natural branches be grafted into their own olive tree?

I don't know anything about horticulture or olive trees, but people who do know tell us that you almost never would have grafted a wild olive branch onto a cultivated stock; you would have grafted cultivated olive branches onto a wild olive tree. That seems to be Paul's point here: God had done something incredibly unusual in allowing the Gentiles to experience the blessings of the new covenant. It was miraculous. It was unexpected. It was pure grace.

This realization was intended to humble the Gentile believers toward Jews who hadn't yet believed. In verse 18 Paul wrote:

18 do not be arrogant toward the branches; but if you are arrogant, remember that it is not you who supports the root, but the root supports you.

Notice how he continues in verses 19 and 20:

19 You will say then, "Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in." 20 Quite right, they were broken off for their unbelief, but you stand by your faith. Do not be conceited, but fear;

Instead of an attitude of arrogance toward Jews who hadn't yet believed, they were supposed to walk in humility and in the fear of the Lord. If they did anything else, they would find themselves in the same position as unbelieving Israel: broken off for their unbelief. Paul has in mind Gentiles as a whole or perhaps individual Gentile churches.

Paul is simply issuing the same warning to Gentiles that he issued to Jews in the early chapters of Romans. There he warned Jews against a sense of entitlement because they were descended from Abraham and the patriarchs and because they had been given the Law and temple worship. There was great benefit in being Jewish (Romans 3:1-2), but a relationship with God was **always** a matter of faith. Long before the Law was given Abraham was declared righteous on the basis of his faith.

Ironically, the Gentiles were in danger of having a similar type of entitlement and arrogance. They tended to think that God had rejected the Jews in favor of **them**. Paul warns them that if they don't maintain their faith, they will end up like unbelieving Israel, being broken off because of their unbelief. And so he writes, "Do not be conceited, but fear." Walk in humility and in the fear of the Lord. Then - and only then - would some Jews look at their life and their community, become jealous (in a positive sense), and say, "They are experiencing the blessing of God. We want what they've got!"

**Application.** In light of the example we've seen in Romans 11, I want us to think about the impact of walking in humility. We are in a situation very much analogous to the Gentiles in Rome who had to put away all arrogance/pride toward unbelieving Jews. If we are going to be "the light of the world" there is no place for arrogance toward those who don't yet believe. There is no place for a sense of entitlement whereby we think, "I deserve the blessings of God. . . but others don't. . ."

As you're probably aware, Christians don't have a great reputation for being humble and kind. Actually, we have a reputation for being harsh and judgmental and arrogant. But I can't conceive of a greater contradiction than an "arrogant Christian." Those two words simply don't go together.

I say this because Jesus Himself is humility incarnate (Andrew Murray's verbiage). Jesus' humility prompted Him to lay aside His heavenly prerogatives and become one of us. For our sake He put on the limitations and weaknesses of flesh and blood so that He could die for our sins. Philippians 2:8 says that Jesus "humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." Jesus is humility in the flesh. He embodied the attitude of "considering others as more important than ourselves."

Furthermore, Jesus' invitation to come to Him is an invitation to experience and learn His humility (Matthew 11:28-29):

28 "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. 29 "Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 "For My yoke is easy and My burden is light."

Jesus assures us that we can come to Him because He is gentle and humble in heart. He isn't arrogant and harsh and demanding. A follower of Christ is someone who has accepted Jesus' sacrifice and who is now apprenticed to "the humble one." As His apprentices, we become like Him. First and foremost we become like Him in His

humility. Instead of putting ourselves first and expecting everybody else to conform to our desires, we have the attitude, “I no longer live for myself; I live to love God and to love others.” As you know, humility isn’t so much thinking lowly about yourself; humility means not thinking of yourself.

If you ever want to know how you’re doing when it comes to pride and humility, ask somebody close to you, “Do you experience me as a humble person?” If someone close to you has the courage to ask, please be humble and kind in your answer. You can be honest and still be kind. You don’t want to crush the other person; you want to help him/her learn the ways of humility.

Of course the pursuit of humility is a lifelong pursuit. John Stott wrote:

“At every stage of our Christian development and in every sphere of our Christian discipleship, pride is the greatest enemy and humility our greatest friend.”

When it comes to our influence in the lives of others, humility is our greatest friend. If we are genuinely humble people, we represent Christ accurately. If we are humble people, we can simply be ourselves around people who need Christ. Instead of arrogance and superiority, we will show people the same graciousness that God has shown us.

G.K. Chesterton (1874-1936) was one of several writers who was asked by the *London Times* to write an essay on the topic, “What’s Wrong with the World?” Chesterton sent in a very short reply:

*Dear Sirs:*

*I am.*

*Sincerely yours,  
G.K. Chesterton*

It’s not that Chesterton was the worst person on the planet; he was probably one of the most generous, most virtuous people of his time. But as a follower of Christ his humility prompted him to look first at himself when he pondered “what’s wrong with the world.” Instead of pointing the finger at everybody else “out there” as the problem, he admitted that his own sin was at the core of what was wrong with the world.

Paul had this attitude when he wrote, “I am what I am by the grace of God” (1 Corinthians 15). In 1 Timothy 1 Paul wrote, “It is a trustworthy statement, deserving of full acceptance: Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am the foremost of all.” Paul wasn’t pretending to be someone worse than he was. No, in humility Paul understood that his sin was what compelled Jesus to go to the cross. From that stance of humility he shared Christ with others.

I commend to all of us the pursuit of humility. I’m not suggesting that we **act** a little more humble. I am suggesting that we need to **be** humble people. Instead of making us timid

and weak and mousy, humility will make us like Christ - willing to serve and sacrifice and give our lives for others. In this way we might make other people jealous.