

Lent Devotional March 31, 2023

Scripture

Romans 11:13-24

13 Now I am speaking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I glorify my ministry 14 in order to make my own people jealous, and thus 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 part of the dough offered as first fruits is holy, then the whole batch is holy; and if the root is holy, then the branches also are holy.

17 But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, a wild olive shoot, were grafted in their place to share the rich root of the olive tree, 18 do not vaunt yourselves over the branches. If you do vaunt yourselves, remember that it is not you that support the root, but the root that supports you. 19 You will say, "Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in." 20 That is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand only through faith. So do not become proud, but stand in awe. 21 For if God did not spare the natural branches, perhaps he will not spare you. 22 Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God's kindness toward you, provided you continue in his kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off. 23 And even those of Israel, if they do not persist in unbelief, will be grafted in, for God has the power to graft them in again. 24 For if you have been 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 natural branches be grafted back into their own olive tree.

Devotional

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Horticulturists cultivate plants to maximize health and growth by adding nutrients to soil, developing irrigation systems, and pruning diseased branches. In Romans 11:17-24, Paul describes God the Horticulturist grafting branches from a wild olive tree (Gentiles) onto a cultured tree (Israel).

Many Jewish Christians objected to Paul's ministry to the Gentiles. Even those who understood that salvation in Christ is for all insisted that Gentiles be fully Jewish (circumcised) to be fully Christian. This division between "us" and "them" frustrated Paul, who prayed for the reconciliation of the world.

Israel's branches were broken off because of unbelief; Gentiles were grafted on because of faith, but Paul urges them not to become proud, for "those of Israel, if they do not persist in unbelief, will be grafted in . . . again" (v 23). But will those who are re-grafted welcome the "wild" branches or demand God remove them?

Today as people huddle in like-minded groups fearful of contamination by "them", let's look to God the Horticulturist: Grafting branches from a wild tree onto a cultivated tree's rootstock increases hardiness and resistance to insects and disease, resulting in larger fruit and bigger yields. Yet, surprisingly, each part of the grafted tree keeps its original character. God's intention is not the contamination of Israel by Gentiles, but cross-pollination. God's design is for a strong, healthy, fruit-producing hybrid. All varieties of people sharing the same roots, branching out to share our gifts in ministry to a hurting world.

Prayer

Dear Jesus, you assure us that “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me . . . that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit” (John 15:1-2). Help us to be pliant in the hands of the Horticulturist who prunes us of our faults and imperfections that we may be strong, healthy and fruit-producing. Amen.