

# “Continue in Humble Faith”

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**Series:** *Romans*

**Bible Text:** Romans 11:11-24

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## **Christ Presbyterian Church**

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Thanks, Chris. If you have a Bible, you can be making your way to the New Testament book of Romans. We're in chapter 11, verses 11 through 24 today. And if you don't have a Bible on you, feel free to follow along in the worship guide. It's printed there for you. In this in this series that we're in we've been a few weeks now deep into this section of the Bible that if we're brutally honest, it is a little strange to us. It feels weird. We don't really know what to do with it. Paul's talking about Jewish people and Gentiles, and that was very much his world. And it's just not our world. It's a mostly Gentile crowd here. But he's asking questions like, why is it that, and remember, he's Jewish, why is it that none of my family, friends, peer group, the people that he knows, why are they not believing the gospel? What is going on? And is it possible that God's purposes for them as a group are over or have changed? And thankfully, this discussion forces us back to the whole Bible, the context of the story of Jesus, and forces us to ask questions. Are there two people of God or just one? What's our relationship to Israel supposed to be like? Does God work differently based on our ethnicity? All those questions are kind of popping up for Paul. And so let's read the passage and remember that this is God's word, and it doesn't just say something to those people in that day about their situation. God's word is for us. So let's listen to it. Romans 11:11-24.

*11 So I ask, did they stumble in order that they might fall? By no means! Rather, through their trespass salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous.*

*12 Now if their trespass means riches for the world, and if their failure means riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their full inclusion mean!*

*13 Now I am speaking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry*

*14 in order somehow to make my fellow Jews jealous, and thus save some of them.*

*15 For if their rejection means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead?*

*16 If the dough offered as firstfruits is holy, so is the whole lump, and if the root is holy, so are the branches.*

*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 root of the olive tree,*

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

*19 Then 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 fast through faith. So do not become proud, but [stand in awe] fear.*

*21 For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you.*

*22 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.*

*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 [off] 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?*

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Would you pray with me?

*Father, we always desperately need the help of God the Spirit to illumine for us what is in front of us, and to help us understand things with our minds, and that your word would actually make its way into our heart, and that as whole people, we would hear and believe and worship and obey. So would you, yet again this morning, would you help us with that? Would you help us to understand your word? We ask you to be gracious to us in that way, through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

There's an old bluegrass song, I think it was originally performed by Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs, made popular to the elect by Ricky Skaggs. It's called *Don't Get Above Your Raisin*. The great thing about the bluegrass genre is you don't have to go digging for the meaning. They just put it right there, right there, bottom shelf, it's there for you. The songwriter's talking to a girl that he knew when he was younger, and something has happened in her life that his term, it's gotten her high-headed, not sure what that means, but high-headed, thinking that she's better than him, and he's telling her, I know you, I know where you're from. Don't act like you're all uppity and city-fied now. You grew up right here. Which must have been a strangely specific song for that songwriter to write. You know, I guess there's a genre for criticism of the girl that you love in bluegrass music. I'm not sure, but you've heard sentiments like that before. Don't get above your raisin. Don't forget where you came from. Don't put on airs, that kind of thing. When you're famous, don't forget us little people. We say things like that because behind that is a reality that some people who were low were made high, and they forget what it was like to be low. That they have risen to the top, and they've forgotten what it was like to be down on the bottom.

In other words, people are prone to arrogance. It's kind of what we do. We're really good at thinking very highly of ourselves, especially if they were low and they find themselves elevated. And what the irony is that when somebody gets puffed up like that, very often something will come along and pop that bubble. And great is the downfall, right? It's the pride goeth before the fall sort of thing.

Forgetting where you came from can lead to an identity crisis at best and a crash at worst. And that's true in most spheres of life. But it's certainly true in terms of our spiritual lives. There's a sense in this passage where Paul is telling Gentile believers, which is us, he's trying to help us understand, yeah, don't get above your raisin. Don't begin to think higher of yourself than you ought. He's telling us here in this passage, God is taking lowly people and raising them up. But you're going to have to continue walking in a humble sort of faith.

When God raises you up, don't get puffed up. Walk, continue on in a humble sort of faith.

Well, how does that work?

How do you not get above your raisin?

How do you not get overinflated and puffed up?

We've already talked about it multiple times in the service. The only way for a human being to stay humble is to constantly have, in his or her view, an overwhelming vision of God himself. It's only by seeing who God is that we could possibly stay humble. So in this passage, we're going to look at two aspects of God, his severity and his kindness. Those are categories that Paul lays out for us. Let's talk about each so that we might see him and continue on in a humble sort of faith.

So, we're going to have to know God's severity.

This passage does begin with questions about Israel's unbelief. *Did they stumble in order that they might fall?* In other words, did the large swath of Jewish people in Paul's day refuse to believe the gospel? And that's it. Nothing else is going to happen. It's just judgment. Last week, Steve preached the passage before ours where Paul specifically asked, did God reject his people? Meaning ethnic, national Israel. And the answer was, if you were here, it was no and yes. No, because Paul's Jewish and he believes the gospel and God saves a remnant. There's always some people, there's a lot of Jewish people who believe the gospel, Messianic Jews. And the answer was yes, because anyone who refuses to believe is cut off.

So Paul here is asking, okay, so those who were cut off, if the large swath of Jewish people refused to believe the gospel, is there no redemption in it? And Paul wants to tell us here, no. There's a couple of things going on. No. Through their trespass, salvation has come to the Gentiles. And it has the purpose of making them jealous. So hear what he's saying. Ethnic, national Jewish people in that day, as a nation even, largely rejected the Messiah. And what that did, if you read through the book of Acts, you see it, the apostles would preach in a synagogue. And then at points, you see them, Paul himself says, okay, now I'm going to the Gentiles. I'm preaching. You're not believing. I've got to go take this elsewhere. And what happens is the gospel moves out to the nations. And they believe. Lots of them believe. In such a way that within the first several hundred years of the church's existence, the world changes dramatically.

But the gospel going out to the Gentiles has this other purpose. It will, and is intended to make Israel, jealous. They're supposed to see other people getting the benefits of God's covenantal love and promises. And he says it in verses 13 and 14.

*I magnify my ministry to Gentiles in order to make my fellow Jews jealous and thus save some of them.*

So he's ministering to Gentiles, hoping that it makes his brothers and sisters and his extended family members and the people he grew up with, he wants them to be jealous and to see the gospel and to believe it, in hopes that they'll turn to the Messiah in faith.

But for now, he makes clear in verse 17 that they are branches broken off of the olive tree. There's a reason we read that passage in Jeremiah earlier. (Jeremiah 11:13-17\*\*) That's another place where Israel is equated to an olive tree. And this breaking off is something that God has done. So largely speaking, they have been broken off by God for now. And Paul's telling the Gentiles in verse 19, here's what you're going to be tempted to do. You're going to be tempted to say, *branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in.* He says that's true. They were. But they were broken off because of unbelief. It's not because they were Jewish. It's not an ethnic issue. They're broken off because of unbelief. And God didn't spare the natural branches. And guess what? He won't spare the grafted in branches either if you go down the road of unbelief as well.

And he says, this is the severity of God. Toward those who have fallen. Toward those who refuse to believe. God meets that with severity. Because unbelief is a mockery of God himself. Unbelief is a rejection of the God who made them. It's a trampling on all of his promises. All that they know. They shake their fist at the God who made covenantal promises and kept them throughout generations. And God's response, according to his holy severity, is to break them off, for now. And he'll cut anyone off who continues in unbelief.

Now keep in mind, Paul's not speaking to a Jewish audience here. He says it in verse 13. *I'm speaking to you Gentiles.* And these Gentiles, as Paul talks about the severity and judgment of God because of Israel's unbelief, they need to grapple with some stuff.

Two things. They need to understand, even though Israel's experiencing God's judgment right now, and that severity has brought mercy to the Gentiles, it's not forever. And we'll hear more about this next week. This cutting off is not forever. It's not everyone. There's always a remnant.

And it's not eternal. Again, we'll see more about that in the next passage. There will be Jewish people who believe the gospel. They have over the years. Is it all of them? No. It's a remnant of them. But part of the reason Paul explains this is to help the Gentiles understand that if Jewish rejection means riches for the world, you hear what he's saying? If their unbelief has caused the gospel to go out to all of the pagan nations of the world, consider what their inclusion would mean. What would happen if a whole bunch of them started to believe? If their rejection is reconciliation for the world, then their acceptance, he says, would mean life from the dead.

He wants them to know that the dough from which the firstfruits is offered is holy. The whole lump will be holy. The root is holy and so are the branches. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are the roots. They are the firstfruits. They were holy. They believed the promises of God. And Paul wants them to understand in verse 18, if you follow in their faith, whether you're Jewish or Gentile, you also are holy too, the you don't support the root, the root supports you. And God might graft them back in at some point. You don't know that.

All of it is Paul pushing them to understand; Gentile believers, you stand on the shoulders of the patriarchs who believed from Israel. And maybe they only experienced it as a remnant now, but you need to understand the severity of God.

He will judge unbelief. Hard stop.

He'll judge it with Jewish people as he is.

He'll judge it with Gentiles too.

The whole point is to say, do not become arrogant.

If God decides to gather a bunch of Jewish people into the kingdom of Jesus at some point in the future, that will be even greater glory and blessing. And for that we pray. And understanding the severity of God and trusting in his mercy. What it does is it keeps us from being like so many Christians throughout the ages have been, which is, why can't those Jewish people believe? What's wrong with them?

We do that with other ethnicities and other types of people too. Why can't they believe? What's wrong with them? Our own Martin Luther got to this place. I mean, this is, you know, the catalyst of the Protestant Reformation. We sing his hymns. We preach his doctrine of justification by faith. The doctrine upon which the church stands or falls. We love it. We adhere to it. And at the end of his life, he was old, his body hurt, he got really grumpy, and he got mad at the Jewish people because he felt like we're preaching the gospel and y'all aren't believing it. And he began to say some things that would be co-opted by others later to produce atrocities against that group of people. Shows us that our heroes in the faith have blind spots and problems.

How did he get there? He got there the same way any of us would get there.

Go ahead and forget about the severity of the Lord against human unbelief.

Go ahead and forget that you too are prone to unbelief. Go ahead and forget that.

Go ahead and forget the holiness of God. And then don't be surprised if you wake up one day and there's a group of people that you just kind of hate.

That's how we get there. So he's telling them, walk with humility. Continue on in humble faith. Remember the severity of God. That's why the scriptures say the beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord.

I don't know if you do this, but in evangelical circles, here's what we do with that verse. We say, now we don't mean cowering in fear. We don't mean like you need to be afraid of God. And every time I hear that, I want to say, hold it right there. It might need to start with that. Nobody wants to live in a cowering sort of place, but you're telling me that if you see God as creator, your creator, and you begin to see him as the one who will absolutely hold you to account, as the judge and evaluator of your life, and you begin to see the dark parts of your heart, the rebellions that you have, why would we say that, no, no, we're not afraid of him? You should be afraid of him, at least initially. That's how it should work. You don't want to stay there, obviously.

We just sang it earlier. We sang it in Amazing Grace. Very familiar lines. 'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear. That's not reverence. To fear him. And then, grace my fears relieved. It's grace that opens your eyes to see, oh, God is holy, and I bring nothing but sin to him, and he's the judge. And then it's his grace to us in the gospel that enables us to say, the Lord Jesus took the severity of God in my place. Justice has fallen on him, not on me. That'll move you to reverence. That'll move you away from a cowering fear and toward a reverence. So that's where we're trying to get.

But let me ask you a question. Think about your neighbors and your family members who may not, you know, they may not be Christians. And do you think the people you know, do you think they walk around thinking, I am so afraid of God. He might smite me at any moment, and he is just so powerful and holy, and I'm just, I am genuinely scared of him. Do you think most people wake up every morning and that's their first thought about God? Or do you think it might be something more like, and this is assuming they believe there is a God, A, right? Do they wake up every morning and think, yeah, I'm fine. And, yeah, there's a God, but like, he's generically nice. He's certainly not going to evaluate me. He loves me just as I am and would never ask me to change. Doesn't that sound more accurate? Modern people struggle to fear God appropriately. We really struggle with that. Modern people struggle to think of God as severe. We struggle to think that God will actually hold people to account. We struggle to think that one day we're going to die, and one day we're going to stand before him, and one day we will actually be evaluated. That just doesn't even enter into our minds.

And honestly, that might be where you're at today. And you could be that way even as somebody who's a Christian. It just doesn't cross your mind very often. Let me make this argument to you wherever you're at spiritually. You cannot be a humble person, and you can't continue in a humble faith unless you really know something about the holiness and the severity of God against unbelief and sin. It just can't be done.

If we forget that he's holy and severe, if we don't fear him properly, we will become arrogant people. It just can't help but happen.

This happens in other aspects of our lives. I was thinking for no specific reason about traffic laws recently. And, you know, there are places where there are traffic laws, and they are enforced. And sometimes you have to learn that the hard way, right? Some of you, and I'm not going to ask for a show of hands, some of you have driven through Tallulah Falls. Yeah, and you got just a nice letter from the state with your picture on it and a request that you send a certain amount of money to them. The rumor is they're doing just fine financially these days up there in Tallulah Falls. There are traffic laws, and they are enforced. And so it only takes one time to realize I better go 45.

There are other places where there are traffic laws, and they're not enforced. I found myself on a cab ride in my younger years in Mexico City on a missions thing, and I thought this is how it ends right here. This is how it all goes down because there are laws, and no one cares, and you feel like it is chaos, and we're all going to die. So we have those categories.

We tend to forget, though, that God doesn't just tell us that he's holy and just, but he is and he will be holy and just.

What happens if you forget that is that you won't evaluate yourself against God and his holy standard. You'll evaluate yourself against your own standards or the people around you. And, you know, it just doesn't take much work to try to figure out, yeah, I'm doing better than this person in these categories, so I feel pretty good. You know what happens when you keep doing that over and over? Suddenly, you begin to think, I'm not just doing a little better than them. I am better than them. And you might even do that with whole groups of people. You could become an anti-Semite, right? Or you could become, I really just hate those people above or below me socioeconomically. I really, I'll tell you who I hate. I really hate poor people, or I really hate rich people, or whatever. It could make you a racist. I really hate this group.

Self-righteous, presumptuous, those are the subtle sins that quietly creep in when we no longer fear the Lord, we no longer think he's severe, our hearts puff up, and we forget that I was a wild olive branch that was in the burn pile, that God went and got and grafted on to this nourishing root and gave me life. We forgot.

Is there evidence of such pride in your heart, in your mind this morning?

If you did a quick diagnosis on yourself, is it possible you've forgotten the severity of God? We have to fear the Lord. It's the beginning of wisdom. It's the way to continue in humble faith. But there's something else we have to know if we want to continue. And it's not just God's severity, mercifully. It's the kindness of God. These are the two categories. Second point. These are the two categories he gives us in verse 22. *Note then, account for, look at the severity of God toward those who have fallen and God's kindness toward you, provided you continue in his kindness.*

If we would continue in humble faith, we have to know the kindness of God.

It's all over this passage. Look at verses 11 and 12. It's the kindness of God that causes salvation to come to pagans. You know that that's what Gentiles are. It's not just that they're not Jewish. That's true. But like Gentiles, meaning, I bet every single person in this room, if we did a little ancestry.com or something, we've traced back. Who were your people, you know, 800 years ago? We're all coming from some bloodthirsty gang of misfits in Europe probably, right? They're not great people. That's your family. That's my family.

So understand, it is the kindness of God that salvation would come to Gentiles, to pagans when Israel turns away.

It's the kindness of God that he would make Israel jealous so that they might be included again.

It's the kindness of God that he would give riches, all the fullness that's ours because of our union with Christ. It includes justification, sanctification, glorification, the now indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit, and every single blessing that's yours by your union with Jesus through faith.

It's the kindness of God in verse 15 to say it stronger, that Jewish acceptance of Christ, if they were to come into the kingdom, it would be life from the dead. There's some debate about what that means. It could mean the final resurrection, that they will come into the kingdom, and then there will be the final resurrection. But it's more likely, I think, that it means something like the full life and blessings that come to us because of Christ's resurrection. It includes the end and everything we get, but it begins now. Full life, full experience of life in Christ.

It's the kindness of God that Gentiles receive the blessings of salvation.

It would be the kindness of God, life from the dead, if Jewish people believe too.

It's the kindness of God on display in verse 17 when we see that you and I have this new nourishing root from which to draw.

So this is why we're whole Bible people right here. Reading the Old Testament and understanding it is crucial for a New Testament believer. Otherwise, you're getting half nourishment. You're kind of getting half of your identity and half of your life. It's the root that nourishes us. It's the Old Testament that shows us the God who made us. And how he reveals himself in time and space and how he made a people for himself. And all of his great redemptive acts, shows us his character. The covenant promises that find their fulfillment in Jesus. It shows us Jesus in shadow and type. We need it. We need to be nourished by the root. This is the ground on which we stand. These are our people.

So it's the kindness of God that we would be able to look back and see, oh, our story didn't just begin the year, you know, 1 to 30 A.D. It began at the beginning.

We have a new-to-us root, which is good news because we were taken from a not-great root, to be honest, right? We were taken from a poisoned root, drawing poisoned sap from a disfigured, twisted tree from which we were born in our world. Whatever that looked like for you. We're just various types of the same thing.

God mercifully cut us off from that tree and grafted us into a different tree.

Do you realize that? This is from whatever you came into the world, whatever your sin patterns are, whatever the world that actually makes its way into your ears and you kind of love it, whatever the patterns of your family that are against the Lord. It's God's mercy and kindness to cut us off from that and to transplant us over, graft us in to a very different tree.

This is a really helpful illustration. I don't know anything about horticulture and arboriculture, which is a thing, right, Don Bluster? Good, got that word right. Grafting is a thing. It's an easy visual that a wild olive branch could be grafted into a cultivated olive branch and could be nourished and made healthy because it has a new root. And Paul's saying, yeah, that's you. That's me.

We are mostly here, Gentiles grafted into the tree, and it's the kindness of God to make it happen. And what he says is that not just don't become proud, but he says in verse 20, stand in awe. That's a good line. If you're a grafted in olive branch, if you've known the kindness of God, stand in awe. Let it overwhelm you periodically. Let it get you.

I was listening to an interview recently with, you might know the name, Ben Sass. He was a former U.S. senator from Nebraska. Whatever you think about his political career, it doesn't matter for this. He was in this interview. So he was a U.S. senator. He left that to become the president of the University of Florida. He left that to go home and take care of his wife, who had been diagnosed with early-stage dementia. And as he's doing that, like two months ago, he was diagnosed with stage four pancreatic cancer. So he'll die soon. I mean, within a couple of years. He won't be here. Which you might not know, but he is a solid, consistent, reformed Christian. He was disciplined by the systematic theology professor at a seminary that might send you, you know, pastors like Steve and Jimmy and myself. So he has those kind of roots. And in this interview, he was talking about the gospel with some chops, like good theology. I mean, he's talking about the person of Christ. He's talking about the work of Christ and the atonement and just how it was the Lord Jesus who was swept into the wrath of God for him. And as he was talking about it, it just, I mean, this is a guy that knows he's going to die soon. And it just got him. And he cracked. His voice cracked. And he just had to stop for a minute. And the other guy took over the interview. I mean, this is a guy that was at the top, right? He's fine education, U.S. senator, president of a major research university, all relatively young. This is a guy who stood in the halls of power who was saying, don't stand in awe of the halls of power. Stand in awe of the mercy of God to a sinner like me. Look at what the Lord Jesus has done. And I just heard that and I thought, man, if I ever have to suffer like he is, may the Lord make it look a lot like that. Let me suffer in faith like that. Let me be in awe of the kindness of God whenever I'm close to the end, even more than I'm in awe of the kindness of God, even at my conversion.

If we want to continue in humble faith, we're going to have to marvel at the kindness of God. Grafted in by grace through faith.

Steve mentioned last week that saving faith isn't perfect faith. You're not saved by the perfection of your faith or the quality of it. You're saved by the object of your faith. That's Jesus. And yet saving faith is always persevering faith, right? Like we have to keep believing. And that's the nature of it. And that with many trips and falls, sometimes flat on our faces, we continue to repent and believe and persevere. And, you know, and those who don't persevere, it could be that that proves that something wasn't real. But continuing in faith is what we're called to. And one of the ways that we do that is to continue to see the kindness of God in our lives. We weren't cut off, and only because Jesus was cut off. We don't get the severity of God. We only know his kindness. And it's because Jesus took the severity of God on the cross in our place. This is the gospel. This is the good news.

If you're here and you're not yet a Christian, we don't assume everybody here is, this is what we're talking about here. And I would press that on you. Your sin is actually that bad. It's worse than we could ever imagine. And it will lead to destruction and misery unless you repent of it and turn to Jesus Christ in faith and cast your lot on him. He is the perfect one. We couldn't be that. He died bearing God's wrath, raised on the third day, returned to make all things new. If you're not a Christian, we'd love to talk to you about that. Let's have that conversation. Let's have lots of conversations.

If you're a Christian already, it's the grace that began this thing that is the grace that will continue it. Right? So God's not saying, I'm going to let you in by grace. Now it's on you. That's not what he's saying. It begins by grace. It continues by grace. And he calls us to persevere and to put ourselves in places where our faith can be nurtured and encouraged and we can be pushed toward repentance and faith. If you want to continue, learn how to marvel at the mercy of God. Don't let the gospel grow stale in your life. And take part of the means that God intends to use. Weekly worship is one of those means. We're not here just to check the box or do something because it's part of our tradition. We're here because we actually think that we need weekly nourishment from the word of God with his people. This is part of how we continue. So I would encourage you to think of it that way.

It's also March. And let me just do a, let's do a wellness check on New Year's resolutions. I'm going to ask all of you who are perfectly keeping them to stand. I'm just kidding. Please don't. Don't do that. I bet everybody in here thought this year I'd like to read my Bible more and pray more. That's, that's just, that's what we do. So how's it going? Have you fallen off the wagon already? Did you never even really make it onto the wagon? You like put one leg up and then, oh, this is really difficult. Like wherever you're at with the wagon, just get back on, just get back on. We need the word and we need to come to God and pray. That's just like the weekly nourishment that we need.

Avail yourself to the means that God gives us to persevere. God is gathering his people. It's natural olive branches. It's wild olive branches. He's doing it on his terms. Most of you are grafted in and we're called whatever we are to continue on in humble faith in the Lord Jesus. So, so don't get above your raisin. Don't put on airs. Remember the severity of God. He cuts off those who won't believe. And remember the kindness of God too. That it was our Lord Jesus who was cut off ultimately for us. And he pours out on us all the riches of his grace, even life from the dead. Would you pray with me?

*Lord, we want to continue in the faith. I bet not one person here wants to become a really arrogant human, who refuses to believe the gospel and who ends up walking away from you. But, Lord, you know our propensity toward arrogance. You know how we can puff ourselves up. And so, would you in your kindness help us to remember your severity? Not so that we might stay cowering in fear. Lord, if that's what it takes, let us cower for a minute. Let us learn to fear you. And then remind us of the gospel so that we might revere you and love you because you first loved us. Show us, in other words, show us your kindness in the gospel. Meet us even here as we come to the table. We thank you for the way that you feed your sheep. We pray these things in Christ's name. Amen.*

\*\*Portion of scripture read before sermon--Jeremiah 11:13-17