

A Spiritual Spring for the Week

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Sermon Text: Romans 11:11-24

Sermon Title: "Picked for the Right Team; Grafted into the Right Plant" (A Journey through Romans)

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{SLIDE 1} Remember being on the playground during recess or lunch, and standing against a wall or chain-linked fence, and waiting for your name to be called out? Remember all the kids gathering together to play kickball, and a teacher would choose captains for each team, and you would hope and pray that your name would be called out before all the other children. Some of us had our names called toward the beginning. Some of us were the last names to be called. Sometimes the teacher would pick us as the captain, and we could fashion the best team in the school.

We knew the kids we wanted to play with. We wanted to be on their team. We wanted to win the game, even though it was just playground kickball during recess or lunch. The school bell would ring, and we would form lines to enter the school and go back to our classes. We would look forward to the next day to have the same good players on our team and call ourselves victors once more.

Have we ever not wanted to be on a certain team?

Why would we want to do that, leave a team to join another? Maybe because we didn't think the kids were good players. Maybe because our team lost all the time and we were sick of it. Professional athletes do it all the time: they wait for their contracts to end so they can play for another team, or they complain so loudly in the press that they finally get traded. They don't give it their all during practice or in the game, and so the coach doesn't think much of them, and the team executives begin talks to get rid of the player.

{SLIDE 2} But why would people want to leave a team, if that team is called the faith? Faith in Jesus Christ. Why would people want to leave faith in Christ? Because we don't like the way the team plays? Because they are frustrated with the Coach, who is Christ himself? Because the practices are hard and the games themselves are even more difficult? Why would people want to leave faith, as Paul seems to suggest in his letter to the Romans, Chapter 11?

Instead of sports or playground kickball, Paul is talking about botany in Chapter 11. Botany is the study of plant life and is a branch (pun not intended) of the science of biology. Botanists love to understand everything about plants. They love to study a plant's relationship to the environment and other living

organisms.¹ Paul takes this love and applies it to the faith community. What is our relationship to the world? We see the people around us and we notice similarities and differences. We notice that we like one thing and others like another thing. We notice that we can do certain things that others cannot, and they can do certain things we cannot. The most important similarities we have are the ways we express emotions. We all can cry or laugh. We can all become angry or we can chill out and relax without a care in the world.

But how do we deal with each other? What are the standards that are socially acceptable? We as Christians turn to Jesus Christ. He is our Example of how we interact properly with others. He shows us the way by the way he touched people's lives. He shows us the way by the way we spoke and spent time with others. Jesus shows us how to feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, heal the sick, and visit the imprisoned.²

We are so convinced by Jesus' life that we engraft ourselves into his life. We join ourselves to Christ through faith. We fasten ourselves our Savior, so there can be no separation. We join Christ's team and never choose to be traded away. We spend the whole of our careers only with Christ.

¹ <http://www.wisegeek.com/what-does-a-botanist-do.htm>.

² Cf. Matthew 25:31-46.

{SLIDE 3} Now if we are grafted in Christ, we take on the life of Christ. Christ feeds us with everything we need, all the spiritual food we need to interact with others on a level of compassion and goodwill.

Back in John 15, Jesus said that we are the branches and he is the Vine.³ It is the vine that keeps the branches alive and makes them fruitful. As any good botanist would know, the vine has deep roots to absorb nutrients in the fertile soil. Those nutrients travel up the vine to the branches and makes them health. Paul says in verse 16, “If the root is holy, then the branches are holy.” He seems to have heard this parable of Jesus’ and related it to his illustration about plants. If the root being God is holy, then the branches will be holy. They will carry out God’s purposes through Jesus Christ as our Example and most importantly as our Savior.

Paul seems to slip into a baking metaphor in that same verse 16, when he says the “part of the dough offered as first fruits is holy, then the whole batch is holy, too.” We can interpret it this way: If we confess with our lips that Jesus is Lord, then the rest of our body should follow along. Our lips confess holiness, and so our bodies should live such holiness. Likewise, if one person in a group says he or she believes in

³ Cf. John 15:1-8.

Christ and follows him, the rest of the group follows suit.⁴ It is all-in or nothing. We don't do this partway. We confess, and we engraft ourselves into Christ, and we live the life God wants us to live without reservation. We are a part of God's team. When we do this, we are nourished spiritually. We have the knowledge and the tools to interact with others peaceably, compassionately.

{SLIDE 4} And then, Paul talks about breaking away. He again speaks of botany by using the illustration of a branch breaking away from a tree or plant. If a branch breaks, it will wither on its own and die. We don't get the nutrients that come from the roots and travel up the main body of the plant. Back in John 15, when Jesus said that he is the Vine and we are the branches, he said that without him we can do nothing.⁵ We could be nothing, for life spills out of us if we left on our own.

Now remember using the image of children playing kickball at school, and those students wanting to be picked for a team? Would people want to be unpicked for a team? Would they want to leave that team for something better? What are the reasons for leaving faith, as Paul suggests? Why would they want to

⁴ John Stott, *Romans: God's Good News for the World*, cf. 299.

⁵ Cf. John 15:5.

break away?

{SLIDE 5} Maybe because the words of Christ are too difficult to follow. Christ's words are life-giving, but to some they may seem constricting and impossible. I keep going back to John's Gospel, but at one point the people surrounding Jesus complained, "Your teachings are difficult – who can accept them?"⁶ Who indeed, because it takes a person willing to accept them. It takes a person willing to let those words transform his or her life. The person sees what Christ's words can do for him or her. The person chooses to be grafted into Christ's body, joined with Christ in a love and hope and faith.

But even the words I just spoke may seem difficult. Transformation? Commitment? Grafting? Does a person really want to attach to one Person, let alone to Jesus? People want to be free to do what they want. They think they are freer making their own plans and reaching their own goals if they have any. They are excited about the new thing that may come their way, so they don't want to miss it. Jesus' words are too difficult to follow, too difficult to incorporate into someone's life, so some people may choose to break away from God for that.

{SLIDE 6} Paul suggests a reason for being cut off

⁶ Cf. John 6:60.

from Christ: rejection. Paul speaks of the Jews that he would speak to about Christ being the fulfillment of their law. Christ is the One who can get the Jews, and all of us, across the impossible gap to where God is. Put faith in Christ, and let Christ do the rest. But the Jewish people would reject anything Paul would say. It cannot possibly be what God wills for his people. It cannot be that salvation comes from one Person, but that it must come from follow God's law to the letter and being as perfect as possible.

Nowadays people reject Christ for a slightly similar reason: They are looking for some sort of salvation but they don't believe it comes from Christ. Some people believe salvation comes by way of a different form of spirituality. They think they need to follow the teachings of Buddha to find the peace they have always been looking for. Or, the need to practice Islamic disciplines like praying five times a day toward Mecca is the way to find their salvation. Or, they must run off to join with a spiritual guru in the mountains who will show them the way. Or, maybe they just create their own "religious" beliefs, and commune with nature, and try to rid themselves from all negativity, and then they may have a more fulfilling life.

People reject the words because they believe there has to be something else they haven't tried. There has to be something new that somebody discovered, which

will truly give us what they need. They don't believe that they can find peace in Christ. They don't trust that all it takes is confession and acceptance, and Christ is theirs as Savior and Friend. They want to make it more difficult than it really is. They refuse the One who gives us everything we need.

{SLIDE 7} However, this doesn't mean that they are excluded from knowing Christ forever. Just because they have rejected Christ and find his word difficult now doesn't mean that later on they could accept Christ and find his burden easy.

Paul looks at those who have refused to hear about Jesus Christ, a good number of them being fellow Jews, and he says that they can be grafted back into faith once more. "If they do not persist in unbelief," Paul says, "[they] will be grafted in, for God has the power to graft them in again."⁷ They are not completely lost. They can be found again. They might have stumbled and broken away, but they can get their footing again. God can give them balance, and welcome them back, and receive them as children. God has the power to graft them back into faith. God even has the compassion and the drive to graft people into God through faith, whether they have fallen away

⁷ Romans 11:23.

or they are coming to faith for the first time. Healing is always offered to them. Resurrection can still be theirs.

{SLIDE 8} Paul says that one of the reasons they may come back to faith is by watching others come to faith.⁸ Paul speaks of his fellow Jews who have broken away from God, but he hopes that they may see the Gentiles, who were never grafted into God to begin with. He hopes they will see these bright-eyed, aimless pagan folks coming to a new life in Christ, and that the Jews might be so jealous of what they have that they want it to be their own. They miss having God in their lives. They want his guidance again. They want God's grace pouring down on them, too.

Have you ever been jealous about a thing that somebody had? That might be a silly question, because we have all been jealous about something. I remember being jealous about the thing certain Christians had, when I attended youth group as a teenager. They had a joy about them that I didn't have. They had a way of facing a problem and finding the help to solve it. They had God. I thought I had God, but I really didn't. I thought I was praying hard enough, worshipping well enough, but I wasn't. I was missing something.

⁸ Cf. Romans 11:14.

I didn't know what I was missing, until I spoke to my youth leader. He understood what I was saying, and he told me that I didn't have God. I believed in God, but I didn't have God in a rich and personal relationship. That was what made me jealous toward the other youth. They had God, and I was standing on the outside without God. So I stepped through the door. I joined the team. I wanted God to graft me into himself, and develop a faith in Christ from scratch.

Maybe we felt the same. We saw who was on God's team, and we want to join. We saw the work that God's church does, and we wanted to be included. Sign me up. Count me in. I want what they have, a new life with the God of the universe.

Paul says that there are those who have stumbled. They have broken off. They find God too difficult and refuse Christ's words. Yet, Paul believes a light can still reach the dark places in their hearts. A sliver of grace or a shard of hope can penetrate their hardened minds. And they will see again. They will understand once more. They see their error of their ways, and they want to make things right.

Yes, they may have stumbled, Paul says, and you who never believed in God might be beneficiaries of

what they used to have.⁹ But the one who stumbles can walk. The one broken away can be mended. “How much more will their full inclusion mean!” Paul celebrates. “Imagine the great kindness God shows to those who return to him!” Paul rejoices. “How much more will these natural branches be grafted back into their own olive tree!” Paul applauds. They and we move from death to life. We all move from being nothing to being everything in Christ Jesus our Lord.

⁹ Cf, Romans 11:15, 17-18.

The Assurance of Pardon:

Hear the good news! Christ Jesus lives and reigns in heaven above, holding the keys to death. Christ reigns in power with God the Father and the Holy Spirit, and he tells us to not be afraid. All sin is forgiven: large and small, secret and revealed. We are saved from death, and life is our reward. Believe this good news. You and I are forgiven through Christ our Lord. Amen.