

The Warning Label On The Olive Tree: Romans 11:1-36 Ephesians 2:8-18

Portions adapted from "Warning Label Series," by Jeff Strite @ SerRmonCentral.Com

Over the years, "The Michigan Lawsuit Abuse Watch" has sponsored an annual contest of the most absurd warning labels. Among their top place winners have been:

- "Do not use this snow blower on the roof."
- "Do not allow children to play in the dishwasher."
- A Clothes Iron had this advice: "Warning! Never iron clothes while they are being worn."
- On a Superman costume: "Warning: Cape does not enable user to fly."
- On a bottle of hair coloring: "Do not use as an ice cream topping."
- On a cardboard sunshield for a car: "Do not drive with sun-shield in place."
- On a toner cartridge: "Do not eat the toner."
- On a portable stroller: "Caution: Remove infant before folding for storage."
- And my personal favorite - In a microwave oven manual: "Do not use for drying pets."

So, why do they make such silly warning labels? Doesn't it seem obvious enough that you shouldn't use these products in this way?

Well yes, but you just know somebody must have actually tried to do exactly what these labels have warned against ... and someone or their pet got really hurt! And then they sued the manufacturer, for not warning them. Remember the 1994 court case where McDonalds was sued by a patron who spilled hot coffee on her lap? McDonalds had failed to warn her that her hot coffee was going to be hot. That case was eventually settled for \$600,000.00 and now McDonalds – and all other restaurants - prominently display warning labels on all their hot drink products:



So warning labels often must warn about the obvious, because as a wise person once said: "*The desire to make something foolproof vastly underestimates the creativity of fools.*"

In a similar manner, the Bible must sometimes state the obvious because we humans are often foolish. So today's portion of Scripture comes with an attached warning label ... and here it is.

So do not become proud, **but stand in awe.**
For if God did not spare the natural branches,
perhaps he will not spare you....
continue in his kindness
otherwise you also will be cut off.
Romans 11:20-21

Actually that phrase "but stand in awe" is a poor translation from the Greek which actually says "but be in

fear.” Thus the New American Standard Bible translates it this way: *Do not be conceited, but fear.*”

Thankfully, neither fearfulness nor the warning label is the main focus of today’s story, which is actually about both ours and Israel’s inclusion in God’s plans for sharing His Good News with the world. The warning label was just put there for us Gentiles who might not catch the obvious lesson from this passage.

Now, why did I just say, “us Gentiles?” Because in this portion of scripture Paul was speaking directly to us Gentile believers about our past – and continuing? – prejudices towards Israel – God’s historically “chosen people” – both those who have and also those who still have not accepted their Messiah. It is in this section of Romans that Paul brings one of his major themes of his letter to a conclusion, which is to resolve the prejudices dividing Gentile and Jewish believers.

Apparently the church at Rome was struggling with divisions that were beginning to form between its Jewish and Gentile membership. Some Jews looked down on the Gentiles because they had not been a part of the covenant God had made with His people in the Old Testament. They thought of Gentile believers as poor dirty country cousins. Johnny come latelays. Probably many still doubted that a Gentile could even be fully Christian without adopting kosher practices. Jews had grown up hating Gentiles, and it was a hard habit to break. So Paul spends the first 4 or 5 chapters of the book of Romans addressing Jewish prejudices against their Gentile brethren.

And in their turn, Gentiles wanted to have nothing to do with the Jewish believers, because – after all - turn about is fair play. They thought of the Jews as now being rejected by God and replaced by the church, after all wasn’t it Jewish people who had killed Jesus Christ.

Dare I say that this was pretty much the same attitudes of prejudice that continue to exist even to this day between black and white Churches. While claiming to worship the same God – who has supposedly broken down all the dividing walls between us – most holding skewed opinions about the other and still preferring still to keep their own company.

So while Romans is Paul’s major theological treatise on “*salvation by grace through faith for everyone who believes – without distinction*” (Romans 3:22-24), a major portion of his letter is also concerned with debunking those prejudices that Jewish and Greek Christians had against each other, and bringing the two factions back together. Which is why Paul has now dedicated chapters 9-11, written directly to us Gentiles, to point out that God not only has not rejected the Jews, but He still loves them as a unique people, and He has always maintained a “remnant” who have remained faithful to Him and through whom He can keep His promises, and He still has plans for Israel’s full restoration at the end of the age...

And so all Israel will be saved ... [because]
as regards election they are beloved, for the
sake of their ancestors; for the gifts and the
calling of God are irrevocable.

Romans 11:26-29

Now the commentators here are unsure whether Paul is referring to God restoring Israel as a nation, or whether at the end of the age, He will un-harden their hearts and many (all?) the remaining Jews will come to faith in the Messiah. **But the point is that God is not yet finished with His promises made specifically to the people of Israel, and to be Jewish – whether believing or unbelieving – is to still be living in a unique relationship with God according to these ancestral promises.**

Which brings us to Paul's **Olive Tree** illustration on how God is actually continuing to accomplish his original plan for the salvation of the world, first given to national Israel but now largely being carried forward by Gentile churches: not by abandoning the Jews and adopting the Gentiles, but by grafting the faithful from both races into one living organism containing all of God's elected – both Jewish and Gentile – which is still growing out of and being supported by Israel's ancestral roots. Biblical commentators have labeled this hybrid group of God's people as the "Israel of God." Which is how Paul referred to this new body in his letter to the Galatian Church....

For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything;
but a new creation is everything!
As for those who will follow this rule
peace be upon them, and mercy, and upon the **Israel of God.**

Galatians 6:15-16

Paul is now describing this "Israel of God," to the Romans as a grafted **Olive Tree**. **But here is a very important distinction needed to understand this illustration – which is the only way I can make sense out of Paul's later warning – is that the Olive Tree is referring not God's election of those who are "saved" or "unsaved," but instead to those people who have he has now elected to continue fulfilling God's promise of blessing all nations through Abraham's descendants.** This task was originally exclusive to Israel, particularly their role in bringing the Messiah into the world. But now, some of them have been broken off because of their unbelief, their refusal to accept their Messiah. So God has grafted in those faithful from outside Israel to take their place in spreading this Good News. Why I want to make this careful distinction between God's election for salvation versus God's election for service will make better sense when we get to the warning.

But first, remember how earlier, Paul had carefully distinguished what it meant to be merely a descendant of Abraham (like Ishmael and Esau) and others (like Isaac and Jacob) who were specifically elected to be heirs according to God's promise to bless the world through Abraham. Again this election was not necessarily related to their personal salvation but their actual participation in God's salvific plan for the world

For not all Israelites truly belong to Israel,
and not all of Abraham's children are his true descendants ...
it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God,
but the children of the promise are counted as descendants.
Romans 9:6-8

Then Paul went a step further by explaining that being an heir of God's promise could include both those from within Israel who had remained faithful to God, His "elect remnant" (Romans 9:27, 11:5-7), and also those from outside Israel who shared the faith of Abraham.

For this reason it depends on faith,
in order that the promise may rest on grace
and be guaranteed to **all his descendants**,
not only to the adherents of the law but also
to those who share the faith of Abraham
(for he is the father of all of us)...
Romans 4:16

So keeping this new symbiotic relationship of Jewish and non-jewish believers in mind, along with their individual prejudices against each other, notice how Paul describes the characteristics of this particular **Olive Tree**.

If the root is holy then the branches are also holy ... meaning every part of the tree, both the natural and the grafted branches share the same holiness (vs. 16). So Gentile believers are not just half-Christians but have fully joined the same royal priesthood that was once exclusive to Israel (cf: 1 Peter 2:4-10).

It is not the branches that support the root but the root that supports the branches (vs. 18). Which basically means that the Gentile Church which has grown since the time of Christ, is not a new thing but a continuation of God's salvific plans for the ages. We stand on the foundation of, the blessings given, and the lessons learned, by all those people of faith, Old Testament saints, who lived before Jesus. This is a very important lesson for all those believers who identify themselves as a "New Testament Church."

By rejecting the Old Testament from their thinking they are literally cutting themselves off from the holy and life giving, and also very instructional root of their faith.

And finally notice that Paul is careful to say only that

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,**
Romans 11:17

Which means once again that God never rejected all of Israel ... only "some," those who have refused to receive His son as their Messiah. After which we "wild olive branches" were grafted in to what God has continued to care for and nourish. **So don't let anyone ever tell you that the Gentile Church has now replaced Israel as "God's holy nation."** The truth is that the Gentile Church has joined and become one with Israel's "faithful remnant," to now form "the Israel of God" to continue forwarding His plans and promises, which he made to Abraham that through him to bless all People.

The Gentile Church may be a part of God's mystery revealed to the world after Jesus, but we are nothing new, nothing different, from what God has planned to do long ago, which was to bless all nations through the children of Abraham, both those natural born and those who can claim his heritage of faith.

Which now brings us back to the warning.

[some of Israel] was broken off because
of their unbelief, but you stand only through faith.
So do not become proud, but stand in awe.
For if God did not spare the natural branches,
perhaps he will not spare you.
Romans 11:20-21

Remember what I said at the beginning of this message. This warning label is just put there for us Gentiles who might not get the obvious lesson from this passage.

The obvious lesson – Paul's central message throughout the book of Romans – is that the only way into fellowship with God has nothing to do with ethnic race, religious ritual, or personal holiness, and everything to do with whether or not a person comes to God by faith alone: *the one who is righteous will live by faith* (remember, this is how Paul opened his letter: 1:17)

Notice that Paul described Israel's branches as being broken off not because of "sin" but for their "unbelief." And that we Gentiles having now been grafted in, not because

of our innate goodness, but because, like Abraham, we came to God in faith.... So now Paul is warning us to not be conceited towards those who have been replaced, but to fear lest we also be cut off from the **Olive Tree**. However, I cannot believe that he is talking about our personal "saved" relationship with God but distinctly about our "service" relationship with God. Because the Bible is very clear that salvation is both given, secured, and maintained by God. As Jesus said

My sheep hear my voice.
I know them, and they follow me.
I give them eternal life, and they will never perish.
No one will snatch them out of my hand.
John 10:27-28

So take this warning to "*not be conceited but fearful lest we also be cut off*" for what it means; which is in realizing that it is not your innate goodness or superiority, but simply your faith, that has you now grafted into God's **Olive Tree** to carry forward His mission of blessing all nations through Abraham, And If God willingly removed his original "chosen people" from this task because of their lack of faith, realize that he can just as quickly remove you.

Note then the kindness and the severity of God:
severity towards those who have fallen,
but God's kindness towards you,
provided you continue in his kindness;
otherwise you also will be cut off.
Romans 11:22

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.
Romans 11:23

Cut off ... but able to be grafted back in should we return, which applies to both unbelieving you and me as well as unbelieving Israel, I am convinced that this does not refer to our personal salvation which Scripture has described as being sealed within us by God's Holy Spirit, but only our usefulness for service and our receiving of blessings of those beautiful footed people who continue to share God's good news with the world.

This makes sense according to Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son, who never stopped being his father's son even though at the end of his exile, he had stopped thinking of himself as his father's son. When he left his father's house, he was cut off from his father's blessings, but when he returned, he was fully restored to his former status of "son" and "brother." And while the father did not chase after his son, he watched and waited fully prepared to restore his son upon his return. Which when you think about it has been the history of National Israel's with God, wandering then returning only to wander and return again, while God remained faithful to His promises.

It is this idea of being cut off but restorable to service that makes sense of Paul declaring his own fear, in his letter to the Corinthian Church, when he was describing his ministry of sharing the Gospel with everyone, of carefully watching his own life, lest in failing in his self-discipline, he might thus be "disqualified" from "running the race;" (1 Corinthians 9:27).

So here are three important lessons that we Gentile believers need to learn from Romans 11, this is today's take home:

1. That the Church is not a new distinct ministry separate from Israel, but rather a continuation in partnership with Israel's elect, the faithful remnant, the Israel of God, who continue to move God's plans for the salvation of the world forward.
2. That God has not rejected Israel but only temporarily "hardened" those who have refused to believe, setting them aside, until He has finished his mission of saving the rest of his children around the Gentile world; after which God will in some way or another restore Israel back to their original relationship with him, *because the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable* (11:29).
3. And how all this will work out in the end is only known by the unsearchable, inscrutable, merciful ways of God (11:30-33).

So what about that warning label? God through Paul, is advising us to never take our purpose and position among His royal priesthood for granted. We may have been saved by His grace, but we are also saved for a purpose: to participate in sharing the Good News of God's offered salvation ... which has been His plan all along for blessing all nations through Abraham's seed. Remember "*How can they believe in one of whom they have never heard. And how can they hear unless someone proclaim him How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news*" (Romans 10:14-15).

And that's all God is saying here. Your salvation is secure but your privilege of serving God now is both a precious thing, and conditional upon your keeping the faith. Don't take the evangelistic privilege that you have been given for granted. Get on your feet and get moving for God's sake.

Amen.