

Sermon for Sunday, October 10, 2010
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The Kindness and the Severity of God
Romans 11:1-6, 22-32

People like to emphasize the kindness of God

When I was little I thought God was like my paternal grandfather. He died when I was four, but I clearly recall his thin, white hair and welcoming lap. I climbed on him whenever I saw him, pulled his nose and played with his hair. He endured it with a smile and infinite patience. As a child, I thought God was like my grandfather: patient, always smiling, safe and soft. Little did I know that there was so much more to that skilled, accomplished and passionate man.

Many of you still think God is soft and kind and you are perfectly content with your child-like view. God *is* kind, but just as there was more to my grandfather, so there is more to God. 2 Rom 11:22 says, "Consider the kindness and severity of God."

Romans 11 is a long, complex chapter, but Paul states the core in 11:22: "Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God." The kindness and sternness [or severity] of God is a theme that pervades scripture. It's stated first in Exodus 33-34. At the time, Moses was so shaken by the sin of Israel that he wasn't sure he could lead them into the promised land. He wanted assurance of God's favor and help. God promised to go with Moses and sealed it by revealing himself to Moses:

The LORD proclaimed his name, the LORD. And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, "The LORD... the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished" (Ex. 34:5-7).

We hear the accents: God's compassion, grace, love and faithfulness. But he concludes "Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished." That line is essential to a complete idea of God and our world. God's character is complex. So Paul says, "Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God" (11:22).

People like to remember the kindness of God and forget his sternness. We want a kindly grandfather, bringing gifts, plucking silver dollars from our ears, sleeping through our disobedience. People have created many ideas about the gods. In the last century or so, the "kindly grandfather" may be the most common popular concept. Liberal Christian theologians have rejected God's sovereign power, wrath and judgment. Richard Niebuhr summarized that theology: "A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment thru the ministrations of a Christ without a cross."¹

Such a view of God seems like a relief at first. "No wrath" means "No wrath for me! I can do whatever I please." But ultimately it leads to despair. If God is *simply forbearing* and kind, then he must also be *weak* – too weak to do anything except smile at goodness and frown at evil. Such a god is "infinitely forbearing and kind."² But that god cannot account for evil and certainly cannot vanquish it. Thus we are left to our own strength, which means we are left to despair. There cannot be strong hope for the future.

¹ The Kingdom of God in America, Harper & Row, 1959, p. 193

² Packer, Knowing God, pp. 143-145

There are three common views of god and a certain world view follows each:

First, God is unknowable. He may or may not exist, but if he does, it hardly matters. He is far off, long gone, uncaring. If he wants us know him, he has done a poor job. We are alone in the world. We fend for ourselves, amuse ourselves, satisfy ourselves, and distract ourselves from the terrible certainty of death.

Second, God is good, but not powerful. He is not the omnipotent Lord. He is a kindly old grandfather. He hopes everyone has a good time, but can't do much to ensure it. He means well, but can't protect us from trouble or promote our good.

If God is good but weak, then this world is an uncertain place. There is nothing to restrain the moral evil of men or the natural evil of disaster and death. This weak god makes pessimists and fatalists of us all. At best, we can hope that goodness and life win in the end.

Third, God is personal, knowable and sovereign. In a book by John Frame he writes the Bible calls God "Lord" seven thousand times. Seven thousand times! We should know therefore, that he is Lord of all. Note: Scripture never says God governs all things *the same way*.

- Usually: "My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please" (Isa. 46:10).
- Sometimes we read "God gave them over" to their own sinful desires, foolish thoughts, and sins (Rom. 1:26-28). He lets us do what we please.

Either way, God is Lord. He is Lord of Israel, Lord of the church, Lord of the nations, Lord of all. In Romans 11 the Lord defines himself, reveals himself, and tells us to ponder it. "Consider the kindness and sternness of God" (New International Version). Or "Consider the goodness and severity of God" (English Standard Version).

God is kind. He gives us life, sends us food in the seasons. When we sin, he is patient and offers forgiveness to all who repent. Yet he is stern. He shows his justice, his severity, to those who do evil and refuse to repent.

Some quiver at the thought that God is judge, that he would finally punish evil, but how could it be otherwise, if we hope ever to have peace and victory? The histories of World War II teach that many Nazis and Japanese imperialists were defiant to the end, as full of venom and violence as ever.

Question: What would have happened if England, America, China, Russia, Canada, Australia, and Brazil had been kind to Hitler, and not stern? How could World War II end, how could justice and love triumph, if hatred was never defeated, if malice was never silenced?

How can evil be defeated on the grand scale if God is always kind, never stern? Evil must be defeated if love and peace will prevail. God must be willing to battle evil and strong, to be successful. Because he is kind, he offers forgiveness. He patiently grants time to repent. But if sinners *never repent*, the Lord is, and must be, stern, to defeat evil.

The Bible says mankind is judged at death. Jesus says, "The Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what he has done" (Matt. 16:27). Indeed, he says each person renders an account for every word we utter (12:33). Buddhism, Judaism, Islam agree!

Paul says "We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad" (2 Cor. 5:10). Someone will say this is frightening. It is, but...

First, Christianity offers mercy, grace, forgiveness to all who ask God for it, in the name of Christ. But one must ask, not expect an arbitrary slip of paper saying "forgiven." If we ask the Lord to forgive, we are asking the Lord to forgive. He says, "I forgive you, now come follow me." He imputes righteousness and he imparts righteousness. Impute means he calls us righteous and forgiven. Impart means he leads us into righteousness personally, morally.

Second, it is frightening if God is judge, but it's more frightening if he is not, if there were no accounting. If no one had to render an account to God, people would do whatever they have the power to do. If men do whatever they can get away with, then surely brute power rules and lawlessness is the law of the land. We would live in a world where God is dead and everything is permitted.

Every part of Romans assumes there is a God, creator and Lord, redeemer and judge. He is good and stern and his universe reflects both elements. That brings us to Paul's last discussion of sin, evil and unbelief. Unbelief has been Paul's constant concern in Romans 9-11. For Paul, it's a particularly painful form of unbelief: God had long promised his people a redeemer – a King like David, a prophet like Moses. Israel had long awaited that Savior.

Yet when Jesus came, most failed to believe; some were hostile to him. Next, as Paul took the gospel to the great cities of the Empire, the Jews were hardly more likely to believe than the Gentiles. So Paul asks, "Has God's word failed? Did his purposes for Israel fail?" (9:6). It seems so since not many believed the gospel. Romans 9 says God has not failed; Paul give five reasons:

1. All whom God has elected to salvation are or will be saved (9:6-24).
2. God previously revealed that not all Israel would be saved and that some Gentiles would be (9:25-29).
3. When people fail to believe, it's their choice, not God's fault (9:30-10:21). All day long, God stretches out his hands to his people.
4. It may seem that God has forgotten his people, but some Jews, including Paul himself, believe and are saved (11:1-10).
5. The salvation of the Gentiles, which is happening now, will arouse Israel to envy and become the means to restore many of them (11:11-24). In the end all true Israel will be saved, so that God fulfills his promises to them (11:25-32).

I don't want to lecture through all this, but underscore the main point: God's plan has not failed. He neither forgets nor rejects his people. That is important, because it means he never forgets us. He never forgets you. This leads to some vital questions in Romans 11.

Question 1: Does God Reject or Forget his People? (11:1-6)

He has not. First, Paul himself is an Israelite and God did not reject him (11:1). God intervened on the road to Damascus to redeem Paul and make him an apostle.

Second, God foreknew his people. As Romans 8 shows, God's foreknowledge is more than mere awareness of what will happen next. In the Old Testament, when it says God "knows" us, it means he directs us (Psa. 1:6). If God knows us, he sees our weakness and rescues us (Psa. 144:3-11). If God knows us, he watches us, cares for us. In Hosea 13:5, when God says, "I cared for you in the desert," it literally

says "I knew you in the desert, the burning heat. To God, foreknows is to say, God loves. "His foreknowledge is his affectionate, sovereign, distinguishing love."³

Third, life often seems darker than it is. God always preserves a remnant of his people. Perhaps you recall the story of the time Elijah thought Israel had entirely rejected God, so that Israel had ceased to be God's people. He lamented:

"Lord, they have killed your prophets and torn down your altars; I am the only one left, and they are trying to kill me"? And what was God's answer to him? 'I have reserved for myself seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal.' [So God preserved a remnant, by grace.]

Friends, we must hear this! How often we feel alone. Everyone feels alone, forgotten, rejected at some point in life. Many of you feel that way right now. Paul's three answers speak to you, O Christian: God has loved you and called you. He knows you. Life often seems darker than it is. *We think* we're alone, but no. My story: I was feeling alone and shared my feelings with a group of friends and colleagues. They were very sympathetic, good listeners. Four of them said "I experienced *something similar. God led...*"

Lord, remind each of us how we enter your story. We're prone to be like Elijah: I'm special, one of the few who "gets" your plan. I know the gospel and the way it plays out in all of life. I know your justice and your mercy and "I am the only one left!" But God's Spirit says "I have reserved for myself 7,000" and many more. God reserves and preserves his beloved people. Americans, Israelites, Germans, all are invited into God's family and the place He reserved for us.

Question 2: Does God still have a plan for Israel? (11:7-10)

Paul says, "What Israel sought so earnestly it did not obtain, but the elect did...The others were hardened... 'God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes so that they could not see and ears so that they could not hear'" (11:7-8). This is a summary and allusion to Paul's earlier comments about the mystery of unbelief and the hardening of Pharaoh.

In Exodus 9:16 (repeated in Romans 9:17) God tells Pharaoh: 'I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.' That is, God's judgment on Pharaoh displays part of his character, not otherwise known – his justice and his severity.

God showed his just judgment in hardening Pharaoh. He spoke to Pharaoh through Moses many times in Exodus 5:1; 7:16; 8:1, 20-21; 9:1, 13; 10:3. The Pharaohs had enslaved the Israelites, because they had the power to do so, because they wanted slaves. God commanded Pharaoh, "Let my people go" and threatened judgment if he refused. Despite every sign and warning, Pharaoh said, "No" again and again.

At great length God hardened Pharaoh's heart. Hardness isn't disobedience. If we disobey God in weakness and grieve and repent, our hearts are soft and God's mercy forgives all. To be hard is to be stubborn, insensitive, and defiant toward God. A hard heart can lead to eternal judgment; it did with Pharaoh.

³ Murray, Romans, 317-318.

Pharaoh rejects God's word fifteen times in Exodus 5; 7:13-22, 8:15-19, 32; 9:7, 17, 27. Pharaoh hardened himself repeatedly (8:11, 28). But about the tenth time Pharaoh refused God, the Lord hardened him (Ex 9.12, Rom. 9:15). This is "a *judicial* act, abandoning him to his own stubbornness."⁴ But God never hardens anyone who did not first harden themselves toward him. But God sometimes says, "As you wish."

The same thing can happen to anyone: to Israel, to people born in the church. For centuries Israel went after other gods. Then they pursued God, but the wrong way. They focused on law, law, law! They tried to master God's commands, to obey so perfectly that God had to save them. These people became Jesus' most implacable foe because he focused on God's love and mercy, and they focused on law.

Therefore, "God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes so that they could not see and ears so that they could not hear" (Rom. 11:8). Then it's a prayer of judgment, "Let their eyes be darkened" (11:9). This comes from Psalm 69. It is King David's agonizing prayer about betrayal. He pleads for help, he cries for justice "Let your anger overtake them." Peter draws on the same passage when he explores the terrible mystery of Judas, who betrayed Jesus.

We must hear this word about judgment because complacency multiplies the effect of sin the way high interest rates multiply the cost of a loan. We dare not say "I was baptized, I was in the church once, I asked God to forgive me, and I will again, but not now, please." Hear Romans 11:22 again: "Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God: sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you, provided that you continue in his kindness. Otherwise, you also will be cut off." That is, if anyone cuts off God in his kindness, God will respond with sternness.

Case: Dmitri Mendeleev was perhaps the greatest chemist of the 20th century. He is the father of the periodic table and the science of the nature and attributes of the elements. He shared his knowledge with manufacturers and farmers and enriched the lives of millions. Mendeleev thought his success brought him privileges. In 1892, he married his second wife before he legally divorced his first. So he was guilty of the crime of bigamy. The czar forgave him saying, "I admit, Mendeleev has two wives, but I only have one Mendeleev."

Mendeleev received mercy, but never repented and soon put himself above the law again. He joined an anarchist, revolutionary group. This time the czar was not so patient and he lost his university post. The point: This world reflects God's nature. We cannot do evil and refuse to repent forever. Judgment will come.

This is true of individuals, of Israel, of churches too. In northern Africa, Asia Minor, churches that once thrived are now gone. In vast swaths of Europe, great cathedrals hold a few dozen worshippers and the gospel is gone. God says: Continue in my kindness or you will be cut off.

The case of Ephesus: A strong church whose love grew cold. God warned: "Return to your first love. Repent or I will remove your light." I've been to Ephesus twice: There is no church there; the whole region is a desolate ruin, with no churches in the vicinity. Whether Israel or churches or smug Christians, the warning is same.

⁴ Stott 269

God's plan for Gentiles and for Israel

Nonetheless, God has a plan for his people. Paul explains God's plan for Israel in 11:25: "Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in." God's plan rests on his power to take evil and use it for good. Remember Joseph? His brothers sold him into slavery and he was dragged to Egypt, where he rose to great power. From that position, he saved his family from a terrible famine. He said, "You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good" (Gen. 50:20).

So it is here. In Paul's journeys through the empire, if there was a synagogue in a city, he always started there. Every time there were ready listeners, who trusted Jesus and became disciples. In the town of Berea, the whole synagogue believed and another had perhaps a 50/50 split. But most times, for example, Pisidian Antioch, Ephesus, and Corinth, the synagogue leaders and most members opposed Paul. So he went to the Gentiles. He said, "We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it... we now turn to the Gentiles" (Acts 13:46).

Therefore, Israel's unbelief was the catalyst for the Gentile mission, "God overruled the sin of Israel for the salvation of the Gentiles."⁵ But there is more. When the Gentiles come streaming into the kingdom and family of God, many Israelites will see it. When they do, Israel will experience a jealousy. It will "make Israel envious" (Rom. 11:11) so they seek God's blessing and grace (11:11-14).

Paul uses an agricultural image, one Jesus used earlier. Dead branches are removed from the tree. Expanding the metaphor, one known in that day, he adds that Gentiles were grafted into the olive tree – the family of God and covenant. Thus, by God's plan, Israel's unfaithfulness means life for the Gentiles.

But the Gentiles can never be proud. And God still has a plan for Israel. His "gifts and calling" are irrevocable (11:29). He will yet deliver them and forgive their sins. When Israel does return to God, the blessing for the world will multiply: "For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?" (11:15). One day, all Israel, that is, the true Israel of God will be saved.

You say, "I don't see that today. Perhaps not. But many Israelites did join the church. It received a steady stream of Jewish converts in the first centuries. And there are many more to come. That in turn will strengthen God's mission here.

Hoping in God's sternness and kindness

We know that God is and must be stern, for some persist in evil and rebellion and he must and will defeat it. Yet we hope in God's kindness – a kindness shown supremely in the gospel. We receive all the benefit of his kindness when we believe and receive all the privileges of the covenant: peace with God, forgiveness of sin, his daily protection and provision.

God made us in his image, therefore we should meditate and live it ourselves. Kindness and sternness, love and justice are the twin virtues of life.

Parents: Are you kind? Are you also stern, lovingly just, when your children stray, so as to drive folly from them? Both! Both! Kindness without discipline is mere indulgence. Sternness without kindness becomes cold and brutal.

⁵ Stott, Romans

Leaders: Are you kind, caring for those who work for you or look to you? Are you also stern? If you let them goof off, customers will suffer, conscientious workers will suffer. Be kind and loving, yet just. Even in internal dialogue, self appraisal: Are you kind with yourself? Stern and just?

The Lord is both: stern toward sin, teaching us to repent. He is kind and loving to all who seek his favor. So seek it, by faith in him.