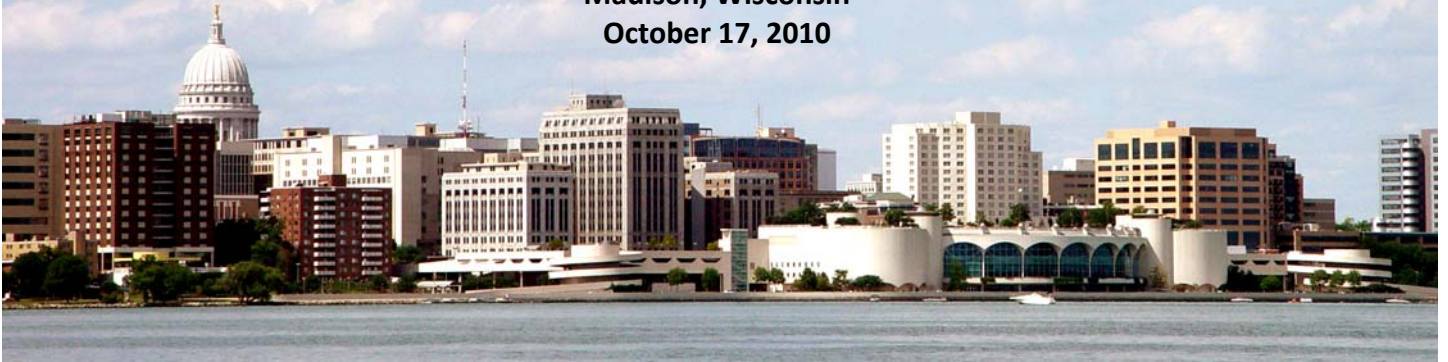


“The Kindness and Severity of God”

Romans 11:17-22

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Introduction:

Most of us would agree that in the Bible we find a complete and accurate picture concerning the nature of God. However, both in ancient times and also today, people have overemphasized certain aspects of God's nature.

On one extreme, many people tend to think of God only in terms of His great love. And so we hear from some that God is only kind and generous, that God would never condemn anyone. Perhaps some think that God is a pushover, that He can be manipulated. Perhaps some think of God as some kind of grandfather who is kind to his grandchildren no matter what they may do. Some people think, "Because of the love and kindness of God, I can get away with just a little bit of adultery, just a little bit of racism here and there, or maybe a little bit of theft, because God is so loving that He does not care about all of those little details." And so we find today that many people are willing to gamble their eternal souls on the extreme position that God is only a God of love.

Of course on the other extreme, there are some people who seem to think that God is completely stern and that He has absolutely no compassion whatsoever. There are some who are warped in this direction. There are some who believe that we are nothing more than sinners in the hands of an angry God. Most of us are familiar with the sermon delivered by Jonathan Edwards at a church in Connecticut on July 8, 1741,

The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect, over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked; his wrath towards you burns like fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to be cast into the fire; he is of purer eyes than to bear to have you in his sight; you are ten thousand times so abominable in his eyes as the most hateful venomous serpent is in ours.

Sinners in the hands of an angry God! Obviously, our society is now leaning away from this view of God, and yet those on the outside of the Christian faith continue to portray this God (a God that they don't believe in) as a hateful, vengeful being who just loves making people miserable. Several years ago, the *Onion* newspaper featured an article with the headline, "God Loses Decision-Making Coin,"

HEAVEN—God confirmed Monday that He has misplaced His special decision-making coin. “I have no idea where I put it,” a visibly distraught God said of the coin, which He has used for more than four billion years to determine everything from the direction of breezes to genocides. “I remember flipping it last night for...Mark and Patti Brenton’s attempt at conception, but I haven’t seen it since.” God said He hopes to locate the coin before 7:15 a.m. Thursday, when United Flight 251 takes off from Seattle with actress Dixie Carter on board.” (2001)

Well, that is certainly how many people look at God these days. They see God as this mean and capricious being who flips a coin to determine who He will kill next. And yet as we think about these two extremes—on one hand the loving God who does not care what we do, and on the other hand the God of vengeance who looks forward to watching people burn in misery—we need to realize that neither position gives us an accurate picture of the one true and living God.

So that we can see the truth about God in a time when so much of what we hear is twisted, I would like to ask that we look at a paragraph of Scripture that is found in Romans 11 (p. 1774). The church in Rome, of course, was made up of both Jews and Gentiles, and these two groups were not getting along (to say the least). Paul, then, had to write to get them to settle down and to convince them to get along with each other. There was certainly the temptation (on one hand) for the Jewish Christians to look down on the Gentiles, because the Gentiles were the newcomers and had not always been God’s chosen people. And then the Gentiles (on the other hand) would have been tempted to look down on the Jews for being the ones who murdered the Lord. “We are God’s chosen people.” “You killed your own Messiah.” Back and forth, back and forth! And so, starting in Romans 9, the apostle Paul starts to express his deep concern that his fellow Jews were in the process of rejecting the gospel message. It broke Paul’s heart! In fact, in the opening verses of Romans 9, Paul tells us that he has **“great sorrow and unceasing grief in [his] heart.”** He then goes on to say that he wishes that he himself could be lost, separated from Christ, if it would mean that his Jewish family could be saved. So on one hand, Paul was torn up.

But then on the other hand, Paul was thrilled that the Gentiles were starting to accept the gospel message. And yet there again, the Gentiles would not even have a Savior if it had not been for the Jews. As he sorts all of this out, the apostle Paul explains how the Gentiles had been grafted into God’s family, just as a skilled gardener would graft a cultivated olive branch into the trunk of an established olive tree. And so in that way, the Jews and Gentiles could understand that they were both important in God’s plan and that neither group had any right to boast over the other. But as the apostle Paul makes this argument in Romans 11, he summarizes the nature of God and boils it down to a choice that all of us need to make. If you will, please look with me at Romans 11:17-22, as Paul now addresses those of us as Gentiles. Paul says,

¹⁷ But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, being a wild olive, were grafted in among them and became partaker with them of the rich root of the olive tree, ¹⁸ do not be arrogant toward the branches; but if you are arrogant, remember that it is not you who supports the root, but the root supports you. ¹⁹ You will say then, “Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in.” ²⁰ Quite right, they were broken off for their unbelief, but you stand by your faith. Do not be conceited, but fear; ²¹ for if God did not spare the natural branches, He will not spare you, either. ²² Behold then the kindness and severity of God; to those who fell, severity, but to you, God’s kindness, if you continue in His kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off. (NASB95)

As we look back at these six verses, and as we think about the extremes that we see around us when it comes to God's nature, I would like for us to consider first of all, the kindness of God, I would like for us to then consider God's severity, and then as we end, I would like for us to ask ourselves the very important question, "So what?" Or in other words: What does this passage really mean for those of us gathered here this morning?

I. **As we begin, though, let us please think about the meaning of what Paul said in verse 22 where he tells us that we are to BEHOLD THE KINDNESS OF GOD.**

And certainly in at least one regard, God's kindness and love is shown to everyone. We remember what Jesus said in Matthew 5:45, where He said that God ***"...causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous."*** In other words, God (at least in one sense) shows kindness toward everyone. He provides us with snow and rain, He gives us colorful trees in the fall, He blesses us with rivers, and plains, and snow-capped mountains. But in the context of Romans 11, this is not the kind of kindness that Paul is talking about. But instead, Paul is talking here about kindness in terms of salvation and spiritual blessings.

We remember God replacing the Ten Commandments in Exodus 34:6-7 as ***"...the LORD passed by in front of [Moses] and proclaimed, 'The LORD, the LORD God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin....'"*** And so we find that the Lord is good; not only in a physical sense as He is to the whole world, but also in a spiritual sense. The Lord had been kind to the nation of Israel.

Over time, though, the Jewish people forgot, and they had to be reminded that God is good. After the Babylonian Captivity, we remember how the Levites praised God and confessed the sins of the previous generation and said, ***"They refused to listen, and did not remember Your wondrous deeds which You had performed among them; so they became stubborn and appointed a leader to return to their slavery in Egypt. But You are a God of forgiveness, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness; and You did not forsake them"*** (Nehemiah 9:17). That does not sound like a God who has lost His decision-making coin, does it? And so even when the people turned away from God, God did not give up, but in His great kindness, the Lord remembered the Jewish people.

But even with the Gentiles in the Old Testament, God also showed tremendous kindness. We remember the prophet Jonah who tried to avoid preaching in Nineveh. In Jonah 4:2, the prophet explained why he first refused to preach to the Gentiles by saying, ***"...for I knew that You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and one who relents concerning calamity."*** Jonah knew that God would be gracious even to the Gentiles in Nineveh.

Bringing this over into the New Testament, we remember Paul's words to the Gentiles on the Areopagus in Athens, Greece. As Paul preached the gospel in Athens, he appealed to the kindness of God, ***"...since He Himself gives to all people life and breath and all things"*** (Acts 17:25). Paul then applied that in a spiritual way: God is not like idols, but He has blessed us in a powerful way.

And so we come back to Romans 11:22. As Paul addressed the Gentiles who were members of the church in Rome, he appealed to the kindness of God, and Paul was saying: You need to behold (you need to look at, you need to carefully consider) the kindness, the goodness, the love of God, and you need to be encouraged by this—you have been grafted into God's family. What an amazing blessing!

II. **Secondly, though, Paul also said that the Gentile Christians in Rome also needed to THINK ABOUT THE SEVERITY OF GOD.**

In other words, there is another aspect of God's nature that should also be considered. People today, of course, would rather not think about the severity of God. As a society, many think that God is not really serious, that God is all about love, and tolerance, and acceptance. But when we look at Romans 11:22, we find that we are commanded to, "**Behold then...the severity of God.**" As I understand it, the word "**severity**" literally refers to "steepness" or "sharpness," as in a sharp rock or the edge of a cliff. And so we are commanded to look at God's severe side, because to only focus on His love presents a distorted view of God. It would be a little bit like a parent talking to a young child about how great the kitchen stove is. Imagine showing a two-year old the stove and only talking about how great it is, "It has fire that can cook macaroni and cheese, this stove can bake cookies, it can make us pancakes, it can make us popcorn." But imagine saying all of these positive things without some kind of warning about how dangerous that stove can be! It would be a tragedy to focus on only the good and the amazing things that a stove can do. In fact, to only emphasize the positive would actually be quite dangerous—it would be an unloving thing to do. And so the command to behold the severity of God is actually a very loving command, and those who try to avoid talking about this side of God are not doing us a favor at all.

And so for that reason, the Bible seems to emphasize not only the love of God but also the severity of God—all the way from the very beginning. We think about the creation of man and woman and how the Lord placed them in the middle of a beautiful garden. They had everything they ever could have needed. God is good! God is kind! But the Bible goes on to explain that they disobeyed the one negative command that they were given. They did the one thing they were told not to do. And in response to that disobedience, the Lord not only kicked them out of the garden, but He also pronounced a burdensome curse on both the man and the woman. Several days ago, I was weeding the garden with my young daughter. We were cleaning it up for the last time so I could till it up before winter, and as we were pulling those very tough weeds, my daughter said, "Daddy, you know how some people have rope burn? Well, I have weed burn!" And I knew what she was talking about. We had a teachable moment there, and we talked about how weeds were a part of God's curse in response to Adam's sin. Behold, then, the kindness and the severity of God!

Several hundred years later, we read about the flood. According to Genesis 6:5, "**The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.**" The Lord then decided to flood the earth and to kill every living thing by drowning the earth in water. When our son was born, we decorated the nursery with images of Noah's Ark. But when we thought about it, we realized that we had just decorated our precious son's room with what is probably the most violent Bible story of all time! But the good part is that in the middle of all of this, the Lord found Noah, "**...a righteous man, blameless in his time; Noah walked with God**" (Genesis 6:9). And that is the message we want our son to get! We want our son to grow up to be a "**righteous man, blameless in his time.**" We want him to walk with God. And so God decided to save Noah by instructing him to build an ark, but even beyond this, God allowed Noah to preach a message of repentance (an invitation to join him on the ark) for 120 years. God did not have to do that, but He did. Behold, then, the kindness and the severity of God!

Several years after the great flood, we read about the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Out of His great love, God bargained with Abraham and agreed not to destroy those cities if He could find only 10 righteous people. But when those 10 people could not be found, the Bible says that God destroyed four entire cities with fire and brimstone. Do we realize what that means? The loving God of heaven melted rocks and dropped them on people! Most people seem to agree that brimstone is a highly combustible form of sulfur.

God burned people to death with burning sulfur. If you want to have some idea of what burning sulfur smells like, you can come pretty close by lighting a match and sniffing it right after you light it. God took that and He burned people to death with it. Some people might say, "I don't want to serve a God who would do something like that! I mean, that is horrible." And yet when we read the text, we find that the Lord did this because a vast majority of the people in those cities had decided to be immoral. After all of the warnings and the bargaining with Abraham, and even after seeing the example of righteous Lot, God could not even find ten righteous people in the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Behold, then, the kindness and the severity of God!

Then, in chronological order, we get to the event from the Old Testament that is actually referred to in Romans 11:22 as we read about **"those who fell"** in the wilderness. Over and over again we have learned from our study of the book of Numbers that God has killed more people for the sin of whining than for just about anything else! God hates whining! And so when God's people whined, and complained, and moaned, and groaned about how they would not be able to go in and take the land that He had promised, God got pretty upset about that and the consequence was that all of those who knew better (all of those from 20 years old and older) would die in the wilderness. Several million people would die for the sin of not trusting in God and then whining about it. "We don't have enough food! We don't like the food we have! We don't have enough water! We want to go back to Egypt! We don't want Moses to be our leader!" Of course, towards Joshua and Caleb, God was incredibly gracious, but the rest of the people had to wander around until all of those 20 years old and older had died off in the wilderness. Behold, then, the kindness and severity of God!

Paul, then, is saying that we need to look back and learn a lesson from God's people in the Old Testament. For the most part, the Jewish people had rejected God, and so when the time came, God cut them off and grafted the Gentiles into His family tree. Of course, there will always be some individual Jews who will continue to find the truth and obey it. Right now, in fact, there is a faithful congregation of the Lord's people in the city of Jerusalem. But as a race of people, they continue to reject the good news of Jesus Christ. So, should we as Gentiles be arrogant toward what happened to the Jews? Absolutely not! And that is Paul's point here in Romans 11: We as Gentiles will also be cut off if we are not faithful. Behold, then, the kindness and severity of God.

Of course, we should not forget the fact that much of God's severity is still coming in the future. Paul went on to say in 2 Thessalonians 1:6-9 that, **"...it is only just for God to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to give relief to you who are afflicted and to us as well when the Lord Jesus will be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. These will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power."** When the Bible says that we need to behold the severity of God, we need to pay attention. In Matthew 25:46, the Lord Himself explained that the punishment of the wicked will last just as long as the reward of the righteous: Both the reward and the punishment will be **"eternal."** The same word is used to refer to both. That is not something that many people today want to hear, but it is something that all of us need to hear. Even as preachers, we need to remind ourselves that God's punishment will be eternal. To avoid the subject of eternal hell in our preaching is to do our listeners a terrible disservice.

In fact, as I was preparing for this lesson, I started thinking to myself: I cannot think of anyone who has overstated the terrors of hell. Can you? Can you think of any false teacher we have disfellowshipped because he made hell too scary? I can think of some who have dismissed hell. I can think of some who teach that when we die we simply cease to exist. But among all of the people I know, out of every sermon that I have ever heard, and out of every book or article that I have ever read, I cannot think of anyone who has portrayed

hell as being scarier or more awful than it really is. And the reason is: God's severity is far beyond our ability to even comprehend it! We cannot get any worse than an **"eternal fire"** (Matthew 25:41), or a **"lake of fire"** (Revelation 20:15), or **"unquenchable fire"** (Mark 9:43), or the **"weeping and gnashing of teeth"** (Matthew 8:12). How could we make it any worse than this? Revelation 14:11 is perhaps the most graphic description of hell in the Bible as the apostle John cracks the door open just a little bit and says that, **"...the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever; they have no rest day and night...."** I realize that this is an unpleasant topic, but the apostle Paul wants us to consider it. Behold, then, the kindness and severity of God. If there is an eternal punishment coming, then it is good to know about it. It is good to know not only what the stove can do FOR US, but it is also good to know what the stove can do TO US. It is good to be warned.

III. So far today, we have looked at the kindness and the severity of God. But before we bring our thoughts on this passage to a close, we need to ask ourselves what is perhaps the most important question that we can ever ask when looking at any passage of Scripture, and that is, we must ask ourselves the question, SO WHAT? Or in other words, now that we have studied what the Bible says, we need to consider WHAT DOES THIS PASSAGE ACTUALLY MEANS FOR US.

The lesson here is that we have a choice concerning what aspect of God we experience. Will God be kind toward us? Well, that depends! Will God be severe toward us? Well, that also depends! And as Paul points out here in Romans 11, God's attitude toward us does not depend on whether we are Jews or Gentiles. That's not the point, but the point is that we must choose, because God will deal with us depending on our own behavior. If we whine and complain as the Israelites did before they fell in the wilderness, then we will also fall, but if we continue and persevere in God's kindness, then we also will experience God's kindness.

Sometimes people today say that God accepts us as we are, no matter what. But that's not what we read in Romans 11:22. When God's own people rejected Him in the wilderness, God cut them off just like a gardener would prune an olive tree. We should point out, though, that God would prefer that we go with the kindness option. As God said through the prophet in Ezekiel 33:11, **"I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that the wicked turn from his way and live. Turn back, turn back from your evil ways! Why then will you die, O house of Israel?"** And in the New Testament, we have Paul referring to God as our Savior, **"...who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth"** (1 Timothy 2:4). God wants us to be saved. He wants us to make the right choice.

The application of this passage, then, is that all of us have a choice. Adam and Eve had a choice. Noah, and his family, and the people of his generation had a choice. Abraham, and Lot, and the residents of Sodom and Gomorrah had a choice. God's people in the wilderness had a choice. Jonah and the people of Nineveh had a choice. And in the same way, all of us here this morning also have a choice. We can try to put it off, we can choose that we want nothing to do with the gospel, or we can do whatever it takes to follow God.

I am reminded of a true story from the life of brother T.B. Larimore, something that took place at some point during the last few years of the 1800's. In his own words, brother Larimore said,

Last night, when we got to the water, we found that no one had cut the ice. There seemed to be a misunderstanding all 'round. Notwithstanding men could walk on the ice, the ground had thawed on top, it had rained a little, was very dark and very muddy, the sloppy mud resting on a firm foundation of frozen earth. Finally, after we had stood there from twenty to thirty minutes, they succeeded in beating, with a long, heavy piece of timber, room through the ice for the

baptizing. The lady who was to be baptized had on old, thin, leaky shoes; hence, of course, her feet were wet from walking and standing in the deep sloppy mud—mud almost as wet as water, nearly as cold as ice. Some one went after a rake, returned and reported “no rake.” Finally, however, a rake was secured. The broken ice was raked to right and left, till it was possible for the baptizing to be done.

In the meantime, the little woman who was to be baptized was not the least bit nervous; but she was afraid they would insist on postponing the baptism. She said, “The water doesn’t seem to be very cold.” As we went down into the water, I said, “I’ll take good care of you.” She said, “The Lord will take care of me.” I said, “Yes, he’ll take care of us both.” It was not the slightest trouble to get her into proper position and depth of water. As I lowered her into the cold grave, the broken ice naturally closed over her, so that she was literally covered over—the grave filled—with ice. The mass of broken ice over her must have been many inches thick. As I raised her up, she said, “O! I’m so glad!” Talking and praising God in a low, soft, sweet voice, she “came up out of the water,” pushing great blocks of ice out of her way. When she reached the bank, loved ones hastened to wrap her up as quickly and completely as possible; but when they betrayed some anxiety about her, she said: “I’m not cold at all.” She never complained.... [The next morning she said]: “Dark as last night was, it was the brightest night of my life.” Hers was certainly as disagreeable and as delightful a baptism as I have ever witnessed. (Page, 2006)

There is a woman who decided to obey the gospel, doing whatever it took to appeal to the kindness of God. The lesson this morning is that all of us have a choice.

Conclusion:

Some people may have the idea that God is only a God of love, that God is only kind and generous, and that He would never condemn anyone. On the other hand, some may have the idea that God is a ruthless dictator, just waiting for us to make a mistake so that He can have the pleasure of tormenting us forever—sitting up there in heaven flipping that coin. But according to the apostle Paul, neither of these extremes is true. But instead, we are to, ***“Behold then the kindness and severity of God.”*** May God help us to know Him as He truly is.

The Bible is a book of good news, and the good news is that God has a plan for us to be saved from our sin. We respond to God’s plan by putting our trust in His Son, by turning away from our sin, and by allowing ourselves to be briefly dipped in water for the forgiveness of whatever we have done in the past. If you have any questions, we would love to study with you to try to figure it out together. But if you are ready to obey the gospel right now, you can let us know by coming to the front as we sing this next song. Let’s stand and sing...

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