

*Not Like Our Promises*

A Sermon on Romans 11 and Matthew 15 by the Rev. Philip Major

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When we read our passage from Romans 11 and the passage from the Gospel of Matthew we notice some important similarities. Today I'd like us to pay attention to one important difference in the two passages.

Let's begin with the story from Matthew. In the first half of the passage, Jesus is with his disciples in the northern region of Israel, called Galilee. The disciples report the response of the Pharisees to Jesus; the Pharisees are offended and hostile toward Jesus.

*So Jesus left that place and went away to the land of the Gentiles, to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." But Jesus did not answer her at all. And his disciples said, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us."*

Then, in a fairly shocking reversal, Jesus begins to act like the Pharisees, and speaks in a hostile, offensive way. Jesus said, *"I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."* But she came and knelt before him, saying, *"Lord, help me."* He answered, *"It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."* She said, *"Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."* Then Jesus changed his mind. He said, *"Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish."* And her daughter was healed instantly.

Jesus changed his mind about whether he would take care of the Gentile woman. This is a very good thing. Christ Jesus was divine, he was the son of God. Jesus was also fully human, which meant that sometimes he needed to change his mind.

Paul's Letter to the Romans articulates a somewhat different message. Paul's message is that God, the one Jesus referred to as 'the Father', does not change.

This chapter of Paul's letter is important, so I've included eight verses from the middle of chapter that you may not have heard before. The theme of chapter eleven is one of the main topics of Paul's letter; what is the relationship between the Gentile Christians and the Jews? This is an important topic for us today.

It was also an important topic for Paul, because Paul was a Jew, and he was also a follower of Christ. Paul was the person who was most responsible for sharing the good news of Christ Jesus, the Jewish Messiah, with the Gentiles. When we read all of Paul's letters we come to see that one of the most difficult facts of Paul's life was that he witnessed many Jews rejecting the message and teachings of Christ Jesus. Many Jews were rejecting Jesus as the Messiah at the very time when his congregations of Gentile Christians were growing larger and larger. Paul watched it happen with his own two eyes.

Paul watched the group of Jewish Christians in Jerusalem struggle to maintain their congregations, while his congregations of Gentiles were thriving and growing. Paul was trying to make sense of this change in the church. When Paul asks a question like, "Has God rejected his people?" he is articulating a question he has been struggling with for many years.

A somewhat similar sequence of events had happened in the churches in Rome. These congregations in Rome had been comprised of Gentile and Jewish followers of Christ. Several years before Paul wrote this letter, the leaders of the Roman government blamed the Jews for some sort of catastrophe and banned them from the city for a period of time. When the ban was lifted, many of the Jews returned to Rome, including the Jews who were members of the congregations of Christ followers.

But during the years they were gone, the Gentiles in these congregation had taken over all the positions of authority. They began to treat the Jewish members of their congregations as if they were deficient or second class members. Paul has heard about this. People have written letters to him, asking

him for advice or support, even though he has never been to Rome. This is how the relationship between Gentile Christians and the Jews came to be one of the main topics of the letter to the Romans.

Paul begins the chapter with this question: *I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. God has not rejected the people he knew first.*

*So I ask, have they stumbled so as to fall? By no means! But through their stumbling salvation has come to the gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous. Now if their stumbling means riches for the world and if their loss means riches for gentiles, how much more will their full inclusion mean!*

*Now I am speaking to you gentiles. Inasmuch as I am an apostle to the gentiles, I celebrate my ministry in order to make my own people jealous and thus save some of them. For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead? If the root of the tree is holy, then the branches also are holy.*

Gentile Christians are a branch of the tree, and the tree that supports them is the tree of the Jewish faith. *But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, a wild olive shoot, were grafted among the others to share the rich root of the olive tree, do not boast over the branches. If you do boast, remember: you do not support the root, but the root supports you.*

This is the relationship between Jews and Christians. Our faith is a branch of the tree of the Jewish faith. This is important for our relationships with our Jewish brothers and sisters. But Paul's message is just important for our relationship with God. Let me explain why this is so.

God's faithfulness to the Jewish people is also an indication of God's faithfulness to us. Paul concludes the chapter by saying: *For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. Just as you were once disobedient to God but have now received mercy because of their disobedience, so they have now been disobedient in order that, by the mercy shown to you, they too may now receive mercy.*

None of us are perfect. Every person, regardless of their faith makes mistakes. Sometimes we give up on God, or turn away from God. God never gives up on us, or turns away from us. Our mistakes are an opportunity for us to understand that God is *merciful to all*.

Sometimes we feel very much alone. We wonder if God is still listening to our prayers. The former South African Bishop Desmond Tutu had a good sense of humor. He told a story about times when people wondered if God was still listening to their prayers. Bishop Tutu recalled that during the worst years of violence and oppression in South Africa during the decades of apartheid, he would sometimes say this prayer: "Dear God, we know that you are in charge. Can you please make it a little more obvious?"

We sometimes wonder if God is paying attention. We wonder if God has changed God's mind about humankind. Paul reminds us, God's commitment to us is unbreakable. God's mercy for us is everlasting.

People change their minds and break their promises. God does not. God's love for us is everlasting. We don't fully understand what it means for God's love to be everlasting, because the love we have received and the love we give others is sometimes very weak and broken. That doesn't change the meaning of God's love and God's promises.

Jesus was persuaded and changed his mind about whether it was his job to care for the Gentile woman. God doesn't change God's mind about whether God is going to keep on loving us.

Let's also pay attention to an idea that is proclaimed loud and clear in both of these passages. God's salvation is for all people. God's salvation is for the Jews and for the Gentiles, which is an old-fashioned way of saying, 'Everyone who is not Jewish.' God made this promise to Abraham, which is why we think of ourselves, as Gentile Christians, being grafted onto the tree of Abraham. God's

salvation is for all people, not just for one group of people. This is what Jesus seems to be coming to terms with in today's Gospel passage.

Paul wanted the gentiles in Rome to understand one more thing about God and about faithfulness. We reveal what we really believe about God by the way we treat other people. We especially reveal what we really believe about God by the way we treat people who are not part of our special group. The gentiles in Rome were treating the Jews like second class members, and thus revealed they believed in a God who does not keep promises. Through their poor treatment of the Jews they showed they believed in a God whose promises and love were short-lived and broken, just like our love and our promises.

We reveal what we believe about God by the way we treat other people, especially by the way we treat those who might be different from us in some way. What do we really believe?

Through our hospitality for all, through caring for those who need it most, we reveal what we really believe to be true. Through treating all people as members of God's family, we reveal our true beliefs. God's promises and mercy and love for us, and for all of our neighbors, and even for the people we think of as our enemies will never end.