

“The Joy of Being Wrong”
Romans 11:25-32
September 10, 2023

INTRODUCTION:

As Paul concludes his discussion of Jewish unbelief, he moves in today's passage to apply this to his Gentile readers. Paul has spent the better part of three chapters dealing with this problem. Why did the Jewish nation as a whole reject Jesus as their Messiah? Did this mean that God had forsaken his people? If so, what about all the Old Testament promises to the effect that God would never forsake his people?

The church in Rome, to whom this letter is written, was largely Gentile in its composition. They were being tempted with the sin he warns them about in verse 25: **“Lest you be wise in your own sight.”** These Gentile Christians were being tempted to think of themselves as better than Jewish unbelievers. In other words, they located the difference between themselves and Jewish unbelievers as something inherent in themselves, namely some inherent superiority. This is nothing more than the sin of pride or the lack of humility. This is a sin to which we are all prone, Jew and Gentile alike. When we find our identity in being right, we are on spiritually shaky ground. Instead, we are to find our identity in God's mercy.

I. The Danger of Being Right – v. 25a

The warning of verse 25 is a common one in the Bible for the simple reason that the attitude being warned against arises from human pride. We read in Proverbs 26:12, **“Do you see a man who is wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for him.”** When you review all the trouble the fool brings upon himself and others in the book of Proverbs, this is a remarkable statement. For example, the fool makes bad decisions about his companions and ends up paying for that with his life (1:10-19). The fool is susceptible to sexual temptation and ends up once again paying with his life (7:23). The fool is not a good listener but loves to talk. **“A fool takes no pleasure in understanding, but only in expressing his opinion”** (18:2). Another proverb warns against depending on a fool. **“Whoever sends a message by the hand of a fool cuts off his own feet and drinks violence.”** As bad as the fool is, there is a category that's worse than the fool, and it's the person who is wise in his own eyes.

There is a word we use to describe the person who is not wise in his own eyes, and it's the word “humility.” It is probably the most foundational virtue of the Bible in that it gives rise to all the others. It is humble people who learn to

love, to have joy and peace and all the other character qualities that are a part of Christlikeness. The humility that is willing to admit wrong is a necessary part of life in general and of spiritual life.

Bridgewater founder Ray Dalio once said “If you don’t look back at yourself and think, ‘Wow, how stupid I was a year ago,’ then you must not have learned much in the last year.” In his book, *Think Again*, Adam Grant describes what he calls the “Attachment Error.” It’s when we get attached to a conclusion prematurely, with the result that we start interpreting all incoming data to support our conclusion. Contrary data then gets ignored, while corroborating data gets amplified. The antidote to this error is simply to say, “This is what I’m thinking, but I might be wrong.” Such an attitude then welcomes being shown to be wrong.

I read in Grant’s book of something I didn’t know existed, and that’s forecasting tournaments. Thousands of people enter these tournaments in which they try to predict something in the future. The tournaments are a series of questions about possible future events, such as “Will Vladimir Putin be president of Russia at the end of 2024?” Contestants not only give a yes or no answer to the question but also give their odds for their prediction to come true, earning points on both accuracy and calibration. So a contestant would get the most points for predictions that are both accurate and for which they had a high degree of confidence. Grant then makes this point:

The single most important driver of forecasters’ success was how often they updated their beliefs. The best forecasters went through more rethinking cycles. They had the confident humility to doubt their judgments and the curiosity to discover new information that led them to revise their predictions.

The cartoon “Savage Chickens” features one that has the title “How to acquire wisdom,” followed by six steps. Step 1: Live. Step 2: make mistakes. Step 3: Learn from your mistakes. Step 4: Repeat steps 1-3 until wisdom is acquired. Step 5: Realize that the wisdom you acquired in step 4 was not really wisdom at all. This realization brings new wisdom. Step 6: Repeat steps 1-5 for the rest of your life.

If this ability to avoid being wise in your own eyes and to admit wrong is important for life in general, it is even more important for our spiritual lives. When we are wise in our own eyes, it cuts us off from the grace of God. As Jesus said, with not a small amount of irony, it is the sick and not the healthy who need a physician. He has come to heal sin-sick people. The irony is that that it was those who thought they were spiritually healthy who were the sickest of all. But they remained cut off from the great physician because of their smug self-righteousness.

II. The One Who Is Right – v. 25b-27

God is the one who is right, and Paul turns our attention to God in his antidote to being wise in our own eyes. Pride comes from not understanding something about God, and Paul wants us to understand what he calls a “mystery.” Paul uses this word to refer to something that we can only know by God’s revealing it to us. He pulls back the curtain here and tells us something of God’s purpose in this current age. **“A partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. And in this way all Israel will be saved”** (v. 25-26). He spoke in the previous passage about this partial hardening of the Jews in this current age, describing it as partial as to number and time. It was partial numerically in that God preserved a remnant of Jews who did believe in Jesus. It was partial as to time because a time would come in the future that Paul referred to back in verse 12 as Israel’s “full inclusion.”

Paul now writes more about this full inclusion, declaring that **“all Israel will be saved.”** It is important that we understand what he means by this important statement. Let’s consider first the timing of this. When will all Israel be saved? Two statements indicate that it will be toward the end of the current age, or just prior to the return of Christ. The first statement is that the partial hardening will persist **“until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in.”** Apparently, there is a number God has in his mind for the salvation of Gentiles. We don’t know what that number is, but we are told here of the existence of such a number. When it is reached, Jesus will return, and that is when this promise of the salvation of all Israel will be fulfilled.

The second indication of the timing of this is the quotation from Isaiah 59. The prophet speaks there of a time when society will be transformed so that injustice will no longer characterize it. He speaks of a time when the glory of the Lord and the fear of his name will be universal. These things will only happen at the return of Christ.

What, then, does Paul mean by his statement that **“all Israel will be saved”**? Let’s unpack each word of this important phrase, beginning with the word “Israel.” Does it refer to spiritual Israel, which is a way the Bible speaks of the people of God of all time, or does it refer only to the literal descendants of Abraham? It is true that the Bible refers to the church as **“the Israel of God”** (Gal. 6:16). But it seems very unlikely that he is talking here about spiritual Israel, simply because in the context he is clearly speaking throughout of literal Israel. So when he says that all Israel will be saved, he is talking about those who are of the Jewish race. How about the statement that they will be saved? Some understand this to speak of a national and political salvation such as what some see in the 1948 establishment of Israel as a nation. Some saw in that fact a sure indication that Jesus would soon return. I was a brand new Christian in the 1970’s, and I remember that period as a time when prophecy

conferences were the hottest thing going among evangelical Christians. But it is the context that once again gives clear indication that Paul is not referring to a national salvation here, but a spiritual one. He is referring to salvation from sin and from the judgment of God through faith in Christ. In other words, he is saying that just prior to the return of Christ, there will be a time of renewal among Jewish people, with the result that many will come to faith in Jesus. By the word “all,” he doesn’t mean every single Jewish person alive at that time, but simply enough that it will clearly be widespread.

III. The Right Identity – v. 28-32

Those who are wise in their own eyes fall into the trap of locating their identity in being right. I knew someone once who acted as if he already knew whatever you told him. No matter what he was told, he pretended that it was old news to him. The driver of such an attitude is locating his identity in being right. There is someone else I know much better, and he sometimes has a problem with being defensive. This second person happens to be the one preaching this sermon, and his defensiveness has the same origin as the first person’s problem. It comes from finding one’s identity in being right.

To find your identity in being right cuts God out of the picture. It is also profoundly dishonest, because the truth is that we are often less than right. Whether it’s merely a factual mistake, or a wrong against another person, or a wrong against God (a sin), we are all well-acquainted with being wrong. Beginning in verse 28, Paul brings forth the implications of reinserting God in the picture. He does so by taking both Jews and Gentiles and making the same point about both groups. Both have had their experiences of disobedience, and both have had a time of being God’s enemies. But both will also experience a time of experiencing the mercy of God.

He starts with the Jews, acknowledging that they are currently God’s enemies for the sake of the gospel. To them, Jesus was the problem and not the solution. As a result, Paul and many other followers of Christ experienced persecution at their hands. But that’s not the whole story. Concerning the Jews, Paul writes, **“But as regards election, they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers. For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable”** (v. 28-29). He doesn’t mean that every Jewish person will end up being saved, but rather that the Jewish nation is still God’s chosen people. God is not done with them yet, and they will still experience an outpouring of his mercy upon them when they realize the promise of verse 26 that “all Israel will be saved.”

The same story could be written of the Gentiles. **“You were at one time disobedient to God but now have received mercy because of their disobedience”** (v. 30). Both Jew and Gentile share the same narrative, with both experiencing a time of disobedience and both at different times being the

objects of God's great mercy. There is no room for Gentiles to be wise in their own eyes, to feel superior to unbelieving Jews. The difference maker in both cases is the mercy of God.

Verse 32 summarizes Paul's argument against being wise in your own eyes. **"For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all."** Some have mistakenly concluded that this verse teaches universalism, but that is not the case. The rest of the Bible, including Paul's letter to the Romans, is clear in rejecting universalism. When Paul writes that *all* will receive God's mercy, he is simply saying both groups of Jews and Gentiles. The verb translated "consigned" here has the idea of being enclosed, like fish trapped in a net. Disobedience is a trap into which we have all fallen and out of which there is no escape. It is like Luther's image of being trapped in a ring of fire, with the only deliverance coming from above.

Heaven will be a place marked by humility on the part of every person there. No one will say what a neighbor once said to me. "I'm the nicest guy I know, and if God doesn't want me in heaven with him, I don't want to be there." Instead, we will all say something along the lines of the hymn we sang last week. "Why was I made to hear your voice, and enter while there's room, when thousands make a wretched choice, and rather starve than come? 'Twas the same love that spread the feast that sweetly drew us in; else we had still refused to taste, and perished in our sin."

CONCLUSION:

The one thing that will keep you from heaven is being wise in your own eyes. It is never finding the joy of being wrong. Have you found that joy? I'm not just talking about a willingness to admit wrong as part of the discovery and learning process, though that is certainly a beneficial life skill. I'm talking about the joy of receiving the mercy of God when we come clean about our need of him. This is a joy that comes when we first come to faith, and it is one that repeats every day of the Christian life.

I read years ago of a Christian Bible teacher who was scheduled to address a large group gathered to hear him. Just before he was to speak, he received a letter outlining many of his serious sins from his past that he had not revealed publicly. The letter then threatened him by saying that this information would be made public if he proceeded with his teaching that night. After prayer, he took the letter with him and began his sermon that night by reading it. He then said, "Every word of this is true." But then he went on to proclaim powerfully the mercy of God. He found the joy of being wrong, because it is when we do so that we enter into the joy of our salvation by the grace of God.

Discussion Questions
Romans 11:25-32

1. Can you think of a time in your life when you were convinced you were right but then discovered later that you were wrong? It could be just a small matter or something of more significance.
2. What applications come to mind when you read Proverbs 26:12? “Do you see a man who is wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for him.” Why is there little hope for someone who is wise in his own eyes?
3. The “Attachment Error” is a common way we are wise in our own eyes. That’s the error in which we commit ourselves prematurely to a conclusion and then close our minds and hearts to any contrary data. What are some common examples of that?
4. This passage is Paul’s application to the Gentiles not to be wise in their own eyes by considering themselves superior to unbelieving Jews. Are there groups you tend to look down on and consider yourself superior to them?
5. What do you think Paul meant when he wrote, “And in this way all Israel will be saved?”
6. The concluding verse of this passage is a summary of the passage, and in some ways a summary of the entire book of Romans. “For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all.” What are some applications that come to mind as you consider this verse?