

Spiritual Complacency

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 14 February 2016

Preacher: Nick Louw

[0 : 00] Well, William Shakespeare once wrote these words. He said, security is mortal's greatest enemy. That was in his play Macbeth, actually.

But it's a good point that he makes. Someone else famously said the same thing in these words. He said, the price of liberty is eternal vigilance.

It was an American politician. But again, quite a good point. And what these quotes mean is that it's a dangerous thing to think that you're too safe.

Because if you think that you're too safe, then you drop your guard. And this is true of daily life, isn't it? Especially in the country we live in.

Where crime is always present. And crime is something that we face on a daily basis. You've got to be alert. You can't ever assume that you're too safe, can you?

[0 : 59] You can't go walking in lonely places at night thinking that you'll be okay. You can't leave your handbag on the passenger seat of your car when you're driving through Philippi.

I don't know. When you're driving through anywhere. You've got to be vigilant. You've got to not assume that you're always safe. And that's an important thing. But complacency, this idea that we make the mistake of thinking that we're too safe, that's also a danger in our spiritual life when it comes to our relationship with God.

The Bible often warns us against assuming that we're too safe in our spiritual walk.

Now, with that in mind, we've got to think about what we've been reading in Romans over the past few weeks. We've been learning about the doctrine of election from Romans chapter 8 to 10, which teaches us that salvation is God's initiative.

We do nothing to earn it, and so we can do nothing to mess it up. And it's a great and encouraging doctrine for those who are in the faith. It's in the faith. It's a glorious truth, the security of salvation, because it's not through works.

[2 : 15] But at the same time, that kind of security can lead to spiritual complacency. And that's why we need chapters like Romans 11, where Paul talks about this, as well as chapters like Romans 8, 9, and 10.

And that's the glorious thing about God's Word, is that it's not just one truth. It's a whole lot of truths which balance each other out, and which we need to learn fully in order to learn the counsel of God. And that's why we preach like we do. We work through entire books or entire chunks of books at a time. We don't just pick and choose from the Bible passages that are interesting or that make us feel comfortable.

We read the hard passages as well. And I think Romans 11 is one of those. Because it warns us against spiritual complacency, which is exactly what it seemed like the Gentiles were doing in Paul's day, the Gentile church that he's writing to in Rome.

One of the different things about the church in Rome is because there were Romans, it was largely Gentile. And you had only a minority of Jews. And there was this division.

[3 : 23] There was the tension between the Jews and the Gentiles, which is part of the context of this passage. But you'll see from what Paul tells them in Romans 11, that it seems that they were starting to become spiritually complacent in two different ways.

Not only were they assuming that everyone who just called themselves a Christian was automatically saved, that was the one way they were being complacent, but secondly, they were assuming that everyone who didn't call themselves a Christian was lost without question, such as the Jews, so that there was no point even reaching out to them.

They were eternally doomed, so what's the point? And so Paul writes to challenge these two assumptions that they were making. And he challenges our assumptions too, in how we think of not

only our salvation, but the salvation of others.

And I want to look at one verse in particular, verse 22. That's kind of going to be the verse that we use as a springboard into the rest of the chapter. It says, Some sobering and important words. And this verse really reveals two aspects of God that Christians need to consider to avoid becoming complacent about their salvation. And the first aspect is the kindness of God.

[4 : 52] That's the first thing we need to consider, the kindness of God. So these Gentiles, the first, well, one of the assumptions they were making is they were assuming any Jew was beyond God's mercy just because they were a Jew, because they'd spoiled their chances when they killed Jesus as a nation.

And so these Gentiles started looking down on the Jews as a people, pretty much like people have been doing in every generation since. And we look at Earth's history, the Jews have always been ostracized, no matter where they go, people look down on them, and often the church in history has been the cause of the Jews being ostracized and discriminated against.

And it started right here, in the church to Rome, that Paul was writing, the church in Rome. And so Paul immediately sees the problem, and he challenges that thinking here in chapter 11 by explaining to the Gentiles, quite a shocking truth, that if they thought that the Jews didn't deserve God's mercy, which they thought, he wants to explain to them that they, in fact, deserve it even less than the Jews do.

Because, as we see from verse 1 following, God hasn't rejected the Jews, as they thought he had. He hasn't rejected the Jews and favored the Gentiles in their place.

Rather, and this is where, kind of, it would be a shocking truth to those Gentiles, God is allowing the Gentiles to be included in God's people, the Jews.

[6 : 25] And that's, that's this major mind shift that they needed to get in their heads. Because they were busy looking down on their Jewish neighbors, and they were probably ignoring everything Jewish.

They were probably ignoring their Old Testaments, because they thought, you know, what's this Old Testament got to do with us, sophisticated Roman Gentiles, who read about sacrifices and temples and funny clothes, and, you know, that's not for us.

That, that has nothing to do with us. Well, on the contrary, Paul says, and look how he puts it, he uses an illustration in verse 17, to show them their relationship with the Jewish nation.

And he describes the Jewish nation as an olive tree. And he says this, if some of the branches have been broken off, and you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the other, and now sharing the nourishing sap from the olive root, do not consider yourself to be superior to those other branches, if you do consider this, you do not support the root, but the root supports you.

Okay. Now, it's an important illustration. This behind me is a picture of an olive tree. I don't know if any of you have ever cultivated an olive tree, if you might have an olive grove in your back garden, or, normally it's, it's more common in the Middle East.

[7 : 42] Olive production is quite an industry, and back in Paul's day as well. And what happened in olive groves, where they harvested olives, is that sometimes cultivated olive trees, would stop producing olives.

They would start dying. They would be unproductive. And what farmers would do, quite a common farming practice, in that time, to revive these cultivated olive trees that were dying, they would prune away any of the dead branches, and then they would take an olive shoot from the wild. They would go find a wild olive shoot, and graft it in to this cultivated tree, to give it a whole new lease on life. And it worked. But that's the illustration Paul's using. That's what he's saying God was doing through the Gentiles, through the nations.

He was using people, God was using people from other nations, bringing them to faith in Christ, to revitalize his people Israel. That's what was going on. Because you see, now we need to get this straight, because we're all, I think we're all Gentiles here.

I don't think there's any people of Jewish descent. But of course, if there are, you're more than welcome among us. And you'll see why. Because God's only ever had one chosen people, which are the Jews.

[8 : 56] Israel. And that doesn't change. Those are the people who he's entered into a covenant with, with Abraham. Those are the people who he's made promises to, that are recorded in our Old Testament.

Those are the people who will populate his new restored creation one day. So, where does that leave us? Gentile Christians. Well, you see, Gentiles, Gentile Christians, we aren't the start of a new religion to replace the Jews.

Rather, Gentiles are being grafted into a revitalized Jewish nation, being made honorary Jews, in other words. While at the same time, many Jews, ethnic Jews, were being cut off from true Israel by not believing in Christ.

Because actually, the Old Testament, the Jewish faith, is all about Christ. It all leads to Christ. But you see, the relationship there.

It's not that the Jews have fallen away and the Gentiles have replaced them. It's that the Gentiles have actually now been grafted in to the original Jewish nation, while many Jews haven't.

[10:06] They've been cut off because they were being unfruitful. And so, that illustration of the olive tree is a very helpful way of thinking about the relationship between Jews and Gentiles, which, by the way, we'll study further in our Bible studies this week.

And so, Paul says, do not consider yourself to be superior to those other branches. After all, he says, you do not support the root, but the root supports you. And so, what does that mean for us? That means, practically, that as Christians, we depend on and we're indebted to the historic faith of Israel.

Everything we believe, the way we're called to live, is rooted in the Old Testament Jewish faith. So, let's not ignore the Old Testament like many Christians do. You know, many Christians, they open the Old Testament and they go, wow, this is complicated and very non-implicable to me.

I'm just going to read the New Testament. We can't do that because the Old Testament has a lot to tell us about ourselves, about who we are and about Jesus, of course.

Now, of course, we've got to interpret the Old Testament through the New Testament, which is vital. For example, we don't keep the old Jewish ceremonies and traditions, which were meant only for a certain time in history.

[11:16] But we don't ignore the Old Testament either. We don't think it doesn't apply to us.

Rather, let's be thankful that God has brought us into His people, Israel, and embrace their history as our own.

So, in other words, put it this way, if you are a Christian, your history and your identity as a person is not any more bound up in Jan van Riebeck or Shah Kazzulu or British colonialism or your ancestors.

You know, we see often in politics today people referring back to history as if we're defined by the people we come from, which in a way we are.

We are defined by our history, by our people. And yet, if you're a Christian, what this passage is teaching us is that you've joined a new people, a brand new people, and your history is found now on the pages of the Old Testament, not on the pages of your primary school history books anymore, unless, of course, they teach you about the Old Testament.

But you see what I'm saying? Our history as a people, our identity as a people, even though Gentile Christians from all different cultures and all different languages, if you've come into Christ, you've come into Israel, true Israel, and your identity, your history is found on the pages of the Old Testament.

[12:40] So we can't ignore that. We mustn't ignore that. That's why, from next week, we're starting a sermon series in a book of the Old Testament, amongst other reasons. So please do join us for that.

Now, that's the first major thing we've got to get from this. But secondly, there's still a problem. And the problem is that doesn't explain why so many Jews have rejected Jesus. And that's really what the Gentiles' case was.

They're like, oh, come on, most of the Jews have rejected Jesus, so surely they can't be His chosen people anymore. And they've got a point. I mean, look at Israel today. If you go to Israel, the country, and you speak to most Israelis, most of them won't be Christians.

Of course, you do get Christians, but they're a minority. And the only conclusion is that God has rejected the Jews and chosen the Gentiles in His place. Well, again, Paul says, no, that's not right. And he explains that the reason the Jews have largely rejected Christ is because if they hadn't, the Gentiles wouldn't have been saved at all.

[13:44] That's a major teaching in this passage. Look at verse 11. Again, I ask, did they stumble, talking about the Jews, did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery?

No, not at all. Rather, now mark this, note this, because of their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel envious.

Because of their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles. In other words, get this, if the Jews, God's people, had embraced Jesus when He came, if Jesus had come and the Jews had said, yeah, the Messiah, and they had all recognized that, then not only would the gospel never have gone to the Gentiles because it wouldn't have needed to, but the Jews wouldn't have killed Jesus and He wouldn't have died for the sins of the world.

And so God knew what He was doing in allowing the Jewish nation to turn against Him, allowing their hearts to become hard. And that tells us something about God that we need to remember today, and that is that God uses the hardness of people's hearts and their rejection of Him still for His purposes, for an even greater outcome in the end.

Everything that God does, even using evil in the world, is for His ultimate best outcome. And we must remember that about God. We must remember that a setback for us in people resisting the gospel when we're trying to share it with them, it's not a setback for God.

[15:09] And furthermore, just because people reject God doesn't mean that He's rejected them and that there's no hope for them and that we give up on them. That is vital. And Paul makes this point by quoting the story of Elijah that we read from the Old Testament earlier.

And he quotes it again in verse 2 of Romans 11. Now Elijah lived, as Adrian said, in a time where the whole of Israel had turned away from God and he felt that he was the only, he was the last man standing and he was out there in the desert and he was kind of on the brink of suicide, I think.

He was going through some difficult times. And yet despite, what God tells him is, despite Israel's downfall and the hardness of heart in worshipping other gods, God still, despite that, decided to save a set number of Israelites chosen by grace alone, despite their hard hearts.

grace. And he always has. Throughout Israel's history of hard-heartedness and idolatry and turning away from God, God had still chosen throughout every generation he had chosen and saved a particular group of hard-hearted rebels through grace alone, which teaches us something.

It teaches us that no one in any generation is beyond God's saving grace, no matter how hard their hearts seem. And that's the point that Paul's making to these Roman Gentiles.

[16:35] The Jews are not beyond hope because of their rejection of Christ. Look at me, Paul says. You know, I'm a Jew. I was a hard-hearted opponent of Jesus and yet he made himself known to me and he chose me of all people.

And so if I can be saved, anyone can be saved. So don't give up on the Israelites. And that was what Paul was saying to those Roman Gentiles.

But in the same way, Christians today mustn't give up hope for anyone to be saved because we tend to do that, don't we, sometimes? You know, I said earlier one of the problems with the doctrine of election that we've been learning is that we can assume that if someone doesn't immediately respond to the gospel, oh, they're obviously not chosen.

We can have that thought in the back of our mind. Oh, well, I'll move on. I'll shake the dust from my feet. Often Christians misquote that verse to refer to not spending any more time with people who have rejected the gospel.

And so we become complacent. And we make no further effort to share Christ with them and love them. And you know what? If you're a Christian, you know who I'm talking about, don't you?

[17:43] That work colleague who's totally resistant to the gospel, who demands that you don't talk to him about it. That family member who never wants you to bring it up, who's rejected the gospel for years and you think there's no hope.

I have a member of my family just like that. I was talking with one of this congregation about a work colleague this week who says, just don't bring it up with me ever again.

You see, the temptation is just to say, okay, never mind. I'll move on. I won't bother about them anymore. Well, you know what verse 22 tells us? It says, consider the kindness of God.

You see, God is in the business of saving hard-hearted rebels through grace and no one is beyond that grace. No one. As long as they're drawing breath, as long as their heart is still beating, everyone has the option, has the chance to be saved.

No one is beyond the grace of God. We must get that right no matter how resistant or hard-hearted or uninterested they seem. So don't give up. Ah, but you don't know my work, colleague, you might say.

[18 : 54] He'll never listen. He'll shut me out. What's the point? You know, he doesn't even give me an option to speak. What's the point at all? Well, still, don't give up on him and the reason is because there are other ways you can show him the gospel than just talking to him.

And we see this in verse 11. It's a very interesting little point Paul makes towards the end of that verse. He says, salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel envious.

You notice that? And verse 14 he says the same thing essentially. He says that he, Paul, says and does what he does in the hope that I may somehow arouse my own people to envy and save some of them.

In other words, even though the Jews were hard-hearted and rejected Christ, some would still be saved because of envy which is weird because we think envy is a bad thing, a sinful thing which it most often is for us.

But what Paul's talking about here is not bad envy. He's talking about good envy. In other words, that they want what these Gentile Christians have got because they see the Gentile Christians living it out.

[20 : 02] People who were serving Christ, people who were loving one another, people who were enduring suffering through hope of the life to come.

and that will cause the Jews to say, I want that. And in the same way, Christians today are called to live lives that will make others look on and say, I want that.

To live out the gospel in public, in the workplace, to wear what we believe on our sleeves, so to speak. You know, we're so quick to hide what we believe in this secular world because we don't want to be looked down upon.

But if people don't see what we believe, people will never come to see the reality of the gospel and what Christ has done for us. You know, we want to live so that people look at us and say, I want what she's got.

I want what he's got. They might not say it verbally, but in the back of their minds, they'll be attracted to something because they see the gospel shining out of you as a Christian. Now, if you're not a Christian, I don't assume everyone who comes to church is a Christian.

[21 : 13] You may have been dragged here by a family member, which I applaud you for coming and I applaud your family member for dragging you here. But if you're not a Christian, I hope that maybe you decided to come here this morning because there's something about all this that you want.

You can't put your finger on it, you don't know what it is, but there's something. There's something that's drawing you. In which case, I'd love to show you what that is. I'd love to show you how you can get that. Come speak to me or speak to the person that brought you here.

They'd love to share with you what they've got through Jesus and how you can get it too. But if you are a Christian, let me ask you, are you living out the gospel to such an extent that people around you are envious?

It's a good question to ask yourself. Do they see something different in you that they want or are you disguising it so well, suppressing it, camouflaging yourself so well that they don't notice that you're a Christian at all?

One of the pieces of advice I often give to Christians when they start a new job, this is something that I had to do, is make sure your colleagues know that you're a Christian from the outset because the longer you leave it, the harder it'll get to expose them to what you believe.

[22 : 32] But you see, it's worth asking, do people around us know that we're Christians? Do they see something different about us? It's worth asking. Peter says, we are to live such good lives that outsiders see our good deeds and glorify God.

But anyway, back to the point that Paul is making here. He's saying, don't be complacent. Don't ever assume that someone is beyond salvation, even if they won't listen to you. They can still see, they can still be attracted to the gospel through your life.

So don't give up, no matter how resistant they are. Don't be complacent. But there's a second way that we can be in danger of complacency, not only by assuming someone is beyond saving, but also by assuming that someone is saved when they're actually not.

And that's the second thing that Paul wants to warn us again. Not only must we consider God's kindness in saving those who seem lost, equally we must consider God's sternness in rejecting those who seem saved.

That's the second point, God's sternness. Look at verse 19 onwards, carrying on the idea of this olive tree. Paul says, but you will say then, branches were broken off so that I could be grafted in. [23 : 49] Granted, but they were broken off because of unbelief, and you stand by faith. Do not be arrogant, but tremble. For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either.

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.

Some hard words, aren't they? Sober warning for complacent Christians who think that they're safe when they're not.

not. You see, the point that Paul's making is if God saw fit to remove the unfruitful branches of the original olive tree, the original Jews, what's to stop him removing you who weren't even part of the original tree if you're unfruitful?

And so Jesus, he says the same thing. In John 15, he says, I am the true vine, my father is the gardener, he cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire, and burned.

[25 : 01] Now, these are harsh words, and they seem to go against the security of salvation that Paul was talking about in Romans 8 and 9, don't they? If you've been listening, which I hope you do, it seems to contradict.

You know, that those who God has chosen and called are justified and can never be lost because they're saved through nothing that they do. But then you've got all these verses that seem to say, well, if you're not bearing fruit, then you can lose your salvation.

It doesn't seem to fit, doesn't seem to make sense. How can that be? Well, the answer is simple.

And we find it in what Jesus says next in John 15. He says, no branch can bear fruit by itself, it must remain in the vine, neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

And then he goes on to say, if you remain in me, and I in you, you will bear much fruit. So in other words, bearing fruit is not something you must do to stay saved.

It's something you definitely will do if you are saved. It's not the cause of salvation, but it's the result. And it's a way for you to know whether your salvation is genuine or not.

[26 : 21] Bearing fruit is proof that you are truly grafted into the vine. And you see, when Paul writes this warning in Romans to ensure that you're continuing in the faith, we've got to understand he's writing to a whole church, the whole Roman church, many of the people he'd never met, he didn't know personally, and so he didn't know who was truly saved or not in that church, and so he writes this warning to all to be careful that they continue in the faith they profess, that they live it out, that they bear fruit.

Why? Because those who listen to that warning and heed that warning and continue, those are the ones who are truly saved. Those are the ones who God has chosen. And it's a warning to us.

Someone can say all the right things. Someone can come to this church and say all the things that we want to hear and become a member. They can be baptized, they can be confirmed, they can be an active part of our church, but how do you know that it's real?

How do you know salvation is real? Well, the only way is if they continue to live that faith out through thick and thin, through all the troubles and trials of life. And that's why part of our vision statement that we looked at last week is to faithfully live out the gospel, not just to say that we believe the gospel, but to actually live it out, to bear fruit, not to be complacent, but to make sure that our salvation is genuine.

The Bible says examine yourself to see that you are in the faith. Don't assume it. It's the most dangerous thing you can do. Ask yourself, am I bearing fruit in my life?

[27 : 56] Are you living out the gospel? Are you grafted into Christ? Because if you are part of Christ, you will bear fruit. It's inevitable. Your life will be changed. Now, not overnight, sure, but there will be definite noticeable change, growth in love and holiness and spiritual disciplines and a growing resistance of sin in your life, a growing awareness of the sins in your life and a desire to fight them and steps that you take to actually fight them rather than just let them remain.

That's what it means to bear fruit, growth in love and joy and patience and kindness and gentleness. Now, sure, we all lose our temper and we all get cross and we are all unloving at times, and yet is there a change in your life since you've come to Christ?

Ask yourself that. Because if that's not true of you, don't think you're saved just because you're a church member. Rather, come talk to me or talk to another Christian.

Share your concerns before it's too late and you get a nasty surprise on judgment day. Because Jesus says, on that day, many will say to me, Lord, Lord, but I will say, away from me, I never knew you.

I don't want you to be one of those people. See, as Christians, we can't be complacent. We've got to be vigilant. We've got to be on our guard every day.

[29 : 22] We've got to make sure that we continue in God's kindness, as Paul says, and we continue to follow Christ and trust in Him and be careful that we don't drift off. And you know the best way to do that?

Is through Christian fellowship, through regularly seeing and meeting with and reading the Bible with other Christians and being honest with each other. Joining a Bible study group is a great way to do that, to walk the road with other Christians so that we help each other to continue in the faith, that we help each other not to slip, not to fall away.

Because, you see, by doing that, by taking that seriously in your life, by obeying these warnings, and by continuing to trust Jesus through the ups and downs of life, that's how you'll know that you are indeed a part of God's eternal people.

Well, let's pray that that will be true of us. Heavenly Father, we thank you for your amazing word, the Bible, that contains these truths that nobody could ever make up.

Truths that truly come from you, through the apostles, through the prophets, and ultimately through your Son. Thank you for this great assurance that you've given us over the last few weeks that salvation can never be lost, because it's through nothing that we do.

[30 : 45] But thank you so much for this warning as well, that that means we must continue in the faith, that we must bear fruit as a sign that our salvation is indeed true.

Lord, I pray for this church. I pray that you would help us as a body of believers to bear fruit, continue in your kindness, to endure the trials of life through the unshakable hope that you give us in the gospel, and help us to help each other to do that.

Help none of us to cut ourselves off from the body, from your body. Help us to be an active part of your people as we meet together, as we encourage one another, as we hold each other accountable and we build each other up.

God, I pray for anyone here who is not in Christ, anyone here who has not put their faith in you and chosen to follow you.

Lord, I don't know why you brought them here, but I pray that there's something that is attracting them to you, something that's drawing them in. I pray that you would continue to draw them in until they bow the knee and give their life to you, their ruler, their king, and their maker.

[32 : 03] Lord, we pray these things in Christ's name alone. Amen.