

The Secrets of the Olive Tree: The Covenant Community of Christ

Romans 11: 16 - 22

- Foothills is a church that stands firmly in Biblical truth, it is a church where graces abounds, it is a church that has a loving, welcoming community, and it is a church led by men who are sound in doctrine, and filled with the Spirit, grace and love. A lot of churches aren't nearly that blessed.
 - We need to rejoice and be thankful in all that is ours in this covenant community, but we also each must do our part to preserve what we have, or one day we will wake up and it will be gone.

Revelation 2: 2 – 5 “I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false. 3 I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary. 4 But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. 5 Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent.

- Because the church in Ephesus had abandoned their first love, Jesus was warning them that, if they didn't repent, he would come and remove their lampstand, meaning that he would leave the church and the light of Christ would be gone.
 - If it could happen at the church in Ephesus, it could happen here at Foothills. And it will happen if we forget who we are and why we are here. So, today, and next week, as we continue to examine Paul's illustration of the Olive Tree in Romans 11, I want us to think about our covenant community the church.

Romans 11: 16 – 24 if the root is holy, so are the branches. 17 But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, although a wild olive shoot, were grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing root of the olive tree, 18 do not be arrogant toward the branches. If you are, remember it is not you who support the root, but the root that supports you. 19 Then you will say, “Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in.” 20 That is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand fast through faith. So do not become proud, but fear. 21 For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you. 22 Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God's kindness to you, provided you continue in his kindness. Otherwise, you too will be cut off.

- For the past two Sundays we have been talking about this illustration of the Olive Tree and here is what we have learned so far. First, we learned what this tree represents. It represents that universal or catholic church we read about from the Heidelberg Catechism.
 - It represents the covenant people of God, both Old Testament Israel, and the New Testament church. It is one tree representing all of God's covenant people. That is, those people whom God has called to come and live in covenant faithfulness to Him.
 - But as we talked about last week, not all who are called by God, to live in covenant faithfulness to God, are chosen, that is, saved.

- It is possible to be part of the tree but be broken off because you are not abiding in the righteousness of Christ. Remember Jesus' words that we looked at last week that made all of this so very clear?

Matthew 7: 21 – 23 "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. ²²On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' ²³And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'

- Why did Jesus say he never knew them? Clearly, he knew about them. He is God. He is omniscient—all knowing. What Jesus meant was that he had no relationship with them. Why? Because they were trusting and abiding in their good works, rather than in Jesus and his righteousness.
 - ♦ There will be people, I fear many, who think they are a secure branch on the tree, but in the end will be cast out and broken off.
- But it is not only possible for people to be broken off the tree. It is also possible for churches to lose their place, or as we saw in those verses from Revelation 2, their lampstand, the light of Christ. How does Foothills keep that from happening? By remembering who we are, and who our king is. By remembering what our purpose is, and by focusing our ministry to help us remember who we are and what our purpose is.

- Who are we as a church?

1. The Covenant Community of Christ

- But what exactly does that mean? Maybe it would help us to think of the different ways the church is described in the New Testament.
 - There are four that come to mind: the people of God, the body of Christ, and the temple of the Spirit., and the bride of Christ.
 - Each of these, in their own way, are informative of who we are as the covenant community of Christ.
- The "people of God" imagery connects us to Israel in the Old Testament:

1 Peter 2: 9 – 10 But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. ¹⁰Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

- Here Peter reminds us that like Old Testament Israel, we are a people who have been called out by God and shown mercy by God. Why? For the glory of God. Because of that we are not our own, we are not Satan's, we are not the worlds, but we are God's.
- We have been purchased out of slavery to sin by God through the blood of His Son. But God didn't purchase us out of slavery to be His slaves. He purchased us to be the bride of His Son.

Ephesians 5: 25 – 27 Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, ²⁶that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, ²⁷so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.

- As the bride of Christ, the covenant people of God aren't just made righteous by the blood of Christ, we are also being sanctified by his blood that we would be a people holy, set apart for Christ.

1 Corinthians 3:16 Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?

- Through Christ, our sin is cleansed and each of us individually becomes a place fit for the Spirit of God to dwell. But then listen to what Peter says:

1 Peter 2: 4 – 5 As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, ⁵you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

- Just like a building is made of individual stones that become one unit, so it is with the church.
- To show us how this works, Paul, uses the analogy of the human body to describe the unity and diversity of the covenant people of God.

1 Corinthians 12: 12 - For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit. ¹⁴For the body does not consist of one member but of many.... God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, ²⁵that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. ²⁶If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.

- This is who we are as the covenant community of Christ. We are not our own. We are bought at a price to be the people of God, the dwelling of God, the body of Christ and the bride of Christ. Think what these metaphors for the church teach us: we belong to God, we belong to Christ, and we belong to each other.
- 2. The purpose of the covenant community**
- The covenant community of Christ is a people who have died to self to live for the Lord.

2 Corinthians 5: 14 – 15 For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; ¹⁵and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.

- This covenant community is not about you, or me or anyone else. It is about the glory of God and the glory of Christ. Church is not like Burger King where you come to have it your way. Church is where you come to die to self and live for Christ, so that the glory of God is put on full display.
- Whether we are speaking of Old Testament Israel, or the New Testament Church, the purpose of the covenant community is to display God's glory throughout our surrounding neighborhoods, our cities, and ultimately the world.
- Those verses that we looked at from 1 Peter 2 earlier, not only describe who the church is as the covenant community of God, they also explain our purpose.

1 Peter 2: 9 – 10 But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

- But think what happens whenever we make this covenant community about us by saying things like:
 - “What about me? What am I getting out of it?”
 - Or, when we make it about us by insisting on having our way.
 - Or, even, when we make it about us by putting the focus on what we are doing rather than on what Christ has done, saying “Look at us and how wonderful we are. We at all that we are doing!”
- Do you see how sinful those lines of thinking are? We haven’t died to self. We are making it all about self.
- How many people leave church because their needs (really wants) aren’t being met, or they don’t like the music or some other thing? We belong to one another. We belong to Christ. Instead of focusing on the me monster that lives in each of us and seeks to glorify us, and gratify us, we are called by Christ to put the me monster to death, to glorify him.

1 Corinthians 6: 20 You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So, glorify God in your body.

- So how do we live that purpose out?
 - 3. What are the marks of the covenant community?**
- In reformed circles the marks of the covenant community of Christ, the church, are defined as follows: the proclamation of the word of God, the right and proper practice of the sacraments of baptism and communion, and the right and proper practice of church discipline.
 - I believe and I think you would agree, that if a church is not doing those things it is not operating as a church. Those practices are necessary for a church to be a true church and fulfill its purpose of glorifying God.
 - There are a lot of churches today who have abandoned these things, and, in those churches, I believe that if Jesus hasn’t left the building yet, he’s got one foot out the door.
 - When a church treats the Word of God with contempt, by either denying its authority or making it second place to a band, lights, and smoke, it will drift from truth.
 - When churches treat the sacraments with contempt, as nothing more than an empty religious ritual, then they are treating Christ with contempt.
 - When churches refuse to practice discipline properly, they will soon become like the world.
- But as I speak about the marks of the church here, I have something a little different in mind. I am thinking of the things that Jesus said would mark his church, that would come as a result of sound preaching of the word, a right practice of the sacraments, and proper church discipline.

1 John 13: 34 – 35 A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. ³⁵By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.

- Our Christlike love is a love that is distinctly Christian because it flows out of Jesus and into our lives through the Gospel. We don't manufacture that love. We are simply a reservoir to hold that love and a conduit to distribute it. Selfless love for one another shows the Gospel in action to a watching world.
 - Think what Christ says in those verses to us. We are to love others as Christ loved us. How did Christ love us? Through selfless humility—laying down his life for the sake of our lives. This is the love he calls us to. Listen to Paul's description of how Christ loved us:

Philippians 2: 3 – 8 Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. ⁴Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. ⁵Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, ⁶who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

- When you love others like that, there are no masking wars, or worship wars, there is no me monster demanding, "What is in it for me?" Instead, we live out Paul's admonition to us:

Galatians 6:2 Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.

- What is the law of Christ? Loving one another as we have been loved. How do we fulfill it? By bearing one another's burdens.
 - If we don't fix our hearts on the Gospel and what Christ has done for us, and serve others as Christ has served us, it is easy to become a self-absorbed Christian. The best way to take our eyes off of ourselves is to put our burden down and pick up someone else's.
- But along with love, Jesus also gave us another mark that if we have it will help us to fulfill our purpose of bringing glory to God and to Christ. To see what this mark is, think what Jesus prayed for us, right before he went to the cross for us.

John 17: 21 – 23 that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²²The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, ²³I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.

- Jesus' prayer for his covenant community was that we would be one. That we would have unity. Knowing that this is how Jesus prayed for us, think how angry it must make Jesus when we do things that break that unity. Why do we do those things? That me monster of pride that we allow to well up inside of us.
 - In pride, it is easy for us to criticize and tear down rather than build up. That's why Paul admonishes us like this in:

Ephesians 4: 29 Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.

- Satan's goal is to tear down and destroy by creating chaos. In this he is trying to discredit and dishonor God. But God is a God of order, and God created everything to have order, perfect shalom—perfect unity. What broke shalom? The sin of pride.
- Satan wants to destroy everything good that God created. He wants to use the chaos that comes from the pride of self in our hearts to destroy your family, your marriage, the church, don't give him a foothold to do that.
- Through the blood of Christ, the covenant community of Christ has been set free from the power of sin. It no longer has dominion over us. In Christ we have the power and ability to:

Colossians 3: 12 – 14 Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, ¹³bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. ¹⁴And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

- Look what the result is of bearing with one another in love by forgiving one another with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Perfect harmony—shalom—exactly what Jesus prayed would mark out his covenant community to a watching world.
 - That is why Jesus admonished us in:

Matthew 5: 23 – 24 So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.

- How important is unity and being reconciled? Jesus said it is so important that it has to come before worship. If we are not at fellowship with one another then we can not be in fellowship with God.
- Now along with love and unity, there is one other mark of the church that I think we need to speak about and that is purity. Do you remember how Paul described the church as the bride of Christ in Ephesians 5? Do you remember what Paul said Christ is doing to make his bride ready?

Ephesians 5: 26 – 27 cleansing her by the washing of water with the word, ²⁷so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.

- Now listen to how the book of Revelations describes this bride of Christ:

Revelation 19: 7 – 8 Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready; ⁸it was granted her to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure”

- The church is to be at work making herself ready to be the pure and spotless bride of Christ. Even as we await the day of marriage to Christ, we must strive for purity because:

1 Corinthians 3: 16 – 17 You are God's temple and God's Spirit dwells in you. ¹⁷If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.



4. But how are those marks formed in us?

- Think of the work Jesus has called us to do as his church.

Matthew 28: 19 – 20 Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.

- The church is called to make disciples.
 - So, the first question we have to ask ourselves is: Am I a disciple? Am I truly a follower of Jesus? Am I committed to a relationship with Christ? Or am I just part of the crowd hanging back on the periphery?
- The church is comprised of those who are committed to Christ. Think of the four analogies used to describe the church that we discussed earlier.
 - The church is the bride of Christ. Can a bride be somewhat committed to her future husband.
 - The church is the dwelling place of God comprised of individual believer (living stones). For that to be each stone must live in relationship to the other stones. An individual stone doesn't make a building.
 - The church is the body of Christ composed of many different body parts (individuals). What happens to your body when one part stops working or isn't working right? What happens if a part of the body is removed from the rest of the body? It withers and dies. The body needs all its parts, to function, but the parts need the body to have life.
- Are you living your life connected to the body? Church membership is vital because it is the means by which the making of disciples takes place. It takes a committed and accountable relationship. Are you making yourself accountable and available to minister to the body but also to be disciplined by the body?
- How does the church make disciples? Through a process of discipline—"Teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you." Teaching requires two things. One who is willing to teach and a student who is willing to learn.
- You don't have to be a linguist to see the connection between being a disciple and discipline. Even though we often use the words interchangeably, discipline isn't punishment. Discipline is training. In that regard, there are two different types of discipline. There is formative discipline and corrective discipline.
 - Think of your children for a moment. As parents, we do far more formative discipline than corrective discipline.
 - You know what corrective discipline is with your child. Time out. The naughty chair. Writing over and over again, I will not sass mommy. Taking their keys to the car. Grounding them.
 - What's formative discipline with your children? It's your bedtime. Eat your vegetables. Do your homework. Here is what God's word says. Here is what to look for in the girl you want to marry. Here is how you fix this or clean this.
 - Both forms are important and must not be ignored. But I would argue that we should and do spend much more time and effort than we realize on

formative discipline than we do corrective. Every time we teach and instruct our child it is formative discipline.

- The same is true at church. Most discipline at church is formative—“Teaching them to obey all that I have commanded you.”
- At Foothills, our desire is to be very intentional about formative discipline—the discipline of making disciples of Christ. Formative discipline, disciple making is why the preaching of the word has a prominent place in our worship service.
 - In addition to the teaching during worship on Sunday morning, we have Sunday School for all ages.
 - We also have small groups that you can be part of to learn and grow in community.
 - We have high school youth group on Wednesday nights, along with our Kid’s Quest program as formative discipline for our children. We have a program to help train children how to worship, listen to a sermon, and take notes.
 - For years, we have had Amy in place overseeing our discipleship ministry to children. Now we have Becky to do the same for the women. And even though we don’t have a men’s ministry and discipleship coordinator, yet, they aren’t forgotten.
 - It’s why we have the men’s prayer time on Thursday and Saturday morning, and the Men’s Family Shepherd nights,
- Spiritual formation in your life takes place when you make yourself available and take advantage of the opportunities that abound here for the formative discipline of disciple making.
- But it is not just things we have here at church. It is also why we go to the trouble to publish a family devotional. We want to be engaged with you. Helping you to help your children, through formative discipline to grow up to be disciples of Christ. As a parent, is there anything more important that you can do for them?
- We are all in this covenant community together. By Christ’s design, Christianity was made to be lived in community, that is his Church. There are no Lone Ranger Christians. The way we live out our faith is here in the covenant community of Christ—loving one another, forgiving one another, encouraging one another, and showing mercy to one another in community with one another.
- Our desire in ministry at Foothills is to see each of you and your families persevere to the end. So, give yourself fully to the work of the Lord. Allow Christ to be formed in you. Join us, as we continue to:

Hebrews 3: 13 – 14 encourage one another daily, as long as it is called “Today,” so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness. ¹⁴We have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original conviction firmly to the very end.