



## [Romans 11:21-22](#)

(21) For if God spared not the natural branches, take heed lest he also spare not thee. (22) Behold therefore the goodness and severity of God: on them which fell, severity; but toward thee, goodness, if thou continue in his goodness: otherwise thou also shalt be cut off.

*King James Version*

In his letter to the Christians residing at Rome, the apostle Paul is characteristically astute in his statement of dichotomies. To him, God's penchant to follow destruction quickly with restoration is summed up in the merism, "the goodness and severity of God." He sees these traits, in essence polar opposites, as definitive of God's character, the operational definition of His interface with mankind. Not that [God](#) is bipolar, exhibiting radical mood swings. Rather, God is love, intrinsically so, unchangeably so, but He responds rigorously to sin because He understands how hurtful it is.

Furthermore, implicit in the merism, to Paul's way of thinking, is a stern warning not to abuse God's mercy, lest we incur His severity. The context is the mercy that God has shown some Gentiles by calling them into His church, and at the same time, His rejection of His (physical) people Israel—at least for a while:

If God didn't think twice about taking pruning shears to the natural branches [that is, physical Israel of old], why would He hesitate over you? He wouldn't give it a second thought. Make sure you stay alert to these qualities of gentle kindness and ruthless severity that exist side by side in God—ruthless with the deadwood, gentle with the grafted shoot. But don't presume on this gentleness. ([Romans 11:21-22](#), *The Message*)

Here is the same dichotomy—punishment and restoration, stated in a New Testament context. Two translations of this same passage, quoted below, make it clear that God's severity and His goodness combine to make up two sides of a single personality. J.B.

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Phillips' paraphrase puts it this way:

You must try to appreciate both the kindness and the strict justice of God. Those who fell experienced His justice, while you are experiencing His kindness, and will continue to do so as long as you do not abuse that kindness. Otherwise you too will be cut off. . . .

*The Voice* is quite clear. Notice the translator's turn, "simultaneous balance":

Witness the simultaneous balance of the kindness and severity of our God. Severity is directed at the fallen branches withering without [faith](#). Yet kindness is directed at you. So live in the kindness of God or else prepare to be cut off yourselves.

It is fair to say that this merism—the opposites expressed in God's goodness and His severity—articulate a central, informing theme of God's Word—from its beginning to its end. We see these opposites in narrative after narrative in the Old Testament. Here are just four examples:

1. The goodness of God toward Noah and his family, His protection of them through the cataclysm that destroyed [the world](#) that then was (compare [Genesis 8:1](#) and [II Peter 3:5-6](#)).
2. The goodness of God as He delivered "righteous Lot" from the cities of the plain, which He promptly burned to ashes (see [II Peter 2:6-7](#)).
3. The severity He displayed to Job in order to teach him an important lesson, and the goodness He showed as He ultimately "blessed the latter days of Job more than his beginning" ( [Job 42:12](#)).
4. The severity He exhibited toward Joseph, a bit of a cocky 17-year-old lad, who basked in his father's favor. He found himself a slave in Egypt. [Psalm 105:18](#) (*Common English Bible*) tells us that his "feet hurt in his shackles; his neck was in an iron collar. . . ." Relatively soon, however, Joseph became Pharaoh's vizier.

— Charles Whitaker

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