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Salvation Made Clear

Romans 10

We are in the middle of a three-week series in Romans 9-11. Paul is grieving the fact that his fellow Jews have rejected Jesus and he's trying to make sense of it. In chapter 9, Paul speaks from God's perspective. Even though every human being deserves judgment, God in his mercy chooses to save some of us. That doctrine is called election. The whole Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, teaches election. Paul teaches it. Jesus taught it repeatedly. It is the assertion that we are saved, not because WE make a decision for God but because God made a decision for us. He CHOSE us, He pursued us like the "hound of heaven" and saved us...in spite of ourselves. That is "election."

And I must say, I have rarely had more contrastingly passionate responses to a sermon. One couple literally came up and embraced me after the service. And right after that, a woman came up and politely said, "I appreciate that sermon but I don't believe it. I'm Arminian. (Arminians are those who believe our salvation is dependent upon OUR choice and not God's choice.) That is the core of the issue. WHO initiates my salvation; is it God or is it me?"

More disturbing was a conversation later in the week with a dear friend who warned me, "You better be careful with that...because there are a lot of people who were upset." I asked why. He said, "Because if it's true, it makes them into robots. And what is the point of doing evangelism. If God has already decided who will be saved, why bother?"

I asked him, "Are they mad because they think I am not teaching the Bible faithfully...or are they mad because they don't like what the Bible says?" It is an important distinction. If I am found to be teaching incorrectly, I deserve to be called out! You all need to be like the Bereans in Acts 17 who "received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so." I encourage you...I challenge you... examine the Scriptures and see if what I say is so. If I am wrong, tell me!

But if I am accurately teaching the Scriptures...but you just don't like what the Bible says...that's between you and the Holy Spirit. In truth, we spend our whole Christian lives deciding whether we are going to submit to the parts of the Bible we don't like or don't understand. What the Bible says about our money. What it says about our anger. What it says about our sexuality. And when the Bible tells us that God is the one who saves...that our salvation begins with our sovereign God and not ourselves...even though that might disturb our American sense of fairness or self-determinism... each of us must decide whether we will bow before the authority of God's word. But these are great questions and deserve to be asked...and I want to try and answer them today.

A while back I was looking at our checkbook. (For you millennials, a “check” is a piece of paper that you sign and it’s just like money!) I noticed that several checks were missing and when I turned to the register, only one had been entered. Since I’m the one who balances the checkbook, I was irritated. So I stomped over to Cyndi, thrust it before her, and asked her to explain herself. She took it and, without a word, turned the page. And there they were. Ha! If someone...I won’t name who...had bothered to turn the page, many of his concerns would have been alleviated!

That’s what we are going to do today. We are going to turn the page. I hope everyone who was irritated last week came back. I believe many concerns will be alleviated because, as I said, chapters 9 and 10 belong together! Like two pieces of bread with a piece of ham in the middle. (Although someone mentioned that a ham sandwich might not be the best illustration for a Jewish apostle.)

Paul begins chapter 10 the way he did 9. He laments the fact that his Jewish brothers reject Jesus. They believe they will be saved because THEY are the chosen ones; because THEY obey the law; because THEY earned it. No! Paul says. Salvation is not something to be earned...not something WE do. It is something God has done. It is GOD who has spoken the word of salvation into our lives. But that doesn’t mean we don’t play a part. Listen:

8“The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart” (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. For the Scripture says, “Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame.” For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. For “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!” But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, “Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?” So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.

I want to return to the concern expressed by my friend: “If what you say about election is true...if God is the one who chooses... then we are just robots. And if THAT is true, what is the point of evangelism? Why bother.” Any of you share that concern?

I hope you see now why it is so important to turn the page...to read the rest of the story. Chapter 9 focused on God’s initiative...God’s decision to save some. God has the right to do that; he is God. So, then, ARE we simply robots? Paul says, “Absolutely not! God gives us a part to play. “...if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.”

How does God invite us to be part of his redemptive plan? First, we confess. What do we confess? "Jesus is Lord." This was the first confession of the early church. Jesus is Lord. This three-word confession was simple...and radical. To say that Jesus was Lord was to say that he was God; the ruler over your life and over all things. For Paul's Jewish listeners, this was blasphemous because it claimed that this man, Jesus of Nazareth, was God in the flesh. But that IS what Paul taught and what the early church believed.

To confess "Jesus is Lord" is to say that King Jesus is ruler of my life. This is still a radical confession of faith. Everyone wants Jesus as savior. Who WOULDN'T want someone to pay the price for our sin? We like having a proxy who is willing to die on the cross in our place. We WANT a savior. But this LORDSHIP thing...we're not so sure about that. Because we want to be our own lords! We want to call our own shots. The first and essential confession of faith must be to surrender the control of our lives and acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord of all. The first-century Jews had a hard time with this; so do 21st century Americans. But it is non-negotiable. Jesus is Lord.

"...if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead..." Obviously, there are some other things you need to believe if you are going to follow Jesus. But this is the core conviction. The bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ. We celebrate that in two weeks. We call it Easter!

I remember when we were still in our former denomination. I was seated at a table of presbytery leaders and we were trying to figure out how to pull together all sides, the liberals and the conservatives. I said, "Why don't we figure out what we believe in common. Let's start here: how many of us believe in the bodily resurrection of Jesus?" I thought I was throwing a softball. THREE people around that table could not affirm the bodily resurrection of Christ. I remember thinking in that moment, "We are done! We cannot be in a denomination where it is possible to be a pastor and yet not affirm the single most important confession of the historic Christian church."

There are many things about which we can disagree as Christians. Including election! But if you do not believe in your heart that God raised Jesus from the dead...you do not believe in the foundational truth that makes one Christian. Period.

But if you do...if you confess Jesus is Lord...if you truly believe in his bodily resurrection... what is Paul's promise? "You WILL be saved!" And how many of those who confess and believe such things will be saved? All of them! Every one of them! Verse 11: "Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame." Verse 12: God bestows "his riches on all who call on him." Verse 13: "...everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." EVERYONE...ALL...EVERYONE...who calls on the name of the Lord will be...what? SAVED!

How many of you have visited Union Station in Tacoma? It displays beautiful Chihuly glass and houses impressive courtrooms. But 50 years ago...it was ...a station; a train station! When I was five, my mom, sister and I changed trains there en route from Yakima to Martinez, CA. Even all these years later, I remember that station as a swirling mass of humanity. And suddenly I realized, I was all alone! I had become separated from mom. I began screaming at

the top of my lungs! I didn't care that people were staring at me. I was lost...desperate...and I needed finding. So I called to my Mommy.

Paul promises that everyone...all...everyone who realizes they are separated from God ...everyone... all...everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord...WILL BE SAVED.

But wait a second. Didn't Paul just teach that God elects to save some? Yes. And now he is saying that all who respond to God by calling out to him will be saved? Yes. So... which is it? Is it God's election ...or is it our free will? Yes. Is it confusing? Yes. Is it a mystery? Yes? Is it true? Yes. At the same time. This is called an Antinomy. An antinomy is a contradiction between two statements that are equally true.

Do we believe as John writes that "God so loved the [whole] world" that he sent his only Son to save us? Yes, we believe. Do we believe as Peter writes that that "the Lord does not wish that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance?" Yes, we believe. Do we believe as Paul writes that God has predestined those who will be saved from before the foundation of the earth? Yes, we believe. And do we believe as Jesus teaches that not all will be saved? That broad is the road to destruction and many are those who will take that road? Yes...we believe...all these things.

Election and free will. These are two faces of the same coin. They are like guy wires pulling in opposite directions that hold a tower in place; you need both to hold the tower in tension. Is it easy to understand? NO! But surely, if we believe God is as great as we say, there will be things about God's ways that we cannot comprehend. It is a mystery. A paradox. An antinomy. Both are true. Both are to be believed. Both are to be taught.

So...are you just a robot? NO! God in his grace has granted you the privilege of responding to his call. What you do matters. How you respond matters. It is how our sovereign God saves us.

Now, to the other question: Why bother with evangelism? If God is really the initiator of salvation...if HE decides who will be saved, why bother? Listen again:

How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!" So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.

THIS is why we do evangelism. Because God uses the witness of his followers to save others. And, by the way, because Jesus commanded it! Go into all the world and make disciples. We have the privilege AND the responsibility to share the gospel with others.

"How are they to preach unless they are sent?" That question is the REASON we continue to train and send out pastors from this church. It is why we have three gifted young people-- Ryan Palmer, Julie Hawkins and Gunnar Tesdahl--on track to be ordained as Ministers of the Word in our denomination! And it is why last Thursday night our session voted to call and

ordain our daughter, Rachel Toone, as chaplain to the Imara International school in Kenya. Because we believe in the saving power of the gospel, we ARE a church that is sending out preachers... 16 of them so far... and still counting.

To my friends who wonder what the point is: there you go. The same Paul who teaches election also teaches us to share the good news. So here's my question right back...to all of us. How are we doing at that? Honestly...how are we doing at sharing the good news of Jesus? There was a time when we were better at this. When we were excited about our faith, excited about inviting friends to church, excited to share the good news. But as we have matured in some aspects of our faith... honestly, I believe we have become LESS excited about sharing. We love our church, love being together... love to worship and grow. But the passion we once had for the lost--I think that needs to be rekindled. So, return with me to the first part of chapters 9 and 10. Paul starts both in the same way. He speaks of his "great sorrow"... "his unceasing anguish"... "his heart's desire" ... "his prayer" ...that his brothers...his friends...his kinsmen... would be saved.

Could I ask this sincere question of you? Do you share ANY of those emotions? When you think of someone you love who does not yet know Jesus...is there ANY sorrow? Any anguish in your heart? Any longing to see them come to faith? "How will they believe in him of whom they have never heard?" I love our church...my Sweetheart Church... but I believe we have grown lackadaisical about sharing the incredible news that changed our lives and about which we were once so excited.

Last week I met a young man who gave his life to Christ in our Alpha program. He is so excited; he is bubbling over to tell what God has done for him. You are going to hear from him on Easter. He can hardly wait to share! When was the last time YOU bubbled over with the good news of Jesus? Easter is the perfect time to rekindle that flame. Would you do something with me? Would you pray with me every day for the next two weeks, "Holy Spirit, open the doors for me to invite someone to Easter...and give me the courage to offer that invitation." This flyer will be a great way to start the conversation.

"How will they believe in him of whom they have never heard?"