

Sermon 125: Romans 11:6: Unconditional election

OUTLINE

Not works
By grace

INTRODUCTION

The verse that casts its shadow over the whole of Romans 9-11 is 11:36, 'For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be glory forever. Amen.' This is Paul's grand conclusion and to conclude anything different is to have misunderstood his argument. Every part of our salvation is from God, 'Salvation belongs to the LORD,' Jonah 2:9. It comes from Him, is done through Him and all runs to Him so that He is the only one who can be thanked for every part of our salvation. He must get all the glory, 'Not to us O LORD, not to us, but to your name give glory,' Psalm 115:1. This truth can be summed up in one word, 'grace.' Salvation is by grace alone, not grace and our additions. Not the addition of our motives, not the addition of our free choices, not the addition even of any foreseen choice it is all of grace. This is Paul's point in Romans 11:6, 'But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace.' Paul is talking about God saving Israel, and we have seen that God does this by acting in mercy and justice and saving a remnant not all. This action of choosing some Paul said in verse 5 is to be 'chosen by grace.' Paul has to press this home upon His hearers and he does this by adding verse 6 and showing us that grace and works are fundamentally opposed to each other, they are the opposite sides of the spectrum, they are mutually exclusive. As soon as you add works to salvation you automatically deny grace. As soon as you add anything of your own to the equation you pollute what God provides that can actually save.

This process of coming to see that all of salvation is by grace is not an overnight one, it is one that we grow into as our knowledge grows. Even a man like George Whitfield took a while to fully work out what it means that we are saved by grace. Whitefield lived from 1714-1770. From the age of twenty two until his death he was a famous open air preacher. J.C. Ryle called him 'chief amongst the English Reformers of the 18TH Century.' George Whitfield as a student at Oxford joined the holy club, other famous members of this club include John and Charles Wesley. 'Its members practised early rising and lengthy devotions, and strove for a self-discipline which left no moment wasted throughout the day. At nightfall they wrote a diary which enabled them to scrutinize themselves for any fault. They partook of the Eucharist every Sunday, fasted each Wednesday and Friday, and hallowed the Saturday as a Sabbath of preparation for the Lord's Day... They regularly visited Oxford's prisons (the Castle and the Bocardo) and the Poor House, and each member contributed to a fund with which they relieved the needs of the inmates and maintained a school for the prisoner's children. This program of endeavour, aided by these works of charity, they believed somehow ministered towards the salvation of their souls.'¹ Things came to a head for Whitefield who realised that for all his works he could not save himself, but needed to be born again. He was highly agitated and under much duress. This led to more works of asceticism. He stopped eating anything that tasted good and gave that money to the poor; he put on a patched gown and dirty shoes; he stopped speaking to his friends in public. He writes, 'I constantly walked out in the cold mornings, till part of one of my hands was quite black. This, with my continued abstinence and inward conflicts, at length so emaciated my body, that at Passion-week, finding I could scarce creep upstairs, I was obliged to inform my

¹ Dallimore, Vol. 1, p67-8.

kind tutor of my condition, who immediately sent for a physician for me.² When he had come to the end of his efforts and had nothing to offer he was saved by grace through faith. 'God was pleased to remove the heavy load, to enable me to lay hold of His dear Son by a living faith, and by giving me the Spirit of adoption, to seal me even to the day of everlasting redemption.'³ He was not altogether free from his legalism, for the legalist in us dies very hard, but he began to learn of free grace and justification by faith only. Whitefield went to preach of salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

Today as we allow Paul to continue to teach our stubborn hearts on this point we will be considering how salvation is indeed by grace and not by works.

Not works

Is there any part of your salvation that you contributed? Is there any part that you can take credit for? Can we say that God could not have saved me unless I had..., fill in the blanks. The answer is never, for from Him and through Him and to Him are all things, and only He can be thanked, praised, glorified and acknowledged as the author of our salvation from beginning to end. In the chapters we are considering Paul is talking about salvation in its beginnings, the issue of election. In verse 5 he has made the statement that God's remnant are elect/chosen by grace. V6 functions as an argument against the anticipated objections. Remember if you asked the Jews why did God save the Jewish nation they would say, that God looked into the future and saw that they alone of all the nations would receive and obey the law, or that Abraham was sooooo good that the Jews are stilling living off the interest of his good works. Essentially they had a view of election on the basis of works. Paul is establishing that any addition of any form of works is an impossibility or grace would be annulled.

So if we ask the question why does God elect to save His people? The answer is by grace. Listen to how Paul puts it in 2 Tim. 1:8-9, 'Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God, 9 who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began.' So before the ages began, not merely when Abraham was alive, God according to His own purposes and according to grace chose us for salvation.

But someone will want to say to me, 'Hang on Nick, God predestined me according to foreknowledge because He is outside of time and He looked into the future and learnt that I would trust in Christ. So I am saved because God saw I would choose Him and so He chose me.' This is just the sort of thinking that Paul is familiar with among the Jews and is refuting, if this were true we would have to say that 'from us, and through us and to us are all things, and to God and me belongs the glory.' We call this form of salvation synergism, a cooperation of God and me in bringing about salvation. But we believe that the bible teaches monergism that God alone is the author of our salvation, this is what is implied in this one word, grace. When Paul says, 'it is no longer on the basis of works,' he is not implying that there was ever a time that being God's elect was ever by works. No he is saying that in our thinking we can no longer think in terms of works, that the Jews that have rejected their Messiah because of their stubborn loyalty to their works must put away this way of thinking in acknowledgement of grace.

2 Ibid., p76.

3 Ibid., p77.

Lets look at Ephesians 1:3-6, 'Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, 4 even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love 5 he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, 6 to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved.

Paul tells us that God is to be blessed/praised/thanked, who is the source of every spiritual blessing that we have in Christ that is kept for us in the heavenly places. These blessings refer to every part of our salvation that comes to us by virtue of our union with Christ, be it regeneration, justification, sanctification, the promise of glorification, etc. We are told that the source of this blessing is not our foreseen faith but God's electing love. V4 and 5 are saying the same thing in two different ways, v4 says that God chose us in Christ in eternity past to be holy; v5 says that in love He predestined us for sonship. The grounds of our election is not our works but Christ who stands as our representative even from eternity. The driving motive for all of this we are told is not our foreseen faith it is done 'according to the purpose of His will,' v5. And the final goal is to declare the praise of His glorious grace, v6 not any contribution on our part. Our election was unconditional, it was determined by God's will in accordance with grace, not by our foreseen faith by which God was obligated to respond in a certain fashion. We view God's plan as freely determined by His will not ours.

Romans 8:29 is often cited by those who want to uphold the Arminian view of foreknowledge, which is God deciding all things based on what the info He gleaned by looking ahead into the future. 'For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.' Here is an abbreviated list of reasons why 'foreknow' cannot mean knowing ahead of time.

Firstly, to construct a picture of God who has to see the future in order to learn something from it is to make God in our image with our same relationship to time. God does not learn by looking into the future, He knows all things immediately. We must apply the reality of God to the language that describes Him.

Secondly, any concept of God that seeks to make God react to our wills, and not to be the proactive architect of time is unbiblical. This reconstruction of God as a reactor to us reveals an underlying assumption in our system of thought. That we have placed our wills, or some unbiblical notion of free will at the centre of the universe and are making all things conform to it, even God's decree and knowledge.

Thirdly, it is a logical absurdity to think that God looks in on a future that He is not causing and upholding by His will at all times. It is a hypothetical impossibility.

Fourthly, the word 'foreknow' can have three possible meanings, firstly, it can mean knowing ahead of time, for example we know the second coming will happen 2 Pet. 3:17, and the Jews knew beforehand that Paul was a Pharisee Acts 26:5. Secondly, it means not merely to passively know but to actively ordain, to foreordain something. This is how the KJV translated the word in 1 Pet. 1:20, for God did not merely know beforehand about Jesus Christ but preplanned/foreordained His coming. This a key idea for we cannot separate God's knowledge from His power or will. The only future that exists is the one that God wills and causes to come to pass. Thirdly, the word know is a common word for loved and in accordance with Eph. 1:4 we read it through Hebrew eyes as 'foreloved' as in God set His love upon us in Christ in eternity past.

Fifthly, this view of foreknowledge and election denies the bible's teaching on the sinfulness of man. There is no one that seeks God, not even one. Apart from God's power there is no possible way for a sinner to choose Christ. To foreknow a scenario where this is possible is to deny the bible's teaching on the effects of sin.

Sixthly, and returning to the point of Rom. 11:6 to say that we are saved because God had to save us because He foresaw something in us is to deny the principle of grace. If it is not free on God's part, if He had to save us because He saw something in us, then it is no longer grace. Rom. 11:6 is excluding not only works of the law but all forms of works, this is seen in the fact of the works-grace antithesis. This is confirmed by what Paul says in Rom. 9:11, 'though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad---in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of him who calls.'

By grace

Salvation is a work of grace from beginning to end. We have established that Paul believes that we are chosen by grace and not by works, but it does not end there, it is grace from beginning to end. Let me quickly define grace. What is grace? The traditional definition is God's unmerited favour, but let me adjust this slightly, it is demerited favour. Let me explain. If you are walking down the street and see a beggar and you give him money without him working for it, this is unmerited favour. But if he stabs you first and then you give him money this is demerited favour. God gives not merely to those who have not worked for it, but who have by their sins earned for themselves judgement and condemnation. Grace is God saving His enemies, not merely His creatures.

Lets map this out:

We were given the new birth by grace. Eph. 2:1-3 teaches us that we are dead in trespasses and sin. Matt. 7:18 tells us that we are bad trees that cannot produce good fruit. John 8:43 tells us that we cannot hear and receive Christ's word. 1 Cor. 2:14 tells us that we are natural and cannot discern the spiritual truth of the gospel but perceive it as foolishness 1:18. Rom. 8:7 tells us that we opposed to God and refuse to submit to, and cannot submit ourselves to His law. 1 Cor. 12:3 tells us that we cannot say Jesus is Lord of ourselves. The teaching of John 6:44 is the truth, no one can come to God unless the Father draws him. Left to ourselves, to our intellect, our good motives, our good works, and the strength of our own will we can never be saved. So the Lord intervenes and opens hearts as He did with Lydia, Acts 16:14. When we were dead, by God's grace we were regenerated, granted the new birth and then believed by His enabling, Eph. 2:5, 'even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ---by grace you have been saved.'

We believe and repent by grace. Not only does the Lord grant us a new heart that loves God and hates sin, the abilities of trusting in Christ and turning from sin are said to be gifts and grants by His grace. Phil. 1:29, 'For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake.' Eph. 2:8-9, 'For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, 9 not a result of works, so that no one may boast.' Acts 11:18, 'When they heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, "Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life." 2 Tim. 2:25, 'correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth.' Being saved by grace does not mean becoming a robot, but with the new heart that now loves God and hates sin, with the new understanding that believes we are indeed hopeless sinners and Christ is our only hope. We of our own volition, out of the new heart that has been granted us, we gladly do our own believing and repenting and humbling of ourselves. We act, but we could do nothing of ourselves.

Sanctification is by grace. God commands us to good works, but these have been predestined for us to do by God, Eph. 2:10, 'For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.' Any ability that we have comes from God joining us to the death and resurrection of Christ, Rom.

6:1-4. And even as we go it is He who works in our hearts both to will and do for His good pleasure, Phil. 2:13.

When we pray we are heard because of grace. We pray in Jesus name, dressed in His righteousness, taught by the Spirit of Christ and both Christ and the Spirit intercede for us. Whether it is good works, rewards, glorification, the new birth, etc., it is all of grace.

Is this the way you think, or are you still silencing your inner Pharisee? If you have left GV and you are thinking to yourself, in order to truly be saved I need to... then you have not learnt grace. We are saved by grace alone, through faith alone in Christ alone. Good works will follow faith as the fruit of faith, but we are justified by grace through faith. Repentance will attend true faith in every instance, but we are not justified by repentance but by grace through faith. It must necessarily be faith because it is a receiving act and not a giving act, it is the act of looking out of ourselves and placing our confidence in what Christ has done and not in ourselves to what we do.

There is a form of legalism that is fixed on secondary issues as primary issues. When your Christianity is measured, or the Christianity of others I measured by things like head coverings, drinking alcohol, tattoos, drums in the worship service, watching movies, whether you homeschool, whether you practice any form of birth control. There is a way of having these views that when others disagree with you and you exclude them from the kingdom it is obvious that you are not thinking in terms of being saved by grace but by works.

I can imagine the push back on this point, and I can hear someone saying, 'but if you don't obey Christ and disobey you lose your salvation.' this too is an attitude that is held by those who don't understand grace. It is true that there is an abuse of free grace that teaches a view of antinomianism, where works are unimportant and don't need to even be the evidence of true faith, we reject this error. But when you are fixated on your ongoing obedience as the basis for your good standing with God and the means by which you don't unsave yourself, you are saying that you are saved by grace but you finish your salvation by works.

When you think your prayers will be heard because you have added a self-afflicting action like fasting to your prayers, this is works and not grace. Fasting has a legitimate place in the Christian life, we find this in the teaching of Christ and the practice of the early church. However, there are ways in which we view our self-afflicting actions where we think that we, our prayers, or our good deeds will be more acceptable because we added our own blood to Jesus blood.

Can you see how far reaching this issue is? If we don't understand grace we will reinvent God and make Him a God who has to learn things by looking into the future, who is reactive not proactive, who arranges His will around our will instead of vice versa. We weaken the gospel by making our sins bigger than Christ's provision; we become accusers of the brethren taking the role of satan; we will change the grounds of biblical worship not able to ascribe all to God. This view influences evangelism, prayer, your quiet times, your parenting your marriage, exercising your gifts in Church. It touches every part of your life. Condemnation or forgiveness, earned or free, law or grace, mercy or justice. If we cannot see upon what basis God deals with us then we will not be like our Father in heaven towards others. Take Paul's point, all of salvation even from the very beginnings in eternity past in the act of election is all of grace. Let us make sure that apply this to ourselves and to others.