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Salvation: God's Love Forever

Bethany Bible Church, Adult Sunday School Class, May 12, 2013

Whosoever Will . . . Chosen of God

This morning, we begin to discuss one of the most difficult matters to grasp when it comes to the doctrine of salvation--and, because difficult, it is also often controversial. But when handled humbly and biblically, it is nevertheless one of the most encouraging aspects of the doctrine of our salvation. It's the question of what serves as the basis for God's choice of saving whoever it is that He saves.

The controversy isn't really--as it is often portrayed--a conflict between 'divine sovereignty' (i.e., God's election of someone for salvation), and 'human responsibility' (i.e., that person's freedom to choose Jesus Christ). Both of those realities are so clearly taught in the Bible that to deny either of them would be to deny the clear teaching of Scripture itself. No truly biblical Christian would ever say that he or she chose Jesus Christ apart from--or in spite of--the grace of God. But neither would any truly biblical Christian claim that they were saved apart from having made a personal, free, conscious choice to trust in Jesus Christ. Rather, the controversy is over which of those two things stands as the basis of the other. Did God choose us for salvation because He first foresaw that we would place our faith in Jesus? Or did we choose to believe on Jesus because we were first chosen for faith by God from before time?

It's important to clear-up where the controversy is really centered. This is because 'free will' oriented Christians are often afraid that their 'sovereign grace' oriented brethren will teach that a person who truly desires salvation can't come to Jesus--even if they want to--if they aren't the 'elect', or that we dishonor God in the preaching of the gospel except only to those we believe truly are first chosen by God. And the 'sovereign grace' oriented Christians are often afraid that their 'free will' brethren will teach that salvation is ultimately a work of man and not of God, or that the good intentions of God--in the case of some people that He wishes that He could save--could be ultimately thwarted by human choice. Really, the 'free-will' and 'sovereign grace' brethren can work together and learn from one another; because the Bible teaches that salvation is both a matter of 'free will' and 'sovereign grace'. Both are necessary to hold on to in order to rightly hold to and act on the truth. The 'human responsibility' aspect of salvation spurs us on to preach the gospel to everyone, and to urge them to place their trust in Christ through a bona fide offer of salvation; and the 'divine sovereignty' aspect of salvation assures us that the work of evangelism and missions around the world will be successful and will result in the glory and praise of God throughout eternity.

We should keep the doctrines of 'divine sovereignty' and 'human responsibility' distinct in our thinking, of course. But we don't have to feel as if we have to find a way to reconcile them together as if they were hostile to one another. Both are taught in the Bible without any sense of contradiction. They are friendly to one another in the plan of God for our salvation; and you certainly don't ever have to reconcile 'friends'.

Consider just a few passages from John's Gospel that demonstrate this . . .

John 1:10-13.

In these verses, we're told about the Lord Jesus' coming to His own Jewish kinsmen in a way that was in keeping with the Old Testament promises. John writes, "He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him" (vv. 10-11).¹ And it then tells us, "But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name" (v. 12). And

so, in verses 10-12, we see the emphasis of human responsibility. And what a great invitation it gives us! How many people are giving the privilege of becoming sons and daughters of God? The clear, biblical answer is, “as many as receive Him . . .” This is true not only of the Jewish people but of the Gentiles as well. Salvation is available to all who willingly choose Jesus. But this passage then goes on further information about those who choose Him; “who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God” (v. 13). Their new-birth was, ultimately, not a result of their own will, but of God’s will. They no more ‘willed’ birth to themselves in Christ than they ‘willed’ birth to themselves from their mother’s womb. Both “human responsibility” and “divine sovereignty” are held to be in concert in these verses.

John 5:24-25.

Jesus Himself said, in John 5:24, “Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life.” That’s a great promise--and it comes from the highest possible Authority. “He who hears . . . and believes . . . has everlasting life.” That’s “human responsibility”. But how are they able to hear? Look at what our Lord said in the very next verse: “Most assuredly, I say to you, the hour is coming, and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God; and those who hear will live” (v. 25). This isn’t speaking of physical resurrection, because that’s described later in this passage. Rather, this is speaking of spiritual resurrection--the kind which must precede the ability to “hear” and “respond” to the gracious invitation to come to Jesus. “Hearing”, then, is dependent upon the life-giving grace of God--and not just on the ability of the hearer. This is because apart from the grace of God, the hearer is spiritually dead. That’s “divine sovereignty”--God’s gracious act of giving life to whomever He chooses.

John 6:37-40.

Jesus was talking to unbelieving Jewish people and told them, “All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out. For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me” (vv. 37-38). Look at how Jesus places both realities closely together. All that the Father gives Him will come--and that’s ‘divine sovereignty’; and yet, there’s the promise that whoever comes will never be cast out--and that’s ‘human responsibility’. No one that the Father gave to Jesus will fail to sincerely come to Him. And Jesus will never cast away someone who sincerely comes to Him because they had not been given to Him by the Father. Similarly, in the next couple of verses, He says, “This is the will of the Father who sent Me, that of all He has given Me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up at the last day” (v. 39). This speaks of the sovereign choice of God. But He then goes on to say, “And this is the will of Him who sent Me, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him may have everlasting life; and I will raise him up at the last day” (v. 40). And this speaks of human choice. Jesus seems to declare both realities of human choice and divine grace--sometimes multiple times--right next to each other!

John 10:26-29.

Jesus told the unbelieving Jewish leaders, “But you do not believe, because you are not of My sheep, as I said to you” (v. 26). Note that it wasn’t that they weren’t His sheep because they didn’t believe; but rather that they didn’t believe because they were not His sheep. He went on to speak in terms of human responsibility and say, “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand” (vv. 27-28). But then, He goes in in the next verse to stress the sovereignty of God in the matter; “My Father, who has given them to Me,

is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of My Father's hand" (v. 29). The Father didn't give them to Jesus as an irrevocable gift because they followed Jesus. Rather, they follow Jesus because the Father gave them to Him in such a way that they will never be snatched away from Him.

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Charles Spurgeon put the unity of these two realities of salvation--divine sovereignty and human responsibility--wonderfully well when he wrote; "The system of truth revealed in the Scriptures is not simply one straight line, but two; and no man will ever get a right view of the gospel until he knows how to look at the two lines at once. For instance, I read in one Book of the Bible, "The Spirit and the bride say, Come. And let him that heareth say, Come. And let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely." Yet I am taught, in another part of the same inspired Word, that "it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy." I see, in one place, God in providence presiding over all, and yet I see, and I cannot help seeing, that man acts as he pleases, and that God has left his actions, in a great measure, to his own free-will. Now, if I were to declare that man was so free to act that there was no control of God over his actions, I should be driven very near to atheism; and if, on the other hand, I should declare that God so over-rules all things that man is not free enough to be responsible, I should be driven at once into Antinomianism or fatalism. That God predestines, and yet that man is responsible, are two facts that few can see clearly. They are believed to be inconsistent and contradictory to each other. If, then, I find taught in one part of the Bible that everything is foreordained, that is true; and if I find, in another Scripture, that man is responsible for all his actions, that is true; and it is only my folly that leads me to imagine that these two truths can ever contradict each other. I do not believe they can ever be welded into one upon any earthly anvil, but they certainly shall be one in eternity. They are two lines that are so nearly parallel, that the human mind which pursues them farthest will never discover that they converge, but they do converge, and they will meet somewhere in eternity, close to the throne of God, whence all truth doth spring."²

¹Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are taken from The Holy Bible, New King James Version; copyright 1982, Thomas Nelson, Inc.

²Charles Spurgeon, *Autobiography: Diary, Letters, and Records, Vol. 1* (AGES Software Albany, OR USA, Version 1.0 © 1996), p. 190.