

Who are the Elect?

In the past couple of weeks we have looked at some ideas that are held by some very influential Christian leaders and groups. We've looked at questions like, "Does God knowing things in advance take away human freedom?" and "Does God predetermine everything that happens? Does He predetermine who is given the grace of salvation and who is not?" We've also tried to give some perspective on the concept of "hardening hearts" that Paul uses to describe what happened to his fellow Jews in their rejection of Jesus as Messiah.

The overarching idea in all of this is that for God to be sovereign must mean that He controls whatever goes on on the earth. The people who hold these views will typically base them on a certain reading of Ephesians 1 and Romans 9-11, but, as I've tried to show in the past couple of weeks, their interpretations of these passages are not the only, and not the best, way of understanding the point that Paul was trying to make.

I'm going to make one last stab at this topic today and I'm going to draw some contrasts between the God of justice and grace and goodness that we see throughout Scripture and this God of arbitrariness and control that some think they see in a few passages. The question under which we are going to search the Scriptures today is, "Who are the elect?" In other words, does God choose some people to be saved and others not to be saved? If He makes that choice, is it entirely independent of a human response? In other words, does God just make the choice regardless of our ability or willingness to put our trust in Him? And we'll have to look at another question along the way: Is faith a work that can get us somewhere with God?

In coming weeks, we're going to take a much more positive and encouraging approach and look deeper into the wonders of God's love and grace. But, first, I know of a number of popular Christian authors and speakers who teach this revived approach to God's sovereignty. What first emerged in the theology of Augustine of Hippo in the fifth century, became a mainstay of the early Protestant Reformation and is now being revived as "New Reformation Theology" contains the idea of a God of justice who has a way of being just, that simply doesn't make sense to humans. He has a way of loving the whole world that seems hateful and vengeful to most of that world. He has a way of being good that we would understand as being cruel. We're told that we need to become more appreciative of the mystery of who God is - but that seems like a copout. The God of the Bible wants to be known, makes great efforts to reveal Himself and His character to humans, and doesn't shroud His heart behind the word "mystery".

Let's look at what some of these authors and preachers have to say:

1. We'll start with Martyn Lloyd-Jones who was the influential preacher at Westminster Chapel in London, England:

In verse 6 to 29 (of Romans 9) Paul explains why anybody is saved - it is the sovereign election of God. In these verses he is showing us why anybody is lost, and the explanation of that is their own responsibility - It is God's action alone that saves a person. So why is anybody lost? Is it because they are not elected?

No. What accounts for the lost is their rejection of the gospel ... We are responsible for our rejection of the gospel, but we are not responsible for our acceptance of it. Now I will read you the comments of Dr. John Lennox, the Oxford mathematics professor who you may find on YouTube or read his books. "With all due respect to Lloyd-Jones, from whom I have learned a great deal, this makes no sense whatsoever. Moral logic and common sense demand that, if no one is responsible for accepting the gospel, then no one is responsible for rejecting it. Furthermore, we have repeatedly seen ... in the biblical presentation of the gospel - a person will be saved or lost according to whether they believe or reject ..."

2. Here's a second attempt to preserve this unbalanced view of who is responsible for what in terms of salvation. This is a story used to illustrate his ideas by D. James Kennedy, a well-known pastor from Florida and pioneer of Coral Ridge Ministries: *Here are five people who are planning to hold up a bank. They are friends of mine. I find out about it and I plead with them. I beg them not to do it. Finally they push me out of the way and they start out. I tackle one of the men and wrestle him to the ground. The others go ahead, rob the bank, a guard is killed, they are captured, convicted, sentenced... The one man who was not involved in the robbery goes free. Now I ask you this question: whose fault was it that the other men died?... Now this other man who is walking around free - can he say: "Because my heart is so good, I am a free man"? The only reason he is free is because of me; because I restrained him. So those who go to hell have no one to blame but themselves. Those who go to heaven have no one to praise but Jesus Christ. Thus we see that salvation is all of grace from its beginning to its end. Now let's turn back to Dr. Lennox for analysis: It is hard to imagine an illustration less appropriate to describe the grace of God in the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. When people in the villages of Galilee saw the wonderful works of the Lord and asked Him to leave, He left. He did not invade their personal space with violence. Wrestling someone to the ground seems a grotesque way to illustrate the loving appeal of Christ. Moreover, in the illustration, there is not the slightest trace of repentance on the part of the man who ended up 'free'. Additionally, I find it rather inconsistent that Tim Keller cites this illustration with approval in a book where he describes election as God freely choosing those who 'freely come'. Keller mentions this in his explanation of Romans 9 in connection with a question that seems to lurk behind many expressions of theological determinism.*
3. Now we deal with Timothy Keller's view on election: *For the biggest question is (he writes): If God could save everyone, why doesn't He? And here Paul seems to say that God's chosen course (to save some and leave others) will in the end be more fit to show forth God's glory than any other scheme we can imagine. This may seem strange to us, but that is the point - we are not God, and cannot know everything or decide what is best. In commenting on those words from Keller, Dr. Lennox says, "Yes, we are not God and cannot know everything, and there are many issues that we must leave at that; but this is not one of them. For, as we have seen, Scripture tells us repeatedly and explicitly that the criterion for judgment is whether or not a person believes ... a position that upholds human moral responsibility and does make sense. There is nothing strange about it. Is it not, therefore, possible that in*

this case Keller's sense of strangeness (meaning, I presume, unfairness) is an instinctive and justifiable reaction to actual unfairness? Surely the answer to Keller's question is that God has provided a salvation that is available to all and whether a person is saved or not depends on two factors: on God's part, on the provision of that salvation; and on our side, on our faith not on our merit - on whether or not we avail ourselves of that salvation with the capacity for exercising trust that God has given us."

You can see, as you look at these arguments between the two positions, that it really makes a difference to how you understand God. God seems to fall into one of two categories - One whose relationship with us is primarily defined by His power, or One whose relationship with us is primarily defined by His love. Certainly there are elements of love in the determinist position and elements of power in the position I think is the Scriptural one, but they have a different weight. In one, you see Jesus tackling a would-be bank robber to save him from his own chosen fate and in another you see Jesus turning away from any form of compulsion and allowing people to freely choose to accept Him or to reject Him.

I want to take you to a word-picture from the prophet Jeremiah in our next part of this journey. The picture is found in Jeremiah 6:

*This is what Yahweh says:
Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths.
Ask where the good way is and walk in it
And you will find rest for your souls
But you said, "We will not walk in it."
I appointed watchmen over you and said,
"Listen to the sound of the trumpet!"
But you said, "We will not listen."
Therefore hear, O nations;
Observe, O witnesses, what will happen to them.
Hear, O earth: I am bringing disaster on this people
Because they have not listened to My words
And have rejected My law. (6:16-19)*

Look at God's stance in this prophetic poem. He gives wise counsel to His people: "Stand at the crossroads and look" - basically, "check out your options." And then ask for the ancient paths and where the good way is and then walk in that way. There is no coercion, no threats at that point, but the people's response is completely negative to the word of God: "We will not walk in it." And so Yahweh speaks to them in another way: "Listen to the sound of the trumpet" that the watchmen will sound out to warn you and again their response is negative. It's only when the people have rejected the word of their God that He announces disaster. It is because they have not listened to Him and instead have rejected His law that He punishes them. And even then, God doesn't seem to be doing this for some petty reason, for vengeance or because He's fed up with them, but notice that He calls the nations of the world to be witnesses to His actions. He calls on the earth to hear what His own people have refused to hear.

God's vision is not limited to the people of Israel, but includes the nations - they are called in to witness, and to learn, from Israel's failure to respond to God.

What's the difference between Jeremiah 6 and what Paul is trying to describe in Romans 9 through 11? Is there a different God, a different way of responding to God that's in view? What would you expect from God in response to a people who consistently ignore Him, choose to do their own thing their own way and refuse to take His prophets seriously? Now they have rejected His coming among them as Immanuel, God with us. They responded to that by insisting that He be killed. What would you expect from God besides judgment? Oh, yes, that one other thing that God always seems to provide - a door of mercy, a way for the people of God to return to Him at some point in the future - in Romans 11:

Did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery? Not at all! Rather, because of their transgressions, salvation has come to the Gentiles, to make Israel envious. But if their transgression means riches for the world, and their loss means riches for the Gentiles, how much greater riches will their fullness bring? (11,12)

There's a picture of God that runs through Israel's Scriptures and through the New Testament as well. According to this picture, God is continually reaching out to people who are often not interested at all in knowing Him, serving Him or worshiping Him. But still He persists in patiently waiting for them to turn.

Listen to this passage from Hosea 11:

When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called My son. But the more I called Israel, the further they went from Me. They sacrificed to the Baals and they burned incense to images. It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, taking them by the arms, but they did not realize it was I who healed them. I led them with cords of human kindness, with ties of love; I lifted the yoke from their neck and bent down to feed them. (1-4)

This is language that describes love and tenderness, that portrays a compassionate and gracious God who responds to people in kindness. You don't have to look hard for these kinds of descriptions of God in His response to Israel throughout their Scriptures. You find Him over-the-top forgiving and gracious to King Rehoboam who repents and humbles himself before God. You find a similar response from God towards wicked King Ahab when he humbles himself or Judah's worst king, Manasseh, when he does the same. And then there's God's response to Babylon's King Nebuchadnezzar when he is humbled by the mighty hand of Yahweh and who then declares of Yahweh, "His dominion is an eternal dominion; His kingdom endures from generation to generation."

(Daniel 4:34)

So, who are the elect? If we look at the picture in both Matthew 24 and Mark 13 where Jesus uses the word "elect" - 3 times in each chapter - it simply means those who are chosen. Here's one of the passages from Mark 13:

If the Lord had not cut short those days, no one would survive. But for the sake of the elect, whom He has chosen, He has shortened them. (v. 20)

The “elect” are those whom the Lord has chosen, the ones He has called to Himself and who have responded to the call - that’s the full biblical picture. It’s both the call and the response that bring a person into the elect. In other words, God chooses us and we choose Him. There’s never an issue, as we saw last week, that God’s will is irresistible, that we have no choice in the matter - we do have the freedom to resist God’s will, and to suffer the consequences. But, on the other hand, there’s no reason for us to fear that we haven’t been chosen, that we’re not part of the elect, because we have responded to His invitation and we have received His gifts and we are being made new as we press on to know Him better.

One of the sad aspects of the determinists’ position is that there is a lack of assurance that they are chosen by God. John Calvin, one of the primary architects of this understanding of Scripture says:

There is scarcely a mind in which the thought does not rise, ‘Whence your salvation but from the election of God? But what proof have you of your election?’ When once this thought has taken possession of any individual, it keeps him perpetually miserable, subjects him to dire torment, or throws him into a state of complete stupor ... Therefore, we dread shipwreck, we must avoid this rock, which is fatal to everyone who strikes upon it.”

The New England Puritans of the 17th century were taught that it was important to continually doubt their salvation - and I don’t think it was coincidental that nervous breakdowns and suicides occurred not infrequently.

And R.C. Sproul illustrates the insecurity of the determinist position with this personal reflection:

A while back I had one of those moments of acute self-awareness ... and suddenly the question hit me, “R.C., what if you are not one of the redeemed?” ... I was terrified ... I began to take stock of my life and I looked at my performance ... I could not be sure about my own heart and motivation ...”

He goes on from there to claim that he shared the same insecurity as Peter who once said to Jesus, “Where else can I go? Only You have the words of eternal life.” Lennox points out that Peter wasn’t insecure, but was stating boldly his confident faith in who Jesus is. He then describes how a system where election is entirely up to God, but knowledge of election is entirely up to me, is a surefire recipe for insecurity. And then he quotes New Testament scholar I. Howard Marshall:

Whoever said, ‘The Calvinist knows he cannot fall from salvation, but does not know whether he has got it,’ had it summed up nicely.

If we want any further clarity about who the elect are, we get it right in the middle of these chapters in Romans, where Paul writes this:

The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart, that is the word of faith we are proclaiming: That if you confess with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved. (10:8-10)

Some try to argue that faith is a work and that none of us can “work” our way to heaven, but in this very letter, Paul makes it clear that faith is the opposite of a work of the law. He contrasts faith and works so often that you can’t miss it - faith is trusting in someone else, while works is trusting in what you can do yourself.

I want to end this little “mini-series” by summarizing why I’ve gone this route and what I would like us to take home from this study.

I think there are ideas in certain Christian circles that cause confusion about the very main things that we believe. One of those main things is that we believe in a God who is good, who acts out of love, who acts in justice and goodness and truth and grace. In making that claim, we have lots of biblical evidence that supports us, but we also have lots of questions that people ask, some of which are legitimate. Why did this good God order the mass slaughter of the Canaanites when Israel went in to conquer and occupy the Promised Land? I tried to give a detailed answer to that question on May 12 and followed up with sermons on the goodness of God in relation to the biblical understanding of hell, with a hard look at Luke 16, and in relation to the final judgment.

Over the past three weeks we have looked at questions that are raised by a particular kind of theology that is becoming popular again that doesn’t present God as allowing human freedom in response to Him, but who determines everything, good and bad, in a world He controls. I’ve tried to explain that this doctrine tries to mask a God who isn’t loving to all - just to a few - and whose justice is arbitrary and hidden. I don’t think these ideas truly reflect the God of the Bible, revealed in the person of Jesus, speaking through His prophets and acting on behalf of His Israel. We looked at foreknowledge, predestination, election and hardening - none of which require us to believe that God is arbitrary and secretive in His dealings with humans. If you’re interested in any of those topics or if you missed some things that you’d like to catch up on, these talks are all available on our website, both as pdf files and as audio recordings.

The Scripture portrays God as being very open - openly looking for faith and for faithfulness in our response to Him. The Scripture portrays God as compassionate and gracious, not cruel and vindictive. Again and again we have to ask the question of any doctrine: does it fit with the big picture understanding of God’s character that the rest of the Bible presents to us.

I believe that the deterministic view of God, the Master Controller, the Great Puppeteer in the Sky, is the wrong view. It seems right in a few texts, but on closer examination they don’t really support that view and the broader picture is much more loving, compassionate and just.

What I’d like us to take home from these talks is:

1. a conviction that God is good, always good

2. a certainty that God is open with people, that He puts His cards on the table, so to speak, and lets us know what He wants, who He is, etc.
3. I want everyone to know that God wants to save, that His goal is salvation for us, that He's not trying to make it mysterious or complicated.
4. And 4, again, that God is good, always good.