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Sermon Summary #21

Knowing God: The Eternal Life of the Elect

John 17:1-5

Last week I indicated to you that there are four glorious truths found in the opening five verses of John 17. We looked at the first two of them last Sunday. The first is found in v. 1 where Jesus affirmed the absolute sovereignty of God the Father over his life and the time of his death. This we see in his words, “Father, the hour has come.” The second truth is stated both in v. 1 and again in vv. 4-5. There we were given a glimpse into the love of God for his people. I won’t repeat myself again today, but let me simply sum up the second of these two glorious truths by saying this.

The greatest possible expression of love is when the lover, at great cost and sacrifice to himself, gives or imparts to the beloved the most enthralling and beautiful and eternally satisfying experience possible. There is nothing more enthralling, beautiful, or eternally satisfying than the glory of God himself. So when Jesus prays that the Father glorify him so that he in turn can glorify the Father, he is demonstrating his love for us. He is asking the Father to give us that one experience that alone can satisfy our souls forever, far beyond any other gift or sight or experience. ***Seeing and savoring and being satisfied with the glory and majesty of God is the most loving thing God could ever do for us.***

Now we are ready to look at the third and fourth glorious truths in this paragraph. Although I must say from the outset, that I fully expect some of you to find the third of these four truths unacceptable and more than a little difficult to believe.

Let’s be honest: there are a number of things taught in the Bible that we struggle to believe and understand. Why did God destroy the entire human race, except for Noah and his family, with a great flood? Why did God order Israel to exterminate the Canaanites from the face of the earth? Why is the reality of hell and eternal punishment taught in Scripture? Why does the Apostle Paul say that “neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Cor. 6:9-10)?

These are difficult doctrines, and only the naïve or ignorant would deny it. But there is one doctrine found throughout the Bible that more so than all the others combined causes people to object. It is undoubtedly the most controversial and emotionally explosive subject in the history of the Christian church. I’m talking about the notion of ***divine election or predestination.***

So let us now turn our attention to the third and fourth truths that come to us in John 17:1-5.

God's Gift to the Son of the Elect

We must reckon with the words of Jesus in John 17:2 that he has authority over all flesh, that is, over all of the human race in every age, ***“to give eternal life to all whom you [the Father] have given him.”***

What we read in John 17:2 is neither the first nor the last time this language is found in John's gospel and on the lips of Jesus. Look at John 17:6 –

“I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world. Yours they were, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word.”

Look at John 17:9 –

“I am praying for them. I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours.”

Once more in John 17:24 we read this,

“Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.”

And it isn't just in John 17 that Jesus speaks this way. In John 6 Jesus said this:

“All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out” (John 6:37).

“And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day” (John 6:39).

Again, a bit later in John 10 Jesus says much the same thing:

“I give them [my sheep] eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand” (John 10:28-29).

Thus, no fewer than 8 times in the gospel of John alone do we find this notion of the Father “giving” men and women to the Son. This act of the Father in “giving” men and women to Jesus is the same as what we read in Ephesians 1:4-6 where Paul says that God

“**chose** us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he **predestined** us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved” (Eph. 1:4-6).

Perhaps one more passage from Paul will be enough for us today. This is what we read in 2 Thessalonians 2:13-14,

“But we ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers beloved by the Lord, because God **chose** you as the first fruits to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth. To this he called you through our gospel, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. (2 Thessalonians 2:13-14).

So what are we to make of these biblical texts, together with dozens of others that say much the same thing? Should we ignore them? Deny them? Pretend they don’t exist? Or should we honestly and forthrightly, with great humility, try to understand them? Surely the latter is the only proper approach.

Perhaps I can defuse your concerns about divine election or predestination by articulating several principles that are an essential part of this biblical truth.

(1) First, let’s begin with a definition. Election is a **pre-temporal** decision by God, a choice he made before any of us ever existed. God chose us in Christ “**before the foundation of the world**” (Eph. 1:4). God “saved us,” said Paul, “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**” (2 Tim. 1:9).

(2) One reason people tend to react negatively to the idea of divine election is that they have an unbiblical view of the condition of sinful humanity. **All human beings deserve hell and eternal condemnation.** We are by nature and by choice rebellious, morally corrupt, spiritually blind, God-defying, Christ-rejecting sinners (Eph. 2:1-3). As such, God doesn’t owe us anything, other than judgment.

For whatever reason, many people tend to think of the human race as a collection of *innocent victims of divine wrath*, when in point of fact **we are all wicked perpetrators of cosmic treason against God and the Lord Jesus Christ.** The world is not comprised of good people who desperately desire to be saved, but of evil people who are enemies of God and willingly and freely despise him.

In Romans 3 the Apostle Paul brings to a conclusion his argument that all humanity, including both Jews and Gentiles, are “under sin” (Rom. 3:9). He then quotes from the OT to prove his point:

As it is written: “None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one. Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive. The venom of asps is under their lips. Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood; in their paths are ruin and misery, and the way of peace they have not known. There is no fear of God before their eyes” (Romans 3:10-18).

Thus when God chose to elect unto eternal life certain individuals from among this mass of fallen humanity, no one was treated unjustly or unfairly. No one deserved to be chosen. No one was deprived of his or her rights. All

deserved damnation, but God in glorious mercy chose to redeem from this mass of fallen humanity a people for his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. This paragraph in Romans 3:10-18 (together with numerous other texts) describes the “all flesh” over which Jesus has been given “authority” (John 17:2). It is out from this collection of fallen, hell-deserving sinners that God the Father has “given” to Jesus Christ those whom he chooses to save. It is to these that Jesus gives what not one of them deserves: “eternal life” (John 17:2).

(3) No one deserves heaven. Everyone deserves hell. No one goes to hell except those who deserve to. No one goes to heaven because they deserve to. Many embrace the utterly misguided and unbiblical notion that no one deserves *either* heaven or hell. We are, in some sense, morally and spiritually neutral. If such were the case, it would certainly be unjust and unfair for God to choose some to inherit eternal life while passing over others. But such is most decidedly *not* the case. We were *all* conceived in sin and “brought forth in iniquity” (Ps. 51:5) and “were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind” (Eph. 2:3).

(4) No one who desires to go to heaven will be denied entrance. Anyone who wants to come to Christ may come. No one who repents and trusts in Jesus Christ will ever be denied entrance into the kingdom of God. Election does not mean that people who want to be saved cannot be saved because they are not elect. If any individual wants to be saved it is precisely *because* they are elect.

Divine election does not mean that people who want to have their sins forgiven and enter into the kingdom of God when they die will instead go to hell. ***Divine election does not mean that people who want to be saved will ultimately be lost.***

God does not respond to people who repent and desire to trust Christ by saying: “Sorry. The quota of the elect is already full.” Jesus makes it clear that “whoever comes” to him shall be saved and “whoever comes” to him he “will never cast out” (John 6:35). Thus “everyone who looks upon the Son and believes in him” will have eternal life (John 6:40).

(5) Divine election is not based on God’s foreknowledge of your faith. Faith isn’t the ground or the cause of election, but its fruit. Faith isn’t the reason why God chose you. It isn’t the cause of election, but its effect. ***We don’t get chosen by God because he foresees that we choose him. Rather we choose him because in eternity past he graciously chose us.***

Thus, God’s choice of some hell-deserving sinners was not dependent on any will other than his own. Election “depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy” (Rom. 9:16). Thus, election is the fruit or effect of one will, God’s will.

(6) Election does not undermine or eliminate the urgency and absolute necessity of faith and repentance. Election is what makes them possible! ***Were it not for the Holy Spirit working secretly and silently in the human heart, causing us to be born again and overcoming our resistance to the gospel, no one would ever believe in Jesus.*** Faith and repentance are absolutely necessary if one is to experience the forgiveness of sins and inherit eternal life. They are produced in the heart of an elect individual by the secret, sovereign, and mysterious work of the Holy Spirit by which he enables the previously hostile heart to see and relish and take supreme delight in the beauty of Jesus.

(7) Divine election does not undermine or negate the importance of evangelism and prayer. Election is what assures us that our evangelism will be successful (Acts 18:1-11). Divine election does not mean that we don’t need to pray. God does not ordain a certain end (in this case, saving faith in the elect) apart from ordaining the necessary means (prayer and evangelism) by which that end is attained.

Your concern is obviously for your friends and family members who don't as yet believe in Jesus. And your question is: Are they among God's elect? Are they among those whom the Father has given to the Son? Are they among those to whom the Son gives eternal life? The answer is both simple and mysterious. First, if they want to believe in Jesus, or if they ever do come to faith in Jesus, they are among the elect. If they do not come to faith in Jesus, their refusal to do so is entirely their own fault. It is their choice not to believe. God does not prevent anyone from coming to faith in Christ. He does not coerce or force someone to remain in unbelief. If they choose to believe, they will be saved. If they choose not to embrace the gospel of Jesus Christ, they are getting precisely what they want.

Two final comments and then we'll move on.

First, many of you are probably asking the wrong question. You are wondering: "Is my unbelieving friend (or family member) among the elect?" God does not permit us to ask that question and he refuses to give an answer. The only relevant question for your unbelieving friend or family member is this: "Do you *want* to be saved and forgiven of your sins? If so, trust and treasure Jesus Christ as your only hope." If you do not think you need to be saved and you find nothing appealing in Jesus Christ, you have only yourself to blame. But if you are convicted by your sin and sense a deep desire to know Jesus and to be reconciled to God, then repent and believe the gospel, and you will be saved!

Second, here is the bottom line. You had better hope that divine election is true. For if it is not, there is no possibility that *anyone* will be saved, neither you, me, nor your friends and family members. Unless God chooses and sovereignly enables a person to come to faith, no one will ever believe in Jesus. The only hope we have for the salvation of anyone is God's sovereign, gracious, merciful election unto eternal life.

The Gift of Eternal Life: Knowing God

As I've said several times, there are four wonderful truths in this opening paragraph of John 17. The fourth and final one is found in v. 3 where Jesus declares that *this "eternal life" that he gives to those whom the Father has given to him consists in knowing the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom he has sent.*

Sometimes I get the feeling that such texts as this were written distinctively and intentionally for our day and time. Of course, they are written for all God's people in every age, but it is hard to think of a more immediately relevant statement to what we are facing today than what we find in v. 3. In a day when many are insisting that Allah, the alleged 'god' of Islam, is one and the same with the God and Father of Jesus Christ, this text is a ringing denunciation of that claim.

Notice first that Jesus says the Father is *"the only true God."* And this "Father" is explicitly said on countless occasions to be the Father of God the Son, Jesus Christ, something that Islam categorically denies and denounces as heresy. Furthermore, Jesus says that eternal life consists not only in the knowledge of God the Father but also in the knowledge of God the Son, Jesus Christ, whom the Father has sent, something else that Islam categorically denies. In this paragraph Jesus has claimed eternal pre-existence with the Father. Throughout John's gospel he has claimed to be the only-begotten Son of God, something that Islam declares to be false and heretical.

But enough of that. Of far greater importance is our Lord's explicit definition of that "eternal life" which we have received from him through faith. *To have and experience "eternal life" is to to "know" God and Jesus Christ.* So what does this mean?

First, it involves far more than simply an acknowledgement of the existence of a Supreme Being. There is an eternity of difference between believing God exists and “knowing” the God whom you believe exists. In fact, all mankind knows that God exists. Romans 1:18-23 makes that crystal clear:

“For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. (Romans 1:18-23).

But we clearly see from this text that “although they knew God” in the sense that they are unavoidably aware of his existence and the truth about certain of his attributes, they are not saved. They know *that* God is but they don’t “know” the God who is.

Second, the knowledge of God that is eternal life is not solely the gathering or memorization of information about God. There are a lot of people about whom I know a lot of things. But that doesn’t mean I “know” them as individuals or have anything resembling a relationship of intimacy. That doesn’t mean we can truly “know” God in the way Jesus describes without a basic understanding of his character and attributes and personality. Ignorance of God’s nature is no virtue. Thus there is the important element of exploring who God is and why he does what he does.

Third, to know God is to love God. To know God is to treasure him and to honor him and to regard an offense against him as the worst imaginable thing that one can possibly do.

Fourth, to know God is to trust him, to believe him, to bank everything on who he is and the promises he has made to us in Christ.

Fifth, to know God is to prize and prioritize his glory and praise above everything else in life.

Sixth, to know God is to rejoice in who he is and what he does. The true, saving knowledge of God that Jesus speaks of here is to enjoy him, to find a deep durable delight in him above and beyond all earthly treasures. To know him is to be satisfied with all that he is for you in Jesus.

Seventh, truly to “know” God is to be willing to submit to his authority over our lives, to yield to his will and ways, even when they don’t always make good sense to us. In other words, to “know” God is to obey God, joyfully and spontaneously.

Finally, I find it more than a little interesting and instructive that when Jesus finally gets around to defining what “eternal life” really is, he doesn’t describe it in terms of those experiences that we typically associate with being “saved”. That is to say, he doesn’t say that this is eternal life, that you are . . .

justified by faith alone in Christ alone . . .

redeemed from slavery to sin and corruption . . .

reconciled to God, from whom you were previously alienated . . .

adopted into God's family and are now a child of the Most High . . .

forgiven of all your sins and have the guilt of your transgressions wiped clean . . .

regenerated by the Holy Spirit and thus born again to a living hope . . .

being sanctified by the Spirit as he gradually and incrementally transforms you more and more into the image of Jesus himself . . .

assured that one day you will be glorified and receive a new, resurrected body . . .

assured that when the kingdom of God is consummated you will walk on the streets of gold . .

promised that you will eventually be reunited with friends and family who also know God . . .

Make no mistake. ***Each of these is true*** for those who trust and treasure Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Each of these is a glorious reality, a wonderful promise, an experience that ought to awaken in us adoration and praise of the Lord for his saving grace.

But what makes each of these experiences wonderful and heart-warming is that ***they make it possible for us to know God!*** Knowing God is the consummation of our salvation. Seeing God in his glory, beholding his beauty, understanding his infinite and incomparable power, tasting the sweetness of his person, his kindness, his love, his mercy, this is what it means to know God. This is eternal life.

If you could have each and every one of these experiences, but not have God, not know God, would you be happy? I hope not. I thank God daily that he has declared me to be righteous in his sight through faith in Jesus. I thank God daily that he has forgiven all of my sins and removed them from me as far as the east is from the west. I thank God daily that he has adopted me as his beloved child. But what I thank him for more than all is that ***by means of these glorious spiritual truths it has become possible for me to know God, to get God, to experience the person of God, to see him and enjoy him forever.***

This is precisely what Jesus prays for in John 17:24,

“Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world” (John 17:24).

There it is: *to be “with” Jesus and to “see” Jesus in all his glory*. If that is not the foundational core of what you desire and the all-consuming hope of your heart, then you need to repent and run to Christ Jesus and cry out to him that he might open the eyes of your heart to see and to know him whom to know is life eternal. Indeed, I can do no better than to close with the words of the prophet Jeremiah:

Thus says the LORD: “Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the LORD.” (Jeremiah 9:23-24).