**St. Paul’s Lutheran Church
Wildwood, Missouri**

**Second Sunday after Christmas**

**Ephesians 1: 3-6, 15-18**

**January 3, 2021**

Today, I have chosen to tackle the Epistle lesson from St. Paul’s letter to the Ephesians. Now, my use of the word *“tackle”* might seem a bit strong to you. I mean, I preach on various texts from the Bible all the time and never speak about “*tackling”* them. Well, that is true, but this passage from Ephesians is an exception. Why? Because it deals with what we call the *“doctrine of election”* or as most people know it, *“predestination.”*

Now, I know that they may not seem like much of a challenge, but, take my word for it, it is a lot harder than you think. And, if you ever enter a room filled with Lutheran pastors and start a conversation concerning predestination, you will find more than your fair share of them will slowly back away from the group and eventually disappear from the conversation. That said, today, I am going to take up that challenge and talk about predestination today because that is what our reading from St. Paul to the Ephesians deals with.

So, let’s begin. Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians, clearly and plainly speaks that we are predestined to salvation in Christ. *“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, even as he 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 . . .”*

That is pretty clear and Paul’s words are not difficult to understand. He tells us plainly that God chose us. In fact, he chose us in Christ Jesus before the creation of the world. Before we were even born, God decided to save us by his grace. He predestined us to salvation, according to his pleasure and will. Our salvation was decided upon by God, not by us. Paul, elsewhere, states it even more clearly and succinctly. In Romans 8, beginning with verse 29, he says, *“For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.”*

God in his great mercy, all on account of Jesus Christ’s death and resurrection, decided to save you. One thing that Paul makes abundantly clear in this text is that God is the one doing everything. We, on the other hand, do nothing to save ourselves. God determined beforehand, meaning, before you were born, that you would be called by the gospel. He determined beforehand that you would be justified, meaning declared not guilty, by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And, he determined that those he justified in Christ he would also glorify. God decided it. He determined it. You had nothing to do with it. In fact, we were helpless to save ourselves. We were powerless, and so much so, that we did not even have the wherewithal to ask. So, God in his mercy did it. He saved us on account of Jesus’ death and resurrection.

Now, that all sounds pretty good, doesn’t it? What I mean is that the message that God has chosen to save me by his grace is a good news message, right? So, if this is such a good news message, why is this topic such a challenge for pastors? One would think that telling this message would be fun. One would think that we would want to shout it to the world, *“God is gracious. He is merciful. He saved you.”* Well, here’s the problem. The doctrine of predestination, that God chose to save us, when presented all alone and by itself, just as I presented it, can lead to all sorts of problems and wrong conclusions.

You see, everything I said about predestination just a minute ago is absolutely true. It would have to be because all I did was echo exactly what Paul said and, since Scripture is without error, it has to be true. Right? Right. So, here is the problem: if it is true that God predestined those who are saved, if God chose them by grace, if he predetermined before the creation of the world those who would believe, what does that mean about those who don’t believe? If you are saved because God chose you to be saved, doesn’t that mean, logically, that if you are not saved, God didn’t choose you? Simple human logic would seem to dictate just that, wouldn't it? God saves those he wants and does not save those he doesn’t. He predestines some to heaven and, by default, predestines some to hell. That is the position that John Calvin took. Calvin looked at predestination and came up with the concept of *“double election,”* meaning, God elects some to eternal glory and elects others to eternal damnation. This is what traditional Presbyterians believe.

Now, from a human logic standpoint, it is hard to argue with that conclusion, isn't it? Sure it is, however, do you see the problem: predestination runs smack dab into the middle of what we call, *“universal grace,”* that is, that Jesus Christ’s death and resurrection was for all men. Universal grace, like predestination, is also clearly taught in Scripture. 1 Timothy 2:4 states that, *“God will have all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.”* No man is lost, according to Scripture, because God has predestined them to eternal damnation. He wants all men to be saved and, on account of Jesus Christ’s death and resurrection, extends his offer of grace to all people. Scripture clearly teaches that all men have the opportunity for salvation and that Christ death was for everyone. 1 John 2: 2, speaking of Jesus, tells us, “*he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins and not only for ours but also for the sins for the whole world.”* Jesus paid the price not only for the sins of those who would believe, he also paid the price for the sins of unbelievers. Unbelievers have simply rejected the gift, but the gift is still there, ready to be received.

So, we are left with a quandary. How can the doctrine of predestination be true and yet, at the same time, the doctrine that God wills the salvation of all men be true also? Either predestination is wrong, universal grace is wrong, or Scripture is wrong. None of these is an acceptable position. Are you beginning to see why pastors would rather talk about anything else besides predestination?

So where does that leave us? Well, let me offer up another answer: our human logic is wrong. I don't want to be insulting to anyone here today, but we are not as wise or as smart as we tend to think we are. Whenever we apply our human logic to the way God does things, we are forgetting something: sin has distorted our thinking. Our sinful nature has placed us out of sync with God's, and so God's ways, which are infinitely wiser than ours, seem to us to be so much foolishness. In fact, as St. Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 1, “*Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?”* His questions are rhetorical with the answer being obvious: God has made foolish the wisdom of the world.

What we see by this is that the more we apply human logic to this teaching, the further we sink into the quagmire. The more we try to make sense of it, the deeper we sink into the pit. So, how then shall we make sense of these two teachings, both of which Scripture clearly teaches as truth, but which clearly seem to be in conflict with each other? How shall we harmonize the teaching that we are predestined by God to salvation and that of universal grace being offered to all men? Simply put . . . we don’t!

This is where I love being Lutheran and not a Calvinist. Luther was marvelous at letting paradoxes, that is, two seemingly contradictory doctrines, both of which are true, stand on their own. We don’t try to harmonize it because holy Scripture does not try to harmonize it. Holy Scripture makes no attempt to remove this difficulty from the human mind. It constantly teaches both, side by side, as truth. So, when someone asks me, *“Is predestination true or universal grace true?”* I answer with a resounding, *“Yes!”*

You see, the apparent discrepancy is something which actually exists only within the human mind. Human logic can’t make sense of it, and no matter how hard you try, you will never make sense of it. But, let me let you in on a little secret which is not really such a secret: God is not limited to our logic. Because something doesn’t make sense to me does not mean that it does not make sense to God. As smart as we think we are, the truth is that the thoughts of God are light years beyond our capabilities. That is why Paul exclaims in Romans 11, *“Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments, and his ways past finding out! For who hath known the mind of the Lord? Or who hath been His counselor?”*  That the Lord has come up with a something that does not fit into our logic is not in the least bit surprising. In fact, I would say that it is pretty typical of God. What logic is there in punishing Jesus for my sins? What logic is there in Jesus’ death bringing me life? There is none, from a human perspective. Thanks be to God that when it comes to the cross, God doesn't follow human logic!

So, where does that leave us? Well, probably at about this point you are thinking to yourselves, *“OK, pastor, you said you were going to tackle this subject but it all seems for nought?” Did we just spend the last 15 minutes or so only to find in the end that the Scripture does not gives us an answer?”* Well, to a certain extent . . . yes. Scripture does not give us a firm answer. However, that is not to say that we simply toss the whole subject as if it has no value to our faith. For it has tremendous value and comfort, and that is Paul’s point in offering it. You see, God reveals the doctrine of predestination to us not so that we can get all tangled up in what does and does not make sense to us. No. He offers the doctrine of predestination so that we can get a glimpse at his infinite grace; a grace which he has lavished upon each and every one of us personally and individually; a grace which he gives to us which is dependent upon him and not ourselves. Grace is God’s doing, not ours. Grace is given, not taken. Grace is gifted, not earned, and that is Paul’s point, and that is what we should take from the doctrine of predestination.

You see, it is very easy for us, it’s very easy for you, actually, it is very easy for me to look toward myself for some sort of proof of my salvation. It is very easy for me to try and make some sort of assessment of my life to prove that I am a Christian and that I am saved. We all like to point to the things that we have done. *“I made the choice. I decided to follow Jesus. I gave my life to Lord.”* The doctrine of predestination says*, “No you didn’t. God chose you, and by the way, don’t take any of his glory. Don’t give yourself credit for something the Lord has done for you in his mercy.”*  You see, the doctrine of predestination flies right in the face of any attempt to claim that we have done anything in order to be saved. He has done it all and so all glory and honor and praise belong to him.

And it is our having nothing to do with earning our salvation that makes what Paul writes to us today such a comforting doctrine, because we learn that we are saved by the perfect work of God and not the imperfect work of man. Our comfort comes in knowing that before we were even born, God set his heart on having us as his children.

God has wanted to save you for centuries. Actually, he has wanted to save you for millennia. And he worked all things out to do just that, even giving up his Son Jesus to die for our sins. This he did not because we deserved it, because we didn’t. No, this he did simply out of love. For, God’s plan from the beginning was to save you by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus paid the price and in him we find God’s grace.

Does it bother me that I cannot harmonize the doctrine of predestination with God’s universal grace? No, not in the least. I assure you that I lose no sleep over this. Instead, I bask in them, looking to our gracious Lord, and him alone, for my salvation, trusting that someday, when he is good and ready, he will explain it all to me. Until then, I’ll read Ephesians 1 and thank him for the certainty of my salvation in Christ Jesus because it is 100 percent in his hands. That is what he wants you to know today. To God be the glory. In Jesus’ name. Amen.