

The Canons of Dort: Limited Atonement

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

October 30, 2022 -- AM Sermon

Reverend Peter Jonker

Romans 9:6-24

Last week we heard about the first of the five heads of doctrine from the Canons of Dort, the doctrine of unconditional election. This doctrine says that we were chosen before the beginning of time to be God's children. Before creation we were elect to salvation. That election had nothing to do with our goodness. We were no more deserving than anyone else. It was all God's grace. His sovereign good pleasure. Last week we celebrated the positive side of this doctrine. God's love for us is so deep, it goes back before the beginning of time. He has an eternal hold on me!

But in addition to celebrating the positive side of the doctrine last week, I also mentioned some of the problems and questions that come up around this doctrine. I may be chosen before the beginning of time. But what about the people who weren't chosen? What about those whom God passed over from eternity, those he didn't elect? If salvation was decided before the beginning of time, does that mean there are people born in this world who never have a chance of being saved? Does that mean there are people who have no real chance of salvation even though they're no less deserving than me? Are there people who are born to eternal condemnation?

The authors of the Canons of Dort knew this question was out there and here's some of how they addressed it. Turn with me to page 122 and let's read a little bit of Article 15 called Reprobation. "Moreover, Holy Scripture most especially highlights this eternal and undeserved grace of our election and brings it out more clearly for us, in that it further bears witness that not all people have been chosen but that some have not been chosen or have been passed by in God's eternal election—those, that is, concerning whom God, on the basis of his entirely free, most just, irreproachable, and unchangeable good pleasure, made the following decree: to leave them in the common misery into which, by their own fault, they have plunged themselves; not to grant them saving faith and the grace of conversion; but finally to condemn and eternally punish those who have been left in their own ways and under God's just judgment, not only for their unbelief but also for all their other sins, in order to display his justice." First head of doctrine. Article 15

The language is technical and theological, but I think you can hear the Canon's answer to that question. Before the foundation of the world, in his grace, God chose some who would be saved, but he didn't choose everyone. Some people are left in their own ways. They are left in their own sins and receive the appropriate punishment for those sins. The scope of the atonement is limited.

That's the title usually associated with the second section of the Canons. Limited atonement. That doctrine states that though Christ's sacrifice on the cross is of "infinite value and worth," even though Christ's sacrifice is overflowing with enough Grace to save, the effects of the atonement are limited to those God chose in Christ before the beginning of time.

The Canons say, this is all taught in the Bible. "Holy Scripture ... further bears witness that not all people have been chosen, but that some ... have been passed over." And though it's not directly mentioned in the article we read, the Bible passage most often cited as support for this doctrine is the one we just read from Romans 9. In Romans 9 Paul is working out the problem of the limits of election and he's working it out with a very specific group of people. People who are very dear to him: His own brothers and sisters, his fellow Jews. 'Why,' asks Paul, 'are the vast majority of my fellow Jews rejecting Jesus?' "They've been waiting for the Messiah their whole life, and now he's here, and they reject him!" "Why don't they seem to be among the chosen?" The problem is especially acute because Paul has just finished writing Romans 8, and the whole argument of Romans 8 is that nothing can stop God from accomplishing his purposes! Nothing can ever tear us from his hand!

In our passage Paul is trying to explain what's going on, and he's trying to explain it to himself as much as he is to the Roman church. Paul says, "Look, God has always chosen some to bear the promise and passed over others. God chose Isaac, not Ishmael. God chose Jacob, not Esau. Sometimes God chooses to harden people's hearts in order to accomplish his purposes and show his glory. Like with Pharaoh. In the plagues, God hardens Pharaoh's heart as a way to show his power and glory over the gods of Egypt. And if God chooses one

person and not another, if God chooses to harden someone's heart in order to show his Glory, that's his prerogative. He's God! He's the potter, we are the clay. The potter can do whatever he wants with his clay."

Then in verse 22 he offers this possibility. "What if in choosing to show his wrath and to make his power known, God bore with great patience the objects of wrath prepared for destruction? What if he did that to make his glory known to the objects of his mercy?"— to make his glory known to us followers of Jesus. In other words: 'What if God planned for the Jewish people to rebel against Jesus and that was his strategy for bringing the Gentiles in and pushing the gospel out into the world?' 'Maybe,' suggests Paul, 'like he did with Pharaoh, God is deliberately hardening Jewish hearts so he can accomplish a greater purpose. And if God chooses to work that way, that's his prerogative.' So...The canons point to Paul's words about how God chooses some people and not others, and says, "See! That's where "Holy Scripture ... further bears witness that not all people have been chosen, but that some ... have been passed over."

Which brings us back to that hard question I asked at the beginning of the sermon. Does that mean that people are born into this world who have no hope of salvation? Do the canons of Dort and the Bible teach that there are people who are born to be damned? Because that seems awful. After last week's sermon I had multiple members of this congregation contact me to express how uncomfortable this idea made them feel. Let me say a couple of things here, one about the canons of Dort, the other about Romans 9.

First, the Canons don't say people are born to eternal condemnation. They say that God chooses people before the beginning of time, and they say that not everyone will be saved. They don't explicitly take the additional step of saying: therefore, there are people born to be damned.

Second, Paul, when he talks about how God might be hardening the hearts of the Jews as part of his plan to bring in the Gentiles, he is not certain about his idea. He doesn't claim to know exactly what God is doing, he doesn't claim to know who God is going to condemn and who God is going to save and why. He's just offering possibilities. He says "what if? "What if God is doing this? What if God has this purpose? He says 'what if' twice – once in verse 22 and once in verse 23. Paul isn't saying, "This is what God is doing! Thus saith the Lord!" Paul is saying, "What if? Perhaps this. Possibly that." When it comes to discerning the eternal purposes of God, when it comes to knowing who exactly is saved and why, Paul knows the limits of his understanding. Paul knows what he doesn't know. Paul knows when to say 'What if.' It's not that Paul is wishy-washy. Paul is perfectly willing to say 'thus saith the Lord' in all sorts of places. But Paul knows when he's reaching the limits of his knowledge. Paul knows when he's starting to tread on the holy ground of mystery and so he takes off his certainty and puts on a little 'what if?'

This 'What if' is so important when dealing with the matters covered in these doctrines. I will talk more about this next Sunday night in my longer sermon more specifically on Romans 9, but let me say that, in general, when we do theology and talk about doctrine, it's so important to know where our understanding ends and where holy mysteries start. It's so important to know when to say, "What if." Because when we try to plant certainties in fields of holy mystery, bad things happen.

What do I mean by that? Here are five things that are true about God and his people. These things are all Biblical teachings that we can all assert with confidence. These are 'thus saith the Lord' truths. (see your bulletin)

1: Jesus' death on the cross is strong enough to save the whole world! That's the teaching of the Bible and that's the teaching of the canons too. It is of "infinite value and worth."

2: God is full of mercy and he loves the whole world. That too is Biblical. For God so loved the world – the cosmos - that he gave his only son. John 3:16 God is love. Love is the most excellent of all his gifts. Psalm 136 his steadfast love endures forever. 1 John 4: God is love.

3: Not everyone is saved. The Bible teaches, Jesus teaches, that there is a hell and there are people in it. That's not a nice thing to think about, but it's a biblical thing. Matthew 25.

4: Salvation is all God's work. "You are saved by grace through faith and this is not from yourselves, it is a gift of God." Ephesians 2.

5: God is perfectly just, and so anyone who is condemned will be condemned for sins they committed. Ezekiel 17 – the soul who sins is the one who dies. God will never unjustly punish someone. He is the perfectly just judge. Those are five Biblical truths that we can hold with confidence.

But here's the thing: these things are all true, but when it comes to mechanics of salvation, if you are try to make them fit together logically in your head, if you try to fit them together in a way that fits into a tidy

system, you won't be able to do it. You will hit the wall of your human understanding. You will enter into 'what if' territory. You will be standing on holy ground.

That's where we end up when we ask the troubling question at the beginning of this sermon. If God loves everyone, and salvation is all his thing, and it was all grace and it was accomplished before creation, how can that be fair to those passed over?! How can God be just? How can that be fair!? If its from the beginning of time, and it's all grace, how is that fair to those who are passed over?! We cannot answer that question. Our human minds cannot make those things fit together. All we can do is accept the limits of our understanding and trust our Lord to work things out. We realize that we are in the realm of Holy Mystery, we open our hands and we say, "Lord I don't understand but I trust you."

This is such an important spiritual move. There are so many places in our life where we have to know when it is time to say, "Lord I don't understand, but I love you and I trust you." If you are a parent, this will happen as you raise your child. You will find yourself in situations where you will not be able to figure out how to love this child. You will hit the limit of your human understanding and you will say: "Lord, I don't understand, but I trust you." This will happen in situations of loss. You will lose someone in your life right at the wrong time and it won't make any sense. It seems to bring nothing but pain. You need be able to say, "Lord I don't understand, but I love you, and I trust you." And that's hard to do. Because we human beings like to understand. We like answers. Answers make us feel secure. Answers make us feel like we are in control. Answers feed our pride. It feels good to stand up and say, I know the answer! Let me explain! Saying, "I don't know. I don't understand." That makes us feel weak. That makes us feel vulnerable.

So we don't like to admit that we don't know, but it's spiritually important. It's analogous to failure. You hear a lot of talk about the importance of failure these days. These days a lot of well-meaning parents try to protect their kids from experiencing failure. And that's not good. Failure is a part of life. Part of maturity is learning to fail and not letting it destroy you. Our children need to fail, to learn that they will survive failure, and they can even learn from that failure. In the same way, children need to learn to say "I don't know." We all need to learn the places where we reach the limit of our understanding. This runs against our whole educational project. We teach kids answers and solutions. We give them tests in which we reward them for having answers. And heaven knows when it comes to faith we want them to know the truths of our faith. We want them to know and believe the truths like those five in our bulletin. But it's also important for them to know what to do when they run into the limit of their understanding, when they hit the wall of incomprehension, because that will happen. It will happen to them every single day. And, as Christians, that's the place where we say, "Lord I don't know I don't understand. But I trust you."

When we fail to open our hands at the edge of mystery, when we try to plant certainties in the field of mystery, we do serious mischief. Let's go back to those five statements in the bulletin again. I said that it's impossible for our human minds to make those five truths fit together and that we should just trust that God has it all figured out even when we don't. But because we are human, because we like answers people have tried to make the mystery go away. And they do it by giving up on one of the five truths. For example, some people give up on number 2. They say that God doesn't love everyone; he just loves the elect. God does create human beings he doesn't love and has no intention of saving. That gives you an answer. You have a system that makes sense. But it does serious damage to the love of God as portrayed in the Bible.

Other people give up on that third statement. They say, God saves everyone. That takes care of the problem of injustice. If God chose to save everyone before the beginning of time, it's equitable. Problem solved. We have a system. We have an answer. The only problem is that it goes against the Bible. You're doing damage to our allegiance to the Bible.

Still other folk, hungry for an explanation, give up on statement 4. That's the Arminian solution, the solution that the Canons of Dort specifically speaks against. They say salvation isn't all God. It's just mostly God's thing. God offers us grace through the cross, but we still have to choose it. Everyone has a chance to take it. The people who take it are in. The others are out. That's fair. Problem solved. We have a system. We have an answer. Only problem: you go against the teaching of the Bible that Salvation is God's work from start to finish. We love answers, and we hate to say, 'I don't know,' and so we try to plant certainties in the soil of holy mystery ... and bad things happen. When it comes to our faith we are not wizards, we are not masters and commanders, we are children. We receive the kingdom of heaven like children. It's a basic Spiritual posture.

And where does that leave us with this question of those people in our lives who don't seem to be following Jesus. Because we all love people who don't believe, who seem to be on the wrong side of election. What do we say about God's purposes with them? In asking that question we are treading on the edge of the field of Holy Mystery. But I will tell you how I think about it.

When I think about those people whom I love, who are on the outs with Jesus, and I wonder how Jesus might deal with them, I think of the cross. And here's what I see there. I see a God who is perfectly just. Jesus is making things just, paying for our sins, justifying us. But I also see a God who is full of mercy, extraordinary mercy that goes way beyond what we deserve. I see perfect justice and perfect mercy. So I don't know what God will do with all those folks at the end of time – I'm not going to plant certainty in the field of Holy Mystery –but I know that whatever he does it will be just and it will be full of mercy. And when we see what he does, we will say 'that's perfect.' Until then we say, 'Lord, I don't know and I don't understand, but Jesus, I trust you.'

©Rev. Peter Jonker