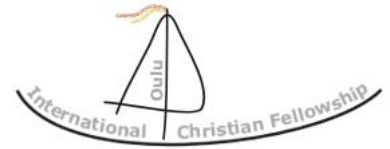


International Christian Fellowship of Oulu Worship Meeting



Date & Time: Sunday, 26.4.2009 at 15.30

Place: Chapel of St. Luke

Topic: Perseverance of Saints

Author: Oliver Jarde

Sunday Verse:

“For the Son of man is come to save that which was lost. How think ye? if a man have an hundred sheep, and one of them be gone astray, doth he not leave the ninety and nine, and goeth into the mountains, and seeketh that which is gone astray? And if so be that he find it, verily I say unto you, he rejoiceth more of that sheep, than of the ninety and nine which went not astray. Even so it is not the will of your Father which is in heaven, that one of these little ones should perish. (Mt 18:11-14; KJV)

-Reason why “Perseverance of the Saints”. Concern: Can a sheep really want to go astray? And can it really go astray? That is what many Protestant theologians nowadays affirm. What was originally (and biblically) meant as comfort for the believer turns into despair and insecurity.

- Five Points of Calvinism, rejection of all the five points of Arminianism at the Synod of Dort in the Netherlands 1618-1619.

- an acrostic: TULIP at a time when Calvin was dead already

Total Depravity – we are spiritually dead. Our sinfulness makes it impossible that we could regenerate ourselves. We can’t respond positively to the Good News *neither alone nor at all: Total Inability (versus free will of man)*

Unconditional Election – not based on my merit. “This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.” (Rom 3:22-24) God chose us for a reason. But the reason is not found within us.
Sovereign Election

Limited Atonement: Christ’s death wasn’t a death of simply potential atonement for everyone who accepts this news. Christ didn’t die to atone for all, because obviously not everyone is saved. *Particular Atonement*

Irresistible Grace: The flock of sheep hears the watchman’s voice and it will follow him only. The flock will never follow a stranger, says Jesus (John 10:4-5). Because God’s grace achieves its goal 100%, it is also called: *Effectual Grace*

Perseverance of the Saints: “Those God predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.” (Rom 8:30)

TULIP a defense, not an offense:

- In defense to the Arminian objection that a believer can fall away from grace. Which is a Roman Catholic view as well. Also against the heresies of Pelagianism and Semi-Pelagianism

- More generally, defending church doctrines – looking at the biblical account, fighting against outright heresies like last week’s “Emerging Church”, where there evidently is no absolute truth anymore.

- Difficulties with the terms: “Perseverance”, “saints”

Perseverance: As if we were capable ourselves. We are like the “little ones” (Mt 18) But God preserves us to final glory. Sproul: Preservation of the saints

Saint: Is not necessarily a person the Pope canonizes. Is a person, a sinner who God calls, regenerates, justifies, sanctifies and ultimately glorifies.

Simul iustus et peccator (Luther): at the same time righteous and a sinner.

Even to save ONE sheep makes God happy. If God is running after the one lost sheep: Does He also love the 99? Yes! Love for the sheep was the motivation to seek the one. He loves the others just as much.

What if that one sheep is not willing to come back? Can we lose our salvation, many Christians may ask. But we shouldn’t be asking this. Because we don’t own our salvation. Only God could lose someone, as He owns us. We are God’s possession through redemption (through Jesus) and regeneration (through the Holy Spirit):

Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honour God with your body. (I. Cor 6:19b-20a)

Repeated in I. Cor 7:23.

The idea here is this: Our body is no longer our body. Our body is indwelt by the Holy Spirit. Therefore, we are His. And this is why, we can now honour God with our body. Here again, we see the concept of “simul iustus et peccator”. We consist now of two “natures”:

- We are fallen by default, living under God’s curse. We can want to do good, but we can’t do it. We sin.
- We are redeemed, we are justified, it now pleases God to live in our bodies. And therefore, we must restrain from sin.

Three reasons why we can’t lose our salvation:

a. God’s possession, b. God’s promise and c. the fear of God

Thus, we don’t own ourselves. Let me say this:

- a. We are God’s possession. He redeemed us. And
- b. He gave us a promise:

My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no-one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no-one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. (John 10:27-29)

He promised that He won't ever lose us. He is not forgetful or senile as we humans are. He is almighty. And no-one can steal us away. Isaiah cites Israel's Only Saviour: No-one can deliver out of my hand. When I act, who can reverse it? (Is 43:13)

Either this is a wonderful insurance! Or it is nothing but an empty phrase when Arminians say that we can fall out of grace.

If it is impossible for the devil to snatch us out of God's hand, is it then maybe possible that I want to be separated from God? The short answer is: No! The biblical account is:

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. What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all- how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died- more than that, who was raised to life- is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered. No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom 8:29-39)

The verses tell us that there are no powers that could separate us from the love of God. Not even a black hole. Could I therefore possibly want to be separated? No, I couldn't. If people indeed want to be separated from the love of God, be it through famine, persecution or whatever: Then these people are no Christians to begin with. God assures that such problems – and they sound like gigantic problems, don't they? – can't do damage to our destiny to be citizens of Heaven.

We had a. We are God's possession and b. He gave us His promise that no-one can snatch us out of His hand – but there is still one more point mentioned in Jeremiah when he writes about the New Covenant:

I will make an everlasting covenant with them: I will never stop doing good to them, and I will inspire them to fear me, so that they will never turn away from me. (Jer. 32:40)

So the third point,

c. is “the fear of God”.

We fear Him and that is why we can't turn away. But we don't fear Him like we would fear a tyrant. Proverbs 1: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom”. We take Him seriously, more and more. We take Him seriously increasingly.

Matthew (24:24) tells us of the tribulation – another and maybe the most gigantic problem of all times for Christians: “False Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great miracles and signs to deceive even the elect.” And he adds: “If that were possible.” True Christians can't ever be turned away from God!

Three objections

Contradiction #1: Judas was lost

Jesus prays: While I was with them, I protected them and kept them safe by that name you gave me. None has been lost except the one doomed to destruction so that Scripture would be fulfilled. (John 17:12)

What does this verse mean? Did Jesus lose a disciple against the original plan? Jesus had a task – to save people. But it was not His task to save Judas. Judas went astray as the Scripture had revealed beforehand. Jesus accomplished his mission fully.

And his mission is not only to initiate our salvation. He accomplished it. If someone's process of salvation has started, it can't just stop in the middle: We can be “confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.” (Phil 1:6)

Contradiction #2: There are believers who aren't saved

There are people who may have thought that they were once saved, unfortunately. These are people having the wrong assurance that they are Christians. But are such people who aren't saved... are they Christians? I'm talking about people like Hymenaeus was (I. Tim. 1:19-20; II.Tim. 2:17)

That is what the Bible has to say on this:

They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us. (I. John 2:19)

If these people had been true Christians they would have remained with Christians. A dogmatic sentence is: “If you have faith you never lose it. If you lose your faith you never had it.”

We can't look into people's hearts as God can. We can see only fruits, either poisonous berries or apples. But God knows who belongs to Him. He not only guesses, but He knows this. He knew us before we ever got to know Him. He knows fully: “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.” (Rom 8:29-30)

There are two very prominent examples of people who – no doubt! - did go astray.

Judas:

God knew he would betray Jesus. God knew Judas wasn't one of His elect. And, Judas is alone to be held responsible for his betrayal. (Lk 22:22)

Peter:

Peter's denial is as severe as Judas' betrayal. Peter didn't deserve to be treated any better than Judas. Yet, Jesus had prayed for Peter. Peter was preserved. Peter is an elect, is a saint. God loves him and will never stop loving him. Later, Peter repented and became a cornerstone of the church. Two of his letters are to be read in the Holy Scriptures. And he has a lot to say about perseverance.

We need to individually come to terms:

Are we a person like Judas – who went astray, or are we a person like Peter – who went astray temporarily.

Do we continue to live in sin or do we ultimately disapprove of it? Do we love and fear God or do we love more to live in darkness, in a sinful state? Jesus said: “If you love me, you will keep my commandments” (John 14:23), “He who has My commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves Me” (John 14:21) and vice versa, “He who doesn't love Me does not keep My words” (John 14:24)

It is our conscience, the fear of God, love – as Jesus says – that makes us understand what is at stake.

Contradiction #3: Irony? Perseverance versus certainty

Even though, God's perseverance is perfect and will never fail, we are to take a responsible role in that process, too.

That seems to be a contradiction: God's perfect power on the one hand, and our duty to be diligent Christians on the other.

Is God only ironical to an extreme when He declares on the one hand that no-one can snatch us out of His hand while on the other He states: “But he who stands firm to the end will be saved” (Mk 13:13)?

There are other difficult issues in the Bible as well, which seem to be apparent contradictions such as

- Jesus is man and God,
- or the crucifixion was a sin and yet, was part of God's salvation plan. (Acts 4:26-28)
- Or Judas being responsible for his deed which was ordained to pass by God.

But none of these are actual contradictions!

Thus, we are to take an active and responsible role in the process of perseverance: We shouldn't only sit here around professing faith that consists of no fruits. We ought to

produce edible fruit, we ought to grow apples: to teach our children how they are saved, how to live a Christian life, we are to seek unity in church, we are to read the Bible, we are to proclaim the Word of God, we are to keep God's commandments, we are to be the light of the world, the salt of the Earth. However, let's face it: We won't ever be able to achieve either salvation or perseverance by these good deeds. But these good deeds are fruits of our regeneration!

Through good deeds doesn't come perseverance, but comes certainty: we can make our calling and election sure (II. Peter 1:10).

Example: If we are supposed to be an apple tree, God wants us to grow apples instead of poisonous berries. If apples grow in our branches we receive certainty that we are on the right way. We can compare our own fruits with God's designed apples. Without God we couldn't ever grow anything else than poisonous fruits. With God, though, we are supposed to now grow apples and stop growing poisonous berries.

And at various times God will check or make sure we've still got the apples and haven't exchanged them with the wrong fruits:

We certainly all have a walk ahead through some kind of wilderness into the promised land. God – and He isn't ironical here either – tests us. We should be happy if God tests us.

Because God strengthens our faith through temptations and trials. "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance." (James 1:2-3)

What has perseverance got to do with church discipline?

Thus, we have to take care of ourselves. Are we on the right track?

Finally, we are to take care of the other brethren as well.

If our spiritual brother or sister doesn't stand strong in the faith and falls into sin it is our duty to help and nurture, to go to the brother and sister privately (Mt 18:15), with one or two more people if he or she refuses to refrain from sinning (v. 16), later on tell it to the church (v.17) and finally, let him [or her] be as a Gentile and a tax-gatherer" (Mt 18:17). This means: Let him or her be like another human being – but let him not be a fellow Christian: Exclude him or her from your church.

Interestingly, these verses about church discipline in Scripture follow directly after our opening passage of the man with his one hundred sheep who seeks the one that went astray.

Conclusion

The one sheep can never ever go astray. This is thanks to God alone. We hated God initially. We can't acquire salvation or perseverance through our own deeds even though most modern theologians affirm nowadays that it would be in fact us choosing God. But we don't choose God, nor can we persevere on our own.

Instead, we are, as Peter writes, "kept by the power of God THROUGH FAITH unto salvation." (1. Peter 1:5, KJV).

Therefore, we are well advised to believe that perseverance is God's work alone. As also the Bible verse of the year clearly states: "What is impossible with men, is possible with God".
(Luke 18:27)

Amen.