



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Who Shall Separate us from the Love of Christ?

Romans 8:31-39

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Our passage last week was the end of the long argument Paul has been building across Chapters 5 to 8. It was an argument about the love of God, manifest in Jesus the Messiah and the Holy Spirit who indwells all those who are, by faith, in the Messiah. It was an argument meant to give assurance to Christians who saw their brothers and sisters facing awful persecution and who would face persecution themselves no too far in the future. It was an argument for assurance, based on the work of God in Jesus and the Spirit, made by a man who had, himself, been subjected to rejection, beating, imprisonment—and who would ultimately be martyred for his faith in Jesus. Paul wrapped up his argument, like a builder pounding in his last nails, as he declared in verse 30: “Those whom he *predestined* he also *called*, and those whom he called he also *justified*, and those whom he justified he also *glorified*.”

Now, how does a person respond to that? These chapters of Romans are the New Testament’s great discourse on justification. It’s easy to pore over Paul’s words here and his line of reasoning as a great theological text. We get to the end of the argument and we sit back and think, “Well, that’s what justification is all about. We might thank God for what he’s done for us in Jesus and the Spirit and we might thank him for the gift Paul has given us in explaining it. But there’s a tendency to see it primarily as a theological text book of sorts. Now that we understand, we’re reading to move on to the next subject. Paul will do just that...but not quite yet. He

doesn’t move on right away. He’s made his point and now he takes a break and he recaps what he’s said in verses 31-39 with a series of exuberant rhetorical questions that celebrate the love of God and his righteousness. You see, that’s the bit that it’s easy to miss. Paul has given this deep text on the theology of justification and redemption, but his greater point is the love of God and the way his righteousness—his covenant faithfulness—is revealed in the good news about Jesus. God’s justice is a great thing, but his love is even greater. It’s his love that drives the whole story of redemption. Justification isn’t an end in itself. The goal of justification is to be swept up into the life of God by the love of God. Paul started out, back in Chapter 5, to make the point that since God’s love for us has been poured out in Jesus the Messiah, there is no one or no thing that can thwart that love or keep it from completing its ultimate mission. Now that he’s explained how this is and how it can be, he brings us back to it with those familiar and comforting words: Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Our enemies are gathered around, but they are ultimately powerless. I think of the story in St. John’s Gospel of the woman caught in adultery. It’s easy to picture the woman on the ground, curled up with her head as she futilely tried to protect herself from the stones. The men were gathered around, stones in hand. She waited for the blows to start. She wondered how many stone it would take before she finally died and found an end to the pain. She waited and waited. Nothing happened. She slowly looked up and peeked out of one eye. The men were gone and Jesus was standing there in front of her. His challenge that he who was without sin should case the first stone had sent them all away in shame. And he looks down and, I have to think with a bit of humour in his voice, asks: “Where did they go? Haven’t you been condemned?”

Paul does something like that here. Look at verse 31:

What then shall we say to these things?

He’s made his case. His case is airtight and he knows it. These questions he throws out are rhetorical. He asks them just to prove that there’s nothing we can say that will call his argument into question. That then leads him to shout out the answers to the questions in praise. So what then shall we say to these things? First:

If God is for us, who can be against us?

I don’t think there’s a better summary of the revelation of God’s saving justice in the gospel than this. If God is for us, who can be against us? In his letter, Paul repeatedly writes about the death of Jesus as being “for us”. If God has given his own Son, the Messiah, as a sacrifice for sin and to set moving the forces that will set Creation to rights, who can possibly oppose that? Who can possibly upset, who can possibly undo what God has done for us? Can the cross be undone? Can the resurrection be undone? Can the pouring out of the Spirit be undone? Can the battle that Jesus has won now, somehow be lost? No, of course not. There’s a whole host of people and powers lined up to try, but none of them has a chance.

To many people, Paul’s statement about assurance sounds arrogant. Maybe they’ll grant it to Paul, but when we repeat it as Christians, then it’s a problem. It sounds like we have all the answers. Of course, we don’t. But we do have *the* answer that makes all the difference when it comes to assurance. God is for us and the proof is in the cross of Jesus. Others will say that this kind of assurance is arrogant. How can we be so sure of salvation? Again, there are lots of things we can’t be sure of, but our salvation in Jesus isn’t one of them. If God is for us, if God has given his own Son to die and rise to life for us,

what can possibly shake the assurance we find there? To some people this “If God is for us, who can be against us?” sort of assurance is offensive in light of all the times nations and armies have marched to war, sure that God was on their side. Last week we remembered the end of World War I, a war in which a host of ostensibly Christian nations went to war with each other, millions dying, in a struggle for military hegemony—and all of them claiming to have God on their side. But that’s not at all what Paul is talking about here. Imagine Paul writing these words, not sitting comfortably in front of the fire with not a care in the world, but on his way to deliver the collection made by the churches for their persecuted brothers and sisters in Jerusalem. Paul was headed into the lions’ den. The Jewish authorities wanted nothing more than to get their hands on him. And if he made it back, he was planning on a mission trip to Rome and then to Spain, to proclaim the Gospel and to challenge Caesar’s empire. Between the everyday hazards of being a missionary and direct confrontations with the powers of the present evil age, Paul had every reason to be afraid. But he stood firm. At time when all sorts of people and things stood firmly against Paul, he writes that no one can be against us. Why? Because there is one, true God and the death and resurrection of Jesus and the pouring out of the Spirit prove that this God is for us. And if the one, true God is for us, then absolutely no one can stand against us in the end—not even death itself.

In answering the second question, Paul asks a third. Look at verse 32:

He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?

When Paul writes about God not sparing his own Son, what he’s doing is pointing us back to Abraham. In

Genesis 22, God commanded Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. Isaac was the son of God’s promise. In fact, as far as Abraham was concerned, all of God’s promises *depended on* Isaac. It was a test. Was God enough for Abraham? Or was Abraham only following God because of his promise of blessing? At the last second, as the knife was raised, God stopped Abraham. What Paul’s drawing on is the statement there that because Abraham had been willing to spare not his own son, God richly blessed him. Paul’s point is that God’s sparing not his own Son is the key decisive evidence for God’s faithfulness—the evidence that he will always do what he has promised. This is what it means that God is “for us”.

This leads to the third question: “How will he not also, with Jesus, give us all things?” And Paul’s logic is this: In the Incarnation and at the Cross, God has done the hard part. Now, if God has given up his most valuable treasure—and the word he uses isn’t the normal word for give, but a very rare form of the word for *grace*—if God has *graciously* given his own Son for the sake of those who cannot merit such a gift, how can we possibly doubt that he will bring his plan of redemption to fulfilment? He gave his Son to make this plan happen, how then can we doubt his promise of life, how can we doubt that those whom he has called and justified, he will not also finally glorify? We have been promised a share in Jesus’ inheritance. We can live in assurance that because we are in Jesus, that inheritance is ours. As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 3: “All things are yours...and you are Christ’s, and Christ is God’s.” But there’s also a sense here in which Paul balances these wonderful statements of assurance with the reality that we live in the overlap of the ages. The whole reason he gives us this assurance is that we *will* face the hostility of the world around us as we challenge the old gods, the old loyalties, the old philosophies. In 2

Corinthians 6, he hammers this out with a litany of things we face, from the unpleasant to the downright horrible, and yet each is countered with our inheritance and glory in Jesus. Today, he writes, we may have *nothing*, but in reality—because of Jesus—we possess *all things*. We look forward to the day when we will be fully restored to our original vocation, to steward and to rule God’s creation alongside the Lord Jesus.

Next, verses 33 and 34 take us back to the lawcourt.

Who shall bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies.

Paul looks forward to the final day of judgement. We’re in the dock. We look around the courtroom. Is there anyone there to accuse us? But the courtroom is empty. There’s no one there to bring any charge against us, and even there were, they’d have to reckon with the fact that God, the judge, has already justified us. He has already rendered his verdict and declared that those who are in the Messiah by faith, are in the right. Paul looks ahead to the future, and as he does so, he stands confident and assured by our past justification, and because of that he can rest in our present standing as God’s people.

Still in the lawcourt, Paul goes on:

Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.

Maybe there’s no one to bring charges against us, but is there anyone in the courtroom who can condemn us—who can declare us *not* to be in the right? And, of course, there can’t be. Paul points us to Jesus the Messiah. He died, he rose from the grave alive again, he ascended to God’s right hand to take his throne, and from there he intercedes for us. What Paul’s doing

is recapping the long argument he's already made. By his death, Jesus condemned sin. In the resurrection of Jesus, God overturned the false verdict against his Son, and declared him to be in the right—to be justified. By his ascension, Jesus has been glorified. And as Paul made clear in the last part of our passage last week: what is true of Jesus, is true of his people. When we repent, turning aside from everything that is not Jesus in order to put our faith in him and him alone, we share in his justification. As God has declared him to be in the right, so he declares us to be in the right. As Jesus has been glorified, so are we—it's a present reality, even if there's more to come.

But Paul adds one more thing here. It's something the John mentions in his Gospel and the writer of Hebrews mentions, but this is the only time Paul touches on it. He says that in addition to all these things, our glorified Lord intercedes for us. Paul knew that this was part of the vocation of the Messiah, because Isaiah wrote about it in his song about the suffering servant: "He bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors" (Isaiah 53:12). That's a pretty wonderful thing to think about. Jesus didn't ascend to his throne and leave us with nothing more than promises and hope. As we struggle and face opposition, our Lord sits at the right hand of our Father and intercedes for us. He prays for us. He tells our problems to the very God for whom to hear is to provide, and in that we can take great assurance too.

And now in verse 35 Paul asks:

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?

Who shall separate us from the one whom who has redeemed us and who intercedes for us? If you stop and think about it, the question is simply silly. Who shall separate from Jesus, the one whom Paul says in Galatians

2:20 is "the Messiah [who] loved me and gave himself for me". Who could possibly come between the Redeemer and his redeemed? Think of the Spirit. Paul doesn't name the Spirit outright—he leaves it for us to infer—but he's going in this Trinitarian direction: the first question in this sequence appealed to the assurance of the Father as justifier and then the second question appealed to the assurance of the Son as the one who, by his death, has condemned sin and death. Paul just wrote a few verses back that the key work of the Holy Spirit has been to pour God's love into our hearts. If God himself loves us and if God himself is in us, causing our hearts to overflow with love for God, how can we possibly ever think that anything in this world can separate us from the love of Christ. It's a silly question.

And yet, as life comes at us, how often do we doubt the love of Christ? The fact is that there's a long list of contenders that would love nothing more than to separate us from the love of Christ. Paul goes on:

Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?

These were all things that Paul was preparing to face as he headed off to Jerusalem and the on his long journey to Rome. Considering how easily you and I fall into the thinking that somehow God has fallen asleep on the job or forgotten us when we face our own struggles, whether sickness or suffering or even our "first world problems", imagine the doubt that Paul could have faced. He endured suffering the like of which we can only imagine. It would have been easy to think God had forgotten him. Languishing in prison or being whipped by soldiers, it would have been easy for Paul to think that somehow he had been separated from the love of Christ. But, in fact, it was impossible for him to think that way in

light of the great truths he knew about the Father who sent his Son, about the Son who died and rose and ascended for the sake of his people, and about the Spirit who was poured out to unite us to Jesus and to fill our hearts with love for God. No, Paul knew that it was *impossible* for God to forget his people. He knew that it is *impossible* for God to fall asleep on the job. He knew that it is *impossible* for the Christian to be separated from the love of Christ. And he also knew the Scriptures. He knew that the suffering of God's people is part of the plan. And so, in verse 36, he quotes Psalm 44:22.

As it is written,

"For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered."

Psalm 44 is the faith-filled plea of Israel for God to act. God's people were suffering, but they knew that as he had acted in the past, as he had promised to deliver his people, he would act in the future. You see, Paul knew—and this runs contrary to so many popular false gospels we hear today—that suffering is a part of God's plan. God not only promised to deliver his people *from* suffering; he also promised to deliver his people *through* our suffering. This was the mission of Jesus and it's a model that Jesus himself calls us to follow as we daily take up our crosses. This has been the call of God's people all along, through the Old Testament and in the New. Our sufferings, somehow and in ways that are usually too deep for us to understand, will be taken up into the ongoing workings of God, not adding to the suffering that Jesus endured on our part—not as if we are earning something by our suffering—but to embody the suffering of Jesus in the world as we make him known.

So, can anything separate us from the love of Christ? The answer, as Paul

writes in verse 38, is a resounding “No”.

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

All of these things may try to come between us and the love of Jesus, but through Jesus we are “more than conquerors”. Paul actually coins his own word to stress his point here. You know the Greek word for victory because a sportswear company uses it: *nike*. Paul adds the prefix *hyper* to it. We are “super-victors”, he writes. And we are super-victors through Jesus, who loved us so much that he gave his own life to deliver us from sin and death. Nothing can set that back, nothing can get in its way, nothing can overcome that. And so Paul goes on, finishing the jubilant passage of praise:

For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.
(Romans 8:38-39)

Death is the last great enemy, as Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15. Death itself cannot separate us from the love of God in Jesus. Jesus was raised from death and we have a promise that we will one day share in his resurrection. Death itself was defeated at the cross. Yes, we will all one day die, but death doesn’t get the final word. Jesus does. And if death can’t get between God’s people and his love, the distractions and trials of life certainly won’t either. No angel, no ruler, no power; not height nor depth; nothing in all of Creation can possibly get between the Church and the love of God, so profoundly demonstrated in the death and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah our Lord. These things may do their worst, but they are a defeated army. They can wave their weapons

and they can make a lot of noise, but they cannot separate the Church from the love of God.

With that, Paul brings us full-circle. The love of God is the power for restoration and the power to make all things new. The love of God is the power to set the world to rights and to deliver us from our rebellion and to make us priests again in God’s temple. All through Romans so far, Paul has had this picture of God and Creation in mind, with us hanging in the middle. God created us to bear his image, to represent him and to bring his good rule to bear on Creation. We rejected that calling. We tried to seize God’s creation for ourselves. We stumbled into idolatry and he handed over his good creation to the corrupting influence of sin and death. But now, in Jesus the Messiah, humanity has been restored to our original calling. Through Jesus sin and death have been defeated. And through Jesus, the forces that will make all things new have been set in motion. Creation waits with eager longing for the day when God’s people will once again rule with the Lord Jesus.

Brothers and Sisters, live in assurance. I know that the world often writes our assurance off as arrogance. And sometimes Christians have been guilty of an arrogant false assurance—usually because we’ve forgotten that our assurance lies in the love of God manifest in Jesus. But Paul reminds us here that assurance—*real* assurance—is the fruit of truly humble and trusting faith, not in ourselves, not in our own righteousness, but in the Jesus who loves us and gave his life for us. Jesus calls us to follow him into the valley of the shadow of death, but we need fear no evil. His love is with us. We may seem like sheep led to the slaughter, but we trust in the Good Shepherd whose love will surely follow us all the days of our life.

Let us pray: Almighty God and Father, you are our refuge and our strength. In the cross of Jesus, your Son, we find your love poured out and in that love we find assurance. Keep the cross ever before our eyes, that we might always know your love, that we might always be assured. As we go out to confront the false gods and false loyalties of this defeated and passing age, send us out with assurance that what you have begun, you will surely finish. Send us out with the assurance of your love, poured out at the cross, that those whom you have called and justified, you will surely restore to glory with your Son. Amen.