

October 29, 2017
Sunday Morning Service
Series: Five Solas – Anniversary Sunday
Community Baptist Church
643 S. Suber Road
Greer, SC 29650
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Soli Deo Gloria
Romans 11:33-36

Our text sits at the end of the contextual argument found in Romans chapters nine through eleven. In that section of Paul's letter to the Christians in Rome, the apostle explained in certain detail how God in His infinite wisdom has turned His central focus away from the nation of Israel for a time and now is pouring out His grace and mercy on Gentiles.

The very thought of God working in a special way with a particular ethnic group or nation stirs the fires of controversy in the souls of many thinkers. We are tempted to marshal all our human wisdom, based on all our human experience, and take God to task. How can God freely offer salvation from sin to all, and at the same time make it possible for one people group to respond while other people groups are unresponsive to His invitation?

What do we do with the apparent conflict we find in just one book of the Bible? When God called Isaiah to be His preacher to the people of Israel, He promised Isaiah that, for the most part, no one would listen to him. *And he said, "Go, and say to this people: 'Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive.' Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed"* (Isaiah 6:9-10).

It is a bit difficult for us to grasp God's promise that His message would harden the hearts of the people against Himself in light of God's universal promise given through the same prophet. *"Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money*

and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; hear, that your soul may live; and I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David."

To thinking people this looks like a conflict. But then, who even thinks about God at all, much less on this level? James Boice asked, "But how many in our day regularly think about God, even in church? . . . Judging by our actions, words, desire, and church programs, I would argue that not one in a hundred churchgoers today actively thinks about God or stands in awe of Him as part of an average worship service" (James Boice, Romans, v.3, p.1410).

The awesome majesty of God is obvious in things He has made and in the works He has done in connection with passing things. But God's majesty is most impressive in His plan of salvation. How can we stop to gaze at the glory of God evident in His works that save His enemies from the penalty of their sins and not be driven to one profound conclusion: ***"To Him be glory forever. Amen."***

We Have Limited Knowledge of Ourselves.

We know that we are hopeless sinners. Honest people acknowledge that they have sinned. Acknowledging personal sin against God is simply a matter of understanding history. We know that God created Adam in His own image. Because Adam was rational, he could communicate with God. Because he was moral, he could please God. Because he was holy, he could live like God. What a wonderful life that must have been in those early days of history.

All of that changed when Adam chose to replace God with himself. Adam determined that he would be in charge instead of yielding to God. At that moment, Adam marred the image of God. The result has been that every person in history is born with a marred image of God. No one can attain the standard in which God originally created us. That problem is illustrated well by the Greek word used in the New Testament for sin that means to wander from the correct path or to miss the mark. It would rightly describe an archer aiming his arrow at the bull's-eye, but the arrow misses the mark. We cannot

hit the mark of God's holiness by nature and so we continually miss God's mark in thought and actions. Donald Barnhouse concluded that "The world is made up of bad archers."

A simple rehearsal of the Ten Commands is enough to reveal that all of us have sinned. Honest people admit it.

But even honest people are not aware of the breadth and depth of their sin. Because we cannot comprehend the holiness of God, we cannot comprehend how deeply sin offends Him. Because the image of God is so marred in us, we cannot imagine how grieved God is to observe what sin has done to His perfect creation.

I know of a case where God called a young man to plant a church. The young man was dedicated to preaching the Bible and spent forty years of his life shaping and molding redeemed sinners into the image of Christ through the teaching and preaching of God's truth. Many of the people had been part of the church for much of their lives. They had invested time and money to build the church. One day the pastor retired and the church voted for a new young man to take over the ministry. This young man was clever and shrewd. He had designs to shape the church after his own ideas but never revealed that to the congregation. Slowly but surely the man took over the church, introduced a heresy, and virtually stole the church away from those folks who had invested so much. I know the pastor and I know some of the folks who experienced this loss and they are very sad. How much sadder is God whose perfect creation was hijacked and whose creation of an image-bearer was so marred it cannot reflect His image?

Though we might admit we are sinners, we truly don't understand how much we need God. That is because it is so easy for us, like it was for Eve, to believe Satan's lie. Satan desired to replace God. Therefore, we should not be surprised to learn that Satan also desires for us to replace God. To that end, he convinces the sinner that sin is not an offense against God, but normal, acceptable living. He has convinced the world full of marred images that it is perfectly normal and acceptable to want to take care of yourself. We naturally assume that it is normal for us to express our desires contrary to God's desires or even the desires of other people with whom we are in conflict. Satan has convinced us that it is to be expected that we would place our hopes in passing things. He tells us to go ahead and

confess some sin, and even make religious decisions, but don't become a fanatic who becomes irrelevant in life. Our need for God and His true righteousness is greater than we can imagine.

It is also difficult for finite humans to grasp infinite God's assessment of us. Our knowledge is limited to human experience and the Word of God. Too often we either ignore the Word of God or limit our interpretation of it according to human experience. In contrast, infinite God not only understands but determines the existence, limits, boundaries, effects, and consequences of every detail that has to do with salvation. Therefore, as we learn, contemplate, meditate, on the truths of salvation, at some point we will be compelled to conclude with David, *Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high; I cannot attain it (Psalm 139:6)*.

We Are Familiar With God's Provision.

We know we are sinners and, to some extent, we understand our need to get to God to receive His forgiveness. We also know the provision God has made for us to receive forgiveness. That has been the theme of the sermons preached this month. We are spending this month learning about the five pillars of salvation established in the Reformation. We will do well to quickly review the four we have already studied up to this point.

God has provided salvation for us through **Scripture alone**. That is why we believe that the Bible is the message God spoke to human writers. We believe that the Bible is without error in the original writings. We believe that God has preserved His Word so that, while copies might contain discrepancies, still the message of God is clear, readable, and understandable. We believe that the Bible is complete, sufficient for salvation, and nothing can be added to God's authoritative message. We believe the Bible is a supernatural writing and that God works supernaturally through it.

God has provided salvation for us sinners through **faith alone**. We believe that salvation comes through faith alone. We believe that any works or kinds of works that a person attempts to add to faith nullifies faith. We believe that faith is a gift of God to spiritually dead sinners who because of their spiritual deadness are incapable of trusting God's Word.

God has provided salvation for us through **grace alone**. We believe that grace is God's favor bestowed to sinners who do not deserve His kindness, but who do deserve His wrath. We believe that the sinner can do nothing to merit God's favor. We believe that through God's grace alone, God makes the sinner aware of his offense, draws the sinner to Christ, and tears the spiritual blindness from his eyes so he can see his need for salvation.

God has provided salvation for us through **Christ alone**. We believe that salvation is through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ alone. We believe that no work of believing, or baptism, or confession, or of any other kind can contribute to attaining salvation. We believe, therefore, that Christ alone is the object of the sinner's faith.

Because we know these truths to be certain, we rejoice. However, we must admit that our rejoicing is somewhat limited in knowledge. While we know that God has provided the means for salvation and rejoice in that truth, still we cannot comprehend all the details of God's salvation. While we adhere to the previously stated beliefs, we also acknowledge that many of the details of those beliefs escape us.

For example, we cannot comprehend the "how" of inspiration or the extent of preservation, or the consistency of interpretation affected by the Holy Spirit's work through the Bible. We cannot fully comprehend how faith comes to the sinner, how long the process is, or often even the exact moment that faith takes hold. We cannot comprehend the amazing grace of God in adopting His enemy's children so that we can receive His blessings. That is what makes grace amazing. We cannot comprehend Jesus of Nazareth being a member of the Trinity, being fully God and fully man, how He could be tempted to sin but could not sin, the extent of sin that was laid on Him, or how at least one member of the Trinity could abandon Him. But we believe these things to be true and rejoice in them.

We rejoice as we trust God. If we must explain all the details of salvation before trusting Christ, we will never trust Christ. Faith accepts the unseen as though it were seen. Faith depends fully on God who is infinite. Therefore, salvation is to the glory of God alone!

We Stand Amazed at God's Glory.

We stand amazed in the reality that God is infinite. Paul wrote in our text, in this great doxology, *Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!* (vv.33a). Illustrating the nature of a doxology, it appears that Paul suddenly could no longer contain himself and burst out with the truth that the riches of God's wisdom and knowledge is beyond our comprehension.

On one hand, God has given us abundant information and knowledge about Himself in the Bible. We are convinced that God has given us knowledge to equip us for every good work. Paul taught us that *All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work* (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

God has given us precious knowledge so that we can partake of His divine nature. Peter taught us that *His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire* (2 Peter 1:3-4). God's plan is for us to grow in knowledge of Him (2 Peter 3:18).

On the other hand, we cannot fully comprehend the riches of God's wisdom and knowledge. The word *riches* in this statement speaks of unfathomable wealth. The depth of these riches cannot be plumbed. God's knowledge is unimaginable. He knows everything about everyone. He knows everything about everything. God instantly and thoroughly knows every thought of every mind, every action, every motive, every being, every spirit, every power, every molecule and atom in eternity. All human knowledge compiled does not begin to compare with a fraction of God's knowledge.

In human's wisdom is the ability to put knowledge to work. God's wisdom also puts His knowledge to work, but on a level we really cannot comprehend. God's wisdom is displayed in the creation, and in the maintenance, distribution, and disposing of all things material or immaterial. With a word of that wisdom, God created all

that ever has been or will be. And the more we learn and the more experience we have with God, the more we agree with David that *Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high; I cannot attain it (Psalm 139:6).*

Nor is there a human who can fully grasp God's judgments and God's ways. Paul declared, *How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!* God's judgments are unsearchable. That means that God's decisions, conclusions, verdicts should never cease to amaze us. For example, why is God so patient with people? Why did God give Israel king Saul? Why does God allow wicked people to persecute and kill the righteous? Why is God's action justified when He allows natural disasters? These are God's judgments, His decisions and conclusions. We cannot fully comprehend, understand, or fathom these things. We cannot fully or finally bring some of God's secrets to the surface for our satisfaction.

Also, God's ways are inscrutable. God's ways are His actions, His work, His plans carried out according to His infinite wisdom and sovereign choice. Why did God love Jacob and hate Esau? How can God choose us before the foundation of the world and yet give us the responsibility to go and preach the gospel to everyone begging them to "believe"? How can God require sinners to believe in Jesus and confess Him with their mouths, and yet no one can come to Jesus unless the Father draws him?

Finite humans cannot trace these things to a final conclusion. The word *inscrutable* can mean that no one is able to track such things. Hunters in Pennsylvania pray for snow on the Sunday after Thanksgiving because Monday is the first day of deer season. It is very difficult and generally impossible to track deer without snow. But when there is a few inches of snow on the ground, it is difficult for the deer to hide.

Faith does not become frustrated when it is unable to explain God's ways. Faith praises the incomprehensible God knowing that it is His plan to be incomprehensible. Solomon understood that *it is the glory of God to conceal things, but the glory of kings is to search things out (Proverbs 25:2).* The Psalmist concluded about God, *Your way was through the sea, your path through the great waters; yet your footprints were unseen (Psalm 77:19).* Not only are such divine secrets okay. They are wonderful.

Obviously, we cannot compare God with anyone else or anything else. God is unique. Therefore, no one knows God's mind. *"For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?" (v.34).* Paul, being intimately acquainted with the Old Testament, quoted this statement from Isaiah 40:13 which says, *Who has measured the Spirit of the LORD, or what man shows him his counsel? (Isaiah 40:13).* The answer is that no one instructs God. The god who sits at the feet of any teacher is not infinite.

That being true, it must also be true that God owes nothing to anyone. *"Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?" (v.35).* This time Paul quoted from Job 41:11, which comes from the context of God explaining to Job how great He is and how dependent on Him Job is. *"Who has first given to me, that I should repay him? Whatever is under the whole heaven is mine" (Job 41:11).* When God humbles us by reminding us that we cannot comprehend Him, He increases our faith. A proud person takes delight in thinking he is able to fully explain God's deep wisdom and knowledge and plans.

Theologians too quickly forget God's promise: *"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Isaiah 55:8-9).* Human pride does not wish to allow God this reality that *The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law (Deuteronomy 29:29).*

Speaking to Gentile believers who are privileged to be grafted in among God's special people, Paul gave the right conclusion for us. *So do not become proud, but stand in awe (Romans 11:20).* When you finally are able to put God in a box and no longer wonder and marvel at how God marries two seemingly incompatible truths, or why God chooses to use the people He uses, or how God can always be just and righteous, or that God forgives and restores sinners, you no longer have God. You comprehend your little god because you created him.

We are left with the wonder and the glory that God is. Apart from God there is nothing. *For from him and through him and to him are all things (v.36a).* Contrary to the teaching of secular humanism, all things are not about humanity, a particular philosophy, or nation.

All things are not about me. These ideas are the essential foundation of secular humanism not God's truth. The result of dismissing God from culture, of rejecting His truth (the Bible) is to conclude that humanity is the measure of all things. Humanism has been the false god ever since Adam chose to sin.

To deny God as the originator, source, and reason for everything will require a false religion. To conclude that a person can and must perform certain works in order to be saved is to make humans equal with their Creator. Most religions and many forms of so-called "Christianity" exalt human effort as a means for salvation. To acknowledge that we are saved by Scripture alone, through faith alone, by grace alone, and in Christ alone, we are left with salvation by God for His glory alone.

The only fitting conclusion is the statement at the end of our text: *To him be glory forever. Amen (v.36b)*. It is a wonderful condition to stand amazed at God's work of salvation. When I can fully comprehend God, then I am His equal and the glory belongs to God and me. The fact is all praise and glory for my salvation belong to God alone.

It seems fitting that we should be awestruck with God's glory because of the truths He has revealed about salvation. To know His Word, to experience faith, to experience His grace, to know Christ as Savior truly is breathtaking. But even more awesome must be the things that God has not revealed to us about salvation. What great things we will marvel at when we see Christ and know as we are known! To God be the glory alone for salvation. Pity anyone and everyone who tries to rob that glory or even share that glory.