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THE DISPLAY OF SOVEREIGN GRACE IN THE FACE OF DISCIPLES AND DEVILS

John 6:60-71

The term “sovereign grace” is a very particular term in theology. All professing Christians would say that God is sovereign, and all professing Christians would say that God saves us by grace. But “sovereign grace” is a fiercely controversial subject and one of the reasons why thousands left the preaching of Jesus in His sermon in John 6.

What is sovereign grace? It is the invincible and glorious truth that God, without the aid of human beings, freely decides whom He will save. As He said to Moses: “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.” (**Romans 9:15**) The human race is at war with God. And the only way that one surrenders and throws down their arms is if God grants them mercy. No amount of human pleading, or gospel preaching, or miracle feeding can convince someone of the truths of the gospel without God exercising His sovereign grace first. If God doesn’t exercise sovereign grace, no one will be saved.

Nothing makes this more clear than the end of John 6. Jesus fed thousands of hungry people a miraculous meal from 5 loaves and 2 fish.¹ No belief. Jesus pled with human hearts to come to Him so that they would never hunger and thirst again.² No belief. Jesus preached gospel saturated words “Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the day.”³ No belief. Now we arrive at the end of Jesus’s sermon, and

¹ John 6:11

² John 6:35

³ John 6:54

instead of Jesus growing in popularity, there is a growing hostility towards Him. Thousands are leaving Him never to walk with Him again.

At this point, from the perspective of the Twelve, it's easy to imagine some of them thinking: "Jesus you're driving them away. Your tactics are not working. Your ministry is failing." And then to end the chapter, as if things couldn't get worse, Jesus tells them that there is a devil among them. A devil whom He knew to be so from the beginning. What's going on?"

Doctrine

It is sovereign grace alone that brings one to Christ, and Jesus is determined to have this displayed

- ☆ It is the Spirit Who Gives Life (v.60-64)
- ☆ It is the Father Who Grants Life (v.65)
- ☆ It is the Son Who Has The Words of Life (v.66-71)

I. It Is The Spirit Who Gives Life (v.60-65)

v.60 When many of his disciples heard it, they said, "This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?"

So far the only people who have resisted Jesus in this chapter have been the Jews, v.41 "So the Jews grumbled about him..."; v.52 "The Jews then disputed among themselves." But now Jesus' disciples are grumbling. His own followers who have identified as being students of His teaching are now starting to complain about what Jesus has been saying. This is important for us to note, because throughout Scripture the visible church body is always a mixed multitude. Not everyone who follows Jesus *actually* follows Jesus. Demas one

of the apostle Paul's companions was following Christ in **Colossians 4:14**, and then forsook Christ in **2 Timothy 4:10**.

These false disciple complained that Jesus' teaching was *hard*, meaning it was offensive. There were four things in particular that they found offensive.⁴ 1) They wanted a purely physical Messiah that would feed them physical food and overthrow Rome.⁵ Jesus wouldn't comply. 2) They believed themselves to capable judges of religious matters, but Jesus said it was only through His teaching that the Father draws men unto Himself.⁶ 3) They were offended that Jesus claimed to be greater than Moses.⁷ 4) They sinfully misunderstood Jesus to say that they must eat his physical body and drink his physical blood. Because of these, they sneeringly say to each other 'This is offensive, who can listen to it?' R.C. Sproul reminds us of an important distinction in Christian ethics, "and that is the difference between an offense given and an offense taken."⁸ Jesus gave no offense, He was perfect in His speech, yet an offense was taken. We as ambassadors of Christ ought to be as blameless in our speech and an actions towards outsiders as we possibly can. But we must expect offense to be taken when we truly share the gospel.

Consider for a moment the sinful insincerity of these disciples. If they found Jesus' sayings to be hard, then why didn't they ask Him instead of whispering behind his back? Is this not Jesus who just fed them yesterday? Would He not truly teach those who come to Him in humility? The truth is, they didn't want their excuse to stop following him to be taken away.⁹

⁴ D.A. Carson, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary, The Gospel According to John*, (Grand Rapids, MI,: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), pg. 300

⁵ John 6:30-31, 34; 6:15

⁶ John 6:44-46

⁷ John 6:32-33

⁸ R.C. Sproul, *St. Andrew's Expository Commentary: John*, (Orlando, FL,: Reformation Trust Publishing, 2009), pg. 124

⁹ It is dangerous when we isolate ourselves to our own counsel. **Proverbs 18:1** "Whoever isolates himself seeks his own desire; he breaks out against all sound judgment."

v. 61-62 But Jesus, *knowing in himself* that his disciples were grumbling about this, said to them, “Do you take offense at this? Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before?”

Jesus *knew in himself* all their secret grumblings.¹⁰ Why does John bother to tell us this? Because these false disciples were clearly acting as though Jesus were just a *mere man*. But how can a *mere man* know the secret grumblings of others? These false disciples refused to believe that Jesus really came down from heaven. So exposing their secret whisperings, He asks a very penetrating question, in effect, ‘if you are offended at what I’m claiming, namely that *I came down from heaven*, how will you react if you see me go up to heaven?’¹¹ Will you believe then?’ If you are an unbeliever, would you believe in Christ if you saw Him ascend to heaven? No you would not.¹² You will never believe in Christ’s claims unless the Spirit of the Living God falls upon you. Though all the evidence in the world were provided to you that you are a sinner in need of a Savior, and that Jesus is that Savior, you will never believe by yourself. Jesus says in the next verse...

¹⁰ Our hearts are laid bare before the LORD of the church. Were we to let that truth penetrate our souls, we would beg God for a bridle over our sinful thoughts. **Psalm 141:3-4** “Set a guard, O LORD, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips! Do not let my heart incline to any evil, to busy myself with wicked deeds.”

¹¹ “It should be noted that some commentators see Jesus’ reference to ascending as an implied reference to His crucifixion (3:14; 12:32, 34), which led to His resurrection, and then His ascension. According to that view, the Lord was making a crucial point: If the false disciples were scandalized by His teaching, how much more would they be offended by His execution (cf. 1 Cor. 1:23)? In any case, Jesus left the question open-ended, because how His hearers responded to Him would determine how they would answer it.” John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: John 1-11*, (Chicago, IL,: Moody Publishers, 2006), pg. 270

¹² Miracles *by themselves* will not convince you to believe in Jesus. When Jesus rose from the dead, an angel of the LORD appeared rolled back the stone and “His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. And for fear of him the guards trembled and became like dead men.” (Matthew 28:3-4) When they reported this to the chief priests in Jerusalem, they conspired together, and traded monies so that this report would not go out. No belief on the guards part, and no belief on the chief priests who had themselves made sure the tomb was secure.

v. 63-64a It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But there are some of you who do not believe.

What is Jesus doing at this point in the chapter? If we consider chapter six as a whole, His sermon is over. What are the effects of His sermon? These disciples don't understand Him. They find Him offensive. **And so now Jesus is giving an explanation for their unbelief.** 'The Holy Spirit must give life, because the flesh provides no help at all.' Meaning the Holy Spirit must cause you to be born again, because your flesh cannot do this.

Now some our brothers and sisters who reject the doctrines of grace will agree with this statement with one qualifier. They will say 'Right, our flesh can't give life, only the Holy Spirit can do that, **but** we must believe *as a condition* to the Spirit giving us life.' But this makes no sense of what Jesus is saying. Jesus is giving an explanation for why they don't believe. 'You don't believe,' Jesus says 'because the flesh is no help at all, only the Spirit can give life. You don't believe because the Spirit has not granted you life. **The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life, but there are some of you who do not believe.** Why don't you believe? Because the Spirit is not working in you.' Why does our gospel preaching not produce belief in Christ every time? Because the Spirit doesn't work life in every hearer. Sovereign Grace is free. It is not owed to any man. "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion."¹³ Unless the Holy Spirit of God sovereignly, and freely chooses to give the gift of faith and repentance into the human heart, that heart will never believe.

Benjamin Franklin was a good friend of the famous evangelist George Whitefield during the Great Awakening of the 18th century. Ben Franklin was an unbeliever but he loved to hear Whitefield preach. He said once of Whitefield's preaching "...one could not help being pleased with [his sermons]; a pleasure of much the same kind with that received from an excellent piece of

¹³ Romans 9:15

music.”¹⁴ Whitefield wrote letters to Franklin and spoke with him one on one urging him to believe in the LORD Jesus Christ. In Franklin’s autobiography, he said this “[Whitefield] used, indeed, to pray for my conversion, **but he never had the satisfaction of believing that his prayers were heard.** Our was a mere civil friendship, sincere on both sides, and lasted to his death.”¹⁵ How come thousands of dirty coal miners come to Christ through Whitefield’s preaching, but one man, a mighty statesman in the world’s eyes would not? Because although Franklin heard the words of Jesus through Whitefield, the Holy Spirit never granted him life. Franklin’s flesh provided him no help at all.

And this is the constant and unrelenting witness of Scripture.

Acts 16:14 “One who heard us was a woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple goods, who was a worshiper of God. *The Lord opened her heart* to pay attention to what was said by Paul.”

Paul tells Timothy in **2 Timothy 2:25** that we ought to correct our opponents with gentleness, because “*God may perhaps grant them repentance* leading to a knowledge of the truth,”

II. It Is The Father Who Grants Life (v.65)

v. 65 And he said, “This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father.”

Jesus had already previously said this in v.44, only here He uses the word “granted” as opposed to the word “draws.” In v.63 Jesus is showing us the doctrine of the new birth, but here in v.65 Jesus is showing us the doctrine of eternal election. No one can come to Christ savingly, unless God the Father from all eternity has chosen them. That’s what election is: God sovereignly and

¹⁴ Arnold Dallimore, *George Whitefield, Vol. 1*, (Carlisle, PA,: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2014), pg. 116

¹⁵ *ibid*, pg. 482

decisively choosing all who would be redeemed by His Son by His good pleasure *alone*. This is what Jesus means by *granted*. So Jesus is saying that if the Father has not elected an individual, that individual will never savingly believe in Christ.

If you've never heard this doctrine before, perhaps it's shocking and offensive to you. Perhaps you would object by saying 'I believe that God grants everybody the ability to come to Jesus.' I would just say, look again closely at what Jesus is saying in v.65. He begins by saying "This is why..." What is why? What is Jesus referring to by "this"? **Unbelief**. You can see it if you connect the beginning of v.64 directly with v.65: (v.64) "But there are *some of you* who do not believe. — (v.65) *This is why* I told you that no one can come to me unless it is *granted* him by the Father." Do you see? Jesus is saying "...*some of you* will never believe, because it was not *granted* to you by the Father."¹⁶

During the Reformation, the humanist scholar Erasmus had locked horns with Martin Luther over this very issue. Erasmus spilled much ink in trying to refute Luther's view on predestination. Erasmus believed that the human soul, though tainted by sin, still retained "a little island of righteousness by which we can choose to come to God or reject Him."¹⁷

Dear congregation, Erasmus' view is a prevailing notion in American Christianity. It's the notion that sin renders us guilty *but not corrupt*. In other words, we are condemned by God because we are sinners, *but* that sin hasn't actually polluted our souls. Our minds, and hearts, and wills have been basically untouched by sin. We are basically good, *albeit*, guilty people. We need a Savior, but **election** is not necessary because we can have the ability to come to God if presented with the choice. However, when Scripture describes sin, it includes both guilt and corruption. **Romans 3:10-12** "None is righteous, no, not one;

¹⁶ Jesus said *some of you* because as the end of v.64 says "For Jesus knew from the beginning who those were who did not believe, and who it was who would betray him." It cannot be said of all current unbelievers that they have not been elected to believe in Christ by the Father. You and I were once unbelievers. But Jesus knew every single person in that crowd that would not believe from all eternity.

¹⁷ R.C. Sproul, *St. Andrew's Expository Commentary: John*, (Orlando, FL,: Reformation Trust Publishing, 2009), pg. 125

(guilt) no one understands (corrupted mind) no one seeks for God (corrupted heart) All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one. (corrupted will)”

This corruption of the soul renders all human beings unable to come to God in humble faith. Not because God is stopping them, but rather because they hate God in their thoughts, and their affections, and because of this they will never choose to come to Him unless something supernatural happens first.

John 6 is illustrating this perfectly. We have the perfect preacher—Jesus; who performs the perfect miracle—5 loaves, 2 fish—who always knows the perfect thing to say and can perfectly read the thoughts of his listeners. According to church growth strategies, Jesus should have a megachurch. Instead hostile unbelief is increasing, not just among the Jews, but among his own followers. And how does Jesus respond to this hostility? v.65 “This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father.” Only sovereign grace can bring these unbelievers to their knees.¹⁸

III. It Is Jesus Who Has The Words of Life (v.66-71)

v.66 After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him.

This last saying by Jesus proved too much for these false followers. Once Jesus confronted them with their total inability to believe, they walked away, forever. Ministry failure according to American standards. There are not a few preachers who would say that a sermon like that should not have been preached.¹⁹ Jesus

¹⁸ When Peter confessed that Jesus was God, Jesus told him in **Matthew 16:17** “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, *but my Father who is in heaven.*”

¹⁹ Calvin says here: “Many would say that it would have been better that a sermon of this kind should never have been preached, which occasioned the apostasy of many. But we ought to entertain a widely different view; for it was then necessary, and now is daily necessary, that what had been foretold concerning Christ should be perceived in his doctrine, namely, that he is the stone of stumbling, (Isaiah 8:14.)” John Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries, Vol. XVII*, (Grand Rapids, MI,: BakerBooks, 2009), pg. 277

knew this would offend them, because He knew their thoughts, and yet He preached it anyway. And what happened? Thousands left. You shouldn't have preached it Jesus. Two responses to this objection: 1) Jesus is God. There is nothing more arrogant to edit Jesus' sermons thinking that we have something more edifying for His church than what He has for them. 2) Should we withhold these doctrines from God's people because the reprobate don't like them? That's like saying "Honey, we better not buy the Volkswagen for the kids, because the burglar will only tolerate a Lexus." These are Christ's doctrines. God thought up these precious truths. If God loves them, we should love them!

Jesus is not the least shaken by this mass exodus. The parenthesis in v.64 tells us that "Jesus knew from the beginning who those were who did not believe, and who it was who would betray him." While these false disciples are leaving, Jesus turns to the Twelve.

v.67 So Jesus said to the Twelve, "Do you want to go away as well?"

Jesus ask this question for their sake. No doubt this seemingly massive ministry failure would have shaken them to the core. Thousands left. This would be a very convenient time for them to leave as well. So Jesus puts them to the test.

v.68-69 Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God."

In spite of everything that was transpiring, Peter couldn't imagine anywhere else they could run 'Lord, to whom shall we go? To the Pharisees? To the philosophers of this age? To self-help books? Lord in whichever direction we look, there are no answers. You alone have the words of eternal life.'

Peter, because he was granted life by the Father, believed on Christ. No doubt, He did not understand everything that Jesus was saying, as we will see in

the rest of this gospel. I believe that is why believing comes before knowing in Peter's confession "...we have believed, and have come to know." But that sovereign grace was the cause of Peter's belief cannot be disputed. In **Matthew 16:17**, Jesus said to him "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven."

Election is what keeps true saints from defecting though all the world is abandoning him. It is not your will power that keeps you a Christian, it is the omnipotent hand of God who loved you with an everlasting love. It was not Peter's will power that made him to stay when thousands were leaving.

When Peter said "Lord to whom shall we go?", we should ask the same thing for ourselves.²⁰ 'Lord, to whom shall we go?' Should we go to a less than sovereign God? A god who leaves the final decision for salvation in the hands of sinners? Lord if I go there I will be undone. I can't raise myself from spiritual death. I will be like these thousands who walk away.

'Lord, to whom shall we go?' Should we go to those who deny the sinfulness of sin? To those who say that sin renders us guilty but not totally corrupt? To those who would say that given the right opportunity, I will make the right choice. Lord, I will not make the right choice, that is why you tell me to pray "Lead me not into temptation." (Matthew 6:13)

'Lord, to whom shall we go?' Shall we turn to the world? Dig in with all our energy, produce wealth, and save and build up our treasure here on earth? Lord there is no rest for our souls there. The market is up one day, down the next, the only thing that is certain is uncertainty.

'Lord, to whom shall we go?...you are the Holy one of God.' You are the Sovereign Savior, you possess the words of eternal life.

v.70-71 Jesus answered them, "Did I not choose you, the Twelve? And yet one of you is a devil." He spoke of Judas the son of Simon Iscariot, for he, one of the Twelve, was going to betray him.

²⁰ <http://www.desiringgod.org/messages/you-have-the-words-of-eternal-life>

This confession of Peter's is magnificent, and what does Jesus immediately do? He takes the credit for it. "Did I not choose you, the Twelve?" If there was any sense of superiority in Peter's words, or the other disciples who sat there and watched at thousands defected, Jesus seeks to squash it. 'I chose you. You are not remaining because you are superior to them.' Jesus will not allow sovereign grace to be a means of arrogance. Oh how contrary to sovereign grace to have hearts that are proud that they get it, while others don't. This doctrine should put us on our face. 'Oh God, thank you for choosing a sinner such as I. I have given you every reason to damn me, but from your heart you have set your love upon me, and all I can say is grace, grace, grace!'

Application

Our Doctrine: It is sovereign grace alone that brings one to Christ, and Jesus is determined to have this displayed

We must let John 6 inform our ministry at this church. Jesus put sovereign grace on display *and* He evangelized the lost. These two things can go together. Jesus put them together. This doesn't mean that we have to preach election or predestination every time. We shouldn't. Jesus didn't. However if Jesus was determined to display this doctrine, we ought to ask why? Why was Jesus so determined to display the sovereign grace of God?

Because Jesus is after worship. Jesus' main concern was not make men feel better about themselves, His main concern was the men might fear God, and be concerned with His great glory. His main concern was not to be pragmatic or helpful, His main concern was to show that it is God's grace alone that is the difference between heaven and hell. His main concern was to show us that our only hope of rescue is by God's good pleasure.

It would have been a lie for Jesus to preach that men have the ability to receive Christ at any time they choose. It would have been a lie for Him to

speak of His Father's love as a general willingness to receive anybody.²¹ It would have been a lie to place man sovereign over his own salvation, while God is *merely* a subordinate.

Jesus preached sovereign grace because these doctrines show God to be God. "Our God is in the heavens, He does all that He pleases." Psalm 115:3

Our Duty: Receive Jesus' words of sovereign grace as words of spirit and life.

Jesus said in v.63 that His words are **spirit and life**. That includes the words He speaks about sovereign grace. When God's absolute, unquestioned Sovereignty is put on display, Jesus knows that those words will give us spirit and life. Our hearts are not strengthened by notions that we can enter the kingdom of God by our own free wills. Our hearts are not strengthened by notions that we can stay in the kingdom of God by our own free wills. Those doctrines do not strengthen saints, but weaken them. Those doctrines either put the soul in a constant state of anxiety and concern: "Does God still love me today?" Or else they produce proud hearts that think they are performing to God's standards.

If someone says "I know people who are arrogant that believe in the doctrines of grace." I would say 'I agree, and the most proud heart I know is the one I see in the mirror.' But don't you see? Pride is not the result of the doctrines of grace. Pride is the result of my remaining, indwelling sin. Sovereign grace is the only doctrine that will kill pride. Jesus uses sovereign grace regularly in this gospel to kill pride: "You did not choose me, but I chose you" (John 15:16)

Sovereign grace is what sets the heart most free to love God and man. Sovereign grace is what caused George Whitefield to preach himself to death by the age 56. He said this in his journal: "Nothing could possibly support my soul

²¹ J.I. Packer in his introduction to John Owens, *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*, (Carlisle, PA,: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2007), pg. 2

under the many agonies which oppressed me...but a consideration of the freeness, eternity and unchangeableness of God's love to me...Nothing but the doctrines of the Reformation can do this. All others leave freewill in man and make him, in part at least, a Savior to himself...Man is nothing: he hath a free will to go to hell, but none to go to heaven, till God worketh in him to will and to do of His good pleasure. Oh the excellency of the doctrine of election and of the saints' final perseverance! I am persuaded, till a man comes to believe and feel these important truths, he cannot come out of himself, but when convince of these, and assured of their application to his own heart, he then walks by faith indeed!...Love, not fear, constraints him to obedience."²²

Our Delight: Jesus sovereignly chose a devil so He could be our bread

Jesus throws us for a loop in the last two verses of the chapter. He says "Did I not choose you, the Twelve? And yet one of you is a devil." He spoke of Judas the son of Simon Iscariot, for he, one of the Twelve, was going to betray him." From a human perspective, it looks like Jesus is losing in this chapter. At the beginning of a two-day evangelistic campaign He begins with thousands of listeners, and then at the end He ends up with 12, but one of them is a devil. It seems as though Jesus is losing. The kingdom of darkness is advancing, and even among Jesus' inner circle there is a devil.

But v.64 shows us something different. The little parenthesis in v.64 makes all the difference. "For Jesus knew from the beginning who those were who did not believe, and who it was who would betray him" The disciples at this point were unaware of the cross. They didn't know it was coming. But Jesus planned for it, when He picked the Twelve. Just when it looks like Jesus is being defeated by the devil, v.64 reminds us that Jesus

²² Arnold Dallimore, *George Whitefield, Vol. 1*, (Carlisle, PA,: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2014), pg. 407

has the devil right where He wants Him: in the middle of the Twelve to do exactly what God has already planned that He would do.²³

What the disciples didn't know yet was that in order to eat Jesus' flesh and drink His blood, He would have to be crucified on a Roman cross. This would require a devil. In order to be united to Christ, have our sins forgiven, be given life by the Spirit, and drawn by the Father, Jesus had to die. And Jesus planned for this.

What a delight that God leaves nothing up to us to secure our salvation!

²³<http://www.desiringgod.org/messages/it-is-the-spirit-that-gives-life>