Sermon Series: What Does It Mean to be Saved?
Sermon Title: Election or Free Will?

Text: **Acts 13:44-48 -- The next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord. 45 But when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and began to contradict what was spoken by Paul, reviling him. 46 And Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly, saying, "It was necessary that the word of God be spoken first to you. Since you thrust it aside and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles. 47 For so the Lord has commanded us, saying, "'I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.'" 48 And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord, and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed**.

Introduction: A week ago, we launched a new series that examines what the Bible teaches about the subject of salvation. We've titled this series "**What Does It Mean to be Saved**?" **In our first message, we looked at the COMMON GRACE of God that is experienced by all** (***in the physical, intellectual, moral, societal and spiritual realms***), **yet recognized by few**. Still, it is for most, if not all of us, the very first way that we encounter God. This morning, I want to focus on **the doctrine of election**, which is the first step in the process of bringing us to a saving relationship with God through His Son Jesus Christ.

Now, before we begin, let me warn you that this is a topic that is hotly debated in Christian circles. **People on both sides of the issue have very strong feelings regarding their points of view**. This reminds me of the story of a group of theologians who were discussing the primary tension created by the debate between predestination and free will. At one point, things became so heated that the group broke up into two opposing factions. One man, not knowing which to join, stood for a moment trying to decide. At last, he joined the PREDESTINATION GROUP. "***Who sent you here?***" they asked. "***No one sent me***," he replied. "***I came of my own free will***." "***Free will***!" they exclaimed. "***You can't join us! You belong with the other group***!" So, he followed their orders and went to the FREE WILL GROUP. There, someone asked, "***When did you decide to join us***?" The young man replied, "***Well, I didn't really decide--I was sent here***." "***Sent here***!" they shouted. "***You can't join us unless you have decided by your own free will***!" EVENTUALLY, HE JUST WENT HOME. Now, I invite you to join me as we take a look at the doctrine of election. Let's begin with the question…

How do we define election? According to the book ***SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY, edited by Dr. Wayne Grudem,*** **it is an act of God, before the foundation of the world, to choose SOME PEOPLE TO BE SAVED, not on account of anything they've done, but purely because of God's sovereign good pleasure**. The Bible gives an example of election in the book of **Romans** in a discussion of the two sons of **Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Esau**. **The Apostle Paul uses their situation to illustrate the principle that God's salvation is based on grace, and not race** (**Romans 9:10-13 -- And not only so, but also when Rebecca had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac, 11 though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad—in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of his call— 12 she was told, "The older will serve the younger." 13 As it is written, "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated**)." Though they shared the same parents, and therefore the same genetic makeup, **God promised that Esau** (the older) **would serve Jacob** (the younger) **before either child was born, simply because He willed it to be so**.

Why are some people troubled by election? The idea of election seems to get a lot of people in an uproar and creates certain dilemmas for them when it comes to this understanding of God.

- **They see God as unfair**. **If He chooses who will be saved, this means that those who are not part of the elect will never have the opportunity to come to faith in Christ**. How can anyone say that God is just when only those He chooses experience salvation? **In response, let me say that this would be the case if people were morally neutral or had a bent to goodness**. But the Bible teaches that mankind is alienated from God

and unwilling to submit to His rule and reign (**Colossians 1:21 -- Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior**). God is therefore just in responding to our rebellion and rejection of His authority by sentencing us to death (**See Romans 3:23; 6:23**). He is not unfair then when He pronounces judgment upon sinners. **He is, however, extremely gracious and merciful when He elects to save some who deserve Hell as much as anyone else**. **Let me attempt to illustrate it for you**: Suppose you and two friends committed crimes worthy of capital punishment. The three of you were sentenced to hang together on a platform built for the occasion. Just before the hangman pulled the lever that would release the trap door and send you to your death, a man intervened on your behalf. Unknown to you, he had prevailed on the presiding judge in the case by showing him a little-known statute that permits a person to take the punishment for another. With the law behind him, he gained permission to die in your place, which he willfully did. ***Though the families of the other two who were executed may have complained that they were being treated unfairly, in reality, they were not***. **They simply had no one willing to do for them what someone was willing to do for you. IN EACH CASE, JUSTICE WAS SATISFIED**. (**Review: They see God as unfair**)

- **They see God as impersonal**. The argument goes like this: **If the issues regarding salvation have been predetermined, doesn't this make God out to be a DISINTERESTED PARTY TO THE DRAMA OF HUMAN HISTORY, because everything that is going to happen regarding our salvation has already been predetermined**? He has no reason to involve Himself in the lives of people.

  This may be the conclusion that human reasoning will ultimately arrive at when discussing election, but it is not what the Bible teaches. **God is anything but disinterested and impersonal! He loves the world and desires that all people come into a saving relationship with Him** (**1 Timothy 2:3-4 -- This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, 4 who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth**). **In fact, He implores the wicked to turn from their sins** (**Ezekiel 33:11 -- Say to them, As I live, declares the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live**). **Once more, it is God's kindness that leads us to repentance** (**Romans 2:4 -- Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?**). THERE IS NO WAY TO DENY GOD'S LOVING ACTIVITY IN OUR WORLD AS HE DRAWS MEN, WOMEN AND CHILDREN TO FAITH IN CHRIST (**John 6:44 -- No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him**). (**Review: Why are some people troubled by election? Because they see God as unfair AND/OR impersonal**). **Yet scripture declares that as the Righteous One (Proverbs 21:12), God is always just and good in all that He does**.

Does the Bible teach election? In my mind, it certainly seems to be undeniable. Here is but a small sampling of the many passages that make the case for election.

- **Acts 13:46-48** – (*after the Jews rejected Paul and his gospel*) "**Then Paul and Barnabas answered them boldly: "We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles. For this is what the Lord has commanded us: "'I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.'" When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed**." It seems to me that the word "***appointed***" is the key to understanding the last part of this passage. In his commentary on the book of Acts, **F. F. Bruce** argues that it means to **"inscribe** or **enroll."** The idea then is that those who had been enrolled for eternal life in the records of heaven believed the message.
- **Romans 8:28-30** – "**And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. 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.**" ***To predestine something is to predetermine it***. **This means that sometime prior to their moment of belief,**

God elected to save FROM HIS WRATH those who would believe and then conform them to the likeness of His Son. The next passage gives us a better sense of God's time frame in election.

- **Ephesians 1:4-6** – "**For (God) chose us in (Christ) before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will--to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves**." ***Every believer who is truly saved is eternally saved***. Before the world was created, God chose those who would become his children in accordance with His own pleasure and will.
- **2 Timothy 1:8-9** -- … **join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God, who has saved us and called us to a holy life-not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time**." ***In these verses, Paul denies that we are saved on the basis of any human effort, but only on the basis of God's grace in Christ***. IF IT IS NOT GRACE, THEN ON WHAT OTHER BASIS CAN IT BE THAT WE ARE SAVED? WORKS? NOT ACCORDING TO THESE VERSES.
- **Revelation 13:7-8** (**NASV**) – "**It was also given to him to make war with the saints and to overcome them, and authority over every tribe and people and tongue and nation was given to him. All who dwell on the earth will worship him, everyone whose name has not been written from the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who has been slain**." **The names of those who worship the beast in the end times are not found written in the book of life that went to print before the foundation of the world**.

What are some misunderstandings of election?

- **God chooses some because He knows that they will choose Him**. Those who hold to this view refer to **Romans 8:29**. They read, "***for whom He foreknew he predestined***," and assume that God simply looks into the future, sees who is going to choose Him (thus preserving their free will), and then elects those individuals. But the word '***foreknew***' here is applied not to knowledge about facts, but knowledge of persons. **Because God is not bound by time, He could, before the world was ever formed, view the elect as already having a relationship with Him through the atoning work of Christ**.
- **God predestines some to heaven and others to Hell**. While this may seem like the logical conclusion to those who struggle with election, the Bible does not teach this. When it comes to the eternal destiny of those who are not the elect, the Scriptures teach that they are accountable for having rejected Christ. Note what Paul says to the Jews in **Acts 13:46 – "Then Paul and Barnabas answered them boldly: "We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles**." He does not say, "since you're not part of God's chosen people (the elect)," but instead points out their rejection of the message (**See also John 5:40**).

How should we respond to election?

- **Election should bring us comfort**. Paul's point in **Romans 8:28** is this: **God has always acted for the good of His people**. In the distant past, he predestined the elect to become conformed to the image of Christ. In the recent past, He called and justified His elect. In the future, God will glorify those He has chosen by providing them with a new body. **This is so certain that Paul can speak of it as already having happened**. Given that God has in the past and will in the future act for the good of the elect, isn't it obvious that we can trust Him to do so today?
- **Election should cause us to worship**. This is the outcome of **Ephesians 1:4-5**. Because God in His love has predestined us to adoption, we are **to praise His glorious grace**. WHEN IT COMES TO RECEIVING GIFTS, THOSE WHO ARE MOST GRATEFUL ARE THOSE WHO ARE MOST UNDESERVING.
- **Election should encourage us to share our faith** (**2 Timothy 2:10 -- 2 Timothy 2:10 -- Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory**). Knowing that some will respond to the Gospel should embolden us to share it with others.

How do we reconcile election and free will? Of course, there are passages in the Bible that mention the role of a person's will in becoming a Christian. Here are a few of them.

- **Deuteronomy 30:19** -- **This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live**.
- **2 Peter 3:9** -- **The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance**.
- **1 Timothy 2:3-4** -- **This is good, and pleases God our Savior, 4 who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth**.
- **John 3:16** -- **For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life**.
- **1 John 4:15** -- **Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God**.

These verses (and others) cannot be ignored. **They teach our human responsibility to believe in Christ**. People must choose to believe in our Lord. On the other hand, I **have hopefully demonstrated this morning, in other places in the Bible, that God chooses people to be saved**. SO, ON THE ONE HAND WE HAVE FREE WILL AND ON THE OTHER GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY.

According to **author and pastor John Piper**, free will and election represent a **paradox, but not a contradiction**. A paradox is something that only gives the appearance of a contradiction, but is not. Listen to his words: (**This paradox) runs through the whole Bible. Human beings are morally accountable, even though they do not have ultimate self-determination (i.e., the freedom to choose). There is no injustice with God** (**Romans 9:14 -- What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means!**). **No one is punished who does not truly deserve to be punished. And the measure of the punishment is always in righteous proportion to the measure of evil. Though God predestines who will be saved and who will not…, no one comes into judgment who does not deserve punishment … I DON'T THINK THE BIBLE MAKES PLAIN HOW BOTH OF THESE TRUTHS—GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY AND MAN'S ACCOUNTABILITY – ARE IN PERFECT COMPATIBILITY. BUT THE WHOLE BIBLE TESTIFIES TO BOTH TRUTHS**.

Perhaps the great preacher **Charles H. Spurgeon** summed it up best when he was asked how to reconcile election and free will. He responded, "**I never try to reconcile friends**." THE FACT IS THAT THE BIBLE TEACHES BOTH.

Conclusion: **In the final analysis, it seems clear that the doctrine of election is found throughout the Scriptures**. Though some may not feel comfortable with it, it cannot be easily dismissed, nor should it be. **Election is meant to bring us hope as we face the difficult times of life by knowing that through the grace of God, we are in Christ and He is always in us**. I like what one person said in trying to help others lay hold of this teaching: He said, "***Think of the gate of heaven, and above it is a large sign that reads, 'Whosoever will may come.' As you pass through the gate, you look back, and from the inside, the sign reads this way: 'Chosen before the foundation of the world***.'