

THE GOSPEL LESSON 19

REFORMED THEOLOGY AND THE GOSPEL – PART 1

The Good, The Question, and the God of the System

Matthew 23:37 – Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling.

REVIEWING THE GOSPEL OF YOUR SALVATION

Last lesson, took up the fifth TULIP petal, Perseverance of the Saints, and found that on its central affirmation there is no argument: the one who believes has eternal life, is sealed, is kept by God's power, and cannot be lost. The quarrel is with the condition the doctrine combines to that truth, that the ones God keeps will necessarily continue in faith and good works, so that continuing becomes the evidence, and in practice, the test of whether a person was ever saved. Preservation is God's act and perseverance is the believer's, and Scripture never says the first guarantees the second. The keeping texts were found to rest security on the Shepherd and the Father, not on the sheep; 1 John 2:19 was found to describe men who denied that Jesus is the Christ; the continuance clauses and the warnings of Hebrews were found to govern reward, consequences, and discipline, never the possession of eternal life; and Scripture was found to name believers who failed, Lot, Solomon, the Corinthians, Demas, and to call them believers still.

With the five points examined one at a time, one thing remains to be said about them together. The first four, Total Depravity, Unconditional Election, Limited Atonement, and Irresistible Grace, make claims about God: about His decree, His choice, the extent of the provision, and the manner of His grace. They do not add a condition to the gospel. The message a sinner hears, the belief he places in it, and the sealing that follows are the same under any of the four. The fifth is different in kind. It attaches to the finished work of God a required result in the believer. That difference is the thesis of the lessons that follow, and it will be tested rather than assumed.

The method has not changed. Each text is read literally in its normal sense, in its grammar, and in its historical and cultural setting, asking first who wrote it, to whom, when, and why. The movement is from the text toward conclusions, and the conclusions are revised when the text resists them. The standard is what the text states and what its author intended, and no doctrine is granted standing because a system requires it "by good and necessary consequence" (WCF 1.6).

WHAT COMES NEXT

The series now turns from the parts to the whole. The petals were read one at a time; now the system they form is weighed as a system, by what it does to theology, to salvation, to the gospel, and to the believer's assurance. One question governs the unit, and it will be answered at the end: is Reformed theology a disagreement in theology among people who hold the same gospel, or is it another gospel? The two are not the same charge, and the difference between them is the whole point of the lessons ahead.

THE GOSPEL LESSON 19

REFORMED THEOLOGY AND THE GOSPEL – PART 1

The Good, The Question, and the God of the System

The plan runs across five lessons. This first lesson states plainly what Reformed theology gets right, then asks what the first four petals do to the character of God, and renders a verdict on those four. The second takes up Perseverance as a doctrine, in the words of its confessions and its living teachers, and shows how it moves works back into the formula of salvation. The third examines the terms the system redefines to make that move possible, faith, grace, and above all the work of the Holy Spirit, and asks what Scripture actually states. The fourth reads the texts the doctrine presses hardest, James 2, Matthew 7, and the parable of the soils, in their own settings. The fifth states where works belong in the life of a believer, where assurance rests, and answers the question that we pose from the beginning.

I. INTRODUCTION – KEY DISTINCTIONS

Three distinctions keep the discussion honest before anything is weighed. None settles the question; each clears ground the argument will need.

1. A Disagreement in Theology and Another Gospel. Believers disagree about many things and remain believers and remain brethren. Two teachers may differ about the timing of the rapture, baptism, or the exact reach of a prophecy, and neither has touched the gospel. Scripture reserves a different word for a disagreement on the Gospel. "I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel; which is really not another; only there are some who are disturbing you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed!" (Galatians 1:6–8). The Galatian error did not deny Christ; it added a condition, circumcision, to the gospel of Christ and called the result the same gospel. The test in this unit is the same test. A doctrine is a disagreement in theology if it leaves the gospel as Scripture states it: a message heard, believed, and sealed (Ephesians 1:13). It is another gospel if it adds anything to that sequence (at the front or at the back).

2. The Offer and the One Who Offers. A message can be left word for word intact while the one speaking it is described falsely. The gospel is not only a message; it is a message from someone, and its content includes His disposition toward the one who hears it. "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son" (John 3:16). The giving is the gospel; the loving is why it was given. If the first four petals leave the offer intact but reshape the God who makes it, that is not nothing. It is the difference between a savior who holds out his hand and a magistrate who reads out a sentence already passed.

3. What Is Stated of God and What Is Deduced About Him. The attributes of God are not in competition. His love, His holiness, His justice, His wrath, His mercy, and His patience are each stated in Scripture, each toward the same world of sinners, and not one of them is permitted to cancel or diminish another. A system that begins from one attribute, His sovereignty, and reasons the rest into its service will end with a God who is consistent on paper and unrecognizable in the text. The rule for this lesson is that every attribute is stated,

THE GOSPEL LESSON 19

REFORMED THEOLOGY AND THE GOSPEL – PART 1

The Good, The Question, and the God of the System

not weighed against the others, and that where Scripture holds two together the lesson will hold them together also.

II. WHAT REFORMED THEOLOGY GETS RIGHT

The critique in this unit will be direct, and for that reason the credit must be given first, without reservation. Reformed theology was born in a fight, and the fight was the right one.

The Reformation recovered, against the whole weight of Rome, that a sinner is justified by grace through faith apart from works. "Being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus" (Romans 3:24). "But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness" (Romans 4:5). "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Ephesians 2:8–9). This was against a system of merits, sacraments, penances, and purgatory, the Reformers said that Christ's one offering "has perfected for all time those who are sanctified" (Hebrews 10:14), and that the righteousness by which a man stands before God is not his own but is credited to him. Every lesson in this series has stood on that ground. It was Reformed men who cleared up the mess.

Reformed theology takes the sovereignty of God seriously. It refuses to make God a spectator of His own creation, or a hopeful bystander to the salvation of men. God "works all things after the counsel of His will" (Ephesians 1:11). Salvation is His work from first to last; He provides the Savior, sends the message, gives life through it, seals the one who believes, and keeps him. No one in this room disputes any of that, and the doctrine of eternal security is a doctrine of God's sovereignty over the believer's standing.

Reformed theology honors the authority of Scripture, reads it seriously, and produces careful men. Its confessions are among the most rigorous doctrinal documents Christendom has written. Many of its teachers have been faithful pastors, and many believers in Reformed churches rest on Christ and nothing else. The disagreement in this unit is with a system and its consequences, not with the salvation of those who hold it.

All of that is granted, and it is granted gladly. It is also the reason the critique matters. A system this serious, holding this much truth, is a system whose errors will be believed.

III. THE GOD OF THE FIRST FOUR PETALS

The first four petals are answered here not one by one, but together, by what they say about God. The doctrine will speak for itself first.

The Westminster Confession states the decree: "By the decree of God, for the manifestation of His glory, some men and angels are predestinated unto everlasting life; and others foreordained to everlasting death" (WCF 3.3). It then states what God does with the rest: "The rest of mankind God was pleased, according to the unsearchable counsel of His own

THE GOSPEL LESSON 19

REFORMED THEOLOGY AND THE GOSPEL – PART 1

The Good, The Question, and the God of the System

will, whereby He extendeth or withholdeth mercy, as He pleaseth, for the glory of His sovereign power over His creatures, to pass by; and to ordain them to dishonour and wrath for their sin, to the praise of His glorious justice" (WCF 3.7).

The Canons of Dort say the same. "That some receive the gift of faith from God, and others do not receive it, proceeds from God's eternal decree" (First Head, Article 6). Those not chosen of God "has decreed to leave in the common misery into which they have willfully plunged themselves, and not to bestow upon them saving faith and the grace of conversion... at last, for the declaration of His justice, to condemn and punish them forever" (Article 15). The same article adds that this decree "by no means makes God the author of sin (the very thought of which is blasphemy)." That denial is theirs, and it will be taken at its word; the question is whether the system can sustain it.

Calvin did not soften the point. "The decree, I admit, is dreadful; and yet it is impossible to deny that God foreknew what the end of man was to be before He made him, and foreknew, because He had so ordained by His decree" (Institutes 3.23.7).

Set together, the four petals describe a God who, before creation, chose particular individuals for life and passed by the rest; who sent His Son to die for the chosen; who regenerates the chosen by a grace they cannot refuse; and who commands all men to believe while intending to enable only some. The offer, as a form of words, goes to everyone. The intent behind it does not. Three things follow for the character of God, and we will evaluate what Scripture states of Him.

1. His Love Is Narrowed. "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him" (John 3:16–17).

The Reformed reading of this verse takes "the world," κόσμος kosmos, to mean the elect from every nation, or mankind in general as a class, so that the love in view is a love for the chosen. The word will not carry it. The world God loved in verse 16 is the world He did not send His Son to judge in verse 17, and it is the same world into which the Light has come in verse 19 and in which "men loved the darkness rather than the Light." The world that is loved is the world that is perishing. We learned in 1 John 2:2, where Christ is the propitiation "not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world," and the οὐ μόνον... ἀλλὰ καὶ οὐ μονον... alla kai widens the scope on purpose from believers to everyone else. "By this the love of God was manifested in us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins" (1 John 4:9–10). "But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). The love is stated, and it is stated toward sinners as sinners, before any of them believed.

THE GOSPEL LESSON 19

REFORMED THEOLOGY AND THE GOSPEL – PART 1

The Good, The Question, and the God of the System

Under Reformed Theology that love has to be reassigned. It becomes a love for the chosen, and for the rest a general benevolence that stops short of the one thing they need. The word "love" is kept and its object is changed. That is the first thing the system does to God: it takes the widest statement Scripture makes about His love for all and reads it as the narrowest.

2. His Desire Is Divided. "This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:3–4). "The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). "As I live!" declares the Lord GOD, "I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that the wicked turn from his way and live. Turn back, turn back from your evil ways! Why then will you die, O house of Israel?" (Ezekiel 33:11). "Turn to Me and be saved, all the ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other" (Isaiah 45:22).

These are not statements about "the chosen." They are statements about God's desire toward the ones who do believe, made in the act of calling them to turn. The Reformed answer is well known and is stated by its most well-known defenders under the heading of two wills in God: a revealed will, by which He commands and desires that all repent, and a secret or decreative will, by which He has determined that most will not. God desires the salvation of all men in one sense and has decreed the damnation of most of them in another.

Scripture does not divide Him this way. When it speaks of God's desire toward the perishing it speaks in one voice, and when it explains why the perishing perish it does not appeal to a hidden decree; it charges the refusal to the one who refused. "How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling" (Matthew 23:37). The verb is the same on both sides. Jesus wanted, and they were unwilling. The word is **θέλω** thelō – Jesus wanted, desired, willed that they would gather to them, but they were unwilling, did not desire, did not want. One will is stated of God, and the will that opposed it is stated of Jerusalem. "You are unwilling to come to Me so that you may have life" (John 5:40). "You men who are stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears are always resisting the Holy Spirit" (Acts 7:51). The drawing of John 6 was found to be teaching or proclaiming the Word of God, and that teaching or proclaiming can be refused; that is exactly what these texts describe. A God who desires all to be saved BUT secretly wills that most be lost is not the God who wept.

3. His Justice Is Reversed. The confessions deny that the decree makes God the author of sin, and the denial is sincere. But the decree as written ordains the rest of mankind "to dishonour and wrath for their sin," and the same system holds that these men could never have believed, were never intended to be enabled, and were passed by before they existed. Their unbelief is the thing for which they are judged, and their unbelief is the thing the decree secured by withholding the only grace that could have prevented it. The judgment answers to a refusal that was never in their power to reverse.

THE GOSPEL LESSON 19

REFORMED THEOLOGY AND THE GOSPEL – PART 1

The Good, The Question, and the God of the System

Scripture states the order the other way and states it as the ground of the judgment. "He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil" (John 3:18–19). The judgment is "because," and the "because" is stated: the Light came, and men loved the darkness. "Those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved. For this reason God will send upon them a deluding influence" (2 Thessalonians 2:10–11). The refusal comes first; the judicial hardening follows it and answers it. In Romans 1 the wrath of God is revealed against men who "suppress the truth," and three times God "gave them over" to what they had already chosen (Romans 1:18, 24, 26, 28). Everywhere Scripture explains a man's condemnation, the explanation is his refusal of a light that reached him. The Reformed system explains it by a decree that reached him first.

The God Who Loves the Ones He Will Judge. These three come to one point, and it is the point on which the whole evaluation of the first four petals rests. The God of the Bible loves the very people He will judge, and He does not stop loving them in order to judge them. Scripture does not resolve that; it states it, and it states it in the same breath.

"When He approached Jerusalem, He saw the city and wept over it, saying, 'If you had known in this day, even you, the things which make for peace! But now they have been hidden from your eyes'" (Luke 19:41–42). Two verses later the judgment is pronounced: the enemies will level the city "because you did not recognize the time of your visitation" (19:44). He wept, and He judged, over the same city, in the same hour. In Matthew 23 the lament of is followed at once by the sentence: "Behold, your house is being left to you desolate!" In John 3 the same chapter that says God loved the world says that "he who does not believe the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him" (3:36). In Romans 2 the kindness of God "leads you to reconsideration," and the one who refuses it is "storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath" (2:4–5); the kindness is real, extended to the very one storing up wrath. In Ezekiel the God who will judge Israel swears by His own life that He takes no pleasure in it. When God proclaimed His own name to Moses He held both together in a single sentence: "The LORD, the LORD God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished" (Exodus 34:6–7).

Reformed Theology cannot leave that whole. It has to make the love and the judgment fall on different people, because a decree that fixes the two groups before creation cannot allow God to love someone He has already appointed to wrath. So, the love is shrunk to fit the decree. The judgment is kept at full strength; the love is reassigned to the elect; and toward the rest God is left with a kindness that gives them rain and harvests and withholds the one

THE GOSPEL LESSON 19

REFORMED THEOLOGY AND THE GOSPEL – PART 1

The Good, The Question, and the God of the System

thing that would have saved them. That is a God that makes sense to a human mind. It is not the God of Luke 19, John 3, or The Holy One of Israel.

This is what is at stake in the first four petals, and it is why the objection that they leave the gospel offer intact, though true, is not the end of the matter. The offer is intact as a false offer. The One offering has been changed. The sinner is told that God loves him, and the system states that God may not; he is told that God desires his salvation, and the system holds that God may have decreed otherwise; he is told that if he perishes it will be for his unbelief, and the system holds that his unbelief was secured before he was born. A gospel can be preached in those words and mean, underneath, something the words do not say. That is not another gospel. It is a misrepresentation of the God who sends it.

IV. THE VERDICT ON THE FIRST FOUR, AND THE BIBLICAL DOCTRINE OF GOD'S HEART TOWARD SINNERS

The first distinction can now be applied. The first four petals add nothing to heard, believed, sealed. Under any of the four, the sinner hears the message, believes it, and is sealed, and nothing is required of him before or after that Scripture does not require. On the test of Galatians 1 the first four are a disagreement in theology, and the men who hold them are brethren. That verdict stands and is not withdrawn.

However, a disagreement in theology can be a serious one, and this one is. The first four petals do not distort the gospel; they distort the God of the gospel, narrowing His love, dividing His will, and reversing the order of His justice, in order to keep a decree consistent. The cost falls on the sinner who is told about God, and on the believer who is taught to think of Him this way. That is the ground on which they are answered, and it is ground enough.

Against it the whole of Scripture states the heart of God toward sinners, and it states it without a hidden second meaning.

He is, by His own name, "compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth" (Exodus 34:6). "The LORD is good to all, and His mercies are over all His works" (Psalm 145:9). He has "no pleasure in the death of anyone who dies" (Ezekiel 18:32), and He says so under oath (33:11). He calls the ends of the earth to believe and be saved (Isaiah 45:22), and He spared Nineveh because He is "a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and one who relents concerning calamity" (Jonah 4:2), asking whether He should not have compassion on a city that did not know its right hand from its left (4:11).

In the Gospels that God is seen. He wanted to gather Jerusalem and wept over it. He loved the world and gave His Son for it, not to judge it but that it might be saved through Him (John 3:16–17). He is the Savior "who desires all men to be saved" (1 Timothy 2:4), "the Savior of all men, especially of believers" (1 Timothy 4:10), and His saving grace "has appeared, to all men" (Titus 2:11). He demonstrated His love toward sinners while they were sinners

THE GOSPEL LESSON 19

REFORMED THEOLOGY AND THE GOSPEL – PART 1

The Good, The Question, and the God of the System

(Romans 5:8), and He "was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them," so that His ambassadors "beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God" (2 Corinthians 5:19–20). God does not beg on behalf of a decree. He is patient, "not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to reconsideration" (2 Peter 3:9), and the last invitation in the Bible is unrestricted: "let the one who wishes take the water of life without cost" (Revelation 22:17).

That same God will judge. He is holy, and His wrath against sin is real, and the one who does not believe "has been judged already" (John 3:18). But the judgment is His answer to a refusal, never the cause of it, and the love that went before the refusal was real love, toward that man, for the whole of his life. The gospel a sinner hears is not a form of words concealing a verdict. It is the sincere appeal of a God who wants him, from a Savior who died for him, on the authority of a word that means exactly what it says.

"In Him, you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation, having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise" (Ephesians 1:13). Heard, believed, sealed. The One who sends that message loves the one who hears it, whatever the hearer does with it, and the message may be believed as it stands.