

Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God

Simply Irresistible (John 6:35-47)

Preached by Minister Jason Tarn at HCC on March 22, 2015

Introduction

- ❖ As we've been going through this series on evangelism, I've been convicted of how little evangelism I'm doing on a regular basis. Yes, I preach the gospel all the time to large groups of people, but I'm not doing that consistently on a personal, individual basis.
 - ▶ And I've often blamed it on my personality, my temperament. I'm a preacher so yes I'm capable of talking a lot. But actually in social settings, I'm not all that gregarious. I'm actually pretty reserved, and I tend to keep to myself. And that certainly affects how open I am to meeting people and taking advantage of opportunities to share my faith.

- ❖ A perfect example would be when I'm sitting around waiting somewhere. Let's say at my daughter's ballet class. I could be sitting there with another parent next to me waiting. So it's the perfect opportunity to strike up conversation. But what's my instinct in that situation? Honestly, it would be to stick my nose in a book. That's my natural reaction.
 - ▶ I know plenty of people who could easily strike up conversation. They enjoy talking to new people, to perfect strangers. And if you're a Christian with that kind of personality, it bodes well for opportunities to share about God and his grace in the gospel. Evangelism probably comes naturally to you.

- ❖ But that's not me. I don't have that kind of temperament. I'm not wired that way. And to be brutally honest, I've used that as an excuse. To justify why I don't speak up and talk to people when opportunities arise. I'm not wired for that. I'm not made for this.
 - ▶ But more and more I'm coming to realize that this is no excuse. It doesn't matter. **I may not be made for this but I'm certainly saved for this.** This is why I'm here. This is why any Christian is here on earth. We're blessed to be a blessing to others. We're saved to be a channel of salvation to others. We've been made into disciples to be disciple-makers. So I have no excuse. I have everything I need to share my faith in those situations. I have the Spirit of God living in me. He is able to make me able.

- ❖ **So that's the first barrier in seeing the lost come to Christ – the hesitancy that lies within us.** But in the passages we've been considering in this series, we've come across another barrier in seeing the lost come to Christ, and it's not something in us. It's in the lost. **Even if we were to overcome, by grace, the hesitancy within us to share the gospel, we still face an insurmountable obstacle within the unbeliever.**
 - ▶ In Ezekiel 37, unbelievers are compared to dead bones, dry bones with no spiritual life left in them. In 2 Corinthians 4, they're described as hardened in their minds and blinded to spiritual light, to knowledge of the gospel of the glory of Christ.
 - And now in our passage, from the lips of Jesus, unbelievers are characterized as starving yet unable to come and feed off the only source of life. He doesn't mince words in v44, *“No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him.”*

- ❖ **No one can come to Jesus.** In context, he means coming to him in faith. Believing in him (v35). Prior to this, Jesus had finished feeding the 5,000 and the crowds were seeking after him looking for another meal (6:26). So he exhorts them to stop striving after food that perishes. Go after food that endures to eternal life. Strive after the bread of God that comes down from heaven. In v34 the crowds reply, “*Sir, give us this bread always.*”
 - ▶ Jesus famously replies, “*I am the bread of life. I’m the bread that comes down from heaven.*” (vv35, 41) **You’ve been chasing after something. Something to fill that void, that hunger, that deep thirst of the soul.** You’ve tried to satisfy it with things of this world, things that perish. What you need is to feed off *me*, to come to *me*, to believe in *me*, and you’ll never hunger or thirst again. You’ll be satisfied completely.
- ❖ And how do they react? Look at v41, “*So the Jews grumbled about him, because he said, “I am the bread that came down from heaven.”* They grumbled. They complained. They didn’t understand. They didn’t get it.
 - ▶ And what’s Jesus’ reaction? It’s in v44. “*No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him.*” You grumble, you don’t get it – because you *can’t* get it. You can’t understand and believe what I’m claiming about myself unless God the Father draws you. Later on in v65 he says the same thing, “*This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father.*”
 - That’s a strange way to talk. And if it’s true, then it affects the way we approach evangelism. We have to figure out what he means and what that’s going to mean for our evangelism. I’ve got three points for us.

Unbelievers Can’t Come to Jesus (But Not That Kind of Can’t)

- ❖ The first is this: **It’s clear from Jesus’ own words that unbelievers can’t come to him, but he’s not talking about the kind of *can’t* you probably have in mind.** When he says you can’t come to him, he’s not referring to a natural inability but a **moral inability**.
 - ▶ A paraplegic can’t get out of his chair and come up on stage. Everyone understands when I say he can’t. And everyone understand the difference when I shift usage and say a college student can’t get out of bed before 10am. He just can’t do it. But you all know I don’t mean *that* kind of can’t.
- ❖ Tim Keller puts it in a real concrete way. He says imagine if every day for the next 100 days, I were to serve you two dishes. On your right, I place a dish of filet mignon or lobster or chocolate cake. And on your left, I place a dish of bloody monkey brains with flies all over it. How many times out of a hundred will you choose the dish on your left? It wouldn’t matter how much I urge you to expand your tastebuds. “Come on, try it. Be openminded.” Nope. You’re going to say to me, “I’m sorry but I just can’t.”
- ❖ You just *can’t*. Now I know you don’t mean you lack the ability to chew and swallow since you can easily put down that steak. You can’t as in you can’t bring yourself to eat it. You can’t find within yourself the desire to eat it. **In other words, you *can’t* eat it in the sense that you don’t *want* to eat it.**

- ▶ A lion is not going to eat a salad. It doesn't matter how hungry he is. It doesn't matter if it's a kale salad with walnuts and slices of apple. He's not going to eat it. Not because he can't chew and swallow. But because it's not in his nature. He has a taste for red meat. A disposition. An inclination. That's why he can't.
- ❖ Likewise, people in their natural condition can't come to Jesus. They can't believe what he claims about himself. Not because they lack the ability to comprehend or handle higher level concepts and ideas. **No, it's not an intellectual inability. It's a moral inability.**
 - ▶ It's because they can't bring themselves to believe. It's not in their nature. Their moral disposition and inclinations are not in tune to God. They're in rebellion to God.
- ❖ That's why even having the privilege of seeing Jesus with your own eyes and hearing Jesus with your own ears is not enough to convince you. We think if Jesus would just show himself to us or speak to us in a still, soft voice, then we'd totally believe in him. Yet look at v36. *"But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe."*
 - ▶ **That tells me that the mind is so calloused and the heart so blind that Jesus can stand in front of you, and you still wouldn't believe who he says he is.** You would still entertain small-minded, short-sighted views of him.
- ❖ Theologians call this **the total depravity of man**. Man in his natural condition is so fallen, so depraved, that he cannot bring himself to believe. Sin has totally incapacitated us. We're incapable of coming to Jesus on our own will.
 - ▶ Now total depravity is not suggesting that we're all as bad as we can be or that all mankind is equally evil in all sense of the word. Thank God for his common grace that we're not as bad as we could be. That we're not utterly depraved.
- ❖ **Total depravity is just saying that sin has totally affected us inside and out.** It's corrupted the body, the spirit, the mind, the heart, and *the will*. Our will, our volition, our moral disposition, is depraved. It's bent away from Jesus. It's not inclined to come to him.
 - ▶ This is essentially what Jesus means later on in John 8:34 where he says that everyone who practices sin is a **slave of sin**. We have chains keeping us from coming to Jesus. But they're not chains around the wrists or the ankles. They're chains around the heart, around the will. As Luther put it, the human will is in bondage to sin.
- ❖ **What this means is that we're unable to come to Jesus for salvation and yet we're without excuse.** We'll still be judged for our rejection of his gospel offer. Now if we happen to be physically incapacitated or inhibited from coming to him, then we'd have an excuse. But our inability lies in the heart. That's where you'll find the metaphorical chains. **We don't come; we can't come; because we're unwilling to come.**
 - ▶ It's like Jesus said as he stood outside of Jerusalem weeping. Oh how he would've gathered them together as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings. But they were not willing! (Matt. 23:37) Which is why they're still accountable for their rejection.

- ❖ It's like that story of the morbidly obese man who was stuck in a prison cell. Who couldn't come out. But this prison cell was unique. It had no bars covering the windows or doorways. That means he could easily walk out *if* he could squeeze out that doorway. But his jailers were cruel and every day they'd supply him with a feast of his favorite food and drink. Now if he could only change his appetite, if he could only curb his cravings, he'd be a free man. He'd walk right on out. But he can't. And yet he has no one to blame but himself. He can't come out – but we're not talking about that kind of can't.
 - ▶ See what this means? **Your non-Christian friends could go to Jesus *if* they can curb their moral appetite, if they can change their moral disposition.** They'd go right to him with a heart full of faith. Yet sadly they can't – but not that kind of can't.

All Whom God Gives to Jesus Will Come (But Not That Kind of Will)

- ❖ I know it feels seemingly hopeless. You're thinking about all your friends and family who don't know Jesus. Now you're told they can't come to Jesus, and yet they're still accountable for not coming to Jesus. This all sounds very discouraging.
 - ▶ But listen – while I believe it's important to come to grips with this reality – this was not Jesus' primary emphasis in our passage, especially in v44. Look at it again, “*No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him.*”
- ❖ So the hope and the emphasis all along is that people – who on their own are morally incapable of coming to Jesus – do eventually come but only because God the Father draws them. This leads to our second point: **All whom God gives to Jesus will come to Jesus but not that kind of will.**
 - ▶ We're not talking about forcing anyone to come to Jesus against their will. **Everyone who actually comes to Jesus comes willingly.** But there is a sense of inevitability if the Father has given you to the Son. Look with me at v37, “*All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out.*”
- ❖ **So God the Father apparently has a specific group of people in mind that he has given to God the Son** (cf. 6:39; 10:29; 17:2; 18:9). And if you've been given by the Father to the Son, then you will come to the Son in faith. It's inevitable. It doesn't say you may come or can come. But *will* come to the Son.
- ❖ Throughout the NT, this group of people the Father has given to the Son is called by different names. They're God's elect (Mt. 24:22, 24, 31; 1 Pet. 1:1). Or God's chosen (Mt. 22:14; Col. 3:12). **And what you'll notice is how all this electing and choosing and giving between the Father and the Son occurs prior to our believing, our choosing, our coming to Jesus.** “*All that the Father gives me (present) will come to me (future).*”
 - ▶ If you're a Christian, this means the Father gave you to the Son to be one of his own *before* you came to faith in the Son. **You were chosen before you chose to believe** (cf. Jn. 15:16; Acts 13:48). **You were elected before you elected to follow Jesus.**

- ❖ Later on in **John 10**, the elect/chosen are also called Jesus' sheep, his flock. He goes on to say that he knows his sheep and his sheep know him. **They know their Shepherd's voice and they listen to that voice. So when he says, "Come." They come.**
 - ▶ In 10:24-26, his critics, his opponents, gather around him and ask, "*How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly.*" ²⁵Jesus answered them, "*I told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name bear witness about me, ²⁶but you do not believe ...*"

- ❖ Okay pause for a second. How would you finish that sentence? You do not believe because *you're too stubborn*. You do not believe because *you're too prideful*. Because *you don't know enough or you have too many doubts*.
 - ▶ That's our train of thought. And by implication, that means if you could just humble yourself, if you could just educate yourself, just get enough questions and doubts answered, then you'll believe. You'll be one of his sheep. Ultimately this is something within our grasp, our control, our sphere of sovereignty.

- ❖ But how does Jesus finish that sentence? Look at 10:26, "*But you do not believe because you are not part of my flock.*" That's the exact opposite of what we would've said. We would've said, "You're not part of my flock because you don't believe." It's you exercising your faith that determines whether you're one of the sheep.
 - ▶ But Jesus flips it around. **You don't believe because you're not counted among my sheep.** The determinate factor is whether you were given to me by the Father. Had you been given, then you'd be part of my flock, and when the time comes for me to call, you will come and follow. Look what he goes on to say in 10:27, "*My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.*" When they hear their Shepherd's voice calling, they're drawn to it and freely come.

- ❖ Theologians have a name for this as well. They call it **God's irresistible grace**. It's the idea that when God rescues one of his sheep, when he draws one of his elect out of darkness and into marvelous light, he does so in such a way as to overcome the sinner's resistance so that they freely come. **They want to do no other than to come to Jesus.**
 - ▶ God's grace is irresistible. All that the Father gives to Jesus *will* come to Jesus. There won't be a single person who refuses. But please don't get the impression of God dragging people to Jesus against their will, kicking and screaming.
 - Instead imagine God giving people new hearts and opening blind eyes by shining the irresistibly beautiful light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Cor 4:6).

- ❖ **God saves people by enabling them to finally see Jesus with clear eyes and new hearts, and instantly they're attracted, they're charmed, they're captivated by his beauty, by his glory, by all that he is.** He's simply irresistible. It's the same way a glass of water is irresistible to a man dying of thirst. There's no kicking or screaming involved.

- ❖ Think back to that man in the prison cell. That man in bondage to his own will, enslaved by his own appetite and affections. Imagine if he were to fall madly in love with a woman, but this new love of his life was on the outside and not allowed into his cell. That means he can't see her, talk to her, or hold her in his arms. If his heart has truly been changed, if his new love for her is truly greater than his love for food and drink, then in no time he's going to drop those pounds, freely walk out of that cell, and make a beeline for the love of his life.
- ❖ This is what happens when God saves us. **This is what has to happen in the lives of your non-Christian friends and family if there's to be any hope of their salvation.** God needs to sovereignly intervene. He needs to cause a new birth, to swap out hearts of stone with living hearts of flesh. Hearts that have a new disposition, new appetites, a new will. We're talking about a new love for Jesus that has the power to break chains and loosen bonds around the heart causing us to make a beeline for Jesus.

Keep a Tone of Urgency in Your Evangelism (But Not That Kind of Urgency)

- ❖ So what does all this mean for our evangelism? How does this understanding of God's sovereignty over conversion, of our total depravity and the need of his irresistible grace affect the way we approach evangelism?
 - ▶ **I think it should lead us to keep a tone of urgency in our evangelism but not that kind of urgency.** Not the kind of urgency that leads to fear and anxiety when you're not seeing any conversions. Not the kind that tempts us to tamper with the message or to rely on underhanded methods. We don't need the kind of urgency that would lead us to use high-pressure tactics to get people to make decisions for Jesus.
- ❖ If we believe in God's sovereignty, if we believe that his grace is irresistible, that Jesus' sheep know his voice and will surely come when he calls, then we can take a huge burden off our shoulders. **The salvation of the lost does not rest on your power of persuasion, on your ability to answer all of their questions, or on the strength of your Christian witness.**
 - ▶ God's redemptive purposes will come to pass. All his sheep will be found. All of them will return to the fold. Of that we can be sure. So at a very fundamental level, the pressure is off. We can rest assured in God's sovereignty. So any kind of urgency that would disrupt this blessed assurance is unnecessary and unbiblical.
- ❖ But having said that, there's still an appropriate kind of urgency to be kept in our evangelism. **It's not an urgency based on not knowing whether all of God's sheep will be found. It's an urgency based on not knowing *who* is God's sheep until they're found.**
- ❖ When it comes to the individual non-Christians in our lives, we have no idea if they're part of Jesus' flock. We have no idea if irresistible grace is working to draw them to Christ. **All we know is that, if God has put them in our lives, then we have a responsibility to urgently urge them to come to Jesus *right now*.** To tell them if you have any inkling of spiritual interest, any sense of spiritual need, then do something about it. "*Seek the Lord while he may be found; call upon him while he is near.*" (Isa. 55:6)

- ❖ **I have the utmost confidence that God will save all whom he wills to save**, that the Father has given to the Son a set-apart people, and that in his sovereign timing he'll draw them to Jesus. **And yet I have the utmost conviction that we should still be urgently pleading with unbelievers to come to Christ.** Come and believe in the gospel.
 - ▶ That's not double speak. That's how Jesus speaks. He teaches that you can't come to me unless you're drawn (v44). He says you have to be given to me by my Father (v37). Your coming to me has to be granted (v65). And yet notice what he says in v47, "*Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life.*"
 - He strikes one note. Over and over again, his appeal to the masses is to just believe. Come to me. Feed off me. Drink of the living water I offer. Come and satisfy your longings in me.

- ❖ **And there's no reason to fear trying to come to Jesus but being told that you can't.** That you're not chosen. That you're not one of his sheep. No way. **The fact that you come confirms the fact that you're chosen.** You could only come if you *were* his lost sheep and if you *were* being drawn by the Father's irresistible grace. That was the cause all along. Of course, you're only aware of these realities after you've trusted in Christ. It's in hindsight.
 - ▶ Charles Spurgeon used to say that on the front of the gate of God's kingdom is inscribed the words, "*Whosoever will enter.*" (Jn. 3:16) But once you enter, you'll turn around and notice that on the back of the gate it says, "*Chosen from before the foundation of the world.*" (Eph. 1:4)

- ❖ So there's no reason to fear. If you come to Jesus – no matter when in life you come, no matter the mistakes you made before coming, no matter the circumstances surrounding your coming – **if you come to Jesus, he will receive you. If you turn to him, he will be there.** He'll always be there for you.
 - ▶ He goes on in v37 to say, "*whoever comes to me I will never cast out.*" Then in vv38-40 Jesus speaks of how he came down from heaven to do the will of the Father, and his Father's will is for him to lose none of those he's been given. "*For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.*" (v40)

- ❖ I want to speak directly to anyone here who's not a believer, who hasn't come to Jesus in saving faith. Since you're here in church, I'm going to assume you have some degree, some inkling of spiritual interest in Christ. You've heard the gospel before (perhaps many times).
 - ▶ And yet for some reason you feel like it's not the right time to go all in and go to Jesus. To come to him in faith with everything you have. To follow him as your Lord and Savior. "*Maybe after I finish my schooling, after I settle down in my career or in marriage, or once I have a family. Then I'll get serious about Jesus. Then I'll come.*"

- ❖ To you, I want to stress a bit of urgency. **Do not presume that you can come to Jesus at your own leisure, at your own convenience.** It's not in your power to decide the time and place. Jesus' teaching on the total depravity of the human will says you won't come whenever you're good and ready *because* you'll never be good and ready. **You can't come when you feel like it *because* you'll never feel like it.**
 - ▶ Unless of course the Father intervenes and draws you to his Son. **So if you're feeling any spiritual interest for Jesus, then you should follow through and come to him right now.** Clearly the Father is doing a work in you; otherwise you wouldn't be feeling this way. Seek the Lord while he may be found; call upon him while he is near (Isa. 55:6). Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts (Heb. 4:7). Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation (2 Cor. 6:2).