

Sermon 38: Romans 5:18-19: Part Two: Universalism or Particularism

OUTLINE

The history of universalism
The texts of universalism
The truth of particularism

INTRODUCTION

Who goes to heaven? This is a question that has many different aspects to it. It is umbrella over the question of where do babies go, and what about the bushman or disabled? It has to do with the question of whether most of humanity will be in heaven or hell. It has to do with post-mortem evangelism, purgatory, and whether Jesus descended into hell to preach to the spirits in prison. It has to do with the question of free will, natural theology, the necessity of missions and more, touching nearly every major doctrine. As we come to Romans 5:18-19 the text forces the question upon us. 'Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. 19 For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.' You will notice in v18 that it talks about 'all' being condemned in Adam, and Christ's obedience leading to justification and life for 'all' men.

Once upon a time Universalism, the belief that all people will ultimately end up in heaven was a dead belief that was not held in the mainstream of Christianity. However, with the rise of the emergent church we are seeing a resurgence of universalistic tendencies. Spenser Burke the creator of the famous website, theooze.com has written a book called, *A Heretic's guide to Eternity*. The foreword is written by Brian McLaren, a guru of the emerging church. Spenser writes about the question we are facing: 'Could it be that—beyond religion, reason and conventional wisdom—grace is something to be opted out of rather than opted in to? Is it not something you get but something you already have?

When I say I'm a universalist, what I really mean is that I don't have to believe you have to convert to any particular religion to find God. As I see it, God finds us, and it has nothing to do with subscribing to any particular religious view.

The God I connect with does not assign humans to hell.¹

This is a growing sentiment in our post-modern age where a new form of Liberalism has come riding the wave of culture, a post-modern culture that despises tradition, doctrinal certainty and anyone who says that someone else is wrong. Ordinarily I would let a sermon like this go unpreached as it is not relevant, but the revived liberalism of the Emergent Church has forced us to speak out on the issue again. Writers like Rob Bell, of *Love Wins*, and William P. Young who wrote *The Shack*, have revived universalism for a post-modern age and Christians are buying into it.

¹ Quoted in, *Why we are not emergent*, p1839 of 4017 kindle version.

We will approach this topic in three parts: I will give you a short overview of the history of universalism; then we will look at some of the verses they use from the Bible including Romans 5:18-19 and then we will show that the Bible in fact teaches Particularism/Exclusivism, that is that we are saved through faith in Christ, and there are those who do not believe and will go to hell. And might I add that in asserting this truth we are not gloating but are seeking to stress the truth so that we can then go and do what needs to be done without any confusion.

The history of universalism

The first well known Christian theologian to have held to the view of universalism was Origen. He lived during the second and third centuries in Egypt. Origen mixed Gnosticism and Christianity together. He believed that we all lived in a disembodied state before the world was created. And in that state we sinned, and as punishment God put us into a prison cell called bodies. Those who only sinned lightly were made into angels, those who sinned badly were made into demons and those who were in between were made human beings. Origen believed that any prison cell was temporary and that one day every living soul would be reunited with God freed from any bodily existence to dwell as pure spirit with God. This view was called *Apokatastasis*, and even the devil would one day be saved and all of hell empty. Origen was strongly influenced by the Platonic notion that heaven is to be bodiless whereas the Bible teaches us that God's hope for creation is not a bodiless existence but a restored creation free from satan, sin and death. Augustine refuted this view and Origen was condemned as a heretic by the fifth ecumenical council in 533 AD.

Universalism went quiet after that only entertained by the odd heretic or radical until the rise of Liberalism. John Murray an excommunicated Methodist minister went to England and began the Universalist church. This church went on to abandon all the other essential doctrines of Christianity like the Trinity, the deity of Christ, original sin and conversion. The teaching was taken up by Friedrich Schleiermacher. He denied teachings like the deity of Christ and the virgin birth. In the 1900s Karl Barth who believed that the Bible was full of errors essentially agreed with universalism, though denied that he did. He taught that as all men were condemned in Adam, so all men are elect in Christ. He used Romans 5:18 to prove this view. Karl Barth was a very influential figure and lent weight to the view. Following him was Emil Brunner who taught that universalism is the logical deduction of the doctrine of forgiving grace. Jurgen Moltmann the father of Liberation theology taught that God was bound to save all people because He is love, and is compelled by what He is to save everyone. William Barclay who is well known for a very readable historically informed commentary of the NT lost his daughter in a storm in one of the Lochs in Scotland. After that He denied miracles, the virgin birth, and many other doctrines and repeated the typical Liberal line of the universal Fatherhood of God so that because God is a Father to all, God would not be happy sending any of His family to Hell but would only be happy when they were all back home. Liberalism has also affected parts of the Catholic so that the last Pope, John Paul II said:

"Man – every man without exception whatever – has been redeemed by Christ, and...with man – with each man without any exception whatever – Christ is in a way united, even when man is unaware of it."

An Evangelical form of universalism has also arisen within the ranks of conservative Christians called inclusivism. On 31 May 1997 Robert Schuller was interviewing Billy Graham. Graham was asked about the future of Christianity and he answered giving his belief about the final make-up of the body of Christ. He says, "from all the Christians groups around the world, outside the Christian groups, I think that everybody that loves or knows Christ whether they are conscious of it or not, they are members of the body of Christ...He is calling people out of the world for His name, whether they come from the Muslim world, or the Buddhist world or the non-believing world, they are members of the body of Christ because they have been called by God. They may not know the name of Jesus but they know in their hearts that they need something they do not have, and they turn to the only light they have, and I think that they are saved and they are going to be with us in heaven." (Murray:2000,74). Another well known proponent of inclusivism is Clark Pinnock. Pinnock insists that free will is a truth that even exegesis must be tested by. So in order to preserve his version of free will he insists that every man is free to read and understand the knowledge of God in nature; that every person who dies without the opportunity of hearing the gospel will have a chance after death to hear the gospel, post-mortem evangelism; and that believers of other religions can find their way to the true God through those other religions.

And last but not least here is a quote from Rob Bell's book, *Love wins: Heaven, Hell and the fate of every person who ever lived*: "The love of God WILL melt every hard heart." And although he believes hell exists, no one will be there forever if anyone goes there it will be a 'period of pruning,' and 'an intense experience of correction.'

That is only a small taste of some of the thinking behind those who have embraced a universalistic interpretation of Scripture. We will look at some verses in the Bible in a moment but let me offer two critiques at this point. In every case of universalism, in fact in every case of error you have people who have taken sides. When you are reading the Bible you have a choice. Either you accept what the Bible teaches and submit to it, or you put yourself as an authority over the Bible and make it submit to you. You can either see yourself as not-all knowing and believe that there are certain things that God has to reveal and He has done so reliably; or you have to think that you know better than the Bible reveals and have to correct it somehow. Reason or revelation, who is your authority? For this reason we can say that universalism goes all the way back to the Garden of Eden when the devil challenged God's word about punishing sin saying, 'did God really say?' Now we certainly sympathize with those who think of the idea of people being put into an eternal hell as overwhelming. However, Origen mixed Gnosticism with the Bible and taught revelation; Schleiermacher thought the Bible had errors; Barth thought the Bible had errors; Moltmann thought the Bible had errors; Barclay thought the Bible had errors; and Bell is part of the Emerging Church movement that has bought into post-modern attitudes towards the past beliefs of Christianity. In every instance you reason placed above revelation. Man

thinking to himself, 'I don't lie that, it must mean something else,' and then they go and squeeze the truth of the Scriptures to suite themselves. If there is one lesson you need to take away from universalism it is this one: Revelation not reason is the final authority for faith and practice. This does not mean that we do not use our brains, of course we do. We employ logic, argumentation, exegesis, translation, and many other intellectual endeavours. However, we employ them as servants of the truth not as rulers.

Reductionism is the second problem. When it comes to thinking we are naturally lazy. We like to see our news on TV not read it in the newspaper. We prefer books with pictures to lighten the load, and novels to text books. One particularly bad habit of lazy thought is reductionism. We have a tendency to oversimplify things to one main principle and then that principle is made into cookie cutter. For example, God is love. This one truth is turned into the whole truth and then there is no longer any room for God's justice and wrath. Or free will, we see Clark Pinnock insisting that free will tests our exegesis and theological situations like Post-mortem evangelism are created only to accommodate the notion that everyone should have a choice to go to heaven as a fundamental right. Or Barclay's notion of God's Fatherhood. He makes the mistake of thinking that every human being is born a child of God and therefore everyone will one day go to heaven. Reductionism, oversimplification, this is a mental error which leads to dangerous beliefs. The Bible teaches that God is love and God is holy; that we are responsible to choose but need to be enabled by God's grace; that God is our Creator but only becomes our Father in a salvific sense when we believe upon Christ. A single truth made the whole truth at the cost of other truths becomes dangerous lie.

The texts of universalism

Now it is time for us to face those texts that the universalists say teach universalism. We will not be able to take all the texts that are used so we will make a selection. Firstly, some words spoken by Jesus in John 12:32, 'And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.' You will notice that the word 'all' is used by Jesus, this has led some universalists to emphasize that all would therefore go to heaven. The most basic rule of interpreting any texts is to examine a text in its context. So we will look at the verses surrounding these verses and see if there is any way in which they shed light on its true meaning to confirm or deny a universalist interpretation. This verse is quickly seen to be teaching that Jesus intends for all kinds of people, not merely Jews to be saved as a result of His crucifixion, this can be seen in v20 where we find the occasion that brought forth these words was some Greeks wanting to meet the Jewish Messiah. And secondly, in the context in v25 and 48 we see Christ mentioning judgement indicating that He is not talking about universal redemption in v32.

Next we have the text that prompted this discussion Romans 5:18, 'Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men.' Once again all is mentioned, but can we push it for all it is worth? We will see that the context says, no! Firstly, in v17 we are told that justification is for all who receive it, not all by default putting a condition on it. And secondly, in v19 we see the word

many is brought in when the idea is repeated showing us that Paul was not intending the idea of a universal salvation.

Paul repeats this idea again in 1 Cor. 15:22, 'For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive.' Once again we have the 'all' language. But a closer analysis of the verse makes it clear. It is true that all in Adam die in Adam, and all in Christ live in Christ, but not all are in Christ.

Another is Titus 2:11, 'For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people.' This can mean only 1 of two things, either Jesus saves every person, or He is the saviour of all types of people, that is, of all nations not every individual. The second option is of course the correct one.

1 Timothy 4:9-10, 'The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance. 10 For to this end we toil and strive, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe.' This verse appears to support a universalist reading until one is familiar with the historical context. The Roman Emperor took to himself the title 'the saviour of the world.' Paul is making a very politically incorrect statement in 1 Timothy 4:10 about who is the true saviour and is not intentionally trying to teach a universal salvation. One would need a number of clear verses to teach universal salvation before it would be a likely interpretation, but we will see shortly what the Bible actually teaches in this regard.

The last one worth mentioning is Philippians 2:10-11, 'so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.' Some think that because every knee will bow that this proves universalism, but the truth is every knee will bow, some will be bowing willingly, but others will be bowing in fear.

The truth of particularism

What we need to do now is focus on those verses that teach us that all in fact do not go to heaven. And let me stress as we study these that we should do so with a heavy heart and a deep sense of responsibility. Our attempt to clarify what the Bible says on this question is not intended as a boast of an argument won but the establishing of a need that we are responsible to meet.

It is hard to know where to begin because the Bible says so much on this issue. So let's start with Acts 4:12, 'And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.' There is no salvation in the name of Allah, Buddha, Krishna or any other deity. Salvation is found in Christ alone. Why so? Because Jesus Christ is the only acceptable sacrifice for sin, and the only one given by God with the ability to represent His people and provide a righteousness sufficient for them. And so we have it from the words of Christ Himself, 'Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.'" Let that stand as an

argument against the notion that people are saved through other religions. Those who are worshippers in other religions are committing the sin of idolatry and the Bible is very clear about their destiny, 'Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by the gates. 15 Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and the sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood.' (Rev. 22:14-15).

Romans 10:9-17 tells us that we need to hear the Gospel in order to be saved, 'because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. 10 For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. 11 For the Scripture says, "Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame." 12 For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. 13 For "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

¹⁴ How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? 15 And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!" 16 But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?" 17 So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.' This means that one is not saved through general revelation or nature. In fact Paul tells us that no one obeys the information that is revealed in nature, all people suppress the truth and turn it into something else, 'For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. 19 For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. 20 For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.' (Rom. 1:18-20).

Some have taught in universalism that hell is only temporary and that it is like a purgatory, a time of cleansing with a final end in heaven. However, Jesus tells us in the parable of Lazarus and the rich man that one does not exit hell to go to heaven after death, 'And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.' (Luke 16:26). And in the parable of the sheep and the goats we see that all will not be on one place together but there will be a separation of the sheep and the goats and the goats are sent into eternal punishment, Matt. 25:46, 'And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.'

Why stress and prove such a terrible truth, that those who do not believing in Christ will go into an eternal Hell? Because this is what we are supposed to be busying ourselves with as the church. At present 3 people die every second, that is 180 every minute, nearly 11000 every hour, about 260 000 a day, 95 000000 a year. Most of these would be in non-Christian countries. Think of the fragility of life and how all are hanging over the edge of it's pits hanging on to a branch quickly loosening it's roots able to give in at any point. C. S.

Lewis brings this thought home well in a letter he wrote about his wife who was recovering from Cancer. "The cancerous bones have rebuilt themselves in a way quite unusual and joy can now walk... Her general health and spirits seem excellent. Of course the sword of Damocles hangs over us. Or should I say that circumstances have opened our eyes to see the sword which really hangs always over everyone." (Blanchard p46). Think upon the many that die alone, the many that die in pain, the many that die in institutions with no one but strangers all around. Think of the wars and the genocides, and the many without God and hope. There are those who die too young. Life is short and fragile and we are all hanging by a thread. These thoughts if properly pondered can cause an immense burden to the mind. As we fill up our thoughts with the WWI deaths, and the WWII holocaust, and all the while remembering the greatest problem that they are dying without Christ, love and compassion will soon flow with tears.

At Christmas time we are being told that it is a time to think about family, rest, giving, sharing. In truth it is time to think about hell and those will go there. God gave His Son, which is what Christmas is remembering so that any who believe on Him should be saved from eternal hell and have eternal life. The last words that He gave His church before He went to heaven were 'Go and make disciples.' As we ponder how silly universalism is, let us remember the seriousness of the task that is left to us. We go over this ground not to prove we are right but to remind ourselves that we are to be busy going about the business of saving people from hell.