

Sermon 80: Romans 8:28: God's Providence and Permissive Willing of Sin

OUTLINE

In the Church

In the world

INTRODUCTION

The doctrine of Divine Providence from a Biblical point of view asserts that God is in control of everything that happens. This is a necessary truth because it not only flows logically from the fact that God would not be bringing all things to pass according to His will, but also because this is the way the Scripture speaks about God's ongoing supervision of all things. We have enforced the perspective that God is in control contrary to the deistic worldview that modern science has brainwashed us with. We have investigated God's will and working in the realm of nature looking at God use of means, and of miracle. However, instead of allowing rationalism to limit God's providence to merely inanimate things we also looked at how God is in control of all human events, and more pointedly sin. We saw that sin happens according to God's sovereign purposes. That sin does not come to pass without His willing it, however we touched on primary and secondary causes, and God's permissive will to show how it is possible that God can will things without committing the act of sin, nor approving it. We showed the limits of reason and the importance of allowing mystery to hide from us God's perfectly good and holy ways which make God unblamable and man inexcusable.

Well in this next section we are going to explore a little further the details of God's deliberate yet guarded allowing of sin. We will be looking at the issues of sin in the church and the world. Let it be stated up front that, although the doctrine of God's permissive will does relieve the pressure of the difficulty of understanding God's sovereignty over evil, it can only take us so far. It will not give us all the answers we would like but act as a sufficient illustration of the types of good and holy ways that God uses in controlling evil. We will have to infer from God's revealed workings what the nature of His hidden workings is like.

In the Church

If God's purposes are sovereign over sin, how do they extend into sin in the believer's life. Where we can conceive of sin having a role in judging the unbeliever how do we reconcile the use of sin in a believer's life when the believer has been called to holiness? In God's permissive will, His use of sin is always in a self-defeating manner. In other words, He always allows sin to enable sin to judge and destroy sin. He uses sin in order to humiliate sin and glorify His holiness and wisdom. This is highlighted over and over again in the Bible most spectacularly in the death of Christ. Here sin was at its worst and in Christ suffered its greatest defeat. God always sets up sin to commit suicide, whether it is Ahithophel, Saul, Judas or the devil, these personify all God's ways when it comes to sin, and it is no different in the believer. Sin is allowed in order to make the Christian holy, only a holy and wise God could bring such a result without getting His hands dirty, listen to how the confession puts it.

It begins by reminding us of God's wisdom, in case we thought He was foolish; righteousness, in case we feel tempted to charge Him with sin; and grace, lest we assume He is miserly and cruel in His motives. And add the adjective 'most' to all of the above for emphasis. "The most wise, righteous, and gracious God...". It is vital that we bring with the character of God unquestionably established before us. We must not doubt the Fatherly manner of His dealings with us.

Then the confession tells us what He does, "...does often times leave for a season His own children to manifold temptations and corruptions of their own hearts...". The confession puts the examples forward of Hezekiah who God left to reveal to him the persistent problem of pride in his heart. 2 Chron. 32:31 (ESV) "And so in the matter of the envoys of the princes of Babylon, who had been sent to him to inquire about the sign that had been done in the land, God left him to himself, in order to test him and to know all that was in his heart."

Why does He do it, 2 reasons are stated, "...to chastise them for their former sins, or to discover to them the hidden strength of corruption and deceitfulness of their hearts...". The intended outcome being, and 3 things are mentioned '...that they may be humbled; and to raise them to a more close and constant dependence for their support upon Himself; and to make them more watchful against all future occasions of sin, and for other just and holy reasons...'. Another example given is Paul's thorn in the flesh, 2 Cor. 12:7-9 (ESV) "So to keep me from being too elated by the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from being too elated. [8] Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. [9] But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me." The confession is telling us that when we become proud and self-sufficient, and think how well we are doing, not giving credit to God and His Spirit. He will show us exactly how strong we are, 'pride comes before a fall'. Notice that God leaves us to our own sin to teach us, He does not force sin upon us.

The confession shows us what we should be concluding from this aspect of the discussion, 'So that whatsoever befalls any of His elect is by His appointment, for His glory, and their good'. In talking about 'leaving' and God's permissive will, one might get the wrong idea, that God allows sin to spin out of control in our lives. The confession tells us that God's permissive will allows sin, that it is controlled, in order to glorify Him and for our good. God does not make us sin, He does not command us to sin, He allows the sin that is in us to chasten and refine us, humble us and draw us closer to Himself. God is glorified in the ironic use of sin to make us Holy, the ironic display of sins impotence to glorify His strength. Let me just interject at this point that we cannot follow the stupidity of forced logic and argue that if God is in control of the sin in my life, then He is guilty for it and not me. And the foolish notion that this doctrine somehow gives licence to sin. As we have argued all along in the discussion of God's providence. Just because God works miracles, and accomplishes His ends by means, we cannot neglect those means. Just because God is sovereign over sin this does not licence us to ignore His revealed will and govern our lives from a forced application of His secret will. And just because, even our sins are by His

appointment, we cannot think that we are somehow obeying God when we sin, or doing His will. We must follow God's revealed will as found in the Bible and not extrapolate based on reason.

There isn't much here that is controversial, however it would be fruitful for us to look at James 1:13-16 to see how we more about who is actually responsible for the sin in our lives. James 1:13-15 (ESV) "Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God," for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death." The whole of chapter 1 to this point is about trials that God brings in order to test our faith and make us stronger. He in His providence orders the events of our lives to help us to grow in holiness. However, some fall into sin and blame their sin on God because He has sovereignly ordained the events that led to the sin. James makes clear in verse 13 that God tests, He does not tempt "Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am tempted by God'. What is the difference? Well, the difference is in the motive. For example compare the motives of God and satan. God often uses satan for His own purposes, e.g. the testing of Peter. However, God and satan have different goals. God seeks to make Peter holy, satan seeks to make him sinful, and destroy him.

James argues this way on the basis of God's character, 'For God cannot be tempted with evil'. In Greek mythology the gods saw the beauty of women and were sexually aroused. This is not our God, he is not susceptible to sin, nor does He prey on weakness, rather He seeks to strengthen us. His intentions are holy, righteous, good, no matter how otherwise the circumstances may make things appear to be. James highlights that sin comes from the sinners heart not from God, 'But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own evil desire.' God does not make the sin irresistible, He does not hypnotise you, nor work any influence upon you that you are forced into something. He does not put the thought into your head. No temptation arises in us because of our sin natures. So that even when we handle holy things like God's law, it can provoke sin. Not because the law is sinful but because we are. So when we sin, it is because we are tempted by our sin, and we choose to give into it. God may lead us into situations where He knows we are weak, but as we have said this is in order to strengthen us not to trip us up, He always make a way of escape and never tempts us beyond our ability to bear. Sin is always our fault not His. His intentions are pure, holy and just, always.

In the world

Paragraph 6 deals with sin in the world. Here is a quick summary. God's ways of working do not change with regard to the wicked only His goals. He still acts out of His perfect character and so the confession begins, 'As for the wicked and ungodly men whom God, as the righteous judge...' Here we see the emphasis on God's righteous judgement against sin, not His fatherly dealings as in the former paragraph. And, '...for former sin does blind and harden'. Because of sin God hardens and blinds. Please note that God does not randomly harden people, but hardens them on account of their sin. This judgement takes several forms, firstly, '...from them He not only withholds His grace, whereby they might have been enlightened in their understanding, and wrought upon their hearts...'. On

account of their sin God withdraws His gracious workings on the hearts and minds of the sinners. For example, the Word of God no longer penetrates, Deut. 29:4 (ESV) "But to this day the Lord has not given you a heart to understand or eyes to see or ears to hear." Remember that God makes the word effective! This is a work of grace. Secondly, '...but sometimes also withdraws the gifts which they had'. Matthew 13:12 (ESV) "For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away." This prooftext is referring to the privileges that the Jews had, but would lose for their rejection of Christ. Thirdly, 'and exposes them to such objects as their corruption makes occasion of sin'. Now this one should not be misunderstood, the example given is Elisha's prophecy to Hazael that he would one day be king of Syria. The effect of the Word of God on his sinful heart led him to abuse the word and commit murder in order to self-fulfil the prophecy. Fourthly, '...and withal, gives them over to their own lusts, the temptations of the world, and the power of satan, whereby it comes to pass that they harden themselves, under those means which God uses for the softening of others'. Psalm 81:11-12 (ESV) "But my people did not listen to my voice; Israel would not submit to me. [12] So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts, to follow their own counsels." Exodus 8:15 (ESV) "But when Pharaoh saw that there was a respite, he hardened his heart and would not listen to them, as the Lord had said."

This paragraph is stating that the sin of the unbeliever is in the control of God by being the result of His judgement. This brings up the very important topic of God's hardening the sinner. The picture the word hardening has upon our minds upon first hearing sounds like God is doing an act whereby He forces a condition upon someone who didn't want it. This is of course not what should be implied. In order to fully understand the Bible's teaching on hardening, we need to familiarise ourselves with the doctrine of common grace.

Calvin restored to the Church a comprehensive view of common grace. Common grace is God's working in the world, saving grace His working in the Church. In our study of God's providence we have established that all things come to pass by His will and power. This means that the gifts that unbelievers exercise, the various governments they install, the good deeds they perform, the arts they excel in, the sciences they are able to progress, these and more all come from God's enabling. This is important for how we view the sinner and the amount of good in his/her life. Who is it that restrains sin that it does not consume all of mankind in one generation? God! He restrains the effects of sin upon man's mind that he can cultivate knowledge, government, education, science, art, culture, society, etc. Only heaven will reveal how far God has gone in preventing the inevitable degrading that sin affects. 2 Tim. 2:20 (ESV) "Now in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver but also of wood and clay, some for honorable use, some for dishonorable." God wills that some will be saved and have an honourable use, but even those who are not elect, they are not left to be all their sin can make of them, they become vessels of other sorts. Man of course thinks more of himself than he ought not realising that every good gift comes from above, that God opens His hands and everything lives. That it is in Him we live, and move and have our being. All good is of grace.

Now picture with me the way that the Bible describes mankind, as a lump of clay, Romans 9:21 (ESV) "Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel

for honored use and another for dishonorable use?" (Job 10:9, 33:6; Is 29:16, 45:9, 64:8; Jer 18:6; 2 Cor 4:7). Now think as a 1st Century Hebrew about the nature of clay, what happens to clay when exposed to air and sunlight? It hardens, it is the natural tendency of clay to do so. So in order to keep it soft it needs to be kneaded and worked over by the potter. We are not talking here about Polymer clay. However, when He stops influencing it, and leaves it to its natural properties its tendency is to harden. And so it is with the human heart. We are a dead corpse, and it is only the Spirit which keeps us from constant putrefaction. Sometimes, when the unbeliever has continually rejected God's word, God withdraws all of the restraining effects of His Spirit, and the natural tendency of the human heart takes over and sin results. This was the analysis of Dr Martin Lloyd-Jones of what God did in Germany which led to WWII. The German liberals led the whole nation against God in the 1800s, come the 1900s and we see 2 World Wars. Some turned around and accused God of being a monster, but Lloyd-Jones analysis is the best. The Wars reveal what we are like not what God is like. That is the effect of God removing His Spirit and allowing man to reveal himself in all his glory. Phil Johnson shares another illustration,

"When I was in high school, I had an old car, a beautiful 1954 Chevrolet Bel Aire. (I wish I still had it.) But in those days it was not quite the antique it would be today, and far from being a classic, it had some rather severe mechanical problems. One was that it steered left all the time. If I wanted to make it go straight down the road, I had to exert a steady pull to the right. But if I wanted to change to the left lane, I simply had to release that pressure, and the car would automatically veer left."¹

So when we speak of God hardening a sinners heart, He is not forcing anything upon the sinner, He is simply allowing the sinner to be himself.

Continuing with this train of thought, the confession reflects another observation that Calvin made, and that is that the same word, and acts of kindness which work to soften the hearts of the believer work to harden the heart of the unbeliever. When Pharaoh saw that the plague had let up, instead of his heart being brought to repentance by God's relenting, he used the reprieve to extend his rebellion (Ex 8:15). Calvin uses the illustration of the effect of sunlight on a corpse. We do not blame the sunshine for causing the rotting corpse to rot even faster. And so when we speak of God's hardening, because of the nature of the sinful heart even that which is good can harden the heart, not because of God's word, but because of our sin.

So apply this to Saul, Ahab, Pharaoh, Judas, and any other sinner who sins. What we see is that God is in control of their sin, their sin is permitted or restrained according to His purposes. And He never causes the sin in any direct fashion, only indirectly by allowing the sinner to be himself. The bottom line is that the good is attributable to God, and the bad to the sinner. I am sure that there are many more questions about evil that we would like to ask, but there is not more that we can say than what the Scripture says. I hope you can see the God is sovereign, that evil is not a part of the universe where God's will has been overturned or His power defeated. That when evil seems to be prevailing God is still in

¹ (<http://teampyro.blogspot.com/2007/10/does-gods-sovereignty-mean-he-makes.html>).

control and working all things according to His purposes. That being in control does not make Him the author or approver of evil. And that even though it is part of His decree, He does not will sin like you and I do, He is holy and seeks holy ends. We cannot explain more than that, we simply have to affirm that He is in control, He is good, and that sin is from the creature not the Creator. God created the world good, without sin, and then the angels and man introduced sin, however God conquers it displaying His holiness, justice, wisdom and grace. All the while we see double agency.

We have been trying to show that God is working all things together for the good of those who love Him, well let me end by quoting the last paragraph of the confession in the chapter on providence. 'As the providence of God doth in general reach to all creatures, so after a most special manner it taketh care of His church, and disposeth to the good thereof.'