



My wife and I have three adult children and one of them in particular experienced what's commonly called separation anxiety. This is just a stage where a child experiences anxiety when separated from mom or dad. I think most of us know this is something quite common in children and most of the time they grow out of it before they start school, but it can be a challenging time. I'm sure there are more than a few parents of young children who experienced this very thing just a few moments ago as you dropped your child off at CPCKids! I'm told this can become a more serious problem as kids get a bit older and are kind of paralyzed by this fear, but most kids just grow out it.

I want to talk today about a different kind of separation anxiety in regard to our relationship with God. One of the most basic questions we all have to deal with as we grow up in our walk with God is this issue of anxiety or fear over the possibility of being separated from him and his love. Is there something I could do or something that might happen to me that could separate me from his love? I often talk with folks who live with this fear. Some of you are struggling with this very thing today. Perhaps the joy of your initial experience with Jesus has waned and you wonder why? You may be struggling with some sin and that causes doubts as well. The Christian life may be more difficult than you expected and you wonder if perhaps somehow God has turned against you. All these feelings and doubts are common. You do something, or something hard happens, and a voice within you whispers, "Is God still there? Does Jesus still love you?"

It's funny, the first song we sang to our children and then taught them to sing addressed this very fear:

Jesus loves me, this I know,

For the Bible tells me so;

Little ones to him belong,

They are weak but he is strong.

Yes, Jesus loves me! Yes, Jesus loves me!

Yes, Jesus loves me! The Bible tells me so.

Why is this the first lesson in theology we teach our kids? Because we know the simple truth that Jesus loves me is at the core of our faith. We know the constancy of Christ's love must be planted very deeply in the soil of our hearts if we're going to grow up as believers.

This is the issue the apostle Paul addresses in Romans 8:31-39. He begins with these words, "*What, then, shall we say in response to these things?*" What things? Well, Paul just finished giving us an unshakable promise that, "In all things God works for the good of those who love him and are called according to his purpose." Then he nailed home this truth by revealing an unbreakable chain of five links in our salvation. In eternity past God set his love on us, and then he predestined us to become like his Son, and then in present time he called us, and when we responded in faith he justified us. Then, finally in eternity future he even glorified us. And that chain cannot be broken! So he asks, "*What, then, shall we say in response to these things?*" And what he going to try to do in the next paragraph is convince us that no one and nothing can separate us from the love of Christ. Would you repeat that with me: No one and nothing can separate us from the love of Christ. But do you really believe that? Most of us really don't. So Paul is going to build an argument to convince us. And the way he does that is by asking five questions that get to the heart of the matter. Each of them deals with a different reason we might doubt his love.

Question 1: God's Power

The first question is: "*If God is for us, who can be against us?*" When he says, "If God is for us..." he really means, "Since God is for us..." But don't take that fact for granted. If you read the Old Testament you'll see there are several times God will say to a nation or even to a person, "I'm against you." But Paul has spent most of the last eight chapters arguing that God is **for us** in Christ. Jesus took our sin upon himself and paid our debt so that God **can** be for us. If he fore-loved us, predestined us, called us, justified us and glorified us, then he must be for us! And if God is for us, who can be against us?

By the way, he's not saying no one or nothing is ever against us. There are all kinds of forces working against us! The world, the flesh and the devil are all against us, and they're much too strong for us. But what Paul is saying is it doesn't matter who's against us if God is for us. Those marshaled against us won't be able to change God's love for us or alter his plans for us.

When I was in elementary school I was harassed for a time by a bully. I don't know why he had it out for me, but he was twice my size and he loved to pick on me. I was scared to death of the guy. But one day my older brother, who was in junior high at the time, showed up on the playground right around the time

the bell rang for school to be out. Now my brother was already six feet tall and shaving. He stood between me and the bully and said, "If you ever threaten my brother again, you'll have to answer to me." You know what I felt like? Man, I got a little of my swagger back! Do you know why? Because if my brother is for me, who can be against me? That's what King David said in Psalm 27:1, *"The Lord is my light and my salvation—whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life—of whom shall I be afraid?"* So when opposition appears, and you know you're no match for it, remember God loves you and stands with you. If he's for you—and he is—who can be against you?

Question 2: God's Generosity

But we might still wonder, will God really supply everything I need? There are so many variables that could take place in our lives, so many things to worry us and cause us to fret. I don't know about you, but there are times when I project forward in my thinking to all the possible scenarios of what could happen to me or those I love. Or I think about things I might do to cut me off from God's grace. In all this, I wonder if God will really continue to supply what I need? So Paul asks a second question, *"He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all — how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?"*

Here's extent of the generosity of our God: He didn't spare his own Son. He phrases this in a way that points us back to the patriarch, Abraham. God is like Abraham, who was willing to sacrifice his son Isaac. But he's also quite different from Abraham, because in the end Abraham didn't have to sacrifice his son. God provided a ram to take Isaac's place. But here's the deal—nothing was provided for God. God said to Abraham and to us, "I won't require you to sacrifice your sons, I'll only ask that of myself." And that's what he did—he gave his Son.

If that's what God did, how could he possibly withhold any good thing from you? He who's already given you the best, the greatest, the dearest thing he has, while you were his enemy, and while you were helpless, will he not also give you lesser things? If someone thinks enough of you to give you a costly, brilliant, flawless diamond, do you think he'll object when you ask him for the box that goes with it? If God in his love has given us his own Son, do you really think he'll withhold anything else you need? How will he not graciously give us all things?

Question 3: God's Pardon

In the next question we're brought into a court of law. He asks, *"Who will bringing charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies."* His argument is that no prosecution can succeed since God is our judge and he's already justified us. Through Christ, our sin was already judged, the penalty paid in full, and all charges have been dropped. So, who can accuse us?

There are many who will try. At times, our own conscience accuses us. The devil constantly accuses us. In Revelation 12:10

he's called "the accuser of the brethren." Not only that, there are many people who delight to point a finger at us in accusation. I'm reading through the Psalms in my devotions this year and I'm amazed at how often David complains about people accusing him of wrong. It happens to all of us. But none of it will hold up, and none of it should matter. Why? Because the judge of all the earth has justified us. If the highest judge in the highest court has declared us not guilty, who can condemn us?

The accusations that come our way often have to do with our past. Guilt for past wrongs can grab us so quickly and unexpectedly that its assault may rattle even the most seasoned believer. We can be going about our day and suddenly something online, or something on TV, or even something someone says reminds us of something in our past, and a rush of guilt sweeps over us again.

Sometimes it's just a look someone gives us. I recall as a teenager being suspected of sneaking into my dad's liquor cabinet. My dad accused me and I was guilty. He knew it and I knew it, but I knew some things about him. So I looked right at him, deep into his eyes, as if to say, "How can you accuse me when I know what you've done?" He didn't say another word. Years later he told me he knew exactly what my eyes were saying.

Sometimes it's just a look, and our condemnation silences us. Intervening years are no guarantee of a clear conscience. I've preached on abortion and seen hearts torn over something that happened ten years ago. I've preached on adultery and seen silent tears confess sin hidden for decades. I've preached on parenting and seen heads drop in shame over wayward adult children. I don't regret words that convict of sin because that often leads to confession and healing where it's been lacking, but once the sin is dealt with, God's forgiveness should never be doubted, and guilt for sin long ago confessed should never be recreated.

It reminds me of the story in the gospel of John about the woman caught in adultery. The religious leaders caught her in the act and brought her before Jesus and deemed her worthy of stoning according to the law. Jesus invited whomever was without sin to throw the first stone, and one by one they walked away. When it was just Jesus and her, do you recall what he said to her? "Women, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" She looked around and answered, "No one, Lord." Jesus answered, "Neither do I condemn you."

One day, in the heavenly courtroom, it will just be you and him, and he'll ask, "Where are they? Does no one condemn you?" And you'll answer, "No one, Lord." And with nothing but love in his eyes, he'll say, "Neither do I condemn you."

Question 4: Christ's Intercession

But what if sin is not just past? Though we believe God forgives our past sins, what if today's sin eats at our hearts and consciences? Sometimes it's easier for us to appreciate God's

forgiveness for sins we committed when we didn't really know any better than it is to experience forgiveness of our present sin when we do know better.

Have you ever heard the term, besetting sin? It's a particular sin we can't get rid of. It's the sin that attaches to us like a barnacle. We all struggle with besetting sins. They're like a piece of furniture we keep hitting our shin against. At some point, you think you have it licked. But then, all of a sudden, Whack! You do it again. The worst thing about besetting sin is it can propel us into even greater sin. We think, "What's the use of trying to stop? God can't love me anyway in a state like this. So why fight it?"

This is what Paul addresses in the next question, "*Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.*" Paul assures us God's love covers the wrong we commit today as well as yesterday. You see, what Jesus did in the past in his death and resurrection wasn't the end of his work for us. He points us also to Christ's ongoing work of intercession. Jesus is praying for us as he's seated at the right hand of the Father, which is the place of supreme honor. No one can ever condemn us because right now the most honored Son is interceding for us before his Father. He's our heavenly advocate and high priest who's constantly reminding the Father of his love for us and his death on our behalf. Philip Yancey writes, "As Jesus once prayed for Peter, now he prays for us... In fact, the New Testament's only glimpse of what Jesus is doing right now depicts him at the right hand of God interceding for us. In three years of active ministry, Jesus changed the moral landscape of the planet. For nearly two thousand years since, he's been using another tactic: prayer."

Question 5: Christ's Love

This leads to the final question where we come back to the central issue of God's love, "*Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?*" Again, this is the core question. Can anything or anyone separate us from the love of Christ? Paul offers seven formidable candidates: "*Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?*" We know Paul had experienced all those things. We may have only experienced a few of them, but they all involve suffering, and we all suffer. He even quotes from Psalm 44:22 where the psalmist laments Israel's defeat at the hands of pagan nations. "*For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.*" Why would God allow that? Why does God allow any of this?

What Paul is getting at here is so often we interpret our suffering and our defeats as a sign of God's displeasure, as an indication that perhaps we are separated from his love. "If God loves me, why would he allow me to go through all of this? Maybe he's punishing me." But Paul wants to dispel such an idea, so he declares, "*No, in all these things we are more than conquerors*

through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Again, that's a formidable list that includes physical threats, demonic rulers, wicked humans, death, life, time and space. But the things that might harm us or destroy us actually serve to grow us and ensure our victory. That's why he says in all these things we're "*more than conquerors.*" Paul kind of invents a word here that means we're like super conquerors. We not only defeat these things, we subjugate them. We not only endure them, we overcome them! We crush them! They become our servants. Neither suffering nor the forces behind it can drive a wedge between us and him who loved us. Instead, they serve his purposes in our life.

By the way, notice those words at the end of v. 37. Paul points to "*him who loved us*"—past tense. That sounds kind of strange. What if my wife introduced me as her husband whom she loved—past tense? I'd be offended! Don't you love me in the present tense? Why does Paul say that? He's pointing to an expression of love that happened at a specific time in the past. What would that be? What else but the cross? Jesus proved his love for us by his suffering on the cross, so now our sufferings can't ever separate us from his love. Our confidence isn't in our love for God but his love for us; a love forever proven by the cross. Nothing can separate us from God's love. On the contrary, we're more than conquerors!

Paul has asked us five questions that are meant to cause us to pause and think. Each of these questions make us ponder the character of God. Paul's answer to each question is the same: no one and nothing!

- God is for us. Who then can be against us? No one and nothing!
- God did not spare his own Son. What then could possibly quench his generosity towards us? No one and nothing!
- God has justified us. Who then can bring any charge against us? No one and nothing!
- Christ is interceding for us. Who then can who condemn us? No one and nothing!
- Christ died for us. Who shall separate us from his love? No one and nothing!

Tim Keller writes, "The purpose of the questions is almost to beat us out of our disbelief that we're saved totally by grace and are therefore completely safe to face life without fear. It's incredible, relentless, intense logic." No more separation anxiety

because no one and nothing can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ.

If we really believed this, we'd live free from fear. Yet many of us still live in fear of being separated from whatever is important to us. Some hold to things as tightly as possible, trying to control everyone and everything around them. Others try to keep God in their favor by their own good behavior. But the truth is, if we can't be separated from the love of God, and he will graciously give us all things, then in the end it doesn't matter whatever else we might be separated from. If the love of God is the truth on which you're basing your life, then you'll learn to hold everything else loosely. You won't have to live in fear of loss. You won't have to live trying to control everything. You won't have to fret that maybe you haven't done enough to keep yourself in God's favor.

John Chrysostom, who lived in the last half of the fourth century, earned the nickname "golden-mouth" because of his eloquent sermons. This got him in trouble with Roman authorities. When he was brought before the Roman emperor he was threatened with exile if he remained a Christian. Chrysostom's reply to the emperor reflects the insight of one who understood that true

freedom from fear comes with absolute confidence in the love of God.

First, the Emperor threatened him with exile. John responded, "You CAN'T exile me, the whole world is my father's house."

"Then I will kill you," said the emperor.

"You CAN'T," said John, "for my life is hid with Christ in God."

"Then I will take away your treasures."

"You CAN'T, for my treasure is in heaven."

"Then I will drive you away from men and you will have no friends left!"

"You CAN'T, for I have a friend in heaven from whom I cannot be separated. I defy you, for there's nothing you can do to hurt me!"

What's he really saying? No one and nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. And, in the end, that's all that really matters.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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