

SAFE AND SECURE

GOD’S LOVE

Romans 8:31-39

What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written,

“For your sake we are being killed all the day long;
we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.”

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

“Safe and Secure.” This is Paul’s crescendo. This is the culmination of a massive argument, a massive presentation that Paul brings to us to tell us there is security in Jesus Christ. There is complete security. Even though we live in an unsafe world, there is a safe place in Jesus Christ. He doesn’t mean by that that bad things will never happen. He doesn’t mean by that that we’ll never suffer or endure hardship. But there is a place where we are completely secure in this life and for all of eternity.

His crowning section here to this argument is all about the love of God. He calls us to, he reminds us of, he envisions us with a life that is so aware of, so secure in the love of God that we do live in profound security. Our lives, then, are expressed in magnificent, generous, sacrificial expressions of love to others.

I was recently thinking about how God’s love is expressed here in this church. I thought of three things that are somewhat unique to Riverside Church. We are not the only church that does these things. Some churches do them better. Maybe when I tell you these things, you’ll say, “Well, that

hasn’t exactly been my experience.” I’m sorry for the false advertising you’re about to hear. But I truly believe that God is doing these things.

1. Racial unity.
2. Church unity.
3. General expressions of love for all people.

He is giving us grace for these things. We have a long way to go, but we are experiencing God’s help. We are a diverse group of people, if you just look around. We have a lot to learn and we still need to diversify at levels of leadership. I am not in any way suggesting we’ve arrived. But in a world that’s so broken and divided, we see God’s love bringing unity, which is supernaturally driven.

The picnic last week was amazing -- the International Sunday celebration picnic. Did we have fun? As far as I know, even though it got very competitive at times, there were no fights that broke out. Great food, great fun celebrating that Jesus Christ unites us.

Church unity. I am so encouraged at how God is bringing the Church in Broward County together. I’m not talking about this kind of mean-nothing, watered-down, superficial unity. I’m talking about real relationships centered on Jesus Christ and the Spirit of God, where Christians are loving one another and helping one another and working together for the good of the community and for the love of God. It’s wonderful.

Our elders are all in on this. They have released me to participate, to give some of my time toward that effort. I am part of the leadership team in Broward that works toward that goal. Some of you have heard about Church United. They are a new ministry partner for us. You are going to hear from the Executive Director of Church United. He is going to be preaching for us in the near future.

I had the opportunity to facilitate a retreat just this week – a 24-hour, overnight retreat where we brought 12 pastors together with their spouses. We invested in them, built relationships, and brought a speaker in. We are going to meet six more times with those 12 pastors. Humorous thing – I was facilitating, doing my part, sharing a little bit of my story here and there. This pastor came up to me with his wife. He was a little bit younger and he said, “Man, we are so grateful! This is amazing! We are receiving so much. Thank you, thank you, thank you. Man, you’ve made so many mistakes. Could you teach us from the mistakes that you’ve made, so I don’t make those same mistakes?”

I mean, I’ve done some things right. But really, it’s a healthy transparency where we work together. I suppose if we hear those three things: We are multicultural...however we want to say it. We want to love other Christians and work together. We want to love everyone. Boy, that’s just so clear in the Bible. It’s not really a distinctive. Sadly, if you’re new here, it should just be a given, but it’s all too often the exception.

God calls us to love one another. In fact, an example of this would be when people change churches sometimes. No one ever leaves here, but sometimes people will change churches. I don’t mean they’ll move out of the area. They will go to a different church. Sometimes churches have just done a horrible job. They will vilify that person when they leave. If you are a part of Riverside and someone leaves, bless them. Yes, they are probably making a huge mistake, but really, we don’t own people. They belong to God. It’s so dishonoring when we, out of our own insecurity, our own pride, our own tribalism rather than the tribe of Jesus, the “all nations” that are united in Christ, act out of insecurity.

Here’s the point. Here’s why I start with these distinctives: because there is such a need for these expressions and because the world needs them. We need them because of the division that’s out there. It’s easy to take one of these things and make them the main thing. Racial unity is not the main thing. Church unity is not really the main thing. We don’t even start with loving everybody. We start with the love of God. We start by receiving God’s love, and that love makes us secure so that we are then free to love others.

If we take one of these very important things that are really good and make them the main thing, in the end, you watch, it will become more divisive than unifying. We will end up judging those who don’t have the same passion. We will end up being convinced that only our way or only our strategy is correct, and it will be more divisive in the end than unifying.

I have one job this morning. It’s pretty much the same job every Sunday. It’s to connect you to the love of God. It’s to help you understand that God loves you and that that love is available to you in and through and only through Jesus Christ. If you experience and receive that love, by faith in Christ, it is transforming.

The challenge is that you may have heard all of your life that God loves you, but you are really not convinced of it in your heart. You are functionally living as if you can’t really trust God with every area of your life.

Sometimes I’ll have someone come in and see me and say, “Hey, I’m not sure about _____.” Pick a subject...baptism. “Talk to me about baptism. I’m not sure if I should be baptized. People are telling me I should be baptized and I don’t want to be baptized.” “Okay, let’s do this. Before we talk, let’s settle something. If God is clear that this is something you should do, you’ll do it.” I’ve literally had people in that moment say, “Well, no. No, I’m not ready to make that commitment.” “Then why are we here?” “Do you believe that if this is what God wants for you, that it’s good and it’s right and that you’ll do it?” “Well, I want to know what it is first.” Right? I can relate to that. Can you relate?

I mean, if I say to you right now, “Listen, God is going to speak to you today. He’s going to speak to you. I don’t know what he’s going to tell you to do. He’s going to speak to you. Will you commit right now to do whatever it is, no matter what he tells you?” “No, no, no, no, no. He’s going to make me move to New York City.” I love New York. I would live there if I could, but New York has come to me instead.

Our reluctance to give over to God is this fundamental misunderstanding that you can’t quite completely trust him. My message today has just two simple points. Let me give them to you. They are right from the text.

- I. God is for you.
- II. Nothing can separate you from the love of God.

Let’s look at the first one.

- I. God is for you.

It’s in verses 31 through 34. Paul’s logic is very, very simple. He just says, “Listen, if God is for you, who can be against you?” Is there anyone that can oppose God? Is there anything that can oppose God and prevail?” The answer to that is no, so let’s just ask the question. Let’s just settle it then. Is God for you?

We know that God is for us because he has given his Son for us. God gave his Son so that you could be reunited to him, so that your sin could be paid for in full, so that the debt that you and I owe because of the guilt of our sin could be completely removed. And as a gift, we receive the love

of God and the forgiveness of God and the grace of God because of what Jesus Christ has done for us.

If I were in a situation where I was called on to give my life for you, I'd like to think that I would do that as an act of love. But I have to tell you, to give one of my children for you – that's another level, a level I don't know that I can even comprehend. God is for you. What else can God do to convince you? The logic is very simple.

Now, here's the thing. He explains in these verses that we were separated from God. He gives the explanation for how we are united to God. He says God is holy. God is just. We stood under a sentence of judgment because of our sin. But God's love is so magnificent, so great, that he sent his Son to live in perfection and holiness so that he could offer himself as a sacrifice for our sin, to pay the penalty that we should pay but are unable to. So we receive God's love as a gift. The condemnation that we feel because of our sin is removed because of what Jesus Christ has done. And by faith in Christ, we are completely united to him.

My desire for you is for you to know Jesus Christ, for you to know God. If that's unsettled in your life, please, today, trust in Jesus Christ. At the very end of the service the deacons will be available over here on this side of the sanctuary to pray with anyone, for any reason. A very good reason would be to go there and say, "Listen, I want to talk to someone. I am unsure of my relationship with God, of my relationship with Jesus Christ."

Jesus came as the Son of God and demonstrated over and over and over the Father's love. Let me ask you a question. What do you think was Jesus' greatest act of love, if you had to rate them? I know that's dangerous and it's somewhat subjective. We know what the greatest was because he tells us that the cross was the greatest. His sacrifice for us was the greatest because he tells us, "No greater love can someone have for someone else than to give their life for them."

Jesus gave his life for us. The cross is his greatest expression of love. But after the cross, there are many amazing expressions, miracles, acts that Jesus did. You think about the woman at the well. She was an immoral woman and she was racially hated. There was tremendous racial separation. Jesus expressed love in a dramatic way to her so that her life was completely transformed by the acceptance and love and forgiveness which he extended to her.

I think about the Gadarene demoniac. Jesus helped a lot of very, very troubled people. Imagine this. You go into a graveyard and a man with no clothes comes rushing at you to take your life.

That’s a horrifying prospect. All kinds of people cannot restrain him, so they keep him in chains. Well, Jesus set this man free -- amazing love, right?

People had infectious diseases that no one wanted to be around, no one wanted to touch – Jesus showed them love and touched them and healed them and restored them. If you look at these situations like the first one – the woman at the well in John 4, the second one in Mark chapter 5 – in these very situations people said, “Jesus, let us go with you.” He said, “No, no, no. I want you to stay and show my love to everyone that remains here.”

You know what I think one of the greatest expressions of love is? It’s not an obvious one. It’s one of the last things Jesus did with his apostles before he was crucified: he washed their feet. Look at the beginning of this passage in John 13. There is something remarkable here when you see the love which is expressed. John writes, “Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father...” So he knows he is about to be crucified. Everything is building up. He is literally hours away from this fearful, excruciating death. We read: “...having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.” What he is about to do is an expression of dramatic love.

We read, “During supper, when the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon’s son, to betray him, Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going back to God, rose from supper. He laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist.” He served them.

Think about the elements here. One of his closest friends is betraying him. He is about to suffer horribly. He is doing it for others. And he dresses himself to serve through the most humble act known to that culture and society: washing their feet. I mean, I have a bad day and I want sympathy. Right? Just come home. I want “me time.” Give me my space. Can you relate? When things mount up against us, we almost feel like we have permission to stop loving and say, “It’s about me right now.” But this extravagant love of Christ for us has no boundaries, no limits. God is for you. He has given his Son for you, which then provokes a question -- we move to the second point.

II. Nothing can separate you from the love of God.

If we really start to get the first point, that God loves us, then there’s really just one question: Is there any way for me to be separated from God? Is there any way for me to be separated from his love? Because as long as I am in his love, as long as I am secure in his love, then I’m safe. So Paul ends Romans 8 with this captivating description that nothing can separate us from the love of God. “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?” He wants us to understand that suffering in this life feels in the moment like “God doesn’t love me.” It feels like, “If God loved me, things would be going better. Things would be easier. My marriage wouldn’t be this challenging. Or I wouldn’t still be single. Or I wouldn’t be struggling with this sin. Or I wouldn’t have this heartache over this particular child or relationship. Or someone I love wouldn’t be suffering.” We could just go on and on, right? It feels in that moment like, “God, where are you? Why are you not answering? Why is this situation happening?”

And it’s magnified at times, because sometimes the pain comes through sources that should be relieving pain – through the Church or through a parent or through a spouse. Nothing can separate me from the love of God. Nothing can separate me from the love of God. Paul wants this to just reverberate and echo in our hearts. He is helping us to see it over and over and over again.

It’s interesting, because when you start to step out and express God’s love in various ways – racial unity, church unity, love in general – it’s not always met with approval. Have you figured that out? I have found it challenging to pastor a multicultural church, doing it very imperfectly. I have literally lost count of how many times people have come to me and said, “You know, you did it wrong. You said it wrong. I’m offended.”

I had a dear woman come up to me one time years and years ago. She said, “Brian, I just want you to know, I have hated you with all my heart.” I said, “Wow, that’s a lot of hate! What did I do to you?” Don’t take offense at this. It was just a very transparent moment. It was a moment of healing. She said, “You are white and you are a man. That’s what you did to me.” I said, “Well, I can’t undo either of those, but obviously I feel like I need to ask for forgiveness because you’ve been really hurt.” She goes, “You just have no idea.”

My brother Mike gave me permission to share this. We were talking about racial unity one Sunday and just loving people. He had been carrying something from his childhood. When he was a child, he had a friend who was of a different race, a different color. This boy came over to the house. His

name was James. He was playing with Mike in his home. But when his dad came home, he threw James out and said, “We don’t do that. They are not welcome here.” Mike had carried that with him, so he found someone here that Sunday of that race. He went to that person and said, “Listen, can I just tell you this story?” It led to this whole exchange. Then that person shared some very personal things.

In this passage, Paul tells us that nothing can separate us from the love of God, and as that security starts to take over, it frees us then to begin to step out and experience God’s healing and unity. It’s wonderful. It’s transforming. The point I want you to see is that that’s not always immediately applauded. Only the security of the love of God allows us to push through, to keep at it.

When we adopted Joshua and Caleb, some of you were so funny. You came up to us and said, “Don’t you know how to take care of black hair and black skin? These boys look terrible! You are doing a terrible job.” “As a matter of fact, no, I’ve never taken care of black hair or black skin and I don’t know how.” You guys were so gracious, those of you that were bold enough to come up and share with us. I’ve been told at times, “Don’t use that word. Don’t say that. You thought that was funny, but that was so offensive to me.”

I can promise you, in those moments you want to step back and say, “This is too hard. I just don’t want to do this. Why would I do this?” When we fight for Church unity there are times when people, even really close friends come and say, “You know, this is just a distraction and you’re watering down truth.” No, we’re not! Or, “Why is this person speaking and not this person?” You have to have thick skin and soft hearts.

Believe it or not, I’m going to bring this section together and tell you how all that fits. When you’re reading it, for me, I’m being drawn in to Paul’s poetry and language. “He loves me.” Then he drops in this reference from Psalms. “We are being led to the slaughter all day long.” You know, Paul, I could have done without that reference. “Like a sheep about to be slaughtered.” What is his point? He is telling us that when God’s love comes in and changes us and transforms us and we live in the security of his love and begin to express that love to everyone else, there is suffering and persecution sometimes directly connected to that, but he wants you to know that his love conquers all.

When he ends with this, “you are more than a conqueror,” he basically gives a list of general suffering. Then he references supernatural powers, and then everything in creation. This is what I

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Romans 8:31-39 | Sunday, February 25, 2018 | By Brian Brookins



think he is saying to us. He is saying that though at times you may feel very, very vulnerable, you are more than a conqueror. If you will make the love of God the main thing and just keep receiving his love, he will conquer all suffering. He will conquer spiritual powers. He will conquer and he is greater than anything and everything in all of creation. It's a very powerful, very compelling note to end on.

At the heart of every temptation that Satan brings to you, from the very first one in Genesis 3, is this idea that God is holding out on you. I want to encourage you today: Trust him with all your heart. He loves you. He is for you. And nothing can separate you from the love that is in God in Christ Jesus.