**The blessed motivation of assurance**

Text: Psalm 77:7-9; Romans 12:1-2

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**Scriptures:** Psalm 77:1-13; Romans 12:1-2

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 42, 56, 313, 218, 263

**Series:** Canons of Dort (#17; Articles 5:11-13)

**Theme:** Although assurance of salvation is not always felt by the child of God, the certainty of perseverance is a blessed motivation for gratitude and good works and does not result in carelessness or neglect of godliness, but rather in a carefulness in living for the Lord.

**Proposition:** Especially in the struggles of life, seek greater assurance of your own salvation so that you can be motivated to greater gratitude, good works and a careful lifestyle in the Lord.

**Introduction**

Are you aware of the danger of being on a slippery slope? Physically, the risk is that you will slide down, gathering speed until you eventually come into contact with a hard object which slows you down abruptly – likely causing injury or even death. As you probably know, the term ‘slippery slope’ is used in the English language in a metaphorical sense to describe ‘*a course of action that seems to lead inevitably to adverse and unintended consequences*’. Here is a ‘slippery slope argument’ a concerned parent might use:

* If you don’t do your homework, you’ll fail the class.
* If you fail this class, you won’t graduate from school.
* If you don’t graduate, you won’t get into college.
* If you don’t attend a good college, you won’t get a good job.
* If you don’t get a good job, you’ll be poor and homeless.
* You don’t want to be poor and homeless, do you?

Here’s another one:

* If I eat this donut today, I’ll probably eat another donut tomorrow.
* If I eat one donut tomorrow, I might eat several donuts the next day.
* If I eat several donuts, it won’t be long before I’m eating biscuits and chocolate cake every day.
* My diet will quickly go out the window and I’ll become morbidly obese.

A slippery slope argument shifts attention from the issue at hand to a hypothetical outcome, often offering little or no proof that that outcome is certain, or in many cases even likely. A ‘slippery slope argument’ is often a fallacy that appeals to people’s emotions or fears.

One aspect of the approach that the Pharisees and Scribes took to God’s Law could be described as the implementation of a ‘slippery slope argument’; they ‘built a fence’, not around a house roof or a swimming pool, but around the Torah (the Old Testament Law). Part of the idea was that if they legislated hard against minor offences which broke their tradition (written down in a document called the Mishnah), then people would be protected from committing major offences against God’s holy law. Jesus strongly rebuked this ‘slippery slope argument’, saying of the scribes and Pharisees, ‘*they tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people’s shoulders*’ (Matt 23:4).

The Roman Catholic church also used a ‘slippery slope argument’ when formulating official doctrine at the Council of Trent in response to the Protestant Reformation. The sixth session of this gathering lasted from June 21, 1546, until January 13, 1547. Fellow office-bearers, if you ever think that session, presbytery or synod meetings are too long, how about over six months for just one section of the agenda!

This section of the Council dealt with the issues of grace, justification and perseverance of the saints. The Council of Trent affirmed that ‘*no believer should presume to have certain knowledge of his predestination*’, stating ‘*no one, so long as he lives in this mortal life, ought to be presumptuous about the deep mystery of divine predestination as to decide with certainty that he is definitely among the number of the predestined. In fact it is impossible, apart from a special revelation, to know whom God has chosen for salvation*’.

Part of the argument for this Roman Catholic position is that if people are certain of their salvation, they will live godless, lazy, careless lives – knowing that they have a ‘guaranteed ticket to heaven’. What motivation would people have to do good works if they were already certain that the prize had been won for them? This ‘slippery slope argument’ was also followed by Jacobus Arminius and his followers, the Remonstrants who taught: ‘*By its very nature the doctrine of the certainty of perseverance and salvation causes false security and is harmful to godliness, good morals, prayers, and other holy exercises. On the contrary, it is praiseworthy to doubt*’.

In response to this false teaching, the authors of the Canons of Dort wrote articles 5:11-13. As we consider these, we are going firstly to see that doubts are experienced by God’s elect at times. Then we’ll see from Romans 12:1-2 that:

1. The mercies of God motivate godliness
2. The confident Christian lives carefully

Firstly, let’s focus on the experience of uncertainty of salvation.

1. **The reality of doubts for the children of God**

Doubt is a ‘feeling of uncertainty or lack of conviction’. In contrast, when we say the words ‘no doubt about it’ we express that something is certainly true. Doubt is debilitating, weakening a person’s will and often leading to procrastination. James wisely writes about petitioning God in prayer: “*But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways*” (James 1:6-8).

We have already seen the reality of doubt in the life of a believer revealed in Scripture in this service. We sang part of Psalm 42 earlier: “*O my soul, why are you grieving, why disquieted in me? Put your hope in God, believing he will still your refuge be*”. In Psalm 77, Asaph expresses personal doubt – an uncertainty about the Lord’s love towards him: "*Will the Lord spurn forever, and never again be favourable? Has his steadfast love forever ceased? Are his promises at an end for all time? Has God forgotten to be gracious? Has he in anger shut up his compassion?*" (v7-9). He is not alone. The Sons of Korah express doubt about God’s love: “*Why have you forgotten me?*” (Ps 42:9). David also reveals his self-doubt about his relationship with the Lord in the psalms: “*How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?*” (Psalm 13:1). “*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me*” (Psalm 22:1).

Despite having previously baptised Jesus and declared "*Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!*” (John 1:29) later John the Baptist, languishing in Herod’s prison, seems to have had doubts about who Christ is. He sent two of his disciples to Jesus to ask Him “*are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?*” (Luke 7:19). It is worth noting here that some scholars think that John is not expressing doubt here, but that he was impatiently suggesting that Jesus should actively bring in His kingdom – because John misunderstood the work of Christ as the Messiah.

Reformer Martin Luther wrote of his personal ‘anfechtungen’. This German word describes multi-faceted trials and torments of the soul which include, at times, deep doubt about personal salvation. Luther was afflicted by anfechtungen during various periods of his life despite being horrified that the Pope ‘*should have entirely prohibited the certainty and assurance of divine grace*’ {cited in J. Kostlin, The Theology of Luther (Philadelphia Publication Society, 1897),2,462).

John Bunyan, in his largely autobiographical work ‘Pilgrim’s Progress’ describes the imprisonment of Christian and Hopeful in ‘Doubting Castle’, the home of a giant named ‘Despair’. The giant’s wife, Diffidence (which means lacking in self-confidence), advises her husband to provoke his two pilgrim prisoners into killing themselves. Christian and Hopeful discuss what to do. Christian feels that death is better than life. Hopeful agrees that things are terrible, yet their Lord forbids murder of anyone, including themselves. Besides, they had heard that others had escaped the Giant. How do they know that God won’t help them in some way? Hopeful encourages Christian be patient and courageous. John Bunyan was born (1628) 9 years after the Canons of Dort were completed. It is highly probable that he was familiar with this Reformed confessional document.

When writing their Fifth Head of doctrine, the authors of the Canons of Dort did not deny the reality that Christian believers do, at times, experience doubt about their own salvation. This is how they express this unsettling uncertainty (Art 5:11): “*Scripture meanwhile testifies that believers in this life have to struggle with various doubts of the flesh and, placed under severe temptation, do not always feel this full assurance of faith and certainty of perseverance*”.

Perhaps you, like me, have experienced times of deep personal doubt. Does God really love me? Am I really certainly saved? If I have deep doubts does that mean I have lost the salvation I once thought that I had? ‘Giant Despair’ can lock people like you and me up for a while in his gloomy castle – place of stubborn darkness.

There is blessed comfort in knowing that ‘*believers in this life have to struggle with various doubts*’ as Scripture testifies through Asaph, David, and the Sons of Korah. This comfort is expressed by the Canons of Dort (Art 5:11) in these words: “*But God, the Father of all comfort, will not let them be tempted beyond their strength, but with the temptation will also provide the way of escape, and by the Holy Spirit will again revive in them the certainty of perseverance*”. Being certain of your own salvation is a rich comforting blessing and one that motivates the believer to greater godliness – which brings us to our second point:

1. **The mercies of God motivate godliness**

In writing the book of Romans, the Apostle Paul certainly does not use a ‘slippery slope argument’ as he begins chapter 12. This is the great turning point in Romans, moving from what God has sovereignly done by grace, justifying His elect by faith alone in Christ, the second Adam, alone to how His people are called to respond. It is God who has chosen His people according to His own will. The Lord says, "*I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion*." (Rom 9:15). Salvation then ‘*depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy*’ (Rom 9:16).

It is precisely because God alone saves without any human intervention, that the salvation of all His elect is certain from beginning to end. The ‘golden chain of salvation’ cannot be broken! “*Those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified*” (Rom 8:30). This is why Paul writes with certain confidence in Christ: “*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*” (Rom 8:38-39).

The argument that Paul uses to prove that ‘the mercies of God motivate godliness’ is Biblical, logical and inspired by the Holy Spirit. As a consequence it is reliable and trustworthy, unlike ‘slippery slope arguments’. The logic is expressed in the single word ‘therefore’: “*I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship*” (Rom 12:1). In light of God’s saving grace – His mercies – including His divine election, effectual calling, justification, adoption and preservation of His elect, ‘*present your bodies as a living sacrifice*’. ‘Body’ here refers not so much to the physical part of us (although that is most certainly included) but to our whole being as ‘embodied’ image bearers of God. Put another way, there is no part or aspect of us, our physical bodies, our desires, our will, or our emotions that are not to be presented to God in His service for His glory.

The Canons of Dort use the Biblically sound argument that Paul reveals in our text when they write in Article 5:12: “*This certainty of perseverance, however, so far from making true believers proud and complacent, is rather the true root of humility, childlike reverence, genuine godliness, endurance in every struggle, fervent prayers, constancy in suffering and in the confession of the truth, and lasting joy in God. Further, the consideration of this benefit is for them an incentive to the serious and constant practice of gratitude and good works, as is evident from the testimonies of Scripture and the examples of the saints*”.

We see this blessed motivation to godliness in the Old Testament: “*I must perform my vows to you, O God; I will render thank offerings to you. For you have delivered my soul from death, yes, my feet from falling, that I may walk before God in the light of life*” (Psalm 56:12-13). “*What shall I render to the LORD for all his benefits to me?*” (Psalm 116:12).

It is also clear from elsewhere that the mercies of God motivate His elect people to greater godliness: “*For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works*” (Titus 2:11). “*And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure*” (1 John 3:3).

Brothers and sisters, are you motivated towards greater godliness by the mercies of God towards you in Christ? He said of all who trust in Him alone for their salvation: “*I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand*” (John 10:28-29). Certainty about personal salvation motivates the Christian believer to greater godliness. Confidence, not doubt, in Christ also results in a life carefully lived for Him, which brings us to our third point:

1. **The confident Christian lives carefully**

Many people live careless lives with damaging consequences both for themselves and for others. Which book of the Bible would you say could be described as a repeated series of cycles of careless living? The book of Judges comes to my mind. At the end of this book we read: “*In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes*” (Judges 21:25). We could accurately say that the Israelites during the period of the judges were largely ‘*conformed to the unbelieving world around them*’, worshipping false gods and forgetting the Lord’s great acts of salvation in their past (2:10; 6:13).

In contrast, the Apostle Paul writes to ‘*those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints*’ and by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit to us today: *“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Rom 12:2)*.

Here is the blessed irony. It is precisely as we are more and more motivated to greater godliness in light of God’s mercies that we can have great assurance of salvation because we know ‘the good and acceptable’ way to live and desire to be careful to strive to live ‘the good and acceptable way of the Lord’; because this pleases and glorifies Him.

This truth is expressed in Canons of Dort Art 5:13 ‘*Neither does this renewed confidence produce carelessness or neglect of godliness in those who have been restored after their fall; rather, it produces in them a much greater concern to observe carefully the ways of the Lord, which he prepared beforehand*”.

Assurance of salvation is a blessed motivation to careful living, as the Canons explain: “*They observe these ways in order that by walking in them they may retain the certainty of their perseverance. Then shall the face of their gracious God not turn away from them again because of their abuse of his fatherly goodness, with the result that they would fall into still greater anguish of spirit. Indeed, to those who fear God the contemplation of his face is sweeter than life, but its withdrawal is more bitter than death*”.

Experiencing ‘certainty of perseverance’ in the Lord is like knowing that you are standing on solid firm ground – not on a slippery slope! That is what David expressed in Psalm 40:2 “*He drew me up from the pit of destruction, out of the miry bog, and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure*”.

Brothers and sisters, may your steps be secure in the days and weeks to come as you are motivated by God’s mercies to greater godliness and with confidence in Christ you live carefully, discerning what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect: for His glory and your own good.

AMEN.