

The Potter and the Clay: Romans 9:19-23

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As we venture into a new year I have a renewed sense of our need for prayer and our need for the Word. I hope you feel that as well. We reflect on a year that has just come to an end, and we look ahead to the coming year, and we do so surely with a mix of emotions. Thinking of 2013 there are regrets and disappointments. There are also fond memories and gratitude for many blessings. Considering 2014 there may be fears and discouragement about what lies ahead. There may also be much excitement and anticipation for the goals we hope to accomplish and the blessings we hope to experience in this new year.

Something we need to be reminded of again and again is our complete dependence on God. What has been in 2013 and what will be in 2014 is all part of God's sovereign plan. He is good. He is in control. He listens to our prayers. He speaks to us in His Word.

So whatever it is you are feeling at the start of this new year, I invite you today to praise the God who is. Let us look into God's holy Word and see what He has revealed about His righteous character. And let us pray to our sovereign God. We need His help. We need to express our dependence on Him and cry out for His guidance. We need to confess our sins to Him and plead for grace and for transformation. I hope you will begin this year with a deep sense of your need for prayer and for the Word. And may that sense of dependence last throughout this year and continue to the day we see our Lord face to face.

We're back to Romans 9 this morning, and this is quite a text to begin the year with. These verses provide an amazing revelation about God's will and desire and purpose and freedom. Many avoid this passage or seek to reinterpret it. But this is God's Word, clearly portraying an important characteristic of God Almighty, namely His absolute sovereignty in salvation. We ought to sit humbly before this text and listen to what it is teaching us about our God. Don't worship a god of your imagination. Don't fashion a god in your own image. Listen to God's Word, and praise the God who is.

I'll briefly review for us the context of Romans 9, and then we'll look in detail at verses 19-23. Remember the problem in verses 1-5. The Israelites have rejected the Messiah, the Christ.

And that seems to call into question God's promises to His chosen people. The Apostle Paul, who is writing this under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, is determined to put that objection to rest. He makes the assertion in verse 6 that "it is not as though the word of God has failed." Then he begins to defend that thesis. The point he is making so far here in Romans 9 is that God never promised to save every individual Israelite. Beginning even with Abraham's family, there was a son who was chosen to be the son of promise, and there was another son who was passed over. Again with Isaac's family. In this case the sons were twins. The younger was chosen instead of the older. What's the point? God's unconditional election. God chooses some, not others. And He doesn't make His decisions while sitting at a desk reviewing résumés. His choice is not based on our background or behavior. It is not based on our achievements or even our decision to believe. He chooses unconditionally. That brings us up through verse 13.

In verse 14 there is a question that arises, and Paul responds to it. The question has to do with fairness. Is it fair that God chooses some and not others? As verse 14 puts it, "Is there injustice on God's part?" Paul says no—"By no means!" But the explanation he gives doesn't really sound like an explanation. He simply reasserts the reality that God chooses freely and unconditionally. He has mercy on whomever he wills (like Abraham's son Isaac, and Isaac's son Jacob). God also hardens whomever He wills (like Pharaoh). The quotation from Exodus in verse 17 does give us an insight into God's purpose in all of this. The hardening of Pharaoh was to show God's power and so that His name might be proclaimed in all the earth.

That paragraph (verses 14-18) showed very clearly the absolute free will of God. God is free to do as He pleases, in showing mercy to those who don't deserve mercy, and in hardening those who deserve to be hardened. There is nothing unfair or unjust about that. As R. C. Sproul puts it very succinctly, "The elect get grace; the non-elect get justice. Nobody gets injustice."¹

But another question remains. And this brings us to our passage for this morning—verses 19-23. We have seen that God is sovereign over who receives mercy and who remains in hardened rebellion against God. Now the question comes, "Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?" Let's look at this paragraph in three parts. First, the question (verse 19). Second, the rebuke (verses 20-21). Third, the explanation (verses 22-23).

¹ Romans, page 324.

The Question (verse 19)

The question in verse 19 is a follow-up to the question in verse 14. “Is there injustice on God’s part?” No, because He is free to have mercy and free to harden. He is free to show His power and magnify His own Name. The point that is very clear in verses 14-18 is the fact that God is sovereign over who gets mercy and who doesn’t.

So the follow up question is: “Why does he still find fault?” And notice the basis for the question: “For who can resist his will?” This questions deals with God’s sovereignty and human responsibility. If God is sovereign in all of this, then how can He still hold human beings responsible for their actions? In the case of Pharaoh, for instance . . . If God hardened Pharaoh’s heart, then it doesn’t seem fair that God would consider Pharaoh guilty for his rebellion. This is the tension we feel when we wrestle with the biblical realities of 1) God’s absolute sovereignty over all things and 2) the responsibility we each have for our actions. Our finite minds want to resolve this tension in a simplistic manner. So we assume that one of these needs to cancel out the other. And since we tend to cherish (almost idolize) the idea of human free will, the common viewpoint is that our free will limits God’s sovereignty.

In our day, that is a very common objection to what we’re learning in Romans 9. It’s why some people avoid Romans 9 or try desperately to interpret it in different ways. And it’s interesting to see here in verse 19 that the same question was already being asked in Paul’s day.

Now, we need to clarify what God’s “will” is referring to in this verse—“For who can resist his will?” We’ve talked before about the 2 wills of God: God’s revealed will and His secret will, or His will of command His will of decree. God’s revealed will (or His will of command) is what we see throughout the Bible in all of God’s guidelines and commands and instructions for us. God gives commands, which He wants us to obey. God desires that we be obedient to Him. He does not delight in sin. He is deeply saddened by our rebellion and disobedience.

But there is a depth to God’s purposes that is far beyond our comprehension. As we’re learning in Romans 9, God also ordains (decrees) that certain individuals remain hardened against Him. This we would understand in terms of God’s secret will (or His will of decree). Such is the mystery of God’s plans. He decrees that certain individuals be hardened, even though He does not find delight in their hardening, in and of itself. What He does

delight in is the overall outcome—which is the display of His own glory in all of its fullness—both in mercy and justice.

Think of Judas. God does not look at the heart of Judas and find pleasure in what He sees there. It does not warm God's heart to know of that cold-hearted betrayal. But God does find great joy in the fact that a multitude of sinners are being redeemed through the sacrificial death of Jesus on the cross.

Similarly in the case of Pharaoh. God is not happy about Pharaoh's pride and stubbornness and rebellion. But God does rejoice to show His infinite power over such a leader as Pharaoh. And God rejoices to free His people from such a wicked taskmaster.

When trying to understand God's purposes, it's helpful to recognize these two facets of God's will—His revealed will and His secret will. In which sense is the objection of verse 19 referring to God's will? The objection is, "Why does he still find fault?" And the basis for the objection is, "For who can resist his will?" Is that a reference to God's revealed will or His secret will? Well, it must be His secret will. Because people resist God's revealed will all the time. That's exactly what Pharaoh was doing. God's revealed will to Pharaoh was, "Let my people go!" Pharaoh resisted, and resisted again, and hardened his heart and rebelled. But even though his actions directly contradicted God's revealed will, those same actions were exactly according God's secret will. God ordained that Pharaoh would remain hardened.

So it's this secret will of God that is at the center of this question—God's sovereign decree of all things, including evil—that's what this objection has to do with. If God planned all of this, then is everyone just a puppet? Do human decisions have any significance?

That's the question of verse 19. And it's important to notice that Paul, in his response, does not try to modify the assumption which is the basis for the question. Paul completely agrees with the premise of the question, namely, that nobody can resist God's will. Paul doesn't try to get God off the hook by limiting His sovereignty. He takes it as a given that nobody can resist God's will. Every human decision, whether good or bad, is ordained by Almighty God.

Before we move on to the rebuke of verses 20-21, I want to say one more thing about asking questions of God. The fact that Paul's response begins with a rebuke tells me that the question he cites in verse 19 was not asked in a humble, teachable manner. I

think this same question can be asked in a way that would be honoring to God. But Paul had been in enough discussions and debates about such things, and he has in mind a certain kind of person. Paul can envision the fire in this person's eyes, the tone of their voice, the antagonism expressed in their demeanor, and the skepticism in their heart. That's what elicits a rebuke.

This makes me think of the difference between the question that Zechariah asked of the angel Gabriel and the question that Mary asked of Gabriel. When Gabriel told Zechariah, "your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son," Zechariah's response was, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years" (Luke 1:18). Do remember what happened next? Gabriel told Zechariah, "*you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time.*" (Luke 1:20, ESV)

A few verses later in Luke 1 we read of Gabriel's conversation with Mary. The angel tells her, "you will conceive in your womb and bear a son." Mary asks a question very similar to Zechariah's. She says, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" Did the angel discipline her for asking that question? No. He gave her an explanation that the Holy Spirit would come upon her and bring about this miraculous conception. Mary's question was one of faith seeking understanding. She was humbly searching to better comprehend the ways of God.

So I would encourage us and warn us in this. God welcomes our questions, but be careful how you question Him. God will not be interrogated. You cannot question Him as though He owes you an explanation for His actions. You cannot question Him as though you know better than Him. But you can and should humbly seek for a deeper understanding of His ways. And Romans 9 is a great passage to study as we try to understand God better.

The Rebuke (verses 20-21)

When someone asks this question in a prideful way, then the response comes with a rebuke. Paul seeks to bring this arrogant objection down from its lofty pedestal. Don't think that you can stand above God and determine what He's allowed to do. "But who are you, O man, to answer back to God?" Paul is putting us all in our place. You are a mere human. Don't point your finger at God. Don't talk back to Him. I picture a cocky ignorant young person entering the military and trying to question the drill sergeant about why they have to do so many push-ups and why they have to run so much and why they have to make their beds a

certain way. The drill sergeant is going to put that kid in his place real fast.

Paul is doing something similar here for us. He's telling us, "It's not your place to question God like that." It's fine to ask your questions (and Paul does go on to give some explanation, which we'll look at in a minute). But remember your place.

And what is our place? We have to remember that we are created. We are the vessels that are being molded. We are the clay. And we have to remember God's place. He is the Creator. He is the molder. He is the potter.

The response here is somewhat similar to the response in verses 15 and following. The question in verse 14 was about God's justice. But Paul's answer didn't seem like much of an answer. He quoted God's words from Exodus 33, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." It is a statement about God's freedom.

Here again in verse 20, we have another response that doesn't really seem like an answer. It's a rebuke. And it's another statement about God's freedom. "Will what is molded say to its molder, 'Why have you made me like this?'" That really puts us in our place. God, as Creator, owns us. He owns the universe. And He has authority over His universe. He has the right to do with His universe, and with each individual in His universe, as He sees fit.

The analogy continues in verse 21 with the potter and the clay. God, as creator, has sovereign rights over His creation. He can make one vessel for honorable use, that is, salvation. And He can make another vessel for dishonorable use, referring to condemnation. There is no injustice in this. Some get the punishment they deserve. Others get mercy, which they do not deserve. God is free to bestow His mercy on whomever He wills.

This is a radical paradigm shift for all of us. We tend to be self-centered and man-centered. We want to think that the world revolves around us. But that is simply not true. You and I, and the rest of this universe, revolve around God. He is the center. He is the Creator and King. This is a rebuke we must heed and a reality we should remind ourselves of regularly.

The Explanation (verses 22-23)

Paul doesn't stop with the rebuke. He moves on to give us a profound insight into the purposes of God. Here is another similarity with the previous paragraph. The question in verse 14 was followed by statements about God's freedom and election in

verses 15-16. But verse 17 ventured further to reveal God's desire to magnify His own Name. And it's that desire which guides His free choices.

Now, in verses 19-23 we have a similar structure. The question is in verse 19. There is a rebuke in verse 20 along with a restatement of God's freedom and authority. But then verses 22-23 venture deep into the mysterious purposes of God. Let's see what we can learn here about God's ways.

The wording of verses 22-23 is interesting. The English translations begin verse 22 with the words, "What if God . . ." But more literally it is simply, "if God . . ." Paul is starting an "if, then" statement, but he doesn't finish it. The implied "then" statement would be something like, "God is perfectly just in His sovereign choices." *If* God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory, *then* He is perfectly just in His sovereign choices. But instead of finishing that thought, Paul moves on to a point about the diversity of whom God calls—not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles. We'll study that next week.

But this "if" statement in verses 22-23 is an explanation of why God does what He does. And Paul is not saying "if" in a hypothetical way. It's just the way he words it. He's not saying that God *might* act in this way. He's saying God does act in this way, and this truth ought to settle the objections raised in verses 14 and 19.

There are two pieces to the explanation. One is in verse 22 and the other in verse 23. Verse 22 tells of God's desire to show His wrath and to make known His power. That's very close to what God said to Pharaoh, quoted in verse 17—"that I might show my power in you." God wants to manifest His glory, and part of how He does that is by defeating and destroying those who oppose Him.

This is what verse 22 is talking about. God has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction. This means that God has ordained that certain individuals will end up in hell. They will never repent of their sins, and in the end they will experience God's wrath. But God is patient with them in the sense that He does not destroy them immediately. He allows them to live and to continue in rebellion against Him. Why would God do this?

Pharaoh is again a fitting example. God could have destroyed Pharaoh after the first plague, or even before the first plague. God could have brought the Israelites out of Egypt in any number of ways. But He kept Pharaoh alive and allowed Pharaoh to continue rebelling. God ordained that Pharaoh's heart would become more and more obstinate. For what purpose? So that God's power over Pharaoh would be seen all the more clearly and gloriously. In this way God is patient with vessels of wrath prepared for destruction. He delays their destruction because He wants to show His wrath and make known His power.

But that is not all. That is not even the main objective. God's patience with vessels of wrath is a secondary goal which serves a higher goal. Notice the purpose statement in verse 23, "*in order to* make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory."

Verse 22 is the backdrop to verse 23. God showing His wrath is the backdrop to Him showing the riches of His glory for vessels of mercy. I think it's really important that we see the relationship between these two things. It's not just that God does one and the other. He does one for the purpose of the other. He demonstrates His wrath upon vessels of wrath, not merely as an end in itself, but for the greater purpose of making known the riches of His glory for vessels of mercy.

God wants to display the full spectrum of His divine characteristics, and we will praise Him forever for these characteristics. But we should also see here a special emphasis on His mercy. God does not delight in wrath like He delights in mercy.

There's even a possible hint in the grammar that would point to a difference between God's preparing certain individuals for destruction and others for glory. In verse 22 the statement "vessels of wrath prepared for destruction" is in the passive voice. It does not explicitly say that God prepared them for destruction, although I think that's what we have to conclude given the context. It's a divine passive. But still, it's in the passive voice. In contrast, the statement in verse 23 about the "vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory"—that's in the active voice and it's clear that God is the subject. I don't want to make too much of this. But I also don't want to ignore it altogether. It could be that Paul, writing under the inspiration of the Spirit, has given us an insight into the way God considers His wrath, on the one hand, and His mercy, on the other hand. God shows His wrath—yes. He even prepares vessels of wrath for destruction.

But what He especially delights in is showing His glory to vessels of mercy.

So how does the one action serve the greater purpose? How does God's wrath serve the purpose of demonstrating His glory to vessels of mercy? Here's how. Consider the fact that we are all of the same lump. The vessels of wrath and vessels of mercy are all from the same stuff. And what have we been learning all through this passage? The truth of God's unconditional election. He doesn't choose us to be vessels of mercy because of anything good or attractive about us. So what should we feel when we consider God's judgment upon vessels of wrath? We should stand aghast, and in holy fear, and say to ourselves, "That could have been me! That should have been me! That would have been me, but for the mercy of God."

Think about it: If it was not for the wrath of God, what would His mercy mean to us? If there was no wrath . . . if we knew nothing of God's wrath, then we would take His mercy completely for granted. We would think of God's favor upon us as something we deserve. And that's *not* mercy. We can only perceive God's mercy against the backdrop of His wrath.

Therefore God, in His infinite goodness and wisdom, devised this plan in which certain individuals will get what they deserve and be punished for their unrepentant sin. And against that dark backdrop will radiate the brightness of His mercy, which He freely bestows on many, many undeserving sinners.

The other night we were talking about this passage as a family around the dinner table. And I was searching for a way to illustrate how mercy shines forth more clearly when it's against the backdrop of divine wrath. In our dining room there hangs a picture of Stacy and me on our wedding day. I'm wearing a black tuxedo. Stacy is wearing a beautiful white wedding dress. I pointed that out. The kids observed that if I was wearing a white tuxedo, then it would look like my legs were part of the dress. That's exactly right.

I'm not a photographer or an artist, but I'm sure that photographers and artists give a lot of thought to the background of their pictures. Whatever the focal point of the picture is going to be—the main image in the foreground—it will be seen more attractively and clearly if it has just the right contrast in the background. This is what God is doing in manifesting the riches of His glory.

For those who are in Christ, let us marvel together at the great mercy of our God. We deserve hell, and yet we will inherit heaven. We deserve to be vessels of wrath. But we are vessels of mercy. God has ordained to save us. He sent His own beloved Son to die for us. He has given His Spirit to indwell us and preserve us to the end. And we will be in the presence of our great God forever and ever.

If you are an unbeliever here today, I hope that you, too, will marvel at the mercy of God. You should see God's mercy in the fact that you are here this morning listening to this Good News. You are hearing of God's undeserved favor lavished on sinners like us. Step into this mercy today. Turn away from your sins. Let go of your idols. Stop rebelling. Don't be like Pharaoh or Judas! Turn to Jesus Christ and cry out for mercy today. We all must understand that God is angry toward sin. He must hate sin, or else He would not be righteous. He must punish sin, or else He would not be just.

But here's the Good News: God punished His own Son on the cross, such that all those who believe in Him will be spared that judgment. The cross is where God's wrath and mercy meet. The Father pours out wrath on the Son, who serves as a substitute. And as a result mercy flows to us.

We have learned much about God's power and purposes. Let us honor Him and fear Him and love Him and tell others of His greatness. Let's be careful not to refashion God in a way that we think would make Him more acceptable to our ways of thinking. Instead, we need to labor to see Him as He reveals Himself in His Word. And then we must praise Him for who He is.