

"IS GOD UNJUST?"

I. Introduction

- A. These verses contain the Bible's clearest teaching on the doctrine of double predestination, the two components of which are typically expressed by the words election and reprobation.
1. Election refers to how God graciously chooses some from the mass of fallen humanity and appoints them to eternal life.
 2. Reprobation refers to how God justly passes over the remainder of fallen humanity and gives them the damnation that they deserve.
 3. One of the things that is important to understand in connection with double predestination is that while God creates faith in the lives of the elect, he does not create evil and unbelief in the lives of the reprobate.
 4. While God intervenes to secure the salvation of his elect, he only leaves the reprobate in their sin.
- B. Predestination is a subject that often provokes a strong response.
1. John Calvin points out that "The flesh cannot hear of this wisdom of God without being instantly disturbed by numberless questions, and without attempting in a manner to call God to an account."
 2. This portion of Romans 9 shows us that the apostle Paul was well aware of this.
 3. He wrote these verses in order to respond to the objections that people raise when they hear about predestination.
 4. The fact that the Bible talks about predestination as much as it does tells us that God wants us to know something about it.

5. Knowledge of this doctrine is useful for us, and it is incumbent upon us to strive to understand what God has revealed about it.
6. At the same time, God has not told us everything about predestination, which means we need to be careful not to inquire beyond what has been revealed about it.
7. As Calvin says in his introductory comments on this passage, "Let this then be our sacred rule, to seek to know nothing concerning [predestination], except what Scripture teaches us: when the Lord closes his holy mouth, let us also stop the way, that we may not go farther. But as we are men, to whom foolish questions naturally occur, let us hear from Paul how they are to be met."

II. God's Freedom in Distributing His Mercy (14-18)

- A. The "foolish questions" that Paul addresses in this passage arise from what he said about God's purpose of election in the preceding section.
 1. The main point of that section was summed up in verse 13, which cited the verse in Malachi where the Lord says, "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated."
 2. God chose Jacob and he passed over Esau.
 3. And God made that decision before either child was born, before they did anything good or bad.
 4. In v. 14, Paul acknowledges the objection that some people may raise when they hear this teaching.
 5. Some people will contend that it isn't fair.
 6. The fact that Paul felt the need to address this objection is very telling.
 7. To speak anachronistically, it proves that Paul's doctrine of predestination was thoroughly Calvinistic and not in the least bit

Arminian.

8. The question, "Is there injustice on God's part?" would never arise in connection with the Arminian understanding of predestination.
 9. If the Arminian view were correct in saying that God elected some to eternal life because he foresaw that they would believe the gospel and consigned the rest to hell because he foresaw that they would not believe, then predestination would simply be a matter of God giving people what they deserve.
 10. There is no injustice in that.
 11. The reason why Paul anticipates the charge of injustice is because he expects his readers to understand him to be saying that election is based entirely on God's sovereign grace and not on anything in us
- B. As Paul considers this potential objection, his immediate response is to say, "By no means!"
1. That same phrase is repeated at various points in the letter to the Romans.
 2. Paul's use of this phrase is instructive to us.
 3. It underscores the importance of having our hearts and minds transformed by God's Word.
 4. The more we immerse ourselves in Scripture, the more its truth gets internalized in us so that we instinctively know how to respond when people raise questions about our faith.
 5. We may not always be able to form the perfect counter-argument, but we will at least know when something is not in accord with Scripture.

6. Paul instinctively knew that it is impossible for God to be unjust, and he made that clear from the outset.
- C. Having denied the possibility of injustice on God's part, Paul then turns to Scripture to prove his point.
1. He first cites Exodus 33:19, where God claims the prerogative to show mercy to whomever he will.
 2. God said to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion."
 3. In other words, the ground of God's decision to extend mercy is in found in God himself.
 4. This is underscored in verse 16, where Paul says that God's mercy is not based on anything that God sees in man.
 5. It is not based on our will or exertion but on God's freedom to distribute his mercy to whomever he wills.
 6. Romans 9:16 is an extremely significant verse.
 7. It explicitly states that salvation does not depend in the least bit on the human will or on human effort.
 8. R.C. Sproul is not overstating the matter when he says that "This one verse is absolutely fatal to Arminianism." [*Chosen by God*, 151]
- D. The second Old Testament passage that Paul cites to refute the contention that God is unjust comes from God's dealings with Pharaoh.
1. God told Pharaoh that he raised him up in order to provide an opportunity for his divine power and character to be put on display for all to see.
 2. The book of Exodus even tells us that God hardened Pharaoh's heart.

3. This does not mean that God created the evil in Pharaoh's heart.
4. When God judicially hardens a person, he does not create new evil in that person's heart.
5. The work of hardening is a matter of God judging the sin that is already there by removing the restraining power of his common grace and giving the person over to his sin.
6. In the words of New Testament scholar Douglas Moo, "God's hardening is an act directed against human beings who are already in rebellion against God's righteous rule. God's hardening does not, then, *cause* spiritual insensitivity to the things of God; it maintains people in the state of sin that already characterizes them... God's mercy is given to those who do not deserve it; his hardening affects those who have already by their sin deserved condemnation." [Moo, 599, 600]
7. There is no injustice in God's work of judicial hardening, because those who are hardened are only being given what they deserve.

III. The Potter's Sovereignty over the Clay (19-23)

- A. This brings us to the next objection that Paul addresses in our text.
 1. He states it in verse 19, saying, "You will say to me then, 'Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?'"
 2. In other words, does God's sovereignty in hardening certain people mean that those people are not responsible for their actions?
 3. Will such people be able, on the day of judgment, to contend that it was ultimately God's fault that they persisted in their rebellious unbelief?
 4. We might expect Paul to interject another instinctive "By no means!" at this point, but he does something much more confrontational than that.

5. He says, "But who are you, O man, to answer back to God?"
 6. Paul does not have to defend God against the accusations of puny mankind.
 7. On the contrary, he confronts those who have the audacity to talk back to the One who made the universe, the One who upholds all things by the word of his power, the One who rules over history to ensure that his purposes are perfectly carried out.
 8. No one will answer back to God on the last day.
 9. On that day, every single person who has ever lived will concede that God's judgment is just.
 10. No one will dare speak even one word against the Judge of all the earth.
 11. They will simply put their hands over their mouths and stand in awe.
 12. This is something that we quickly lose sight of as we live on this side of judgment day.
 13. Paul's words in verse 20 remind us that human beings have no right to stand in judgment of God.
- B. This leads right into verse 21, where Paul sets up a metaphor in which God is the potter and humankind is the clay.
1. The prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah employed the same metaphor in their prophetic oracles.
 2. The lump of clay represents mankind in its fallen condition.
 3. Otherwise it would make no sense for Paul to speak in verse 23 of God showing mercy to some of the vessels made out of the clay.

4. Mercy can only be extended where punishment is deserved.
5. The point of the metaphor is to show that God is free to make some of the clay into vessels of honor and some into vessels of dishonor.
6. God does not owe mercy to any of the clay.
7. The fact that he shows it to some underscores that all of the clay stands condemned.
8. God will display his wrath in judgment toward some, but he holds back that judgment in order that the riches of his glory might be made known to those whom he has prepared for glory.
9. This makes it clear that the salvation of the elect is entirely to the praise of God's glorious grace, while the condemnation of the reprobate is to the praise of God's glorious justice.

IV. God's Calling of Jews and Gentiles (24-29)

- A. We turn now to the last part of our passage, where the focus is upon God's calling of his people from among both Jews and Gentiles.
 1. In verses 25 and 26, Paul cites two passages from the book of Hosea in reference to God's calling of Gentiles to himself.
 2. The interesting thing about this is that in Hosea, these verses are referring to the renewal of Israel's ten northern tribes.
 3. The fact that Paul sees this prophecy being fulfilled in the salvation of Gentiles shows us that the Old Testament's prophecies of a renewed Israel find their fulfillment in the church.
 4. God's promise to Abraham that he would make Israel more numerous than the sands of the sea only reaches its fulfillment in the ingrafting of the Gentiles into the people of God.

5. The ingathering of the Gentiles is by no means 'Plan B' or a parenthesis in redemptive history.
 6. It is the fruition of God's promise of a regathered Israel.
- B. The final verses of our text contain two more Old Testament prophecies, this time from the book of Isaiah.
1. The first is Isaiah 10:22-23, which says that only a remnant of ethnic Israel will be saved.
 2. This reiterates the point that Paul made earlier in Romans 9.
 3. Not all who belong to ethnic Israel belong to the true spiritual Israel.
- C. The second verse that Paul cites from Isaiah is Isaiah 1:9, where it says, "If the Lord of hosts had not left us offspring, we would have been like Sodom and become like Gomorrah."
1. The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, recorded in Genesis 19, stands as the Bible's paradigm example of divine judgment.
 2. Those cities were wiped from the face of the earth because of their wickedness.
 3. In Isaiah 1:9, the prophet is saying that if the Lord had not left Israel a few survivors after her fall to Babylon, they would have been totally annihilated.
 4. The fact that God left anyone at all was sheer mercy.
 5. It was an example of the Bible's remnant principle.
 6. All throughout the historical unfolding of God's plan of redemption, he preserves a remnant.

7. Not all who are outwardly connected with the covenant people are saved.
8. God chooses a remnant and he distributes his mercy to them.

V. Conclusion

- A. The Bible's teaching on predestination shows us that God's love is very different than human love.
 1. Human love is reactive.
 2. We love certain people and certain things because we are attracted to them.
 3. There is something in them that we find to be pleasing and lovely.
 4. God's love for his elect is not like that.
 5. God does not love his elect because they are lovely.
 6. On the contrary, he makes his elect lovely by setting his love upon them.
 7. Martin Luther expressed this so well when he said, "The love of God does not find, but creates, that which is pleasing to it. The love of man comes into being through that which is pleasing to it." (*Heidelberg Disputation*, thesis 28)
 8. God did not make his decree of election by looking at the mass of fallen humanity and saying of some of them, 'There is something in these folks that makes them more attractive than the rest. I will set my love upon them because they please me.'
 9. It is not like that at all.
 10. God calls those beloved who have no loveliness in themselves.

11. He takes some from the one lump of clay, a lump that deserves the terrible fate that befell Sodom and Gomorrah, and calls them sons of the living God.
- B. Some of you have heard of Dr. John Gerstner, who taught for many years as a seminary professor and with Ligonier Ministries.
1. I recently heard a story about an occasion when Gerstner was speaking at a conference.
 2. He was dealing with the subject of human depravity when he made this assertion: "Man is a rat."
 3. During the question and answer session that followed, one member of the audience stood up and angrily demanded that Gerstner apologize for making such an offensive statement.
 4. Gerstner responded by stepping up to the microphone and saying this: 'Yes. You are right. I do apologize... to the rats.'
 5. It is an insult to rats to call man a rat.
 6. Only when we see this, only when we realize that God owes us absolutely nothing but judgment, only then will we respond to the doctrine of predestination in the right manner.
 7. Instead of crying foul over the fact that God does not show mercy to all, we will be utterly dumbfounded that he shows mercy to any.
 8. And we will be eternally grateful to find ourselves numbered among the recipients of that mercy.