

Romans 9:19-23

19 You will say to me then, "Why does He still find fault? For who has resisted His will?"

20 But indeed, O man, who are you to reply against God? Will the thing formed say to him who formed it, "Why have you made me like this?"

21 Does not the potter have power over the clay, from the same lump to make one vessel for honor and another for dishonor?

22 What if God, wanting to show His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction,

23 and that He might make known the riches of His glory on the vessels of mercy, which He had prepared beforehand for glory,

Remember we saw last week that Paul anticipates the questions that his teaching will create. The he puts those questions right on the table and deals with them straight forwardly. These are the two questions in my words primary questions in my words:

1. Is God unjust if He chooses some to be eternally saved and He does not choose others? And
2. How can God hold man responsible for their fate if it is God's choosing that determines their fate?

We saw that the answer to the first question is that there is nothing unjust or unrighteous about God deciding to favor some lost souls with His mercy and compassion. A legal case cannot be made against an act like that.

Now the second question, which is the harder question, what about

responsibility?

19 You will say to me then, "Why does He still find fault? For who has resisted His will?"

Let's look at this. Paul has been teaching that our salvation is ultra secure because salvation is initiated by **God's** choice and is accomplished by **God's** provision. We as humans **cannot** and **would not** initiate such a thing. It only happens when God initiates it. So those for whom God does **not** initiate such a salvation, these people do not stand a chance. So how can God **blame** them, how can God find fault with them for remaining damned? There is some logic in saying, "If they **cannot receive** Christ, it is not their fault for **rejecting** Christ." "If God has not chosen a person for election, a person cannot gain entry into salvation by force of will." "He cannot go against God's will and plan." The word for **will** here is only used several times in scripture and it means counsel or will. Here it means what God has decided or willed.

We need to carefully watch how Paul answers this question. The answer will reveal much about God's sovereign will in election.

20 But indeed, O man, who are you to reply against God? Will the thing formed say to him who formed it, "Why have you made me like this?"

The first thing we need to look at in this verse is the word "reply". The word Paul uses means to **answer by contradicting or replying against**. Some of the Greek experts say that the choice of this word indicates a **spirit of contention**. We who are parents are very familiar with this attitude. It comes out in every child born. At a certain stage we as parents issue a command and our child responds by asking why. And the question is not asked to gain understanding. It is asked so the child can work out an angle to disobey.

We can see by Paul's choice of words that he is dealing with the same kind of attitude. This question is issued in an effort to condemn God's actions. It is backtalk from man to God. It is man's attempt to reveal how **unfair it is** of God to choose some and not others.

We need to keep that **in mind** as we read Paul's response. As you read the pages of scripture you will find that God is not usually harsh with the honest questioner. In fact He is very patient. You can take your cares and anxieties to God honestly and sincerely and you will find answers and peace.

The problem comes in the dishonest questions, the questions that are only given to strengthen a verdict. These questions are really just dishonest communication. What we really want to do is make a statement but we don't have the courage to make our position be known, so we ask a question like the first bullet fired out of a gun. The next one is soon to follow shortly behind. And it doesn't take long until the conversation becomes more of a lynching than a fellowship.

We do well to take note how Paul handles this dishonest communication. It might be helpful **to us** when **we** the receiving end of these kinds of questions. And we do well to avoid hiding our dishonesty in questions in conversations we have with others. If we intend a question as an accusation we might as well be honest and make the accusation.

So Paul responds to the question by **first** requesting the qualifications of the questioner. Mike used to often say that you don't owe all of the truth to every person. There are some questions people don't have the right to ask. And where that is the case, you do not need to respond. Just because someone asks a question, doesn't mean that you owe them an answer. Jesus often answered a question with a question. He put the burden back on the questioner. When the questioners were duplicitous, they did not deserve an answer and he wouldn't

give it. Just because they had authority in one arena did not give them a dictatorship in all arenas.

In our text Paul's first emphasis is on the state of the questioner. He says, O man. O man. Doesn't that begin to put things into perspective? He points out that the questioner is but a mere man. He is formed of dust. He is fallen with Adam. He has a limited brain capacity and no inherent spiritual wisdom. So he starts by putting things in perspective.

Then he goes on and says- **who are you to reply against God?**

This is akin to saying, let's see your credentials. Paul up to this point has been careful to refer to scripture after scripture in his discourse. He has not taken it upon himself to **say much** that does not begin with information that **God has provided** in scriptures. Paul was an excellent minister. He did not think more of himself than he should have, even though he was an apostle. Nothing that Paul did could be construed as sassing off to God. Paul had kicked against the goads and those days are over. He is now compliant to the will of God. But the questioner on the other hand showed no such constraint.

To put this in perspective I would like to use an illustration.

Imagine yourself in a conference room where the greatest rocket scientists were in a room to figure out how to fix a problem with their newest rocket. Sitting at that table is a first grader. Imagine how it would be received if that first grader began criticizing the scientists work in their physics calculations and trajectories and fuel mixtures.

Well that insulting disruption is nothing compared to us challenging God's righteousness or justice. We have nothing to commend us for this task. We are not qualified. We have no knowledge. We have limited experience. All we have is a great sense of unwarranted confidence and human pride.

Paul asks an excellent question that applies to anyone who would place a charge on God. What is your qualification oh measly little creation? Who do you think you are anyway?

That is what we must consider before we attempt to place a charge on God. We do well to consider that **we do not understand at all**. The only wisdom **we have** we have received from the revelation that God has given us of Himself.

As we consider the topic that is before us, this is the state of mind we must be in. We cannot think to bring in our human wisdom and begin telling God what is right or wrong about what he is doing. That is laughable. We must go to the words of Paul and receive them as a man receiving something from God's hand. We were

not appointed as **evaluators**. We were called as **children** of God, not aunts and uncles of God. God needs no advice, nor will he be taking any of ours.

We do well to identify with David in my favorite Psalm- Psalm 8

Psalm 8:1-9 (NKJV)

1. O LORD, our Lord, How excellent is Your name in all the earth, Who have set Your glory above the heavens!

2 Out of the mouth of babes and nursing infants You have ordained strength, Because of Your enemies, That You may silence the enemy and the avenger.

3 When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, The moon and the stars, which You have ordained,

4 What is man that You are mindful of him, And the son of man that You visit him?

5 For You have made him a little lower than the angels, And You have crowned him with glory and honor.

6 You have made him to have dominion over the works of Your hands; You have put all things under his feet,

7 All sheep and oxen-- Even the beasts of the field,

8 The birds of the air, And the fish of the sea That pass through the paths of the seas.

9 O LORD, our Lord, How excellent is Your name in all the earth!

This is the perspective of wisdom. We start with God and end up amazed that God would care for us at all. We become amazed by the condescension of God as Brad puts it. All our rights crumble away at the threshold of God's glory. And we stand amazed and humbled by who God is and the amazing mercy He has shown to us.

Paul goes on to say,"

Will the thing formed say to him who formed it, "Why have you made me like this?"

Now it is important that we pay great attention to the wording here. Notice where it says, "the thing formed". The Greek word used here is the word we get plastic or plasma from. It means, "What has been molded or formed." This is very distinct from the words for creation. What Paul is describing is the process of forming something that already exists. He is not talking about creating something from nothing, which is what happens in creation.

This might be very significant.

I am a bit out of my league on this topic. But I am seeing a trend in scripture that I am surprised by.

There is nothing in this passage, or in all of scripture that I am aware of, that says that any humans were created for destruction. They were formed. But they were not **created** for that purpose. Forming requires that something already exists. Creation does not. So it is quite possible that scripture is telling us God takes people who are all equally damned, and who are fully responsible for their own damnation, and He forms them from that point for one of two purposes. If so, this counters the idea that is called "**double predestination**". Double predestination says that some people are created for the specific purpose of salvation and some are created for the specific purpose of damnation. Paul very clearly supports the first predestination, but his words specifically and intentionally avoid stating the second. While God takes **full credit** for His actions in calling people to Himself and rescuing His children, He is not attributed with actively causing them to be born damned. We will see the difference as we continue on in this text.

Some would argue that logically you cannot make that distinction. Others would say you can. This **isn't** something I would argue about because I am not qualified. But I think it is wise to follow the clues Paul gives us. And they very strongly lead in the first direction.

Now we go back to our verse.

Will the thing formed say to him who formed it, "Why have you made me like this?"

Paul uses this question to strengthen his point from the last verse. Who does the questioner think he is? He uses the example of a potter and clay. It puts things in perspective.

On one hand you have a blob of clay. What **virtues** does it have? In its current state it is pretty much useless. It cannot shape itself. It cannot become anything useful by **its own** force of will. It is nothing without the will and expertise of the potter.

Now how about the potter on the other hand? The potter is the primary force in the pottery world. Nothing happens without the will of the potter. It is **only** the skill of the **potter** that determines the destiny of the **clay**. And the will of the potter shapes each piece of clay as it intends. There is nothing about the clay that **determines** what will be **made of it**. It is only **the potter** that controls that.

So imagine that blob of clay has a voice. And the potter makes a beautiful plate out of a lump. And the lump says, what gives you the right to make a plate out of

me. I wanted to be vase. Doesn't that strike you as being absurd? It is ridiculous. It is none of the clay's business what the potter wants to make of the clay. And that is precisely why the illustration of a potter and clay is used so often in scripture. Paul was probably drawing from those other references.

He goes on to say,

21 Does not the potter have power over the clay, from the same lump to make one vessel for honor and another for dishonor?

The word for power alludes to authority. Paul strengthens his case to the questioner. A potter, due to his position, has perfect right to make of any lump of clay anything He wants to make. If he wants a work of art or a bedpan, he has every right to make what he wants.

Let's take a look at some other uses of this illustration.

Isaiah 45:9-11 (NKJV)

9 "Woe to him who strives with his Maker! Let the potsherd strive with the potsherds of the earth! Shall the clay say to him who forms it, 'What are you making?' Or shall your handiwork say, 'He has no hands'?

10 Woe to him who says to his father, 'What are you begetting?' Or to the woman, 'What have you brought forth?' "

11 Thus says the LORD, The Holy One of Israel, and his Maker: "Ask Me of things to come concerning My sons; And concerning the work of My hands, you command Me.

The questioner in Romans falls into the category of the one who strives with His Maker. That is always a bad thing. And that is probably why Paul refers to this passage.

How about us? Do we strive with our Maker? Do we think to evaluate God's provisions for our lives? Do we think to improve His plan for our lives by advising God where He is right or wrong? I think it is very easy to fall into that trap. In fact every time we foster an attitude of discontent I think we are dangerously close to this woe. It is good for us to keep the perspective that we are but clay in the potter's hands. He has every right to do with us **as He chooses** for His glory. But we have to remember that this is not **the only** imagery used. We are also like sheep are to a shepherd and as a wife is to a husband. We are very loved even though we are very much clay to the potter.

Isaiah 64:8 (NKJV)

8 But now, O LORD, You are our Father; We are the clay, and You our potter; And all we are the work of Your hand.

Isaiah combines metaphors here. God is the Father. We are the children. We are the clay. God is the potter. And ultimately we are what God makes us and nothing more.

Jeremiah 18:1-6 (NKJV)

1 The word which came to Jeremiah from the LORD, saying:

2 "Arise and go down to the potter's house, and there I will cause you to hear My words."

3 Then I went down to the potter's house, and there he was, making something at the wheel.

4 And the vessel that he made of clay was marred in the hand of the potter; so he made it again into another vessel, as it seemed good to the potter to make.

5 Then the word of the LORD came to me, saying:

6 "O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter?" says the LORD. "Look, as the clay is in the potter's hand, so are you in My hand, O house of Israel!"

Here we see it again. The point is very clear. God does what he wants with His creation. He exhibits absolute control. And we are completely dependent upon Him.

22 What if God, wanting to show His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, 23 and that He might make known the riches of His glory on the vessels of mercy, which He had prepared beforehand for glory,

Look closely at these verses. First look at the phrase "vessels of wrath prepared for destruction". Notice that there is no reference of **who** prepares them for destruction. Paul is very good about giving credit where it is due. But he does not, in any way say that God prepares them for destruction. We only are told that they **are prepared** for destruction. How is that true?

Just as we have said before, men are born under Adam, we are born in sin, and we choose to sin. That is **enough** preparation. We need no more.

But look at the vessels of mercy. It is specifically stated that it **is God** who prepared them for glory. This would fit right in with the line of reasoning we have been following to this point. God chooses to rescue some of those who are headed toward judgment, but He does not rescue **all** of them.

The reasoning would be that God created man in His image. God created man for fellowship with himself. But Adam sinned and brought upon himself the punishment for sin. Ever since then every person born is a vessel of wrath

prepared for destruction unless God intervenes and shows His great mercy. When that happens, their destiny changes. They are then vessels of glory that God actively prepared for Glory. And His choice to do that is completed well before they even exist.

We see from this verse several other things.

1. God wants to show His wrath and make his power known. Part of God's character is His hatred of sin. He despises it. And He will ultimately destroy it. God's judgment of sin and his exhibition of power in that stead is something God wants to do. And He will do it.

But why does He wait so long? Why has world history gone on so long? Why has he suffered the wicked to live? Maybe it is because the delay just proves His point.

God endures with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction. If you think about it, there is no reason that God should not have killed Adam on the day he sinned. There is no reason that God should not have wiped out the whole world's population at any period of time. We surely deserved it. But God has allowed human history to continue. Part of His reasoning may be to prove to onlookers that **His judgment is justified**. No matter how long the human race continues, it just continues to sin. The Old Testament consisted of thousands of years and the result was the same. No one ever deserved God's favor. Now the New Testament has continued and the result is the same. No one deserves God's favor. So every year that continues, God proves his justice in condemning the sons of Adam. No matter what resource God provides, mankind just continues to sin. So the longer people live, the more his justice of eventually destroying them is proven right.

One of God's traits is that He is long suffering. He puts up with that which goes against His character. But He will not do that forever.

2. **23 and that He might make known the riches of His glory on the vessels of mercy, which He had prepared beforehand for glory**

Here is the other side of the story. God wants to display His power in **destroying sin** and all those **associated with it**. But He also wants to make known the **riches of His Glory on the vessels of mercy**. And the vessels of mercy are those who were chosen before the beginning of time. They were prepared for a specific purpose. Their preparation for destruction was overcome by mercy and grace. God singled them out to call them to Himself.

Notice that while God wants to show **His power** in the destruction of sin, the word **Glory** is not associated with that action. Paul reserves that word for what God has in mind for **His children**. The **children of God** is the way that God is going to show off the riches of His glory. God will glorify Himself in the **salvation of His children**. He has chosen his vessels of mercy. He has, as the potter, shaped some vessels from the clay that he wants to show off His workmanship. They are vessels of mercy. They are the ones that deserved judgment but He gave them mercy.

He had this in mind before they were ever born. He took an active hand in shaping them and molding them.

And he uses them to point to Jesus Christ and the salvation He provided.

1 Corinthians 1:20-25 (NKJV)

20 Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the disputer of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?

23 but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness,

24 but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

25 Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

30 But of Him you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God--and righteousness and sanctification and redemption--

31 that, as it is written, "He who glories, let him glory in the LORD."

You see when God shows off Christians, what He is really showing off is Christ. Christ is the glorious one. When you read of descriptions of Christ in Revelations or Daniel you understand quickly of the riches of the glory He displays. Christ is the wisdom of God and the righteousness, sanctification and redemption. Christ will receive the glory and honor for all of this.

The phrase the "riches of His glory" refers to wealth that cannot be measured. There is no end to that Glory. It extends for eternity. It is very difficult to catch the vastness of this statement in mere words.

Some people may avoid chapter 9 of Romans for being such a theological chapter. But look at the gem thrown in the middle of solid teaching about God's choice. We see the surpassing wealth of glory being displayed for all to see. We have a crescendo of glory in the midst of the explanation of God's intention and purpose. How can we miss the significance. God is

showing off and that is what He intends to do. And his greatest focus of this glory is using the people of God to show off the glory of the Son of God. And His people are right in the middle of it?

Can you grasp this? Can you see how wonderful that is? It is miraculous. And how amazing it is that His children are called to be part of it. Are you one of His children? Call out to Him and you can be!

And for those of us who **are** His children. Is this the perspective we walk through our days with? Do we regard our Lord as the absolute potter? He did not owe us grace or mercy. Yet He showed it by **awakening** us to our sin and **granting** us repentance. Now He may shape some things in our lives differently than we would like them. Really, who are we to accuse God of making some thoughtless mistake or failing to take into consideration our well being? What attitudes do we foster toward Him? We would do well to set firm in our thinking this week that God is the masterful potter. We only deserved **wrath** from our shaper. Yet what He showed us was **mercy and grace**. Now if He **has plans** for our lives that we aren't fond of, is that really any of our business? Who are we to say that He should have done it differently? We have mercy, grace and eternal life. Isn't that enough to convince us of God's good intentions toward us? Isn't that enough to warrant a life lived in service to our God? Isn't that enough to prove we can trust Him with the little stuff?

Skipping ahead in Romans we see Paul say this:

Romans 12:1-2 (NKJV)

1 I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service.

2 And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, (your thinking, your ideas about yourself, about life, about God. Replace your ideas with God's truth) that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.