

***“IT’S NOT FAIR” — A QUESTION OF GOD’S RIGHTEOUSNESS
ROMANS 9:19-23***

In homes with children — especially young children — there is an often repeated declaration that particularly reveals the theology of the children: “It’s not fair.”

- ✓ When dad receives a larger portion of ice cream for dessert, “it’s not fair.” (The same thing might *not* be said when dad takes more broccoli during dinner.)
- ✓ When an older sibling’s bedtime is extended, “it’s not fair.”
- ✓ When a younger sibling receives a more expensive gift from Grandma at Christmas, “it’s not fair.”
- ✓ When the child doesn’t get to start for his baseball team in the playoffs, “it’s not fair.”
- ✓ When a friend, who doesn’t study as much as the child, receives a better final grade, “it’s not fair.”
- ✓ When the teenager doesn’t get the anticipated promotion at work (or scholarship), “it’s not fair.”

With every “it’s not fair” statement, the child is revealing his theology. He thinks he is revealing a theology of supreme righteousness, but in actuality he is revealing a theology that asserts that he is to be the Lord of the universe and that all things in all places are to be for him and for his glory. He needs to have his basic belief system realigned to the truth. And a wise parent will help him with that.

In a very similar way, there are common protestations against God, His sovereignty, and His salvation. The theological term for these protests is “theodicy” (God + Righteousness). “Is God righteous when there is suffering, evil, Hell, judgment, etc....?” It is this very question that Paul is addressing in Romans 9. After asserting God’s sovereignty in salvation, Paul addresses two anticipated objections to divine election. The first question is in vv. 14-18 — “Is God unjust in choosing?” And the second is in the passage before us today (vv. 19ff) — “If God sovereignly chooses and hardens, then how can He condemn anyone to Hell?”

Let’s summarize it this way:

GOD’S DIVINE ELECTION IS JUST AND GOD’S CONDEMNATION OF SINNERS TO HELL IS JUST.

That is Paul’s conclusion, but his answer to the question is different than what we might anticipate. We will see the righteousness of God revealed in a dialog of two questions:

- 1. Man Questions God: “Is God’s Condemnation **RIGHT?**” (v. 19)**
- 2. God Questions Man (vv. 20-23)**
 - ✓ “Who is **MAN?**” (v. 20)
 - ✓ “Doesn’t a Sovereign God Have **RIGHTS?**” (v. 21)
 - ✓ “Isn’t Judgment a Demonstration of God’s Just **PURPOSES?**” (vv. 22-23)

1. Man Questions God: "Is God's Condemnation RIGHT?" (v. 19)

- When Paul says, *you will say to me, then*, he is taking up a second objection to divine election. He is anticipating an argument against what he has said and summarizing that argument. It goes like this:
 - ✓ **Why does He still find fault?** To find fault is to blame and scold; here it infers judgment and eternal condemnation. The question addresses the fairness and rightness of God to act against men and their sins if He is sovereign over the extension (and withholding) of mercy. Is God unfair to render sinners guilty of sin and condemn them to suffer from His wrath if they have not been sovereignly chosen as recipients of His mercy? That's the point of the next anticipated question:
 - ✓ **For who resists His will?** His will is revealed in **v. 18** — His will (*desires*) reveals who receives mercy and who remains hardened. The anticipated objection also is that it is impossible to stand against or resist or change God's will. What He decrees will unchangingly happen. Since that is true, is it appropriate for God to condemn anyone for what He has willed?
 - ✓ This question addresses whether man is responsible for his own sin if God is sovereign in His elective salvation. Paul will answer the objection in vv. 20ff.

- These arguments against God are common. People regularly chastise God and repudiate Him for His lack of righteousness. They cannot understand God's commands to destroy the nations in the OT, His "lack of love" in consigning anyone to Hell, the existence of pain and suffering (particularly "untimely" suffering, as with young children) and the existence of immense perversity and evil (holocausts...).
 - ✓ The argument goes something like this:
 1. If God is **all-powerful**, He can prevent evil.
 2. If God is **good**, He would want to prevent evil.
 3. Evil exists.
 4. Therefore, there is no God. (Or: God is either not all-powerful, or He is not good.)
 - ✓ As Dan Phillips has pointed out, the argument is really something like this:
 1. If God can do anything He wishes, He could prevent evil *if He wished*.
 2. If God is good... I can't think of a reason why he would not prevent evil.
 3. Evil exists.
 4. Therefore...I don't know why God might choose to permit evil.
 - ✓ The problem with the arguments against theodicy, is that the lesser is challenging the greater. Not just the lesser challenging the greater, but the least is challenging the greatest. The ignorant is challenging the all-knowing. The fool is challenging the supremely wise. The guilty is challenging the Judge. And that is exactly what Paul addresses in vv. 20-23.

2. God Questions Man (vv. 20-23)

- It is notable that Paul's answer does not directly address the question being asked. The question is about theodicy and God's righteousness. The answer is about man's lowliness and, in a sense, the inappropriateness of the question. God, through Paul, is essentially saying, "I know your question, but you are asking the wrong question. In fact, you really don't even have a right to raise an objection because this is *God* to whom you are speaking."
- One theologian captured the sense of this when he wrote: "A Pilate, a Judas, and a Jerusalem Council can nail the Savior of the world to a cross but it is God who decides what that cross is to mean in the subsequent history of mankind." [Smart, quoted in Morris] God stands in judgment of man; man does not get to be the judge of God. That is exactly where Paul begins —

• "Who is **MAN**?" (v. 20)

- ✓ The way Paul constructs the opening phrase in this verse draws attention to the contrast to man and God — he begins with *man* and ends with **God**: "*O man, on the contrary, who are you who answers back to God?*" Both with his question and with his word order, he is emphasizing the disparity between man and God and the humility and inability of man to question God.
- ✓ Paul would have us to think about the nature and position of man. Who is man?
 - Remember what Paul has revealed about man in this book:
 - ... The nature of man is rebellious against God and His truth (1:18, 21ff, 32).
 - ... No man — neither Jew nor Gentile — does anything good or desires or seeks God (3:10ff).
 - ... All men are under condemnation and accountable to God (3:19, 23)
 - ... All men are born sinners, and everything they do is sin (5:12, 14).
 - ... No man has any capacity to save himself by his own righteousness; all men are completely dependent on the righteousness of Christ to be saved (4:25; 5:18-19; 6:8-11).
 - Notice also that in this verse Paul uses the phrase **answers back to God**. It means "talk back." It is an objection and it is resistance to what God has said and done. It also supposes that God has asked us for our input; He has not. As with Moses, our position is not to question Him, but to take off our shoes and worship Him (Ex. 3:5-6).
 - In summary, man is exceedingly low and God is exceedingly exalted. John the Baptist understood it well: "He must increase; I must decrease" (Jn. 3:30). No one can object to God's actions and decrees. We are, as Whitfield says, "Little, impotent men" and we have no capacity to argue with God and we have no right to argue with God and His actions.
- ✓ Paul illustrates his point with the account of a potter and the potter's creation: **the thing molded...**
 - The quotation here is from Is. 29:16; 45:9, but the theme is common in the OT. And the way the question is asked here anticipates a negative answer — "No, the molded thing won't say..."

- The problem with the question ***Why did you make me like this?*** is not that one might ask for information, but that this is an objection. The question is really an assertion that the created thing knows better how to run the world than the Creator. Man has no more right to question God than a clay pot can question the creator of the pot about his purposes for that pot.
- I both chuckled and cringed when I read what one commentator said about this verse: “The answer rebukes the questioner for his impudence and for his imbecility; for his shamelessness and for his senselessness. The objector calls in question God’s justice, and is therefore impudent, arrogant. He forgets that if that which is molded has no right to say to its molder, ‘Why did you make me thus?’, then *all the more*, human beings have no right thus to address their Sovereign Maker. The objector is stupid.” [Hendriksen] He’s blunt. But he’s right.
- ✓ This verse is so reminiscent of other passages of Scripture, particularly Job 38-41 (e.g., 38:1-7; 40:1-8). God is not answerable to us; we are His creation and we are answerable to Him. When we whine and complain like the men of v. 19, we are attempting to place ourselves on God’s throne. And He will not share His position or glory with anyone else. We are created by Him, and our position is to submit to His will, not object to His will.
- ✓ Before we begin making objections of God, we must remember our position before Him. We are low and He is exalted. We do bear the image of God (Gen. 1:27) and we have been given an elevated position in creation (Ps. 8:5-8). But there is still an infinite distance between us and God. He will not be questioned/resisted by us.
- ✓ The question is not “Is God unfair to condemn?” The question is, “who are *you* to object?” There is another question that is better than the one that objectors might ask —

• **“Doesn’t a Sovereign God Have RIGHTS?” (v. 21)**

- ✓ When Paul asks the question, ***does not the potter have a right...*** he is anticipating a positive answer — “Yes, the potter does have a right.” It is self-evident; it’s almost foolish to ask.
- ✓ To have a ***right*** is to have authority and freedom of choice. And if a potter can do that with clay, then the infinite God has an even greater right because of His position.
- ✓ From this lump of clay, the potter might make two kinds of vessels — ***honorable*** and ***common***.
 - While the potter/vessel imagery is common in the OT, it is most extensive in Jer. 18:1-12.
 - Verses 6ff emphasize God’s right to choose nations for His purposes. God, the Potter, makes His people the way He intends and designs, for His purposes. The vessel has no right or capacity to object to the work of the Potter.
 - But notice also God’s grace and mercy in His creation of these vessels (Jer. 18:8, 11).
- ✓ If the potter has the right to make these kinds of vessels, then God ***certainly*** has a greater right.

- ✓ Now what is often missed with this analogy is this: the ***lump*** from which God is working is not morally neutral (or even morally righteous). The “lump” includes all humanity that is born under condemnation; from that mass, God keeps some in their rebellion and condemnation (the condition in which they are already living) and others He chooses out for salvation, for His purposes (22-23).
 - When God makes some for “common” use (those who will be destroyed), he is not making them something contrary to their nature. They are already “common” and under His wrath. They are not morally righteous and destined for Glory and God diverts them. No, they are already condemned and He simply keeps them there in that condemnation (e.g., 1:24, 26, 28).
 - Notice that God is *not* creating sinful people for the purpose of punishing them; he is punishing people who are already sinful and objectors against Him. It is not unjust to keep them in their sin. It is not unjust not to be gracious to all men. “...all are guilty before God; no-one has a claim on his grace. If he chooses to extend his grace to some, the others have no ground for arguing that he is unjust because he does not extend it to them. If it is justice they demand, they can have it...” [Bruce]
 - That reminds me of the story told by R. C. Sproul about a theology course he taught — the first paper was due and Johnson was late — “the baby was sick and I was at the ER all night...” “Ok, turn it in within two days and I’ll accept it.” The second paper was due a few weeks later and there were 5-6 late papers: “turn them in within two days and I’ll accept them.” The final paper was due a few weeks later and 2/3 of the class didn’t have it; “Johnson, do you have your paper?” “No, but I’ll get it to you in a couple of days...” “That’s an ‘F.’” “Prof! That’s not fair!” “Oh, you want fair?” “Yes!” “Ok. I remember that you were late with the first one; that’s now an ‘F’ also.”
 - Grace is not required of God and it is not unjust of God not to extend grace.
 - The wonder is not that God keeps some from this lump of clay as common vessels; the wonder is that He refashions the clay to make some honorable vessels. He takes common clay and makes it uncommonly beautiful and worthwhile. He makes the ignoble noble and the inglorious glorious. The wonder is that He makes sinners into saints and conveyers of the treasure of His eternal and infinite salvation. Never get over the wonder of 2 Cor. 4:6-7.

• **“Isn’t Judgment a Demonstration of God’s Just PURPOSES?” (vv. 22-23)**

- ✓ In verse 21, Paul is answering the person who is an objector to God’s condemnation of sinners. In these verses Paul is answering the person who has a genuine question about God’s condemnation of sinners — “I don’t understand; help me comprehend why God condemns some...” Paul gives three answers to the question in these two verses.
- ✓ Note: Verse 22 is particularly difficult to translate because it is a conditional sentence without the second part of the sentence — Paul never gives the “then” to his “if,” though his intent seems clear. So the translators handle it by saying “what if...”

- ✓ The bigger question is what to do with the word **willing**. It could have the sense “although He was willing” (NASB) or “because He was willing...” In verses 17-18 Paul points to the purpose of hardening and extending mercy and it seems most likely that is his intent here also; Paul is demonstrating the purpose of the use of His wrath and the purpose of gift of His mercy. What are those purposes? Why does God condemn some and extend mercy to others?
- ✓ *His purpose is to reveal His power.* God allowed sin into His created world so that He might **demonstrate His wrath and make His power known**. We must not forget that God is revealed (glorified) when man is justly condemned, just as He is glorified when man is justly redeemed. “Even God’s anger, vengeance, and retribution poured out on sinners are glorious, because they display His majestic holiness.” We would not know the extent of God’s holiness if He did not justly judge and pour out retribution against sin. God would be unjust if He ignored and overlooked sin.
 - God’s power is seen in His creation (1:20), and in His gospel (1:4, 16), and now in His just condemnation of sinners (9:17).
 - But it is not just to demonstrate that He has the raw power and strength to condemn, but that He has authority and right to condemn (Rev. 12:10; 18:1).
 - When God judges sin it demonstrates that He is powerful and victorious over sin and that sin does not rule and reign. God is not overwhelmed by sin, but overwhelms sin with His justice. This should be a great comfort to the believer who lives in a world where we suffer from sin.
- ✓ *His purpose is to reveal His patience.*
 - **God endured with much patience...** He is not apathetic toward sin, but He has *much* patience toward the sinners. (Remember that **patience** is a willingness to endure and suffer injustice from people.) He has not just *some* patience, but *much* patience. He has a great reluctance to punish sinners. He is slow to punish. He is not vindictive or capricious. He is patient (Gen. 18:26ff [Sodom]; Is. 5:3-4; Ezk. 18:23, 32; Lk. 13:6ff).
 - God is amazingly, astoundingly (though not eternally) patient.
 - He was patient in the days of Noah and Jonah. He was patient with Pharaoh and Judas. He was patient with the Jews. He is patient with all men, not condemning them the moment they are born or at their first willful act of sinful rebellion (Ps. 103:8; 1 Tim. 1:13; 2 Pt. 3:9).
 - God is patient so that men will repent (Rom. 2:4). If you are not a believer in Christ, God has been exceedingly patient with you. He has been patient with you so that you might come to your senses and repent of your sin and embrace Him as the eternal treasure He is. You need to repent; you must repent. You can repent. He is a forgiving, relenting God (Jer. 18:8, 11).
 - It is important to notice that His patience is extended toward **vessels of wrath prepared for destruction**. The question is, “who prepared them? Who made them this way?” This is similar to what is said of Pharaoh (v. 17) and others (v. 18); God hardens them by leaving them in their rebellion and sin. He simply doesn’t choose them out of their sin. They stay where they want to be.

- ✓ *His purpose is to reveal His glory* (v. 23). The third reason for God’s pouring out of wrath against sinners was ***to make known the riches of His glory upon the vessels of mercy...***
 - How do you know the greatness of your salvation? How do you know that it is beautiful and wonderful? How do you know the beauty of Heaven and the delights of fellowship with God?
 - We can only know the full magnitude of what we have been given when we see it in comparison to what we have been saved from.
 - ... Several years ago, I was cleaning out a box of toys from my childhood and I came across a receipt from Sears & Roebuck. It was for a baseball bat and ball. I don’t remember the exact price, but I think it was about \$3 (yah, that was the early 70s!). It wasn’t a special day gift (bday), just an “I love you gift” from my dad. And it was charged to the store credit account. Dad didn’t have the cash to pay for the gift, so he charged it. I had always enjoyed that gift (I still have the bat), but when I realized what it cost, I had a new and deeper appreciation for it.
 - ... So it is with our gift of salvation. We have been given a diamond of redemption; but it shines most brightly against the black backdrop of God’s wrath.
 - ... We have riches in our salvation (Rom. 11:33; Col. 3:1-3). But the magnitude of those riches are seen most fully when compared to the loss of those who suffer eternally for their sin.
 - God puts His ***glory*** on display most fully when He gives His mercy to the ***vessels He prepared beforehand*** to receive that glory (those whom He elected to that purpose). But those riches are only riches when some suffer loss (God’s wrath). If all are saved, then there is nothing particularly unique or special of the gift. But if some are condemned, then what grace we have received when we have received His mercy.
 - My friend, when we receive this mercy it should produce a continual overflowing of humble praise and gratitude — “why would He redeem and use *me*?” His glory produces worship.

CONCLUSION: What have we learned about the nature of God?

Scripture is given to us as a revelation of God. As we read Scripture, we learn about Him. We come to know Him. And as we come to know Him, we love Him. That’s the goal, as Paul says in **1 Tim. 1:5** — “the goal of our instruction is love...” So what have we learned about God (and us) in this passage?

*We have learned that God is **not like man**.* We are fallible and fallen. He is unerring and true.

*We have learned that God is **sovereign** (authoritative).* He has a right to choose who is His and a right not to choose others not to be His. And He is powerful to redeem and powerful to condemn. He is in control of all things and has a right to be in control of all things.

*We have learned that God is **wrathful**.* God does not delight to pour out His wrath against sinners, but He *will* do it. His justice demands that He must be wrathful. He could not be righteous if He did not.

*We have learned that God is **patient**.* He is *slow* to exercise His wrath and anger. He endures much offense from sinners. How long will we endure sins against us? Peter suggested 7x. God endures tens of thousands of acts and motives of rebellion against Him from most people before He acts. Actually, it is an infinite amount of rebellion that He endures from every person, before He acts with His wrath. He is amazingly and astoundingly patient.

*We have learned that God is **merciful**.*

- ✓ Earlier we referred to the thinking of those who wrestle with God's justice (theodicy):
 1. If God is **all-powerful**, He can prevent evil.
 2. If God is **good**, He would want to prevent evil.
 3. Evil exists.
 4. Therefore, there is no God. (Or: God is either not all-powerful, or He is not good.)
- ✓ Dan Phillips has pointed out that there is a much better way to think about this "problem:"
 1. If God can do anything He wishes, He could prevent evil if He wished.
 2. If God is good, He will not allow evil to go unpunished or reign forever.
 3. Evil exists, will be punished, and it both has been and will be dealt with permanently.
 4. Therefore, repent and believe in the Lord Jesus, or be *part* of that evil that will be judged and dealt with.
- ✓ And God longs for us to repent; He desires men to repent. He is glorified when men repent. He loves to withhold His wrath and extend the gift and grace of salvation.

*We have learned that God is **glorious**.* How do you know that God is glorious? We know it when He saves us from sin, but we only understand the magnitude of that salvation if some are not saved from His wrath. We see the greatness of His grace most fully against the backdrop of His wrath.

We have learned these things so that we might know Him, worship Him, and love Him. Let's do that.

BENEDICTION: Psalm 106:48