



Election 3: God's Sovereign Glory

Romans 9:19-29

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We're going to be looking this morning at Romans, chapter 9, verses 19-29. Not to the end of the chapter, but this is, indeed, the capstone of Paul's teaching on the doctrine of election. After this week, we're going to take a short break of five weeks in total, four weeks in which we're going to turn to the topic of being ambassadors for Christ, of thinking about how we put into action the zeal for the lost that Paul has expressed in Romans 9 in the confidence of election that Paul gives to us in Romans 9

Then we will have Resurrection Sunday, or Easter, and then after that Sunday we will dive back into Romans to finish off the last half or so of the book. Please give attention to the reading of God's Holy Word. For the Word of the Lord is completely without error, the Word of the Lord is completely sufficient, and, especially as we come to a doctrine like this, we must remember that the Word of the Lord is completely authoritative. Romans, chapter 9, beginning at verse 19:

"You will say to me then, 'Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?' But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, 'Why have you made me like this?' Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use?"

What 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—even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles?"

As indeed he says in Hosea, 'Those who were not my people I will call "my people," and her who was not beloved I will call "beloved."' And in the very place where it was said to them, "You are not my people," there they will be called "sons of the living God."' And Isaiah cries out concerning Israel: 'Though the number of the sons of Israel be as the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will be saved, for the Lord will carry out his sentence upon the earth fully and without delay.' And as Isaiah predicted, 'If the Lord of hosts had not left us offspring, we would have been like Sodom and become like Gomorrah.'"

Thus far the reading of God's Holy Word. Let's pray for his blessing upon it.

Lord, we ask that you would open up your Word to us this morning, that you would make clear to us your purpose and your will, that you would show us the Lord Jesus Christ and the mercy you provide in the work of Jesus. Help us, O Lord, for we are weak. We are weak in understanding. Perhaps even more importantly, as we come to this

text, we are weak in will. We don't always want to believe what you say, O Lord. But, Lord, we ask by the power of your Holy Spirit that you would work in us a great trust and a love for your Word. This we ask in Christ's precious name, amen.

As we have said, this passage in chapter 9 is the capstone of Paul's discussion and teaching on the doctrine of election. We've had kind of a short series about election in three parts. This is where we come to the conclusion, but in order to do so, we must remember where we have been so far. Remember that in chapter 8 Paul had given several reasons for the Christian to have assurance of salvation. He said the believer has the Spirit of God and is a child of God and is a co-heir with Jesus Christ.

Paul reminded us that the believer has a future glory that far surpasses any suffering in *this* life. He told us that the believer's salvation is in the hands of God from the very beginning to the end, from predestination to glorification. Then he concluded chapter 8 by reminding us that absolutely nothing can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ.

But this led to an objection. Someone asked, "Well, what about the Jews? How did *they* get separated from God? Didn't God's Word fail in *their* case?" To answer that objection, Paul began to show us the doctrine of election, that God does not work by natural means. His promises are not for all who merely share the same ethnicity. Instead, his promises are in accordance with his purpose. God has his people, and he will never fail to see his promise take hold of them, but that promise is according to *his* choice.

He gave us the example of Jacob and Esau, twins. Before they were born, before they had done anything either good or bad, God declared, "Jacob I have loved, and Esau I have hated." This led to a second objection: "God, that's not fair." You remember we said that this objection was evidence that Paul was actually teaching the doctrine of election, because if he had *not* been teaching that salvation is according to God's choice and purpose, there would be no objection of unfairness to be raised.

Paul answered this second objection by saying salvation is not about justice at all. As a matter of fact, if it were, we would all stand condemned and no one would be saved. He further told us that election highlights that salvation is not about anything we can do. It's not about anything we have done. What makes one person to differ from another is not his works or his ability to believe but, rather, instead, the sovereign choice of God.

Then, finally, Paul reminded us that God has a purpose in election and he brings that purpose about through both judgment and mercy. This morning, we now come to a third objection. It's remarkably similar to the second. The third objection is, "But that's still not fair." Before Paul deals with that, I'd like us to see this under the rubric of three headings. First, we see the *right of God's glory*. Secondly, we see the *reason for God's glory*. Then thirdly, we see the *revealing of God's glory*. This is all about the glory of God.

The Right of God's Glory

We come now to this third objection. "Paul, we understand what you've said, but it's still not fair." It goes something like this: "If God's choice is what determines everything, and if God's will cannot be stopped, how can

anyone be to blame? How can man be responsible if no one can resist God's will?" Paul puts it *this* way in verse 19: "Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?"

If God's will is to choose some to salvation and not to choose others for salvation, how can anyone be blamed for not being saved? They're just the subject of God's will. This may be the heart of the difficulty many have with election. You see, for many, election seems to take away all human responsibility. More than that, I think when someone objects to election they say, "I object because I don't think I deserve judgment for something I'm not responsible for." It becomes very personal.

Now, before we look at the attitude behind this objection, we need to see again that Paul is teaching God's sovereignty in election here. Again, if he *weren't* teaching this, this question would never have come up. This is the second time we have seen this. You may have questions, you may not like the doctrine of election, but you can't deny what Paul is teaching here.

This is very important as we look at election. Paul is being very clear, and the objections flow right from his teaching. Also, we have to see what Paul is doing here. He doesn't avoid the problem. He brings it right out into the open. The Bible doesn't leave us to wonder. It confronts us with an uncomfortable truth, but it *does* address man's objections. Paul doesn't go around this issue; he tackles it head-on.

So how does Paul respond, then? He responds initially, in the beginning of verse 20, with a rebuke. Then he gives a response explaining God's sovereignty over all humanity and what he does with humanity in the second part of verse 20 and verse 21. Next, Paul gives the reason for God's glory to be shown in his wrath *and* in his mercy in verses 22-24. Then, finally, he goes to the Scriptures to show that God's sovereign mercy is revealed in both the calling of the Gentiles and in the preservation of the remnant of the Jews.

Well, that's our outline. Let's look a bit closer now at Paul's rebuke. Before Paul even gets to the substance of the argument of the objection, he rebukes the questioner. The question itself, Paul says, comes from an illegitimate place. "But who are you, O man, to answer back to God?" We have to understand here that Paul is not saying we should never ask questions of God. The Bible presumes that we are in a position of learning, of ignorance, that we need knowledge and need truth.

We can even see examples of the psalmist asking God questions...questions that aren't easy to answer, questions about justice, about why bad things happen to God's people, and so on. The mere act of questioning is not the problem here. No. The reason for Paul's rebuke is that Paul sees the attitude of the objector. This is not a question that is sincerely seeking truth. The objector is not looking for an answer.

This is not a person coming to God to try to understand what God is telling him. Instead, it is a contentious attempt to find fault with God. It's like saying, "If that's true, then, God, you're wrong. You have no right to do this." It is an answering back. We see this in the term itself *answer back*. It means to answer in turn, as in an argument. It means the back and forth of trying to prove someone wrong, and it happens in the context of ill will.

Mothers, which one of you have never uttered this phrase with your children? "Don't you answer back to *me* now." That doesn't mean you never want them to ask you a question. That doesn't mean you can't come to a discussion about certain things. What that's shorthand for is "Don't sass me. Don't be someone who's rebellious against my authority." That's what this word means.

As a matter of fact, where we see it in the Bible, we see it used of the Pharisees answering back to Jesus, trying to find fault with Jesus, specifically in Luke, chapter 14, when they were trying to find fault with Jesus healing on the Sabbath. The Scriptures tell us that after going back and forth with Jesus they had nothing left to answer back. They gave up their attacks on Jesus.

So, Paul responds to our objector, "Who are *you*?" Paul wants us to remember that we can ask questions of God but we can't argue with God. Why? News flash: he is God, and you are not. That's why we can't argue back with God. We can't judge God's moral actions. We are insignificant before God. He is the Creator. He is the sustainer of all things, not us. More than that, we are the ones who are sinful and ignorant. He is holy, pure, and good. He is all-knowing and all-wise.

The very first thing, then, that we must do is to check our attitude, Paul says. "Who are you, O man, to answer back to God?" Do you see the opposition Paul raises there, the distinction between man and God? "See who you are," Paul says, "and don't try to judge God." Paul then moves on in verse 20 to remind us of the reality that is prior to the objection; that is, the reality that is in existence before the objection even comes. You see, this objection does not come in a vacuum. We cannot deny reality just so we can raise an objection.

In the first part of verse 20, Paul stresses the greatness of God. Here in the second part of verse 20, he stresses that we are mere creatures and that God is the Creator. He puts it *this* way: "Will what is molded say to its molder, 'Why have you made me like this?'" You see, we do not come to God on equal ground. It's not just that we're too small to ask questions but that we have no right to ask this question.

So Paul asks his own question, and he expects "No" as an answer here in verse 20. You know what this looks like. Kids, you know what happens when your father asks you a question and you know there's only one right answer. He's not really looking for a "Yes" or a "No." He has made it very clear that the answer is either "Yes" and *only* "Yes" or "No" and *only* "No."

That's what Paul is doing here. The grammar of this shows this. Paul is expecting the answer to be "No." "Will what is molded say to its molder, 'Why have you made me like this?'" "Of course not!" Paul would say. It's ridiculous. The basic idea here is that everything we are comes from God. We're not in a place of independence to ask God questions about his rights.

Now, this is not a popular teaching today. The world rejects the idea of a creator, and to the extent that the world even thinks about God, it does so apart from his creation and apart from our dependence on God. But we must not take our cue from the world. After all, our sense of justice, our sense of right and wrong comes from God. There is no independent standard of justice without God. Where would it come from?

Atheists, after all, have to borrow truth from God in order to object to him. They could never explain why a random series of events would bring about a concept of justice, so instead, they attack God with his own truth. God has declared that he is just and right and true, and they use his standard against him, all the while denying him. The truth is that justice exists because God exists. He has decreed it. He is the one who establishes it. He upholds it. He declares it in his Word.

The truth is, Paul says, that what is molded cannot object to the molder's work. It is a very part of being molded. Being molded means to be contingent, to be dependent, to not be over the molder. That is true of all creatures, but there is even more at work here. We're not talking about creatures objecting to God; we're talking about *sinful* creatures objecting to God.

We'll look at that more closely in just a moment, but that is what is in view: sinful creation objecting to God. This also brings us back to Paul's argument in verse 18. "How can you, O man, object to God's mercy? God has shown the depth of his mercy in sending his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, to die." There is no question about the depth of God's mercy. He has proven it in Jesus.

The Reason for God's Glory

Next, Paul moves from God's *right* to his glory to God's reason for *showing* his glory. He keeps on in the same vein where he *has* been, speaking of the creature/Creator distinction. He does so by using a biblical illustration of the potter and the clay. Look with me at verse 21. "Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use?"

This biblical illustration occurs throughout the Old Testament, specifically in the prophet Isaiah and the prophet Jeremiah. This is significant, because those prophets are rebuking a rebellious Israel for their abandoning of God. That's how the context of the potter and the clay comes up. So this statement here about the potter and the clay follows very closely Paul's statement in verse 20 about molding.

This is important for us because of the word choice. The word here for the thing molded in the Greek is *plasma*. That is, I think, very close to what you think of when you think of plasma, although I think the best description of this is given by Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones. He calls it the *plastic material*. Have you ever seen anything made with plastic? If you have, you know plastic is a substance that men take and inject into a mold to make whatever they want.

The plastic is the preexisting material that is then molded into something: a tire, a baseball bat, a phone, a television, anything made of plastic. That, I think, is important for us to see. It's actually critical, because God is taking something that has already been made and exists and is molding it for his purposes. Paul is not talking about men being considered in creation but as sinful humanity already created. Mankind already exists here. That is the plastic material. That is the same lump of verse 21. It is the same lump of sinful humanity.

If someone argues that God creates people just to condemn them, they're missing Paul's point. The Bible never contemplates creation for the express purpose of damnation. Never. It is not that God desired to condemn some people and, therefore, he created them for that purpose. No. The Bible teaches that God created man in his image

and that it was good. To create someone for condemnation would not be good. It would not be in the image of God to be condemnable.

So we're not talking about man being considered to be created but man who is already created and is fallen, sinful humanity. That is the lump God takes and molds. This is critical here. Paul now is describing, then, God's reason for molding some of sinful humanity into vessels for honor and yielding others of humanity into vessels for dishonor. Don't lose sight of the context. All of the lump, the same lump, Paul says, is worthy of condemnation.

"All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." God would be just in condemning everyone, yet he doesn't. So Paul asks, "Who are you to question why God doesn't condemn everyone?" This gets at the heart of our objections to God. We think we come to God as innocents, worthy of an explanation, worthy of justice, but the truth is just the opposite. We come as sinners. We stand condemned before God. We have no rights.

Not only are we not God; we are guilty. If you don't see that, you will not understand Paul's answer any more than you will understand how you stick to the ground if you deny the principle of gravity. Paul is talking here about the government of God over sinful humanity. It's not just that God has the *power* to do what he will (that's the implicit question of verse 19) but that God has the *authority* to do it.

Some older translations are confusing at this point because they use the word *power* in verse 21. They will say, "Has the potter no power over the clay?" But the thing is that word for *power* there is different than the word for *power* in verse 22, where we read, "What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power..." In the first instance, in verse 21, the word is not *ability*, *dynamism*. It is *authority*. That's why our translation translates it "Has the potter no *right*..."

We might even translate it *freedom of choice*. Does God not have freedom of choice? Does God not have the ability to command? Does God not have the ability to govern? What Paul is saying is "Why are you trying to make God not God? Why do *your* rights trump *God's* rights?" God has every right to do what he wants with this lump, this plastic material, this mass of sinful, condemned humanity. *He* is the one who is sovereign. *He* is the one who has been betrayed. *He* is the one who has been rejected.

So, what does God do with that right or authority? He has the right to his own purpose. That's what is in mind in verse 21. That's what the word *for* means. *For* is directional, purposeful here. He makes one vessel *for* honorable use, for the purpose of honor. He makes another *for* dishonorable use with the purpose of dishonor. That is, God has designed some for the purpose of honor and some for the purpose of dishonor. It is not an accident. God is in control.

We have to understand that the great purpose in all of the world is the display of God's glory. You may recall the famous first question in the Westminster Shorter Catechism. "What is the chief end of man? The chief end of man is to glorify God." I think it is no stretch to say that if we were to ask that question, "What is the chief end of God?" the answer is "To glorify God." That is the chief end of everything in the universe. It is to glorify God because of who he is.

When we consider sinful man, we see that God can't deny who *he* is. God is a holy God who hates sin and must punish sin. If he didn't, he would not be just. He would not be God. When we consider, for example, our own faults, we are eager to escape justice. We want a second chance, don't we? But when we consider *others* escaping justice, then we're not so thrilled about that. We're not so high on second chances for others who escape justice.

What would we think of the world if there were no justice at all in the world? What would we think of God? Paul reminds us that God by his nature and his character will have to have his wrath upon sin. We see this in the word *desiring* in verse 22. "What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power..." This word *desiring* means God desires to show his wrath against sin. Even more than that, God is inclined by his holy will, he is disposed to show his wrath against sin.

That would be what we expect. In fact, that's what we deserve. All deserve to experience God's wrath. If God executed his judgment immediately, all of us would be immediately sent to hell. None would be spared, not even for a moment. But the Bible tells us here, and not only here but in other places in the Scripture, that God will display his glory in the justice of his wrath, that he will put all things right, that he will call all to account.

But what else does this passage tell us? It tells us there's a reason for God's glory in his wrath, but it also tells us the glory of God in his wrath is a backdrop, as it were. It is not all that we see. The glory of God in his wrath is like a dark canvas upon which we can see the glory of God in his mercy. Remember, there are two kinds of vessels out of the same lump, the same lump of sinful, condemned humanity. There are not only vessels of *dishonor*; there are vessels of *honor*.

God desires to show his wrath, and he *will* show his wrath, but there is something else we must take account for: the patience of God. The reason we all do not immediately perish is because of the patience of God. God endures the rebellion and sin of man for a purpose. He puts up with Pharaoh. He puts up with Jezebel. He puts up with the Babylonians. He puts up with those who persecute his church. He puts up with those who mock him, and he does this for a purpose.

He is patient and longsuffering. Why? Verse 23 has the answer. "...in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy..." God is patient in order to make known his glory in mercy. Now, God's patience allows others to still rebel further against him and mock him. In Peter's second letter, chapter 3, the scoffers and the mockers come and say, "Where is this God that you say is going to judge the earth, this God who you say is just and is going to take judgment upon all the earth? You keep talking about this, and we don't see anything. Everything goes on just as it did from the very beginning."

Peter answers it in two parts. The first is he says, "You don't understand God, because one day with the Lord is like a thousand years, and a thousand years is as one day. Don't think God looks at time the way *you* look at time, to be impatient." The second thing he says is that God is not slack, he's not lazy, but he is, rather, unwilling that any of his people should perish, so he tarries until they are all brought in, until the full count of the people of God, redeemed by the blood of Christ, are all gathered together with not one missing. God will be seen in the glory of his mercy.

Now, the longsuffering of God is not laxity of justice. It is not a sign of his favor. Paul especially wants the Jews to understand this, because they thought a lack of judgment coming upon them meant they had God's favor, but Paul isn't just speaking to the Jews of his day; he's also speaking to you and me. You need to hear this today, because the fact that you have not experienced God's judgment is not a sign that there is no judgment. It is a sign of God's patience and of his longsuffering until each and every one of his people have been brought to him.

You hope that God may pass you by, that as God is looking out in his judgment he may skip over you. That may be your hope, but that is not a true and biblical hope. Your hope is not in that God passes you by; your hope is in running to Jesus Christ, to seek his forgiveness, to ask him to show you mercy. Christ died that the Lord could have mercy on sinners like you and me. Will you have that mercy? Then trust in Jesus, and God promises to show you that mercy.

In fact, he has prepared mercy for all who are in Christ from before the beginning of time. It doesn't depend on who you are or what you have done. It only depends on Jesus. But you may ask, "How do I know if I'm prepared for mercy? How do I know if I'm a vessel that God has prepared for mercy?" The answer of the Bible is to believe on Jesus. If you believe on Jesus, you know you are prepared. Only those who are chosen by God and prepared for mercy can have faith in Christ. Yours is not to peer into the eternal counsels of God; yours is to embrace Jesus Christ.

The Revealing of God's Glory

The final thing we see here is that Paul shows how God reveals his glory in the case of both Jews and Gentiles. What Paul does here is typical of his pattern. Paul makes his main point, and then he shows the truth of his point by quoting the Scriptures. It's different, for example, than what the apostle Peter does. If you look at any of the apostle Peter's sermons in the book of Acts, Peter starts by quoting the Scriptures, and then he explains what the Scriptures are saying.

Paul does sort of the opposite. He explains his point, and then he says, "Here are some Scriptures that prove my point." So what we have here is Paul gives us four citations from the Old Testament, two from Hosea and two from Isaiah. What they show is that God has previously (that is, before the time of Paul, before the book of Romans) predicted his way of revealing his glory. Notice the lead-in in verse 24. "...even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles."

You see, Paul has told us that God has prepared beforehand vessels of mercy. Incidentally, look back for a moment at verse 22. Do you see what it says? "What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction..." Do you see? It doesn't say God prepared them for destruction; it says they were prepared for destruction. They were already in an estate in which destruction was theirs.

This is further evidence of what we said earlier, that God is looking at the entirety of sinful mankind. He's not looking at creation. God did not create men for the purpose of destruction. Men deserve their destruction for their sin. Men are responsible for their sin, and they are condemned for their sin, both in Adam and in their own personal

sin. No one can lay condemnation at the feet of God. Every sinner deserves destruction, but here we say that Paul says those are prepared *for* mercy by God.

Look at verse 23. "...he has prepared beforehand..." God is taking out of sinful humanity some and preparing them for salvation. So how will Paul prove this? He says those who are prepared for mercy are not only Jews but they're Gentiles. The interesting thing is Paul proves that the Gentiles are included in a very interesting fashion. He takes us to the story of Hosea.

Hosea was told to take an unfaithful woman as his wife in an image of Israel's unfaithfulness to God. He was further told, specifically, to give his children names. If you remember the story of Hosea, you will notice they were not ordinary names. He was to name his first child *Scattered* and his second *Not Loved* and his third *Not My People*. Can you imagine that? Walking up to someone... "How do you do? Who are you?" "I'm Not My People."

I'm sure that right about now my children are exceedingly glad that God did not give me names for them. They would much rather be Peter, Daniel, Paul, and Abigail than "Not My People" or "Not Loved." All of this is happening because it's a drama writ large for God's relationship with Israel, his people. So Hosea marries Gomer, and she is unfaithful to him. She leaves him, and she is so unfaithful she winds up in an estate of slavery. She probably incurred debts she could not pay, and she is enslaved.

God tells Hosea to go and buy her back, and the price is not cheap. This is an obvious image to the Lord purchasing his people back from sin and slavery at the price of the blood of his Son. Then God tells Hosea that though they were called "Not Loved," now they will be called "Loved." Though they were called "Not My People," now they will be called "My People." This had always been applied to the Jews. The Jews had thought this of themselves, that they had been exiled from God, but now God had brought them back.

So the question comes up, "Paul, how are you applying this to the Gentiles?" Because the Jews, Paul tells us, had ceased to be God's people. They weren't God's people just because they were in lineal descent from Abraham. They had abandoned the covenants. They had rejected God. They were not his people anymore. They were, in essence, Gentiles.

But God in his mercy seeks out his people, not just from among the Jews but from among the Gentiles, those who were not his people. That's the definition of a Gentile: someone who is not of the people of God. Now they are brought, in Christ, in the church, to be his people. God shows his glory in his mercy, not only in calling back the Jews to himself but in calling those who were never a part of his people his people.

For virtually all of you here today, this is good news, because God has called those who were not his people to *be* his people. He did this to show the greatness of his mercy. His promises go far beyond physical Abraham. For all of us here this morning who are naturally Gentiles, this display of God's mercy is found in us. After all, God had promised Abraham that in him all of the nations of the earth would be blessed.

So, we who were not the people of God are, by the mercy of God in Christ, brought into his family, brought into his love. Paul then moves on to two quotes from Isaiah. He uses them to address another concern. The Jews had

thought they were deserving of God's mercy because of the promise God had given to them. Can you imagine that, that somebody actually thought they were deserving of mercy? They don't understand what the word *mercy* means, what the concept of mercy is: getting something you *don't* deserve.

Yet this is what the Jews thought. They thought God's promise to make Abraham's descendants more numerous than the sand on the seashore or the stars in the sky meant they would always receive God's blessing, that God owed it to them. But Paul makes clear here that even in the Old Testament God said this is not the case. God's glory was not revealed in the worth of the Jews; it was revealed in his mercy, and his mercy comes upon those who are condemned, worthy of judgment. Remember, the same lump.

So God reminds them that judgment will come quickly, without delay, and it will come completely, fully upon them. There is no hope in natural descents or ability or numbers. It is only the remnant that will be saved. The remnant are those whom God has chosen, the true Israel within Israel. Now, why is this so important to understand? It's because it doesn't depend on us.

If the Lord had not left a remnant, Paul and Isaiah tell us, they would be no different than Sodom. That same principle applies to us. It's not our gathering here together. It's not our building. It's not our families that will save us. Unless the Lord had chosen a seed, a remnant, vessels for honor, we would be no different from those whom we look upon as being the worst of the worst. We would be no different.

Are you ready this morning to believe that God is God and you are not, that God in his sovereign mercy has the power and the right to show mercy to those whom he will? Because that is your great hope today: that it doesn't depend on you at all, that there is not all justice in the world; there is also mercy. If you want that mercy today, all you need to do is to go to Jesus. Cast your sins on him. Tell him you are unable to save yourself; you need him as your Savior. He will never cast you out. The surest sign of the sovereign mercy of God is faith in Christ. Believe on Jesus now and be saved.