

The Rights of the Potter
Romans 9:19-33 (08/04/13)
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We saw a T-shirt on a young girl the other day that declared more than she realized. It said, "The Center of the Universe." That's exactly how we often act, as if life was all about me, I am the most important being in my world, and everybody else should recognize this. If stuff happens that I don't like, I pout, "That's not fair!" Like Billy at Susie's birthday party pouting and making a scene, "It's not fair!" "What's not fair, Billy?" "It's not fair that Susie gets all the presents and I don't get any." "Billy, this isn't your party."

That's how we live, isn't it? In our marriage, in traffic, at work, wherever, we act as if we are the center of the universe. And when it comes to us and God, how often we have questioned, "God, why did you allow this to happen?" "God, it isn't fair that I am the way I am and other people are so much better off. It just isn't fair!" This is especially true when we come to Romans 9 and the doctrine of God's sovereignty over man. God has determined all things that come to pass. He has chosen to have mercy on some, the doctrine of election, and He has chosen to pass over others, leaving them in their sin. "It's not fair," we think. "If this is how it is, how can God blame me for anything I do? I can't change God's plan, so how can God hold me responsible for what I do?"

WHO ARE YOU, O MAN – vv. 19-20a

You will say to me then, "Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?" On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God?

Ever think like that? Look at verse 19, "You will say to me then, "Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?" Paul knows we'll come to this and ask it, not in humility, but charging God with being unfair and whatever happens, it's His fault, not mine! Paul has some choice words for this guy in verse 20, "On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God?" Remember that line: "Who are you, O man?"

Paul knows this question is not coming out of a humble, sincere heart wanting to honor God. No, this is a cheeky accusation against God. It's like talking back to your parents. "It's not fair. Everybody else is going!" Ever hear that? Paul says, "What a minute, sir!" "On the contrary" is three little particles stuck together for emphasis. Then "you" is emphatic. You, who do YOU think you are talking about God this way? We need to wash out our mouths with Bible soap sometimes. God is God; we're not. Here we are with our little pea-brains, like one small drop compared to all the oceans of the world! John Wesley described us as a "little, impotent, ignorant man."

What do you really understand about life? Sure, there are brilliant people, rocket scientists, physicists, financial gurus, technocrats, but ultimately, what do we really know? We don't know what causes the spark that causes lightning. We still haven't found a fail-proof mosquito repellent. We're thankful for smart people, but never forget, the devil is brilliant. Wisdom is seeing this world through Christ. The smartest man on earth who isn't looking at life through Christ is a fool. A smart fool, but a fool none the less! The fool has said in his heart, "There is no God."

GOD ISN'T ACCOUNTABLE TO YOU OR ANY CREATED BEING – v. 20b.

The thing molded will not say to the molder, "Why did you make me like this," will it?

You have forgotten that you are a creature. Look at you. A lump of clay! Mostly water with some carbon and nitrogen and phosphorus and some other stuff thrown in. Remember Genesis 2:7?

God stooped down and picked up some dirt and made Himself a man out of that mud. At least the ladies were made from nobler stuff. When you die, you go back to dirt. You don't even have control over who you are, your parents, DNA structure, level of intelligence, time in history, your appearance, your life span. Your entire being and existence is in God's hands as your molder, maker, Creator.

God isn't accountable to you, okay? We can't go, "God, you owe me an answer here. Why am I the way I am?" No, God is not accountable to us, but be we sure are accountable to God, and that gets to the issue. It is true that God is sovereign over our destiny and He does His good pleasure with us, but that doesn't mean we aren't responsible. "Who are you, O man?"

Remember what God said to Job, "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Answer Me if you can!" Later in Job 40:3-4 Job answers God and says, "Behold, I am insignificant; what can I reply to Thee? I lay my hand on my mouth." At the end, in Job 42:3, he confesses, "Therefore I have declared that which I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know." We need some of Job's humility!

And that's pretty much what Paul is saying here. He never answers the questioner directly. Someone asked Jesus, "Are there many who will be saved." Jesus totally doesn't answer but says, "Just make sure you are saved." (Luke 13:24) That's an impertinent question and we have no business snooping into the secret counsels of the Most High God. Here Paul says basically the same thing, "Listen, God is free to do what He wants. Your business is to make sure you are trusting in Christ, not prying around in the secret counsels of God Almighty! So Paul goes after our impertinence and brings us down to humbly receive what God has revealed about His ways and counsels. We need a reverence for God, people!

GOD IS FREE TO DO WHATEVER HE PLEASES WITH HUMANS – v. 21

Or does not the potter have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use, and another for common use?

Look at two passages in the Old Testament. God told Jeremiah to go down to the potter's house and learn. Here's what he saw, and notice the last phrase:

Jeremiah 18:3-4, "Then I went down to the potter's house, and there he was, making something on the wheel. But the vessel that he was making of clay was spoiled in the hand of the potter; so he remade it into another vessel, as it pleased the potter to make."

Earlier God scolded Israel in Isaiah 45:9, "Woe to the one who quarrels with his Maker-- An earthenware vessel among the vessels of earth! Will the clay say to the potter, 'What are you doing?' Or the thing you are making say, 'He has no hands'?"

A potter is free to do whatever he pleases with that lump of clay. He can spin the wheel and produce a beautiful vase fit for royalty, or he can make a simple jar to serve as a spittoon for tobacco juice. Paul's entire point here is that God is free to do whatever He pleases with His own creatures.

Here's what Paul is saying. If the potter has the right to make vessels as he likes, then God is free and has the right to take from the mass of sinful humanity who deserve His wrath, and make them vessels of mercy! And, He is free to leave the rest in their sin. Let's get this clear and powerful in our heads: God is God, He is sovereign, and He does whatever He pleases and has absolute rights to do it. We bow in submission to our great and sovereign and glorious God!

GOD IS FREE TO SHOW WRATH OR MERCY TO GUILTY SINNERS – vv. 22-23

What if God, although willing to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction? And He did so in

order that He might make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory.

These are two challenging verses. First, why did God create the universe and why did God include all this evil and sin? He's not responsible for sin. He didn't make Adam and He doesn't make us sin. But evil and sin are a reality and He has assured us that He is going to judge all sin forever. He prepared the eternal fire for the devil and his angels, and everyone who dies in their sin, still in rebellion against God, will join them. God is willing to demonstrate through evil and sin His great wrath and power. We wonder why bad stuff happens. Why do people get away with murder? What about all the total perverts like that monster Ariel Castros. What about all the pornographers making billions of dollars, the child trafficking, all the genocide, the Moslems murdering Christians in Africa, all the wife and child abuse, abortions, legalizing sodomy, all the cursing, the atheism, the scoffing and mocking of everything godly, the sea of lies people are being fed daily, the nonsense and worse on so much of prime time TV, and we could just go on and on.

Why does God allow all this? First, He is very willing to pour out His wrath on all humans who persist in their rebellion and sin against God. And He will be glorified in it. This is what Jay Adams calls the Grand Demonstration. And He could do it immediately. He has done it in the past. Instantly God destroyed Nadab and Abihu when they offered strange fire. One night 185,000 Assyrians went to sleep surrounding God's people, and in the morning, when they woke up, behold, they were all dead! God wiped out the entire world at the flood. God is willing to judge all sin everywhere forever.

But there's something He wants to show even more, and that's mercy! The one reason God doesn't end this whole thing in judgment is because He is rich in mercy, He has a treasure trove of mercy, and He just delights to take guilty sinners, vessels who deserve His wrath, but vessels He prepared beforehand to enter into the riches of His mercy!

God is the Potter, we're the clay, and God is free to choose people in eternity past to be vessels of mercy, and He is free to patiently endure vessels of wrath, guilty sinners whose sin and rejection of Christ has prepared them for destruction.

Completely Fitted versus Planned Beforehand (vv. 22-23)

I want you to see two entirely different words in verses 22-23. In verse 22, the vessels of wrath were fitted, *katertismena*. Notice it doesn't say God fitted them for destruction. It simply says they were fitted for destruction. It doesn't say they were fitted "beforehand" for destruction. Paul isn't saying here that God prepared these people for destruction. Look at Romans 2:5 and we'll see what fitted them for destruction, why anyone goes to the eternal fire under God's wrath – "But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God." Who is storing up the wrath? Not God!

However, in verse 23, you have a different word – *proetoimasen*. Who prepared them? God did! And when did He prepare them? Beforehand. So here we're back to the great doctrine of election! God loves to show mercy and He chose a vast multitude of sinners in eternity past to be His people and enter into the vast treasury of His rich mercy. And who can come into His treasure house of mercy? Anyone who wants to come to His Son, have their sins forgiven, be given the gift of eternal life, be assured that when you die, you will depart to be with Jesus! What about you? Will you bow in submission of faith to Jesus Christ who bore that wrath of God on that cross for sinners? The only thing that will keep you away is your own will. But why would you choose to stay under God's wrath? If you reject Christ, you'll only have yourself to blame, not God!

So God is patiently putting up with all kinds of evil and sin so He can show His mercy! 2 Peter 3:9, "The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance."

Let's pause for a little doctrine here: this is the doctrine of election and reprobation and infralapsarianism. God sovereignly chose to show mercy to a vast number of guilty sinners. That's election and that's mercy. He passed over others and chose to leave them in their sin. That's reprobation and that's justice and that's what we all deserve. And that's the infralapsarian part. God didn't elect or condemn innocent people. He elected some and passed by others as sinners. Paul isn't saying God as the sovereign Potter deliberately created some people just to send them to hell. Martyn Lloyd Jones almost angrily replies to that idea, "That's a lie! It's not taught anywhere in Scripture." Spurgeon would completely agree. And now, God doesn't have to give us an account for what He chose to do or Paul will scold us, "Who are you, O man, to answer back to God!" He is the potter, we are the clay! Enough said!

GOD IS FREE TO SAVE WHOMEVER HE PLEASURES – vv. 24-29

God is not obligated to save Israel. Israel thought it had a claim on God, that she deserved God's mercy just because she was Israel. No one deserves anything from God, including Jews or Gentiles. In this church age, God is calling Jews, Gentiles, it doesn't matter who you are. Here's what God is doing – calling people to His Son through the gospel and by the Spirit in the mouths and hands of His people, you, preachers, evangelists, witnesses, ambassadors, fishers of men. This is how God calls His elect to salvation. And your ethnicity makes no difference. In fact, what kind of sinner you are makes no difference. God delights to reach down into the gutter of human depravity to pour His rich mercy into our lives. Has He poured mercy in Christ into your life? He delights to save adulterers and porn addicts and drunks and thieves and gossips and slanderers and greedy people and proud, arrogant, egotistical people. He delights to shower His mercy on such as these. This is just what the self-righteous Jews resented and hated. And the same is true today. Self-righteous religionists today see themselves as worthy of God, and they are sadly wrong.

Most of Israel has not submitted to Christ. They crucified Him, then persecuted His followers, then were driven out of Israel and melted into the Gentile world, but still maintaining their identity. Today you have Reformed Jews who are pretty much atheistic, and Orthodox Jews trying to keep the Law. There are Messianic Jews who have come to Christ. But in the church age, Jew or Gentile doesn't matter. After the rapture of the church and during the seven year tribulation period, God will call many Jews to Himself, at least 12,000 from each tribe. They will face intense persecution, Christ will return and rule over Israel in Jerusalem for one thousand years, the millennium, but more of that in Romans 11. For now...

GOD IS FREE TO SAVE ANY PERSON WHO BELIEVES IN HIS SON – vv. 30-33

What shall we say then? That Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, attained righteousness, even the righteousness which is by faith; but Israel, pursuing a law of righteousness, did not arrive at that law. Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as though it were by works. They stumbled over the stumbling stone, just as it is written, "Behold, I lay in Zion a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense, and he who believes in him will not be disappointed."

Israel stumbled and fell all over the place over Christ, God's Stone and Rock. They totally missed God's gospel of grace. Because we are saved by faith alone, not by works of any kind! And that's where we leave this amazing chapter. Anyone, any "whosoever" that calls on the name of the Lord in faith alone will never be disappointed. What Paul means is, you will be super blessed, filled with glory and grace and, as the song says, "It will be worth it all, when we see Jesus!"

Are you submitting to God as the Potter with rights over your life? If He has shown the riches of His mercy to you, making you a vessel of mercy, then you need to give Him all your love and

obedience and highest honor. Let's not badmouth our God! Let's ask Him to mold and shape us into just exactly what He wants us to be!