

Is God Really Fair?

(Romans 9:14-29)

Intro: Is it fair for God to draw some people to Himself and not others? That's the question Paul is wrestling with here in Romans 9:14-29. He's been talking about the people of Israel. And he has established the fact that they have no claim on God, based on their physical descent, or their righteous deeds. Paul has made it abundantly clear in this letter from the very beginning, that our acceptance by God is based solely on God's grace received by faith in His Son, Jesus Christ. There is nothing else but to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. But in the course of this discussion about the nation Israel, he has also suggested that election is the result of Divine choice. Let's look back at chapter 9, verse 11, and remind ourselves of what he said there concerning Jacob and Esau.

Rom. 9:11 "in order that the purpose of God according to election might stand."

Election is a word that causes some believers to get all worked up. Paul has been talking about God's choosing/electing Isaac rather than Ishmael. And God's choosing/electing Jacob rather than Esau. As we noted last time we were in this passage, Paul is talking primarily about the nation of Israel, and her failure to enjoy God's promised blessing. That's the major point of this passage. But the passage does establish the principle of God's divine choice or election of the Nation of Israel. There are other passages of Scripture that clearly relate the doctrine of election to individuals. Passages like **Acts 13:48**, which says, "As many as were appointed to eternal life believed." That is a strong passage. Does this mean that the reason some of our loved ones have not come to Christ is because God didn't choose or appoint them? Is that what this means? This sounds unfair on the surface, doesn't it?

Fairness seems to be the major issue in this next section of Paul's letter to the Romans, in Romans 9, verses 14-29. **Fairness, is God really fair?** I mean, if He chooses or elects those who believe in Christ, is it fair for Him to condemn all those who reject His offer of salvation in Christ? The passage is built around two questions. Question number one, v. 14 There is no injustice with God, is there? In other words, *Is it fair for God to choose?* The second question is in verse 19 "Why does He still find fault? For who can resist His will?"

I. First Question: *There Is No Injustice With God, Is There?* (v. 14)

Paul has just talked about God's sovereign choice of Isaac over Ishmael, and Jacob over Esau. Although the twins were not yet born, v. 11, and had not done anything good or bad, in order that, *here it is*, in order that God's purpose according to His choice might stand, not because of works, but because of Him who calls." God said to Rebekah, "The older, Esau, will serve the younger, Jacob" (v. 12).

This leads to the question in verse 14, "What shall we say then, is there injustice or unrighteousness with God?" To which Paul replies with his familiar *me genoito*, "May it never be!" or "Absolutely not!" The fact that God is righteous and just excludes the possibility that He would ever be unfair in any way. When Abraham was pleading with God to spare Sodom from judgment, because of his nephew Lot and his family, he was confident that as the Judge of all the earth, He would deal justly and fairly (Gen. 18:25). God's righteous nature demands that He do what is right and fair. He must always act in accordance with His own holy nature.

Moses likewise, reiterated this same truth in Deuteronomy 32:4 in his assertion that God is "The Rock! And His work is perfect, For all His ways are just. He is A God of faithfulness and without injustice, Righteous and upright is He." **This is a great passage on the fairness of God.** He is a Rock, faithful and just in all of His ways! He is a God completely devoid of unfairness. It is contrary to His holy nature.

Paul doesn't just say God is fair and drop it. He demonstrates that God is fair and just with two biblical examples. The first answer is derived from God's dealings with Moses, verse 15

A. The answer from Moses (v. 15)

15 For He says to Moses, "I WILL HAVE MERCY ON WHOM I HAVE MERCY, AND I WILL HAVE COMPASSION ON WHOM I HAVE COMPASSION."

This quotation from Exodus 33:19 makes no mention of fairness or justice, but focuses instead on the mercy of God. *Mercy becomes the major theme in this passage.* The word *mercy occurs 5 times* in this passage (vv. 14-29). Mercy is the key to understanding the doctrine of election. **Mercy is defined as a quality intrinsic to the nature of God.** As Creator, God desires a relationship with humankind, but He must show mercy to them in order for this relationship to be realized. In fact, mercy epitomizes God's dealings with the people of Israel in the Old Testament, and also provides the basis for His dealings with believers in the New Testament. As Peter explains in, **1 Peter 2:10**: "Once you were not a people; but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy."

Peter reminds his believing readers, both Jews and Gentiles, that all people come into a relationship with God only because God shows mercy to them.

In order to understand how Paul is applying this quotation from Exodus 33:19 “I WILL HAVE MERCY ON WHOM I HAVE MERCY, AND I WILL HAVE COMPASSION ON WHOM I HAVE COMPASSION”; we have to travel back in our minds to Mount Sinai where God was giving the Law to Moses.

God you recall had instructed Moses to come up to Him on top of Mount Sinai, to receive His Law. And in his absence, the people of Israel down below in the valley assembled about Aaron, and asked him to make them a god who would go before them (Exod. 32:1). So, Aaron took gold from the people and fashioned a golden calf for them to worship. Exodus 32:6—The next day the people arose early and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings; and sat down to eat and to drink, and then rose up to play. As a consequence for their idolatry and immorality God threatened to destroy all of them. Destruction is what they deserved. God’s justice demanded it. But Moses interceded on their behalf, and pleaded with God not to destroy them. In verse 14 we read “the LORD relented of the harm which He said He would do to His people.” While many died from the plague that followed, the nation as a whole was spared from God’s destructive wrath. **That my friends is a picture of God’s mercy**

It was shortly after that episode of unbelievable rebellion on the part of the people of Israel **and the merciful deliverance of God**, that God spoke these words to Moses; that Paul quotes here in Romans 9:15: “I WILL HAVE MERCY ON WHOM I HAVE MERCY, AND I WILL HAVE COMPASSION ON WHOM I HAVE COMPASSION”

God is first and foremost a merciful God. His very character is mercy. When His justice demands Him to punish sinners, His mercy restrains Him from administering the full punishment they deserve. How can He possibly be accused of unfairness, if He doesn’t extend His mercy to everyone? The truth is nobody deserves His mercy. You see, it is only out of the mercy and grace of His loving heart that any of us are spared from the punishment that we deserve.

16 So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy.

Paul’s point here is that God’s favor is not determined by anyone or anything outside of Himself. God’s purpose in election does not rest upon human will or effort, but solely upon divine mercy. No one deserves or can earn God’s mercy. The

mercy God bestows on us finds its origin solely in the character of God, which is mercy.

Story: When Napoleon was emperor of France one of his soldiers was found guilty and sentenced to death. The young man's mother was granted permission to speak to Napoleon, and she came and asked that he pardon her son. Napoleon informed her that this was her son's second offense, and that there was nothing he could do. He had been sentenced to death, and justice demanded his death. The old woman said, "Sir, I do not ask for justice, I ask you for mercy." Napoleon responded, "but he doesn't deserve mercy." And the woman answered, "Sir I know that, but it would not be mercy if he deserved it." Napoleon was so moved by this mother's words that he granted her wish. He said, "I will have mercy" and pardoned her son.

These words go right to the heart of Paul's argument. **If mercy is deserved, it is not mercy.** And since mercy is never deserved, it must be given sovereignly. It is based solely upon the will of the one who gives it, and not the one who receives it. If nobody deserves mercy, then the one who gives it must decide who to give it to. Right? Napoleon made a sovereign choice. He had the power to extend mercy to the young man instead of justice. No one could accuse Napoleon of injustice because he showed mercy to the one, and not to others. He wasn't being unfair was he?

In the same way, God makes sovereign choices to extend His mercy to some, and not to others. The answer from Moses, is clear. Israel deserved judgment, but God showed them mercy. Paul next uses the case of the Egyptian Pharaoh of the Exodus to demonstrate that God's sovereignty does not set aside human responsibility, the answer from Pharaoh in v. 17

B. The answer from Pharaoh (vv. 17-18)

17 For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "FOR THIS VERY PURPOSE I RAISED YOU UP, TO DEMONSTRATE MY POWER IN YOU, AND THAT MY NAME MIGHT BE PROCLAIMED THROUGHOUT THE WHOLE EARTH." 18 "So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires."

Here it is again, mercy. God's sovereign choices always involve His mercy. How, you may ask, did God show Pharaoh mercy? God was merciful to Pharaoh in that He spared him much longer than justice required. He was a cruel and ruthless ruler, but God says, He raised him up in order to display His power through him. God was merciful in His dealings with Pharaoh, but Pharaoh rejected God, and refused to let His people Israel go. So, God released 10 plagues on Egypt, which resulted

in Israel being mercifully released from their Egyptian bondage. The result of it all is that it demonstrated irrefutably to the world that God was more powerful than all the god's of Egypt, or all the armies of Egypt. God's mercy was demonstrated. And, God's name was proclaimed throughout all the earth. (Exod. 15:14-16; Josh. 2:10-11; 9:9; 1 Sam. 4:8).

Critics will still object that it is unfair for God to harden some people just to accomplish His own purposes. I mean it says, "God hardened Pharaoh's heart." Let me just say, God never hardens anyone who hasn't first hardened their own heart against God. Henry Morris concurs that "neither here nor anywhere else [in Scripture] is God said to harden anyone who had not first hardened himself" (*Rom*, 361).

If you take a closer look at this story in Exodus, you will discover that Pharaoh repeatedly hardened his own heart against God, prior to God making firm Pharaoh's hardened heart. This is repeated nine times in Exodus 7:13-14, 22; 8:15, 19, 32; 9:7, 34-35. One commentator suggests, "God's hardening follows upon what Pharaoh himself did." Pharaoh was not a puppet on a string who did what God made him do. He made his own choice to reject God, and hardened his own heart against Him. God simply sealed Pharaoh in his decision to reject Him.

This is similar to Paul's earlier condemnation of the Gentiles back in Romans 1:18-31—Even though lost men knew God, they refused to honor Him as God, but became perverted and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for idols; therefore God gave them over to pursue immorality, perversion, and wickedness, for which they will be held accountable.

II. Second Question: "Why Does He Still Find Fault? For Who Can Resist His Will?"

Alright Paul, maybe it is fair for God to choose those on whom He bestows His mercy. But that leads to another obvious question. "If God makes the choice, is it fair for Him to hold us responsible?" **v. 19**

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

I mean, if God makes the choice, how can He hold us responsible. Since He extends mercy to some, and hardens others, then how can He possibly hold me responsible for what I do?" Is it fair for God to hold us responsible for doing the very thing we cannot avoid doing? Here again Paul provides two answers.

A. First answer: *God is the sovereign Potter* (vv. 20-21)

20 On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing formed will not say to the one who formed it, “Why did you make me like this,” will it? **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?

Drawing from the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah (Isa. 29:16; 45:9 and Jer. 18:6), Paul takes us into the potter’s shop to teach us that God is the sovereign Potter. It would be absurd for the clay to question the right of the potter to fashion the lump of clay into whatever he wants. Doesn’t the potter have full authority over the clay to make of it whatever he desires. He is most certainly free to make from the same lump of clay one vessel for honorable use, and another for common use.

This truth, that God is absolutely sovereign, is not well received by most human beings. It is especially difficult for twenty-first century readers, who believe in personal autonomy. We chafe against this truth that God is absolutely sovereign. That He can do whatever He pleases, and that He answers to no one. That He is not obliged to explain to anyone what and why He does whatever He does. While we may not like it, the fact remains, God is the Potter and we are the clay. He has the right to do with us as He pleases.

Let me just say, that in His wisdom, He will always do what is best for us. Therefore, it would be absurd and sinful for us to question or contradict God’s dealings with us. Paul continues in verses 22 that God has actually demonstrated much patience toward us all in withholding His wrath from those who deserved it, v. 22

22 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?

God’s sovereignty does not reduce human beings to helpless robots. God graciously endures men far longer than they deserve. Vessels prepared for wrath refers to the unsaved (1:18), who because they have chosen to reject God’s mercy and grace just like Pharaoh did, are in a state of readiness or ripeness to receive God’s wrath. God permits men to go their own rebellious way, so that ultimately His power and glory can be demonstrated when He brings destruction on these vessels of wrath. Paul explains in verse 23 why God is so patient:

23 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, **24** even us, whom He also

called, not from among Jews only, but also from among Gentiles.

The reason God patiently endures is so that He might make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy. Here is God's mercy again. Notice He has made known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory. According to Ephesians 1:4 God chose believers in Christ before the foundation of the world.

v. 24 *even us*, Paul says, whom He also called. **Called.** There is God's divine election again. Believers are called, brought to faith in Christ, not from among the Jews only, but also from among Gentiles. While we cannot understand how *divine election* and *free will* fit together, the Scriptures none-the-less teach that both are true. We cannot understand how God on one hand can choose to extend His mercy on some and not others. And on the other hand, insist that all people have the freedom to believe or not believe. But that is what the Scriptures teaches. I cannot explain to you how these two truths fit together. The reconciliation of these two great truths, *divine election* and *free will*, will never be settled in this life. The Bible does not attempt to explain how they fit together, but simply asserts that both are true.

Let me just say that I am so happy that God enabled me to accept the gift of salvation through faith in His Son Jesus Christ. Furthermore, I am content to just leave this with the Lord. He says, "He will have mercy on whomever He wishes." He also says, "Whoever will may come, and whoever comes to Me, I will in no way cast them out." He says both of these things, they are both true. Again, while I can't put these two seemingly contradictory truths together, I am confident that God will someday enable me to understand. Until then, we are commanded to share the Gospel, the good news about Jesus Christ, and the eternal life and forgiveness He offers to all, and invite them to place their faith in Christ alone.

B. Second answer: *Derived from two Old Testament prophets* (vv. 25-29)

Paul presents another answer from two Old Testament prophets, Hosea and Isaiah. He shows that God's rejection of the Jews, which is only temporary, and acceptance of Gentiles, had been predicted beforehand.

v. 25 As He says also in Hosea, "I WILL CALL THOSE WHO WERE NOT MY PEOPLE, 'MY PEOPLE,' AND HER WHO WAS NOT BELOVED, 'BELOVED.'"
 26 "AND IT SHALL BE THAT IN THE PLACE WHERE IT WAS SAID TO THEM, 'YOU ARE NOT MY PEOPLE,' THERE THEY SHALL BE CALLED SONS OF THE LIVING GOD."

27 And Isaiah cries out concerning Israel, “THOUGH THE NUMBER OF THE SONS OF ISRAEL BE AS THE SAND OF THE SEA, IT IS THE REMNANT [IT IS ONLY A SMALL NUMBER] THAT WILL BE SAVED; **28** FOR THE LORD WILL EXECUTE HIS WORD UPON THE EARTH, THOROUGHLY AND QUICKLY.”

v. **29** as Isaiah said before, “EXCEPT THE LORD OF SABAOTH HAD LEFT TO US A POSTERITY, WE WOULD HAVE BECOME AS SODOM, AND WOULD HAVE BEEN MADE LIKE GOMORRAH.”

Paul’s point here is that it was only because of God’s mercy that all the Jews were not destroyed. Even though they suffered death and deportation, yet God promised to restore them as His beloved people. God in His sovereign choice and calling always includes a Jewish remnant. Don’t be deceived by the false teachers in our day who are peddling Replacement Theology. A demonic teaching that says the Church has replaced Israel. According to Romans 11:26-27, when the full number of Gentiles comprising the Church has been reached, then all Israel will be saved. God will bring about the national end-time deliverance of the remnant of Israel.

Conclusion: The amazing thing is not that God fails to extend His mercy to everybody, but that He extends it to anybody. That’s the amazing thing. Why? Because none of us deserve anything from God, but His wrath and judgment. It is faith, not national origin, that brings a person into the family of God.

Closing prayer: Perhaps you’re here this morning and would admit that you have never asked Jesus Christ to come into your heart as Savior. Pray with me as I close and invite Christ to come into your heart this morning.

Mercy is God’s withholding the punishment we each deserve, while **Grace** is the provision of **God’s Riches At Christ’s Expense**. I pray that the closing song, *Grace* by Michael W. Smith will minister God’s mercy and grace to your heart.