

# Let God be God

Romans 9:18-24

**18 Therefore He has mercy on whom He wills, and whom He wills He hardens.**

**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,**

**24 even us whom He called, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles?**

Geocentricity is the concept which states that the earth is the center of the Universe and that all other objects move around it. There was a time when almost everybody on earth believed that was true. The view was embraced in Ancient Greece and very similar ideas were held in Ancient China. The facts seemed to support it. The sun, stars, and planets appear to revolve around Earth. The Earth seems to be firm, fixed and unmoving. This was a very comfortable theory to live with because it made life more predictable. Some people got rather upset when evidence that contradicted this view was presented. Some religious people, especially, were upset, for they believed with all their heart that the Bible taught that everything revolved around the earth. They would quote certain passages that seemed to indicate this. It was a long time before people began to realize that the new evidence really showed God to be more wonderful and more powerful than He ever had before. They began to discover, too, that there were certain verses and passages which they had overlooked before that supported this new evidence.

When we comes to a passage like Romans 9, we have a similar problem. There are a lot of us who have grown up thinking that we are the center of the universe and everything revolves around us. We believe certain things about God that make Him fit very comfortably into our self-centered world. We are content with these little theological boxes into which we have crammed God. But God is greater than any human box we can design. Romans 9 is the kind of passage that is designed to break through and kick out the sides of those kinds of boxes. Maybe that has already begun to happen to you as we have been studying this chapter.

And the question for us is, will we stubbornly cling to our comfortable ideas about God or will we believe what God has revealed about Himself in His holy word?

Some of you may be struggling with the deep truths about God's sovereignty that we have found in Romans 9. If so, you're in good company, because even when the Apostle Peter was writing about God's patience in delaying judgment until all of God's elect are saved, he wrote (2 Pet. 3:15-16), **"and consider that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation--as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, has written to you, as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which untaught and unstable people twist to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures."** It could be that Peter had been reading Romans 9.

We have already learned that God never bases salvation on natural privileges: ancestry, inheritance, education, opportunity. The Jews had all these natural privileges and more. They had access to knowledge about God, but they did not guarantee salvation. We saw instead that God chooses those whom He would save. God chooses according to His promise and for His own purposes. He never bases salvation upon what human beings do or are going to do, except as they respond in faith to what God has promised and what God has done. We have seen that all the way through Romans, but here he puts it in very concrete terms. We saw that God's choice of Isaac over Ishmael was only based on God's promise. God's choice of Jacob over Esau was not based on their behavior, whether good or bad, **"that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works but of Him who calls."**

God chose sinful Moses and the rebellious Israelites to show His mercy and God raised up Pharaoh to demonstrate His power and declare His name. To one, He showed mercy, the other He hardened.

What is the basis on which God chooses? Paul's answer is that it is based upon God's sovereign right to choose. God has a right to choose. That the conclusion that Paul draws in verse 18, **"Therefore He has mercy on whom He wills, and whom He wills He hardens."**

**The Principle:** God chooses what He wills to do with people (9:18)

I think that verse is very clear in what it says. God chooses those on whom He has mercy, and He chooses those He hardens. You may not like what it says, it may not fit into your self-centered theological box, but that is what it says. God chooses whom He wants.

**Objection:** How can God condemn people if He chooses what they do? (9:19)

And immediately Paul recognizes that we are going to object to that idea. Paul voices the objection in verse 19:

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

Maybe you feel this objection as well. If God has mercy on whom He desires and He hardens whom He desires (9:18), then aren't we just robots? We have the free will to choose or reject God, don't we? If we don't, then how can God condemn us, since we're only acting as He programmed us to act?

That sounds logical, doesn't it? We want to say, that's not just, that's not fair! God Himself must agree that it is not fair to make somebody do something, and then punish them for doing it. The very sense of justice, which God Himself gave us, is offended by that!

**The Answers:** God has the right to judge and to show mercy as He wills.

Paul has some things to say in reply. He answers with more questions. The first one is found in Verse 20: **"But indeed, O man, who are you to reply against God?"** Here Paul reacts not so much to the content of the question, but to the attitude that is behind it. The phrase "reply against" literally means "to answer to one's face" or to "talk back." It assumes an attitude of arrogance, of getting in God's face and accusing Him. The objector assumes a position of superior wisdom over God and talks back to God. God never turns away those who humbly come to Him with honest questions, but those who in their sinful pride denounce God—these He will put in their place.

**1. Men are not qualified to judge God. (9:19-20)**

Basically what Paul says here is, "All right, you man, whoever you are, you say God is not fair because He does this! Let's examine *your* qualifications." So he asks, **"Will the thing formed say to him who formed it, "Why have you made me like this?"**" (Romans 9:20).

Paul wants us to consider the difference between man and God. Here is man, the creature, the one that God formed. We know something about our humanness. We know that we have limited knowledge, that we have limited power, that we cannot even understand who we are and why we do what we do at times. We are foolish. We make mistakes all the time, big ones and small ones. We often end up hurting ourselves and those we love. We are sinful. Now, contrast us against the God who is infinite in knowledge, infinite in power and majesty, who is almighty, all wise, who knows all things from beginning to end. Who are you to stand up and challenge the justice of a God like that?

Are we equipped to challenge God in this way? The book of Job shows us a picture of this contrast. Job was a devout man who loved God deeply. You know the story. Job suffered greatly as his family and all his wealth disappeared in a series of catastrophes that came one on top of the other. Then his health failed and he suffered from painful sores from head to toe. His wife told him to curse God and die. And lastly, he was afflicted by three sorry friends, who came to accuse him that his suffering must be caused by some unknown sin. They hounded poor Job pushing their bad theology on him for chapter after chapter. Finally, in despair, Job cries out. He doesn't blame God though. He just says, "Lord, I don't understand it! Oh, if I could just come and stand before you and plead my case, I could show you how unfair it seems to me!"

So, in Job 38:1-3, "the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind, and said: **"Who is this who darkens counsel By words without knowledge? Now prepare yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer Me."** God says, "All right, Job, you wanted a chance to ask me some questions -- here I am. But before I answer you, I want you to answer me. Are you really qualified to question me?"

Here is what God asked of Job:

- 4 Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell Me, if you have understanding.**
- 5 Who determined its measurements? Surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it?**
- 6 To what were its foundations fastened? Or who laid its cornerstone,**
- 16 "Have you entered the springs of the sea? Or have you walked in search of the depths?**
- 17 Have the gates of death been revealed to you? Or have you seen the doors of the shadow of death?**
- 18 Have you comprehended the breadth of the earth? Tell Me, if you know all this.**
- 19 "Where is the way to the dwelling of light? And darkness, where is its place,**
- 20 That you may take it to its territory, That you may know the paths to its home?**
- 21 Do you know it, because you were born then, Or because the number of your days is great?**
- 33 Do you know the ordinances of the heavens? Can you set their dominion over the earth?**
- 34 "Can you lift up your voice to the clouds, That an abundance of water may cover you?**
- 35 Can you send out lightnings, that they may go, And say to you, 'Here we are!'**

**36 Who has put wisdom in the mind? Or who has given understanding to the heart?**

**40:2 "Shall the one who contends with the Almighty correct Him? He who rebukes God, let him answer it."**

**8 "Would you indeed annul My judgment? Would you condemn Me that you may be justified?"**

**9 Have you an arm like God? Or can you thunder with a voice like His?**

For three chapters God asks Job questions like these. Questions that only God knows the answer to.

Finally Job ends up on his face in the dust before God and says, "**Behold, I am vile; What shall I answer You? I lay my hand over my mouth. Once I have spoken, but I will not answer; Yes, twice, but I will proceed no further.**" (Job 40:4-5). "**I know that You can do everything, And that no purpose of Yours can be withheld from You. You asked, 'Who is this who hides counsel without knowledge?' Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, Things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.**" (Job 42:2-3).

That is Paul's question here: "Who are you, O man, to reply against God? You don't understand even a tiny fraction of the things to be known, so how can you argue with a God like that?"

Men are not qualified to judge God.

## **2. God designs with a purpose (9:21)**

Paul's second answer come in the question of verse 21:

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

Nobody questions that, do they? Doesn't a potter have the right to take the lump of clay that he is working with and divide it in half and make of one half a beautiful flower vase and out of the other make a chamber pot? Nobody tells the potter what he can do with his clay. Clay has no value until the potter sovereignly shapes it into whatever vessel or shape pleases him. It is merely an inanimate lump of material without shape, form, or value until the potter grasps it and begins to kneed it, and then form it as he pleases.

Paul was not the first in Israel to use this illustration. Isaiah condemned those who tried to hide their ways from God saying, "**Surely you have things turned around! Shall the potter be esteemed as the clay; For shall the thing made say of him who made it, 'He did not make me'? Or shall the thing formed say of him who formed it, 'He has no understanding'?"**" (Isaiah 29:16). And later, to those questioning God's wisdom in decreeing the Persian King Cyrus as a chosen instrument to carry out His purposes, even though Cyrus did not know the Lord (45:4), Isaiah answers, "**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'?"**" (Isaiah 45:9).

In Jeremiah 18 the prophet was instructed to go down to the house of the potter where God would announce His words. He watched as the potter shaped a vessel but it did not turn out as the potter desired, "**so he made it again into another vessel, as it seemed good to the potter to make**" (18:4). Then the Lord asked, "**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!"**" (18:6).

What do we learn from these Old Testament examples of the potter and the clay? (1) The clay only has value and purpose when given such by the potter. (2) The clay has no ground for complaint against or objection to the potter's sovereign purpose. (3) What

matters is not the honorable or dishonorable use of the vessel formed from the clay but the rather the glory of the potter in his wisdom, power, and purpose shown through the vessel.

The potter has different purposes for the various vessels made "from the same lump" of clay. One has "honorable use" while another "common use" or dishonorable use. So the potter might make a vessel for drinking water or serving food or storing produce. He might also make vessels for dishonorable use such as collecting table scraps or for human waste.

If men exercise this kind authority, can we deny it to the one being who, in all the created universe, has the right, above all else? That is Paul's argument.

It is hard to answer that, isn't it? "But," somebody says, "it still doesn't solve this problem of justice. It seems unfair." Paul applies the principle of the potter in verses 22-23 **"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, and that He might make known the riches of His glory on the vessels of mercy, which He had prepared beforehand for glory."**

Paul asks us to consider two of God's purposes for His actions:

#### **A. God's Patience in delaying judgment (Rom. 9:22)**

"What if..." Paul is introducing two categories of people here. The Bible often uses extreme terms to separate people into two distinct groups – the saved and the lost, children of God and children of Satan, light and darkness. Here he uses two quite descriptive categories: **"vessels of wrath"** and **"vessels of mercy."**

This is a tough passage, isn't it? Romans 1:18 says that **"For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness ..."** We don't like to talk about the wrath of God but we must because the Bible does. I want you to notice however, that God **"endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath."** God is patient and His divine delay in delivering justice is so that people will repent and receive salvation. Peter writes about this in 2 Peter 3:9: **"The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance."** Because of our sin we all deserve the wrath of God but there's a way out.

Do you see the phrase, **"prepared for destruction?"** It's helpful to know that the grammatical construction is in the "passive voice," which shows that people prepare themselves for destruction because of their sins. God did not create people to be sinful. But as we saw in chapter 6, we are sinful because we were all in Adam in his sin at the beginning. God leaves people in their sin unless they repent and receive Jesus. If people resist and reject God, they end up preparing their own destruction. If, during the time of divine delay, an individual repents and receives Jesus, he or she becomes an "object of mercy." Ezekiel 18:32 says: **"For I have no pleasure in the death of one who dies," says the Lord God. "Therefore turn and live!"**

So what if God did ordain that there would be vessels for destruction? Is that incompatible with His wisdom, justice, righteousness, and eternal purpose? Might His choice elude our earthbound, time-bordered, ego-centered minds?

People say, "Why did God allow sin? Why did God allow sin?" God allowed sin in order that He might display His holy wrath, no sin, no wrath, no revelation of the fullness of the glory of God. True? So when you wonder why God allowed sin, I believe it's answered in that verse.

Paul is saying in all this that God may have purposes and objectives that we do not see. And doesn't he have the right to do it? And what if one of those objectives is not only to

display his power and his wrath by allowing and permitting man to oppose him and to resist him, but also to display his amazing patience and longsuffering this way? Did you ever think about that?

Did you ever think of how, for thousands of years, God has put up with the mocking, blasphemous, accusing remarks of men, and has done nothing to them? He allowed men to treat Him with hostility and anger and He patiently puts up with all of it. Paul says, "What if God does all that. What if it takes that kind of a display of the wrath of God and the patience of God to bring those of us whom he chooses to himself?"

We see this most powerfully at the cross where the precious, sinless, Son of God has been falsely accused, unjustly prosecuted, brutally beaten, unmercifully mocked, and cruelly crucified as a common criminal. **"He was oppressed and He was afflicted, Yet He opened not His mouth; He was led as a lamb to the slaughter, And as a sheep before its shearers is silent, So He opened not His mouth."** (Isaiah 53:7). God **"endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction."**

Why? So that we could understand something about God's justice and His mercy. God ordained sin, evil, and suffering—even to His own Son so that we could know who God really is and so that we could come to Him for salvation. We are not being forced to come to him, He calls us to Himself, He draws us to Himself.

### **B. God's mercy to vessels prepared for glory (Romans 9:23)**

These verses show us three purposes for why God does what He does and chooses as He does. First (verse 22) God acts to show His wrath against sin — that He is a holy God who hates sin. Second (verse 22) God acts to show His power in judgment. Third, (verse 23) all of this self-revelation is to make known the riches of His glory for the vessels of mercy.

Paul says God chooses some to be vessels of mercy to display most fully His glory, including His wrath against sin and His power in judgment, so that the vessels of mercy can know him most completely and worship him with the greatest intensity for all eternity.

God is determined to show mercy for His glory.

We are not ultimate in the universe. Our desires and wishes are not ultimate. Otherwise, we would be objects of worship. Instead, we exist for the ultimate: God's glory. No higher purpose takes place than the full display of divine glory. Against the backdrop of sovereign wrath God displays the glory—the eternal, radiant, magnificence—of sovereign mercy. Do any deserve mercy? No, certainly not. Do any deserve wrath? Yes, all of us do. If all deserved mercy there would be no true mercy nor would there be any sense of glory in mercy. But since none deserve mercy, yet God in sovereign action shows mercy to "vessels of mercy," and displays the glory of His mercy against the backdrop of "vessels of wrath," what are we left to do? We are left to fall upon our faces and cry, "GLORY! Glory to the God who shows mercy in electing undeserving sinners for His own! Glory to God who shows mercy by calling sinners through the gospel! Glory to God who shows mercy by justifying sinners through the God-satisfying death of His Son! Glory to the God who shows mercy by preparing vessels of mercy for future glory!"

May I say to you as well, that you need to do two things today. One is to thank God for your salvation. Two, if you do not know Jesus Christ, if you have not received His mercy and grace, believed in His death and resurrection and embraced Him as Lord and Savior, you must respond in your heart for the Scripture says, **"Whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."** And if God is drawing your heart and drawing your soul, you must respond. For an invitation can be refused. Don't refuse it.