

God's Mercy

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- [0 : 00] Because as I read Paul in these verses, he has one point to make. And the point is this. That God is righteous. That God is just. That there is no unrighteousness, no injustice on God's part.
- That's how Paul begins in verse 14. What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means. That's the point.
- So why is Paul making that point so strongly? Because he knows. This is why. Because he knows that exactly, exactly at this juncture, his readers are likely themselves making a strong objection.
- Along the lines of assuming that God may in fact be unjust. Look back into Romans 9 to verse 3.
- [1 : 09] Paul is in anguish there. This is page 945, I think, in the Bible in the pew. Back in Romans 9 in verse 3, Paul is in anguish.
- Because so many of his kinsmen, so many of Israel, are what Paul says he could wish that he was for their sake, accursed and cut off from Christ.
- Because they have rejected Jesus, their Messiah. And Paul's thinking, I imagine, of the Jews who rejected the gospel that he preached from synagogue to synagogue as he went on his missionary journeys.
- And his heart is broken over it. He's a Jew after all. And you'll recall, he wrote Romans near the end of his third missionary journey, at which point he's headed for Jerusalem, where he'll plead with the people.
- He'll plead with them, his people, to hear him again about Jesus. That's Acts 21 and 22. Paul's in anguish over the destiny of Jews who are cut off from Christ.
- [2 : 19] Not all Jews rejected the Messiah, to be sure. Paul had seen many believe on his journeys, but he'd seen many more who didn't believe. And so God's Word is called into question.
- Because the condemnation of so many Israelites, to whom as a nation, saving promises had been made, raises the issue, can God's Word of promise fail?
- No, says Paul. Verse 6 of chapter 9. It is not as though the Word of God has failed. And so from there through verse 13, he offers a defense of the truthfulness of God's Word by arguing that the promises never were intended to guarantee the salvation of every individual Israelite, for not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel.
- And what's more, when you read the end of our passage in verses 24 to 29, which I otherwise will not cover in this sermon, Paul makes the point there that Gentiles are now included in promises made to the Jews.
- Look just at verse 24. Even us, Paul says, us whom God has called, not from the Jews only, but also from the Gentiles.
- [3 : 45] The people of God, the true Israel, consists of Jewish and Gentile members. which would only heighten the question, how is it?

How is it that some, some from the Jews and from the Gentiles, some are the beneficiaries of the saving promises made to Israel, but others are not? The answer Paul gives is election.

Who does the electing? God, of course. What is the purpose of election? Paul mentions the purpose of election in verse 11.

What is it? I think it's back in Romans 8 verse 29. It is for Christ to be the firstborn among many brothers. God is forming a people.

God is forming a people made up of Jews and Gentiles among whom Jesus Christ will be forever preeminent and over whom He will exercise His Lordship for eternity.

[4 : 57] That's the goal. That's God's purpose of election. That's what you and I call eternal life.

So now the question becomes, on what basis does God elect those who will be part of that people, you see?

So Paul uses an example from the history of Israel. Beginning in verse 10, he discusses the children of Rebekah, Jacob, and Esau. Read along with me the words again from verse 11.

And though they were not yet born and had done nothing good or bad in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works, but because of Him who calls, Rebekah was told, the older will serve the younger, as it is written, Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.

They hadn't even been born. They'd done nothing. And God chose one and not the other.

[6 : 12] And the principle we're meant to draw is that God's election is unconditional. That it has no basis in anything we say or do or think or will.

Why not? Well, I think so that it might rightly be described as God's purpose, not ours. It's in order that God's purpose of election would continue, not because of works, that is not because of us, but because of Him who calls.

This is where Paul's at. God's decision to bestow mercy or not lies wholly within Himself. And that is the ultimate explanation for why many of Paul's kinsmen are accursed and cut off from Christ.

That's where Paul's at in verse 14. And now comes the objection. Maybe you can hear yourself saying it.

If you're right, Paul, if that's right, then exactly how is God righteous? How is God just?

[7 : 39] Because we've looked at what you've just described, Paul, and our reaction is, can I put it in our language, that's not fair. How could God call Jacob and not Esau when neither of them had done anything, good or bad?

I mean, that's it, isn't it? That's the objection. And Paul meets it head on. Is there injustice in God? But by no means, he says.

Why not? Why not? Sure seems like injustice.

So that's the question that verses 15 to 23 are here to answer. There are, I think, four responses Paul makes in these verses, 15 to 23, to the charge that God is not just to do things this way.

I don't have catchy names for them. I'll just call them response number one and response number two and so on. But despite that simple structure, I hope you sense that this is a crucial text for understanding God.

[9 : 05] As one commentator puts it, these verses are Paul's justification of God. response number one, then, is in verses 14 to 16.

And I've made this point already, but it bears repeating. There is an assumption behind the objection in verse 14. And the assumption is that for God to be righteous in election requires that there must be some standard outside of Himself that moves God to look at a person and say, that person is elect or that person is not elect.

In other words, this objection says, God's electing choice should, ought, to be able to be judged by some criteria other than God's own will that it be so.

You see. And it's that whole assumption that's wrong. And Paul explains why in verse 15.

And the reason why it's wrong is because it misses the point of what it means for God to be God. Verse 15 begins with the word for.

[10:37] Telling us that this is a reason why the objection of verse 14 is invalid. God is not unjust. That's verse 14. For, here's the reason. He says to Moses, I will have mercy on whom I have mercy and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.

Now that seems like a strange argument. It just seems like a restatement of the point. Doesn't it? So we've got to work to understand how this quote taken from Exodus 33 verse 19.

How that's an argument for verse 14. That God is not unjust. And to do that we have to go back to the context of Exodus 33.

You don't have to turn there. I'll just talk about it. In Exodus 33 Moses is talking to God and in the backdrop is that horrific moment in Exodus 32 when Israel had made the golden calf and broke the covenant of God from the very beginning.

And Moses right away begins to plead with God to forgive their sin. But not just that. He wants God Himself to go with them to the promised land despite their sin.

[11:53] God hasn't granted Moses' request yet. So Moses keeps pushing and probing deeper and deeper into the heart of God and he makes an astonishing request in verse 18 of Exodus 33.

Moses says there in verse 18 Please show me your glory. Show me who you are God.

Reveal yourself. Moses wanted a confirmation of God's character. I think so he could confidently continue his petitions for mercy on behalf of Israel.

Show me who you are. And then verse 19 of Exodus 33 God responds and this is the verse from which Paul quotes And God said I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name the Lord and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy.

In other words God says to Moses My glory who I am is expressed in my name Yahweh the Lord and my name is expressed in my freedom to have mercy on whom I have mercy.

[13:30] Yes Moses it is my propensity to show mercy and I am totally free in its distribution. I am merciful and I give mercy freely free from any constraint that originates outside of who I am.

That's who I am Moses. Now earlier in Exodus 3 God had explained his name by saying I am who I am.

and do you hear how it's the same structure here? I think with the meaning expanded I think God has already told Moses that he exists absolutely I am who I am I depend on no one else.

And then expanding on that in Exodus 33 he says I have mercy on whom I have mercy as I exist freely so at the deepest root of my mercy there is no cause no control no constraint on me by anything outside of myself I am free to show mercy.

That's what it means to be God. And watch this that if that's what it means to be God then when God chooses the objects of his mercy freely God is upholding his name and displaying his glory because that's who he is.

[15 : 14] And to do that to uphold his name and display his glory is the essence of righteousness it is the absolute right thing for God to do.

Or to put it as simply as I can in one little sentence this is how God shows himself to be God. Verse 16 then is the inference of that argument.

So then Paul says so it that is God's electing purpose depends not on human will or exertion but on God who has mercy.

That's a restatement essentially of Paul's point from verses 6 to 13. He underlines again the absolute unconditionality of God's election stating as clearly as I think he can that human will and the deeds that it generates are not the condition of election God is the condition God chooses his own people before they will anything like faith or do anything like love that's response number one God is God response number two is in verses 17 and 18 look at how verse 17 begins it's with the word for just as verse 15 did right I think Paul's looking back now again to verse 14 that there is no injustice on God's part he's still referring back to that and on the positive side there's no injustice when he grants mercy to whoever he wills but there's a negative side two and

Paul doesn't shrink from it instead he turns in verse 17 to another Old Testament text again from Exodus this time in Exodus chapter 9 we'll come back to that just a moment but first look ahead to verse 18 because once again just as he did a couple verses earlier in 16 Paul now brings out an inference so that he brings out an inference from the point he's made comprehensive so then Paul says in verse 18 God has mercy on whomever he wills and he hardens whomever he wills there are two sides to God's choosing and both are unconditional in showing mercy or in hardening in saving or in condemning God freely acts according to

[18 : 11] God's own purposes but what does it mean that God hardens this is difficult and I'll just tell you what I take Paul to mean without extensive defense that Paul means that just as God decides who will receive mercy and be saved so also God decides who will in fact rebel in their hardness of heart and in unbelief and therefore perish and so it is God's will not ours which is ultimately decisive oh to be sure when God hardens it still our will that rebels and is hard against God but I take these words to mean because I can't make them mean anything else that even in rejecting God it is

God's will that is ultimately beneath and behind our willing and to illustrate from scripture that God hardens whom he wills Paul turns to the story of the exodus from Egypt and chooses one verse from those ten chapters Exodus 9 16 now recall what's happening God had sent Moses and Aaron to command Pharaoh to let his people go and Pharaoh refuses over and over and God through Moses brings the ten plagues on Egypt and finally delivers his people by parting the sea and you look at that narrative and 18 times in that narrative Exodus refers in one way or another to the hardening of Pharaoh's heart so that he does not let the people go in fact just before the verse Paul quotes from Exodus 9 it says in

Exodus 9 verse 12 but the Lord hardened the heart of Pharaoh and he did not listen to them as the Lord had spoken to Moses note that it was as the Lord had spoken to Moses so the key question is what had the Lord spoken to Moses and when did he speak it to Moses and the answers are that God spoke to Moses when Moses was preparing to go to Egypt in the first place he hadn't even approached Pharaoh yet this is Exodus 4 21 and the Lord said to Moses when you go back to Egypt see that you do before Pharaoh all the miracles I put in your power but I the Lord will harden his heart so that he will not let the people go and then before and after the first plague and after the second plague and after the third plague you find verses in every place that says that

Pharaoh's heart was hardened as the Lord had said referring back to Exodus 4 when the Lord said to Moses I will harden Pharaoh's heart so while Exodus does sometimes speak of Pharaoh hardening his own heart or Pharaoh's heart being hardened it is all as the Lord had said so behind all of it behind even Pharaoh's hardening of his own heart is the plan and the purpose of God God's hardening of Pharaoh was not a response to what Pharaoh did it was a sovereign rule over what Pharaoh did that's what Paul sees in the story of Pharaoh and so he draws it out and uses the illustration for his argument God has mercy on whomever he wills and he hardens whomever he wills so then why quote Exodus 9 16 why not quote one of those 18 verses that actually mention the hardening of

Pharaoh's heart right the answer I think is that Paul wanted a verse that showed why that demonstrated that God had a purpose in doing this when he freely hardened Pharaoh look again at verse 17 for the scripture says to Pharaoh for this very purpose I have raised you up that I might show my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth you see we're back here to a similar line of thinking to the one Paul was on in verse 15 that just as God's display of unconditional mercy is a display of his name so also must the hardening act of God display his name that is to say it is

[23 : 24] God's essential nature mainly to dispense mercy on whomever he pleases apart from any constraint outside of himself but that means that those who do not receive mercy are instead hardened and both mercy and hardening are by God's completely free decision that is what it means to be God and that is what displays God's glory now Paul has yet two more responses to the charge that God's unjust and both of them will come following a new objection in verse 19 actually it's not a new objection it's a reworking of the basic one you saw in verse 14 and I'm just going to summarize these very quickly and let them stand because time is short response number three takes us from verse 19 to 21 here's verse 19 you will say to me I wonder how many of you are saying this in your heart right now you will say to me

Paul says why does God still find fault for who can resist his will which is of course just a more specific way of saying God's unjust on his part right now there's a premise and there's a conclusion there hang with me Paul affirms the premise and he denies the conclusion but he does that in verse 20 and following not by engaging those questions directly but by taking the objector to task watch this the premise is there in the second question for who can resist his will the premise is no one can resist the will of God and that I think Paul has made clear that's right no one can resist God's sovereign will the conclusion is in the first question why does he still find fault you hear the conclusion implied there

God shouldn't find fault in those whom he hardens since they couldn't resist his will anyway and that conclusion Paul denies though not in so many words you see the objector has Paul exactly right no one can resist God's will and God will find fault in those whose hearts are hard that's correct that's what Paul's teaching the objector doesn't like that and so draws a conclusion that God shouldn't find fault if he's the one who hardens the heart in the first place and Paul responds not exactly by engaging his premise and conclusion themselves but by insisting that the one who is objecting in this way is in himself wrong to take issue with these realities do you see that

Paul doesn't try to explain this mystery nor does the Bible ever explain how both are true that God's will cannot be resisted and here the focus is on the fact that God hardens unconditionally and yet those so hardened are truly guilty and at fault in their hard and rebellious hearts and I cannot remove the mystery for you Paul himself does not remove the mystery I can only state what I think the Bible says how God freely hardens and yet preserves human accountability we are not told but I think there can be no question that this is exactly what Paul demands that we do in fact accept as true how else can we explain the beginning of verse 20 in which Paul responds so pointedly who are you oh man to answer back to

God and so here's Paul's third response the argument is basically that a potter has the authority and right over clay to make a wide range of vessels from the same lump some for honorable use some for dishonorable use translate that metaphor and you've got the point we were the clay we don't know enough we don't know enough to elevate our values and our standards and our insights to the point of judging God and saying as this objector does you God you've used your sovereignty in an unrighteous way that you cannot do Paul says you can't do it and then his fourth response in verses 22 and 23 and this one's deeper in fact

[28 : 49] I think it's the deepest argument in the Bible for why God is right to unconditionally choose whom he will show mercy and whom he will harden and it's not easy the deepest reason this is right Paul says is as hard as it will be to get this and embrace it is that this situation this arrangement most fully displays who God is that this way of running the universe most fully displays his glory since God's is a glory that includes his wrath against sin and his power in judgment those are aspects of who he is and all of that must be seen and all of it is so that the vessels of mercy according to

Paul can know God most completely forever so that in the final analysis even God's wrath and power displayed in judgment is for the magnifying for the exalting of his mercy that is known by the ones prepared for mercy that's verses 22 and 23 what if God what if God desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power has endured with 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

God does act to show wrath against sin he is a holy God who hates sin he acts to show his power in judgment and all of it is to make known the greater purpose the riches of his glory that include that wrath and that power to make that known for the vessels of mercy that's Romans 9 as I God help me must read it and maybe you find that to be all too much or maybe you're even angry in response to what you've just heard me say let me say a couple things let me say that first

I'm willing to talk to you about it if you want to do that you can email me and set up a time to talk probably best not to try and do that immediately after the service but you can email me on the church website you find my email I'll talk to you secondly I know it's asking a bit and I'll be gently reprimanded for this because I'm over time and I'm not supposed to go over time but I'm leaving in another month so I guess just give me a couple more minutes because I want to express why why the election of God is good news for us there's so much here and

I had to take my time to get through it but I sense that pastorally that there must be more to say and there's a lot I could say but I'll just highlight a couple things I want to say I want to try and show why unconditional election is good news number one unconditional election is good news because it means that no one in the world is so bad that they could say I'm too sinful for God if God's election is not based on how much we do or do not sin in our lives if it's not based on anything we've ever done or thought or felt or chosen then no one is beyond God's mercy and that's good news because it means God can take the worst and most vile sinner in the world and show him mercy because he's

[34 : 12] God he defines himself as the one who will have mercy on whom he'll have mercy your sin cannot keep God from saving you it cannot none of it proves that you're not elect so repent and call on the name of the Lord through Jesus Christ who died for sinners in my experience you know who it is that often has the biggest hang up with the doctrine of unconditional election it's not the wretched sinner they get it it's the person who thinks that maybe there's just a little tiny something about who they are that might just deserve God's mercy don't you think just a little bit it's a lie there was not and there is not and there will never be a point where we become the decisive cause of our salvation

God chose us freely we boast only in him and that's good news because you'll be so much happier boasting in God than boasting in yourself so much happier number two do you see that unconditional election is exactly why you can wholeheartedly pray to God for the salvation of your friends and your loved ones who do not know the Lord Jesus Christ be like Moses intercede and ask the Lord to show his mercy and so reveal his glory be like Paul whose ongoing prayer for the Jews was that they would be saved don't say well God already knows what he'll do so why should I pray that's rubbish your prayers are surely part of the sovereign God's very plan to bring about the salvation of those you love

God loves to give good gifts to his children pour out your heart to the sovereign God ask him to save those you love because he's the only one who can do it number three and this is it last paragraph unconditional election is good news Christian because when you know you're loved by God and you're forgiven and you're justified and you're accepted unconditional election is the bedrock of your assurance that God will save you that the foundations of your salvation are deeper than you can possibly know because it's not got anything to do with you praise

God the foundation is God's sovereign will and that is never contingent and it's never fragile and it never changes in the name of the father and of the son and of the holy spirit Amen sic that you can he did not but no