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GOD'S GLORY IN JUDGMENT AND MERCY

Romans 9:19-23

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Romans, Lesson 60

God's Glory in Judgment and Mercy Romans 9:19-23

If you're struggling with the deep truths about God's sovereignty that we have been working through in Romans 9, you're in good company, because it is probably Romans 9 that Peter refers to when he says (2 Pet. 3:15-16), "Regard the patience of our Lord as salvation; just as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given him wrote to you, as also in all his letters, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which the untaught and unstable distort, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures, to their own destruction."

Peter is talking about God's patience in delaying judgment until all of God's elect are saved. In that context, Peter refers to Paul's writing about the same thing. Paul only wrote about God's patience in three places: Romans 2:4; 9:22; and 1 Timothy 1:15-16, which refers to Paul's own salvation. Out of those three, the only text that is especially difficult to understand is Romans 9. So the apostle Peter may have been acknowledging that he found our text to be difficult (James Boice, *Romans: God and History* [Baker], 3:1110)!

I have shared with you before the struggles that I used to have as a college student with Romans 9. I would often read Romans 8, which is such an encouraging chapter, but then I would keep reading through Romans 9. It was kind of like running on asphalt in Romans 8 and then hitting quicksand in Romans 9. It always raised so many questions: How is it fair of God to love Jacob and hate Esau before they were even born (9:11, 13)? If salvation does not depend on man's will or man's effort (9:16), then how do we obtain it? Do we just sit and wait for God's grace to hit us like a lightning bolt? And, if God "has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom he desires" (9:18), then how can He judge the one whom He hardens (9:19)?

So I would put on my spiritual boxing gloves and get in the ring with Paul. I felt that I was able to spar with him until I got to verse 19: "You will say to me then, 'Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?'" At that point, I always thought, "Yeah,

Paul, that's a good question. Give me the answer!" Then Paul comes back with (9:20), "On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, 'Why did you make me like this,' will it?"

At that point, I always felt like Paul copped out. He asks the right question in verse 19, but then he dodges giving me the answer that I wanted in verse 20. Then one evening as I was boxing with Paul (or so I thought), it was as if the Lord got into the ring and said, "You're not boxing with Paul, pipsqueak! You're boxing with Me! I gave you the answer, but you don't *like* it!"

So I read it again: "On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God?" It didn't say, "Who answers back to Paul"! I had been contending against God! Instantly, like when God confronted Job (Job 40:2), "Will the faultfinder contend with the Almighty?" I echoed Job's reply (Job 40:4-5), "Behold, I am insignificant; what can I reply to You? I lay my hand on my mouth. Once I have spoken, and I will not answer; even twice, and I will add nothing more." The fight was over. God won. On that day I bowed before God's sovereign right to be God. While 45 years later there is still much that I don't understand, God's right to do as He pleases for His glory hasn't bothered me since then. I'm content to let God be sovereign. In our text, Paul is arguing:

The Sovereign God has the right to deal with sinful creatures
in such a way as to display His glory,
both in judgment and in mercy.

The question that Paul anticipates in 9:19 could be paraphrased, "If God has mercy on whom He desires and He hardens whom He desires (9:18), then are we just robots? Don't we have the free will to choose or reject God? If we don't, then how can He rightly judge us, since we're just acting as He programmed us to act?" This would have been a perfect place for Paul to have responded, "Your question shows that you misunderstood me. I didn't mean that people can't resist God's will. That would deny their free will. What I meant was, God has mercy on whoever He foreknows will trust in Him, and He hardens all those whom He foreknows will reject Him."

But he didn't say that. His answer shows that Paul is teaching that God has the sovereign right to display His power and to have His name proclaimed throughout the whole earth, by dealing with Pharaoh in judgment (9:17). And, to display the riches of His glory, God is free to love Jacob and to show mercy to Moses and others. Let's work through his line of thought:

1. The Sovereign God has all the rights to deal with sinful creatures as He chooses; sinners have no rights (9:19-21).

Paul allowed the earlier question, "There is no injustice with God, is there?" but responded instantly with horror, "May it never be!" But here he says, "You've crossed the line! You're out of bounds in even asking the question. Just who do you think you are? You need to humble your heart before the Almighty Sovereign of the universe."

John Calvin (*Calvin's Commentaries* [Baker], p. 363) points out that the question not only defends the one asking it, but it also makes God the guilty one. It attempts to turn the tables by saying, "God, it's your fault that I'm sinning. You're the Sovereign potter. I'm just passive, helpless clay. So how can You blame me for my sin? I'm just the way You made me." So the very question, "For who resists His will?" is to resist His will!

It's not true that God made us to be sinners. The human race was plunged into sin when Adam and Eve sinned. You say, "Aha, you see, it's not my fault! I didn't have anything to say about the matter!" But to say that is to contend with the all-wise Sovereign God, who assigned to Adam his role as the head of the human race. His action affected the entire race, just as a President's action to take the nation into war affects the entire nation. Besides, to challenge the fact that you sinned in Adam is arrogantly to imply that you would have done better. Trust me, you wouldn't have done better! And, it is to dodge the obvious fact that whether you are guilty in Adam or not, you have plenty of guilt in your own track record to condemn you.

This means that you don't have a leg to stand on when it comes to arguing with God about how He deals with you or with other sinners. He holds all the cards. To blame God's sovereignty for your sin is incredible chutzpah! It would be like a mass mur-

derer arguing in court, "It's my parents' fault! They shouldn't have conceived me. They didn't raise me properly. And, it's the law's fault. If they didn't have these stupid laws against murder, I wouldn't be guilty!"

Paul brings in the frequent Old Testament metaphor of God being the potter and people being the clay (Job 10:8-9; Isa. 29:16; 41:25; 45:9; 64:8; Jer. 18:1-12). He is asserting God's right to make of the clay whatever He needs to further His purpose, which is His own glory. If He wants to make a vessel for dishonorable use, to display His glory in judgment, He has that right. If He wants to make another vessel for honorable use, to display His glory in mercy, He has that right. The clay has no rights.

But, we still sputter, "That's not fair! If we're just passive clay, with no free will, then how can God righteously judge us?" First, we need to understand that the clay isn't innocent clay; it's *sinful* clay. Charles Hodge put it (*Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* [Eerdmans], pp. 317-318, 319),

It is not the doctrine of the Bible, that God first makes men wicked, and then punishes them for their wickedness. The Scriptures only assert, what we see and know to be true, that God permits men, in the exercise of their own free agency, to sin, and then punishes them for their sins, and in proportion to their guilt....

It is not the right of God to create sinful beings in order to punish them, but his right to deal with sinful beings according to his good pleasure, that is here, and elsewhere asserted. He pardons or punishes as he sees fit.... The punishment of the wicked is not an arbitrary act, having no object but to make them miserable; it is designed to manifest the displeasure of God against sin, and to make known his true character.

Someone might still dare to object, "But you claim that God is sovereign over everything. He decreed all that has come to pass. He could have made a world where sin was not possible, but He didn't. So if you assert that God is totally sovereign, you make Him to be the author of sin."

I'm tempted to respond to that charge with Paul's retort, "Who are you, O man, who answers back to God?" But I'll say a

few things. First, some push human free will to the point that they rob God of His ultimate sovereignty. They fall into the error of dualism, where there is an evil power in the universe that has disrupted God's plan. God is trying to gain the upper hand, but He hasn't yet succeeded.

But the Bible is clear that God "works all things after the counsel of His will" (Eph. 1:11), including the sinful actions of Satan and of human beings. The cross is Exhibit A (Acts 4:27-28), "For truly in this city there were gathered together against Your holy servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose predestined to occur." God predestined the cross, which included the most sinful actions of people in the history of the world.

But, although God ordained the cross and the fall of man into sin (the necessary reason for the cross), He did so in such a way that He is not in any sense the author of sin or responsible for sin. *A Faith to Confess: The Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689 Rewritten in Modern English* [Carey Publications], p. 20) puts it like this:

1. From all eternity God decreed all that should happen in time, and this He did freely and unalterably, consulting only His own wise and holy will. Yet in so doing He does not become in any sense the author of sin, nor does He share responsibility for sin with sinners. Neither, by reason of His decree, is the will of any creature whom He has made violated; nor is the free working of second causes put aside; rather is it established. In all these matters the divine wisdom appears, as also does God's power and faithfulness in effecting that which He has purposed [Scripture references follow].
2. God's decree is not based upon His foreknowledge that, under certain conditions, certain happenings will take place, but is independent of all such foreknowledge [Scripture references follow].
3. By His decree, and for the manifestation of His glory, God has predestinated (or foreordained) certain men and angels to eternal life through Jesus Christ, thus revealing His grace.

Others, whom He has left to perish in their sins, show the terrors of His justice.

You could chew on those words for the rest of your life! But Paul's point in Romans 9:19-21 is that the Sovereign God has all the rights to deal with sinners as He chooses; sinners have no rights. So we have to think through these issues by taking our proper place before God, saying, "You alone are God. I am not God!" With Job (42:2, 6) we must say, "I know that You can do all things, and that no purpose of Yours can be thwarted.... Therefore I retract, and I repent in dust and ashes."

2. The Sovereign God deals with sinful creatures in such a way as to display His glory (9:22-24).

Expounding on 9:17-18, Paul sets forth the two sides of this:

- A. God displays His glory by His patience, wrath, and power when He judges sinners who are prepared for destruction (9:22).

Although (9:22, NASB) is the translators' interpretation of a Greek participle as concessive. But the context, which makes it parallel with 9:17-18, lends support to interpreting the participle as causal (Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* [Eerdmans], pp. 604-605). Translated this way, 9:22 would read, "But what if God, *because* He was willing to demonstrate His wrath and make His power known, endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction?"

"What if" is not a hypothetical question that may or may not be true. Rather, it is a rhetorical question introducing a statement of fact. It's as if Paul is saying, "What's it to you if God holds off on judging sinners so as to make a greater display of His patience, wrath, and power?" As Moo explains (*ibid.*, p. 605), "In the case both of Pharaoh and of the vessels of wrath, God withholds his final judgment so that he can more spectacularly display his glory." Or, John Piper puts it ("How God Makes Known the Riches of His Glory to Vessels of Mercy," on DesiringGod.org): "In other words, the final and deepest argument Paul gives for why God acts in sovereign freedom is that this way of acting displays most fully the glory of God, 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.”

What does Paul mean by “vessels of wrath prepared for destruction”? Is he teaching “double predestination,” that God created some just for the purpose of judging them? Some reputable scholars (Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Romans: God's Sovereign Purpose* [Zondervan], p. 213; John Bunyan, *Reprobation Asserted* [Reiner Publications], p. 60) argue that since the subject of the verb is left unstated, the sinner fits himself for destruction by his own sin. This is in contrast to the vessels of mercy, where Paul specifically states that God prepares them beforehand for glory.

But others (Douglas Moo, p. 607; Thomas Schreiner, *Romans* [Baker], p. 521; John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* [Eerdmans], 2:36; Charles Hodge, p. 321, John Piper, “Fitted for Destruction,” from *The Justification of God*, pp. 211-214, on DesiringGod.org) argue that the context of Pharaoh and the action of the potter, argues that God prepares these vessels for destruction. This does not mean that God arbitrarily made these men as sinners so that He could demonstrate His wrath. Every sinner is responsible for his sin; no one can blame God for making him a sinner. But it is to argue that God is sovereign even over proud, defiant sinners. They may think that they can stand against Him, but they are like pawns in His hand. He uses them to display His patience, wrath, and power, and then He righteously judges them for their sin.

I agree with Wayne Grudem (*Systematic Theology* [Zondervan], pp. 670, 684-686) that it is better to refer to God's foreordination of the wicked to judgment as *reprobation*, not *double predestination*, because the latter term implies that God carries out both election and damnation in the same way, which is not true. In predestining us to glory, God works directly on our hearts through His Spirit to impart new life, saving faith, and all the blessings of salvation. But in reprobation, God does not work immediately on the heart to infuse evil or force people to sin. Rather, He works through secondary causes to permit sin, so that sinners are justly condemned for their willful sins.

Predestination, or unconditional election, is a comfort to believers because it assures us that what God purposed to do for us,

He will complete in spite of our many sins. And, it humbles us to realize that we deserved His judgment, but He showed us mercy.

Reprobation, while a difficult doctrine to contemplate (Calvin called it "dreadful," *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. by John McNeill [Westminster], 2:955), is also in the Bible to comfort believers with the truth that no evil person can upset or thwart the sovereign purpose of God. Pharaoh tried to oppose God's will, but God raised him up and patiently endured his sin so that God could make known His wrath and power before He destroyed him (Rom. 9:17, 22). Judas, the Jewish leaders, and Pilate all sinned by crucifying Jesus and they were judged for it, but what they did accomplished God's sovereign plan (John 17:12; Acts 2:23; 4:27-28; see, also, 1 Pet. 2:7-8; Jude 4).

No wicked ruler, false teacher, or persecutor of the church, including the anti-Christ himself, is able to frustrate God's plan. The fact that He doesn't just obliterate them before they increase their terrible sin shows His great patience toward sinners. It also increases their guilt, rendering them more inexcusable. When God finally judges them, He shows the glory of His wrath and power. This should cause us to fear God as the righteous Judge, and to repent of our own sins. And, we should worship God for His holiness and righteousness.

- B. God displays His glory by making known the riches of His mercy on vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory (9:23).

Romans 9:23: "And He did so to make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory." Like a diamond on black velvet, God's unmerited grace shines more brilliantly against the terrible backdrop of human sin. I'm not as eloquent or gifted as John Piper, so let me quote his sermon and encourage you to read or listen to it (*ibid.*):

As a Christian you are a vessel of mercy. You were called out of spiritual deadness and sinful darkness by mercy, through mercy, and for mercy. By mercy, because in our rebellion we didn't deserve to be awakened and opened and subdued to God. Through mercy, because every influence that worked on us to bring us to Christ was a mercy from God. For mercy,

because every enjoyment that we will ever have, forever and ever, will be a merciful enjoyment. And mercy itself will be supremely pleasant to taste and know.

He goes on to say that the fact that we are vessels of mercy means that all the blessings of salvation are undeserved. We deserved judgment because of our sin, but God showed us mercy. This is humbling for believers, but it is hopeful if you are not yet a believer, because you don't have to qualify for mercy. The riches of God's mercy and grace are available to you at this very moment.

God's ultimate purpose is not just to display His glory, which is mind-boggling enough, but "*the riches* of His glory upon vessels of mercy." Have you received God's mercy in Christ by believing in Him? If so, then God has opened your eyes to "see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God" (2 Cor. 4:4). You have begun to enjoy "the unfathomable riches of Christ" (Eph. 3:8). But, also, "in the ages to come [God will] show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus" (Eph. 2:7). The point of that word "riches," says Pastor Piper, "is to waken in us a sense that our inheritance in God is infinitely greater than the greatest riches on earth.... Oh, how foolish we are to lay up treasures on earth when the glory of God is our portion."

Conclusion

But maybe you're thinking, "I'm not sure that I'm a vessel of God's mercy. I don't know if I'm one of His elect. How do I know whether God prepared me beforehand for glory?" The same apostle that wrote this will go on to say (Rom. 10:12-13), "For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, abounding in riches for all who call on Him; for 'Whoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved.'" Will you call on the Lord for mercy? He's abounding in riches for you!

Application Questions

1. Why is a submissive, teachable heart essential for understanding the doctrine of God's sovereign election?
2. How do you reconcile God's desire that all be saved (1 Tim. 2:4; 2 Pet. 3:9) with His decree that only some will be saved?
3. How would you respond to the objection that if God has ordained who will be saved and who will be lost, evangelism is not necessary?
4. How does the doctrine of God's sovereignty differ from fatalism?

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