

Romans: The Good News of God

Is God Unjust?

Romans 9:14-18

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Scripture

Many people see almost no relationship at all between Romans 9-11 and the previous chapter, Romans 8. They say that the Apostle Paul had several purposes for writing to the Romans.

First, he wanted to send them a general tract on how we are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

Second, he wanted to address the relationship between Jewish and Gentile Christians within the church at Rome.

So, having finished his treatise on salvation (in Romans 8), he now turns to a totally new subject (in Romans 9-11).

That, of course, is possible. But I do not think that is exactly what the Apostle Paul had in mind. It seems to me that there is another (and probably better) explanation for the relationship between Romans 8 and Romans 9-11.

Romans 8, you may remember, ends in a tremendous climax of confidence. Paul says that God *guarantees* our final preservation, because our salvation is not based on our will and strength. Rather God has called us and opened our minds to the truth, and now he carries us on to final glory. And so Paul says in Romans 8:30, “And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.”

But now you can imagine someone saying, “Hold on, Paul! You say that when God calls someone he always brings him or her all the way home to glory. But what about the Jews? God called them. He even went to them, but most of the Jews rejected Christ. So maybe God’s calling and purpose *can* be rejected!”

So Paul now deals with a subject not only of intellectual importance but also of great emotional importance to him as well. If God promised Israel that they would be his people, yet the majority did not believe in Christ, does that mean that God’s promise has

failed? That is the issue that Paul tackles in Romans 9-11.

The fundamental question that Paul is dealing with in Romans 9 is this: “Why does not *all* Israel believe when the message of the gospel should be clearest to them?” Or, to put it another way, “Why don’t all people believe the gospel, especially those to whom the gospel should be clearest?”

In Romans 9:1-5, Paul makes it clear that he has a heart of compassion for his own people. He was an Israelite himself and even though his own people—who had tremendous spiritual privileges—in his own time had, by and large, turned their backs on Jesus the Messiah, they were also rejecting the gospel that Paul was preaching. Nevertheless, he deeply loves and cares for them.

That, at the very least, should let you know that what he is going to talk about from verse 6 to the end of this chapter is not some sort of an dry, arid, abstract, speculative, theological diatribe. Paul is invested in outreach, in evangelism, and in gospel witness to the Jewish people. And their rejection of Jesus as Messiah is not simply the occasion of some sort of a philosophical thought-fest on his part. This is something that strikes at the very core of his heart.

I hope that will help us find that what Paul has to say in this chapter is a little more digestible to us, because he has some very hard things to say. But realize that Paul does not say them as someone who is emotionally detached. He is very much invested in the plight of his own people, and yet he can speak very clearly and forcefully of God’s sovereignty in election and salvation.

Then in verses 6-13 Paul gives his first answer to the question of why not *all* Israel has believed the gospel: It is *not* because God’s promises have failed. In verses 6-13 the Apostle Paul answers the question by appealing to God’s distinguishing grace in election. He says, “No, God has not forsaken his promises, because you need to understand that these promises are not simply made generically to all those who are physically descended from Abraham. They are made specifically and covenantally to those whom God has chosen.” The climax of Paul’s argument is in verse 13, where he says: “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.”

In other words, Paul is saying, “If you want to understand how it is that God’s promises have not failed, you have to understand that it is God who chooses.” God chooses Jacob, and he passes by Esau. That is God’s choice. That is what the Scriptures clearly teach.

Now as you might suspect, this immediately raises another objection. And that objection is what Paul is going to respond to in Romans 9:14-18. This has to do with the fairness of God. And Paul basically answers: God is not unfair in his granting of mercy.

Let’s see how Paul expresses it in Romans 9:14-18:

¹⁴What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God’s part? By no means! ¹⁵For he says to Moses, “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.” ¹⁶So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy. ¹⁷For 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.” ¹⁸So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills. (Romans 9:14-18)

Introduction

We fallen human beings have a hard time swallowing the sovereignty of God, particularly as it relates to the doctrine of election. As I mentioned last week, Romans 9 is not difficult to understand; it is just difficult to swallow. Paul’s words are not hard because they are unclear to us. In fact, they are painfully and patently clear, but our fallen hearts find this difficult to accept.

Ligon Duncan, pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in Jackson, MS, tells the following story:

I well remember as a fifteen year-old boy at my grandparents’ house, reading through Ephesians 1 with grandmother and granddad and my aunt and the family for our morning devotions.

And at the end of those devotions, knowing that my grandmother did not share my same love for Calvinistic doctrine, even though the word “predestination” had popped up a couple of times in that passage, I knew that I should keep quiet. After about thirty seconds of awkward silence my grandmother could resist it no longer, and she said to me, “Now Ligon, we’re Southern Baptist and we don’t believe in predestination.”

Now with all the tact of a fifteen year-old, I restrained myself from engaging in a theological dialogue and said, very diplomatically, “Grandmother, you do believe in predestination. It’s just that you think it means something different than what we as Presbyterians believe that it means.”

She immediately responded, “Son, you don’t understand. We’re Southern Baptist and we don’t believe in predestination.”

And I quickly responded again, “But, Grandmother, you do believe in predestination. The word is there in Ephesians 1. It’s just that you think it means something like, ‘God *foresees* that we are going to choose him,’ and I believe it means that ‘God *ordains* that we are going to choose him.’”

And she quickly responded, “Son, you don’t understand. We’re Southern Baptist and we don’t believe in predestination!”

Ligon Duncan concludes by saying, “I realized about fifteen years later that my grandmother had two controlling beliefs: The Bible is true and predestination is not true. And therefore there is no place in the Bible that teaches predestination. It doesn’t matter if the Bible uses the word or not.”

Let me quickly say that I am not bashing Southern Baptists. Actually, there was a time when the Southern Baptists used to believe exactly what Presbyterians believe regarding predestination and election. In fact, many Southern Baptists today believe what we believe about God’s sovereignty, predestination and election.

Furthermore, election is still in all the Baptist confessions. Look at the Philadelphia Confession, the New Hampshire Baptist Confession, and the abstract principles of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Southern Baptists and Presbyterians used to agree on this entirely. There has just been a collective amnesia

among some Baptists for the last hundred years or so on this topic.

The point is that we sometimes have a hard time swallowing God's election. It makes us uncomfortable.

I once read a story in *The Atlanta Journal Constitution* about a Presbyterian minister (not in the Presbyterian Church in America) who said to his 475-member congregation right after his 49 year-old wife had died in an automobile accident, "This was not a preordained part of God's plan. It was an accident and luckily no one has yet said to me that it was God's will, or there would have been two tragedies. It was an accident, pure and simple."

Lesson

We sometimes find it very hard to accept God's sovereignty, particularly in election. Paul knew that because the minute he asserted God's sovereignty in distinguishing grace in Romans 9:6-13, he anticipates the objection, "That's not fair!" And that's precisely the objection that Paul responds to in Romans 9:14-18.

He responds in two ways: First, in verses 14-16 Paul states that God has mercy on some, and that is not inconsistent. Paul explains that our salvation is completely dependent upon God's sovereign mercy. And second, in verses 17-18 Paul states that God sends judgment on some, and that is not inconsistent.

So let's look at what Paul says in this great passage today. If we find God's sovereignty in election hard to swallow, if we're tempted to say, "That's not fair," we need to recognize that Paul is responding in these verses precisely to these concerns.

And may I suggest that as we approach this passage that if this is your struggle today that you determine to separate two questions in your mind.

Instead of asking, "What does the Bible teach?" *and at the same time asking*, "How can that be so?" simply ask, "What does the Bible teach?" Leave the second question for later. That's what Paul does in this passage. He simply answers, "What does the Bible teach?" and then later he explains how that can be so.

So, why don't all believe the message of the gospel, especially those to whom the gospel should be clearest? It is not because God is unfair in his granting mercy.

I. God Has Mercy on Some, and That Is Not Inconsistent (9:14-16)

First, God has mercy on some, and that is not inconsistent. Paul says in verse 14: "**What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means!**"

Paul has just made clear in Romans 9:6-13 that the reason some are elect and others are not is because of God's distinguishing grace. The source of election is grounded in God himself, and not in us. God did not look at us and foresee faith in us, and then elect us to salvation. No. God elected some to salvation simply because he chose to do so.

That is the clear and unmistakable teaching of all of Scripture that is summarized in Romans 6:13, where God says, "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated."

Now, the immediate response to God's election is, "That's not fair!" One reason I am convinced that Romans 9 actually does teach the biblical doctrine of election is that this passage deals with exactly the kinds of objections that people usually have against election. As soon as we say that salvation is grounded in God's sovereignty in election, the first objection is, "That's not fair!" And that's exactly what Paul anticipates people to say, which confirms that he really is teaching the doctrine of election.

If your objection is that election isn't fair, you really are objecting to what the Bible actually teaches.

In answering the question, "**Is there injustice on God's part?** Or, isn't it unfair of God to choose some and not others?" we must ask another question: "Why would God ever be under any obligation to give us anything after we have fallen, having committed cosmic treason, resulting in the desires of our hearts being only wicked continuously?"

It is absolutely essential that we understand this. God Almighty owes us nothing. We have no claim upon his grace. If we did, then we would not be talking about grace and mercy, but about justice. Grace, by definition, is something God is never obligated to give, but something that he gives freely and voluntarily.

Only a perfect person can ever claim that God in justice should give him a reward. But all people are sinners. If God deals with us strictly according to righteousness, we are finished, and we are doomed to everlasting punishment in hell. If God is going to save anybody, then the only way he can do so is by grace.

No one deserves to be saved, for all of us are under the just condemnation of God. If God delivers justice to everybody, everybody will perish.

But suppose that God, in his desire to be merciful, decided to be merciful to some, but not to others, he would not be unjust.

For example, if there are ten people who are guilty of breaking God's law, and God sovereignly decides to pardon one of them and sentence the other nine to punishment, who has received an injustice? The nine who are sentenced receive what they deserved—the punishment for their sins. The nine receive justice. And one receives mercy. But none receive injustice. Do you understand that? Does that make sense?

R. C. Sproul tells the story of when he was a college professor. At the start of the semester, the class of about 150 students had three papers due, let's say, at noon on October 1st, November 1st, and December 1st. The penalty for a late paper was a zero grade.

At noon on October 1st, 140 students strolled in and put their papers on his desk. Sproul asked the 10 students whose papers were late, "Where are your papers?"

"Oh, Professor Sproul," they pleaded, "we have had so much work, and we are having such a hard time adjusting to college. Please give us an extension."

"Okay," said Dr. Sproul, "but the next time your papers are late, you will receive a zero grade. Agreed?"

"Yes," they all replied.

At noon on November 1st, 125 students strolled in and put their papers on his desk. Sproul asked the 25 students whose papers were late, “Where are your papers?”

“Oh, Professor Sproul, we had mid-terms, and we just did not get time to write the papers. Please give us an extension.”

“Okay,” said Dr. Sproul, “but this is your final warning. The next time your papers are late, you will receive a zero grade. Understand?”

“Yes,” they all replied.

At noon on December 1st, 100 students strolled in and put their papers on his desk. Sproul asked the 50 students whose papers were late, “Where are your papers?”

“Oh, Professor Sproul, don’t sweat it! Don’t worry about it! We’ll get the paper to you in a day or two!”

“Each of you will get a one letter grade reduction!” said Dr. Sproul.

Enraged, the students shouted, “That’s not fair!”

“Oh, you want me to be fair!” said Sproul, “I will be fair. I said that if your papers were not on my desk by noon today, you would receive a zero grade. Since they are not here, I will be fair and just, and you will receive a zero grade.”

What Sproul was illustrating is that as the professor setting the rules, he had the prerogative to extend mercy to whom he wanted to extend mercy. He did so the first two times the papers were late, and that extension of mercy was not inconsistent.

But then the students presumed upon Sproul’s mercy. They thought that there would be no penalties for their failure to perform according to the instructions. So, when they asked for justice (by saying “That’s not fair!”), they received the full penalty for their failure to perform.

It is unthinkable that God could ever be unrighteous or unjust. Paul says strongly, “**By no means!** God could never be unfair or unjust.” He bases his argument on Exodus 33:19, where God says to Moses, “**I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion**” (9:15).

This is the basic essence of the doctrine of election, showing it to be a doctrine of grace. Some people think that election inclines Christians to pride, but how could this be? Any understanding at all of divine election recognizes that it is purely by the grace of God. The doctrine of election reminds us that our salvation is completely dependent upon God's sovereign mercy.

Paul's next statement should put an end to the debate about election forever. He says in verse 16: "**So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy.**" God could not make it any clearer. Salvation is by grace, and by grace alone. It does not depend on our **human will or exertion** or desire or effort or choice, but it depends solely, only, and entirely on the grace of God.

Let us thank God, who gives us his sovereign mercy, bestowing it upon whom he will. Those who are devoid of that mercy will perish, and perish justly. They will act according to their sinful nature. They will refuse to surrender to Christ. They will flee from the kingdom of God. They will harden their hearts until the day of wrath. They will resist God until the day they die.

Our only hope is to be found in the God who shows mercy.

II. God Sends Judgment on Some, and That Is Not Inconsistent (9:17-18)

And second, God sends judgment on some, and that is not inconsistent.

Paul speaks of the hard truth of God's passing some by. You see, this is one of the objections that people have to election. If you say that God chooses some, then that by definition means that he must pass over others.

Yes, you are right, and that is precisely what the Bible teaches. It's hard to swallow, but it's crystal clear.

Look at Romans 9:17-18. Here Paul makes it clear that God sends judgment on some, and that it is just and sovereign. He quotes this passage from Exodus 9:6, "**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.’ So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills.”

I will deal with this issue of Pharaoh at greater length next week. Let me just say now that God is completely sovereign and just in his election. He sends judgment on some, and that is not inconsistent.

Conclusion

Pastor and author A. W. Tozer once said:

All of God’s acts are consistent with all of his attributes. No attribute contradicts any other, but all harmonize and blend into each other in the infinite abyss of the Godhead. All that God does agrees with all that God is, and being and doing are one in him. The familiar picture of God as often torn between his justice and his mercy is altogether false to the facts. To think of God as inclining first toward one and then toward another of his attributes is to imagine a God who is unsure of himself, frustrated and emotionally unstable, which of course is to say that the one of whom we are thinking is not the true God at all but a weak, mental reflection of him badly out of focus.

Brothers and sisters, let us not have a weak, mental reflection of God that is badly out of focus. God is sovereign. God is the one who elects a vast number to salvation.

How do we know if we are of the elect? We are one of the elect if we repent and believe the gospel of God, the good news that Jesus is the only Savior of sinners. That is plain and clear teaching of God’s word.

Let us joyfully submit to the teaching of God’s word. For it is only in submitting to the clear teaching of God’s word that we find true joy and liberty. Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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PRAYER:

Taken from Ray Ortlund's *A Passion for God*:

Most High God, we take our shoes off our feet, for we are standing on holy ground. We humbly acknowledge that you are right not to un-god yourself. You are right not to subordinate yourself to defiant human demands. You are right to exalt your supremacy over all things. You are God; we are not. We are the clay; you are the Potter. You have the rightful power to make of us whatever you please. And yet to us, even us, you have been pleased to display the glory of your mercy in Christ. Let us, O Lord, like the contrite prostitute, weep with joy and kiss your feet.

In the holy name of Christ. Amen.

CHARGE:

As you leave here today, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.