

Romans: The Good News of God

God's Judgment

Romans 9:17-18

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God's Judgment

Scripture

Today I would like to study what is arguably one of the most difficult doctrines in the entire Bible: the doctrine of *reprobation*.

The previous two weeks we studied the positive side of predestination, which is *election*. Of course, many people struggle with the doctrine of *election*. However, the so-called negative side of predestination—*reprobation*—troubles people even more.

The biblical teaching of *election* is that God chooses some persons—a great number, in fact (Revelation 7:9)—to salvation. On the other hand, the biblical teaching of *reprobation* is that God passes over or rejects all other persons to eternal condemnation.

Let's see how Paul expresses the biblical teaching of *reprobation* in Romans 9:17-18. I will begin reading at verse 14, in order to set the context for today's message:

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

Many people, as I mentioned, struggle with the biblical teaching of *election*. Many more people, however, struggle with the biblical teaching of *reprobation*.

During my basic training in the South African Air Force, we were out on a field trip for about a week. It was bitterly cold and

raining during the entire period. Shortly after we arrived in the field, the corporal in charge had our unit line up outside.

“You, you, and you,” he shouted as he randomly picked several of us, “You go and dig latrines in the field. The rest of you get inside your tents.”

Off we went to go and dig latrines in the cold and rain, while the rest of the unit went into their tents to get warm.

Now, many people think of God as someone a little like my old corporal. They see God as an unconcerned deity who sits on his throne in heaven, and he randomly assigns some to heaven and others to hell for no good reason. He says, as it were, “You, you and you, you go to hell! The rest of you go to heaven!”

This, of course, is a complete distortion of how God acts. But it is the view of so many, and therefore I need to address it.

Dr. James Montgomery Boice, former pastor of Tenth Presbyterian Church, says that “it is impossible to have *election*, the positive side of *predestination*, without *reprobation*, which is the negative side.”

This has been recognized throughout church history. John Calvin, for example, summarized the thoughts of many when he wrote, “Election cannot stand except as set over against reprobation.”

Now, it is easy to distort the teaching of *reprobation*, as many unfortunately do. But, let me remind you of what I have said the last few weeks: it is not that it is so difficult to *understand* predestination, election and reprobation; it is just that it is hard to swallow.

Intellectually, predestination is really not that difficult to understand. Emotionally, however, it is difficult for us to swallow. But, if we are going to grow in grace, we must joyfully submit to the clear teaching of God’s word and not to our emotions.

Review

Let’s briefly review what Paul is teaching in Romans 9.

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, the Apostle Paul makes it clear that he has great sorrow and unceasing anguish in his heart for his own kinsmen, the people of Israel. They have enjoyed tremendous spiritual privileges but have nevertheless rejected Jesus as God’s Messiah. It is important to recognize that Paul cares deeply for his kinsmen, because Paul has some very hard things to say. He is very invested in the plight of his own people, and yet he speaks clearly and articulately of God’s sovereignty in election *and* reprobation.

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. Paul answers the question by appealing to God’s election. He basically says, “No, God has not forsaken his promises, because you need to understand that these promises are not simply made to *all* those who are physically descended from Abraham. They are made specifically and covenantally to those whom God has chosen.” And the climax of Paul’s argument is in verse 13, where he says: “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.”

In other words, Paul says, “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 chose Jacob, and he passed over Esau. That was God’s choice. That is what the Scriptures teach.

In verses 14-18 Paul gives his second answer to the question of why not *all* Israel has believed the gospel: It is *not* because God is unjust or unfair. Neither God’s mercy on some nor God’s judgment on others is inconsistent with his justice.

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

Last week, we noted that God has mercy on some, and that is

not inconsistent with his justice. Let's read Romans 9:14-16, where Paul says: "What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means! For he says to Moses, 'I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.' So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy."

It is absolutely essential that we understand that God owes us nothing. This is where most of us fall down in our understanding of election and reprobation. We feel that we have a claim on the grace of God. Although we would never be so crass as to say it, many of us believe that God *owes* us salvation.

But, friends, God owes us absolutely nothing. We have no claim upon his grace. Why should God be under any obligation to give us anything after we have fallen into sin, turned our backs and rebelled against him?

Allow me to use an illustration that is perhaps a bit strong, but I want to make the point. After the September 11 attack on America, we became very aware that there is an army of Islamic terrorists who do not like America or Americans. These Muslims regard all non-Muslims, including Christians, as pagans or infidels. They take the words of the Koran literally, such as Sura 9:5, which says, "Fight and slay the Pagans wherever ye find them." That is why they are so committed to killing Americans and Christians wherever they find them. They see us as their avowed enemies.

Now, we recoil in horror at what the terrorists did on September 11 and also at what they would like to do, and rightly so.

But, friends, that is our own attitude toward God. In our fallen condition, we hate God and we want to fight and slay him.

The Bible says that after the Fall in the Garden of Eden, "The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (Genesis 6:5).

And throughout the Scriptures—and indeed world history—we see how people have rebelled against God, wanting nothing to do with him at all. So Paul sums up all of mankind's wickedness,

rebellion, anger, and enmity against God in one of the most compelling passages of Scripture, when he says in Romans 3:10-12: “None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.” Do you see the universal sinfulness and rebellion of man against God here?

The fact is that, left to ourselves, we would kill God if we could. You say, “Pastor, aren’t you overstating things a bit? I mean, we would never kill God!”

But that is exactly what happened when God became man in the person of Jesus Christ. The people living at the time killed Jesus Christ. Why? Because he claimed to be God.

Now, if you say, “Well, I would not have done that if I had been there!” then I say to you, “Friend, then you don’t know the depth of the depravity of your own heart!” For as Jeremiah says, “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?” (17:9; *KJV*).

So, God owes us absolutely nothing. Every single person on the face of the earth deserves the eternal wrath and punishment of Almighty God. If every one of us went to hell, God would be completely just. You must understand this.

The fact is that God doesn’t just let any sin anywhere go unpunished. Either the unbeliever pays the penalty for his own sin, or Christ pays the penalty for the believer’s sin. In both cases, God is completely just. The penalty for sin has been paid. In the case of the unbeliever, he has received full justice as he pays the penalty for his own sin. In the believer’s case, however, he has received God’s mercy, and Christ has received God’s full justice as he paid the penalty for the believer’s sin. In this way, God is completely just *and* merciful *and* sovereign.

So, God has mercy on some, and that is not inconsistent.

Lesson

Let me now continue with today’s lesson.

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

Second, God sends judgment on some, and that is not inconsistent with his justice. Verses 17-18 deal with the doctrine of *reprobation*.

Romans 9:17-18 is one of the most difficult portions of the entire Bible, because the Apostle Paul speaks about the hardening of Pharaoh's heart. It is important, therefore, that we come to a clear understanding of what Paul is revealing to us.

Paul says in 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.’”**

In the book of Exodus, God commanded Moses to go to the court of Pharaoh to instruct him, in the name of God, to let the people of Israel go. Because Pharaoh refused, God sent a series of ten plagues on Egypt. After each plague Pharaoh would relent and agree to allow the Israelites to depart. But then we read the refrain that “God hardened Pharaoh's heart,” resulting in Pharaoh changing his mind and stopping the Israelites from departing.

The reason God raised Pharaoh to his position of power was to promote and advance God's own purposes. Here we have an insight into God's providential rule as the Lord of all history. God raises kings, and God brings them down. Pharaoh became the most powerful man in the world in order to serve the providential plan and purpose of God.

God's specific purpose in establishing Pharaoh was to show God's power. Pharaoh was the most powerful man in the world at that time. But when his power was matched against the power of God, Pharaoh was impotent. And God showed himself to be supremely powerful in the entire world.

God used Pharaoh to advance his own purpose and redemptive activity. This is a common theme of the Bible. It is not that

God creates evil, nor ever does evil, nor even inclines the heart to evil, but rather that God brings good out of evil, overruling the evil schemes of men to bring about his own purposes.

An example of God bringing good out of evil is seen in the life of Joseph. His brothers sold Joseph into slavery. Many years later, after Joseph suffered enormously and unjustly in Egypt, he met his brothers again. After they repented of their wickedness toward him, Joseph said to them, “As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good” (Genesis 50:20a). Joseph understood that God is the sovereign Lord of the universe who controls all events, bringing good out of evil.

The supreme example of God’s control of evil is in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Peter, preaching on the Day of Pentecost, said, “This Jesus, delivered up *according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God*, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. *God raised him up*, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it” (Acts 2:23-24). God was in complete control of all events. And he used the evil to display his own power so that his name might be proclaimed in all the earth.

In Romans 9:18a, we have a repetition of what Paul said in verse 15: “**So then he has mercy on whomever he wills.**” God has the divine right to grant mercy to whom he wants. That is the very essence of mercy (and grace) which, by definition, is voluntary and not required.

But then Paul says something that makes the text so much more difficult: “**and he hardens whomever he wills**” (9:18b). The flip side of mercy is *hardening*.

Some say that God is unjust in hardening somebody’s heart, and then punishing him for doing what he couldn’t possibly stop from doing once his heart was hardened.

Such an idea is utterly revolting to everything that the Bible teaches about the character of God. First, we have to recognize that God is completely just. God is incapable of committing an unjust act. No one will ever be able to successfully sustain a charge of in-

justice against God.

Second, we need to remember that all of us from the moment we are born are sinful and rebellious and hateful toward God. We inherited our sinful nature from Adam and not from God. God is not the author of sin.

Pharaoh was already wicked. He was already rebelling against God. Out of Pharaoh's heart came only wickedness continually. Pharaoh delighted in committing sin. The only thing that stopped him was the restraint that God placed upon him. And this we call "common grace."

"Common grace" is the favor or the benefits that all people, indiscriminately, receive from God. And one of the most important benefits of common grace is the restraint of evil.

All God had to do to accelerate the wickedness of Pharaoh was to remove the restraints from him. God had been providentially keeping Pharaoh's wickedness in check.

Even though Pharaoh was powerful, he was not *all*-powerful. He was still under the control of God's providential rule. Pharaoh would have liked to be more wicked than he actually was.

God allowed Pharaoh to resist the Exodus in order that Israel would understand that deliverance came not through the kindness of Pharaoh, but through the redemptive grace of God.

And so all God had to do was remove the restraints. He did not have to create fresh evil in the heart of Pharaoh. The evil disposition was already there.

And so through a providential act that was both an act of punishment on Pharaoh and an act of redemption to Israel, God removed the restraints, and that is why the Bible says that "God hardened Pharaoh's heart."

But you say, "That's not fair! If God knew that Pharaoh was going to commit a sin, shouldn't God have stopped him?"

And my response is, "Why? Why should God stop Pharaoh?"

If God stopped Pharaoh from committing sin, and therefore reduced the number of his sins and the consequent amount of punishment, he would be doing Pharaoh a favor, and such a favor is

what we call “grace.”

So had God not hardened Pharaoh’s heart, he would have been gracious to Pharaoh. And grace is voluntary. God did not owe Pharaoh any grace. So God let him go on, knowing full well that he was going to sin, and knowing that when he sinned he was going to be brought into judgment.

Therefore God’s activity towards Pharaoh was an act of judgment. Pharaoh got justice. God’s people got mercy. And there was no injustice involved in this act of hardening.

So, God sends judgment on some, and that is not inconsistent with God’s mercy or justice.

Conclusion

At this point, someone may ask, “If the doctrine of reprobation is so difficult, then why speak about it all?”

The answer is that the Bible speaks about it. It is part of God’s revelation to us. Therefore, I must speak about it.

Or, someone may say, “I could never love a God like that.”

The answer to that statement is also that this is the teaching of the Bible. You may not like the doctrine of reprobation, but it is in the Bible. And ultimately, it does not matter whether or not you agree or disagree with me; it is God with whom you have to deal.

Finally, someone may ask, “Of what use then is the doctrine of reprobation?”

I am glad you asked! Let me suggest (from Dr. Boice) some useful aspects of the doctrine of reprobation.

First, reprobation assures us that God’s purpose has not failed. God has determined the outcome of all things from the beginning. His purpose does not fail either in regard to the elect or to the reprobate. God does not begin a work he cannot finish. God does not make promises he cannot keep. So if you have heard and believed his word, you can be sure that God will be faithful to you. If others are lost, it is because God has determined that they should be lost.

“But,” you ask, “Am I one of the elect?”

It is easy to know if you are one of the elect. Repent of your sin and believe in Jesus Christ. If you repent and believe, you are one of God's elect.

Second, reprobation helps us understand apostasy. All of us know of people who seem to have believed the gospel at one time, but then have fallen away. Does this mean that God has failed them? No. It simply means that if they continue in their unbelieving state, they are not among God's elect. Apostasy does not prove that the plan of God has failed. Reprobation helps us understand apostasy.

Third, reprobation keeps before us the important truth that salvation is all of grace and that no works contribute to our salvation at all. The Bible is clear that all are not saved. The Bible is also clear that not one of us is saved because of who we are or what we have done. All of us deserve hell. All of us deserve God's justice. But, in his mercy, God elects some—the elect—to salvation, and passes over the rest—the reprobate—to eternal condemnation.

And fourth, reprobation glorifies God. As soon as we think that God *owes* us salvation or anything at all, we rob God of his glory. But election *and* reprobation glorify God, and remind us that God is absolutely free and sovereign. He owes us absolutely nothing.

So, when I get to heaven, I will never be able to say, “My goodness or my merit got me into heaven.”

No. I will say, “I got what I did not deserve. I received mercy. To God alone be all the glory!”

And the person in hell will say, “I got what I deserved. I received justice. To God alone be all the glory!” 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:

O Lord God, the doctrine of reprobation is a difficult doctrine for us to swallow. It is not difficult to understand because the teaching in your word is patently clear. But it is difficult to swallow.

I pray that you would help each one of us to submit joyfully to the clear teaching of your word and not to our emotions.

O God, there may be someone here today who is concerned about his eternal destiny. He may wonder whether or not he is elect or reprobate, going to heaven or to hell.

The only way to know if anyone is elect and going to heaven is if that person is saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. Would you please grant every person who is concerned about his or her eternal destiny faith in Jesus Christ.

And all of this I pray in Jesus' name. 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.