

Sermons through

Romans

The Potter and the Lump

Romans 9:19-24

Part Two

Why Hast Thou Made Me Thus?

With Study Questions

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Why Hast Thou Made Me Thus?

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?¹

(Romans 9:19-24).

Review

You will say to me then, “Why does He still find fault? For who has resisted His will” (Romans 9:19)?

We as discussed last time that there is only one teaching that would presuppose these questions; that God is the ultimate source—the first cause—when it comes to making choices regarding human destiny. The Apostle then begins to give a threefold answer to this question. The first part addressed an anticipated attitude.

But indeed, O man, who are you to reply against God (Romans 9:20a)?

We considered how the Lord spoke to Moses **“as a man speaks to his friend” (Exodus 33:11)**. But we must be careful that we avoid interacting with God as if He were a contemporary—an equal to be argued with.

¹ *The New King James Version*. (1982). (Ro 9:19–24). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

But how can a man be in the right before God? ³ If one wished to contend with him, one could not answer him once in a thousand times (Job 2:2, 3).

Do you know the ordinances of the heavens? Can you set their dominion over the earth (Job 38:33)?

The proper and inevitable disposition of one who truly has an audience with the Almighty:

Moreover the Lord answered Job, and said: ² “Shall the one who contends with the Almighty correct *Him*? He who rebukes God, let him answer it.”³ Then Job answered the Lord and said:⁴ “Behold, I am vile; What shall I answer You? I lay my hand over my mouth (Job 40:1-3).

This morning we will apply our hearts to grasping the nature of the relationship, at its very basic level; that is to say, not as God our Father or God our Savior or Counselor, etc.—but as God our Maker. Then next time we will complete this section with a brief analysis of one potential reason as to why God would decree such things.

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 (Romans 9:20b, 21)?

The Nature of the Relationship

We’re Not Robots!

I mentioned last time that I had found difficulty in my own theological odyssey with the concept of God finding fault if His will is irresistible. I then explained how, so often, that is where the discussion ends up—it is the first and natural objection. But it is a New York second until another objection rapidly follows. It is the

“we’re not robots” objection. That is a protest with which I wholeheartedly agree. Men are not robots—not even really awesome robots!

Movies provide fantasies about men building robots with a level of artificial intelligence that somehow transitions into a soul (I believe there is yet another movie along those lines out right now). But a robot (no matter how cute and endearing their personality) is not made in the image of man as man is made in the image of God. And this yet another place where we demonstrate our low view of God—as if His creative power were not merely analogous to ours but equal to ours!

The thinking goes something like this:

- Men make robots which do exactly what they’re programmed to do. They are merely a complex piece of machinery under the power of a remote control in the hand of their maker. Therefore they have no will and they cannot be held responsible for their actions.
- God makes men who do exactly what He decrees for them to do. They are merely a complex piece of organic machinery under the power of a providence controlled by God. Therefore they have no will and they cannot be held responsible for their actions.

Creativity may be one of the communicable attributes (attributes of God that men also have) but we err greatly when we reduce, or put limitations on, God’s creative power by saying ‘if this is the way it works for us, this must be the way it works for God’.

Man is not a robot. There is no genuine sense in which we can say a robot is made in our image as we are made in God’s image (Genesis 1:26). Man cannot say of a robot that he **“breathed into his nostrils the breath of life (Genesis 2:7).** Of what robot can it be said that man created it with a reasonable and immortal soul (Genesis 2:7)? It is said of man that when he dies his **“spirit returns to the God who gave it” (Ecclesiastes 12:7).** Can that be said of a robot? In God’s incomparable, creative genius He endued man with knowledge, righteousness, and true holiness (Ephesians 4:24). Can that be said of a robot?

Man is **“fearfully and wonderfully made” (Psalm 139:14)**. He is the central figure in the creation account; as if the waters, the land, the plants, the animals, the sun, the moon and the stars were a mere afterthought or addendum.

When God observed the fall and how it affected all of creation, He viewed it the way a father might view a burning house. It was not the house, nor the objects in the house that would become the focus of His rescue efforts—no, it would be His child that needed to be rescued. Not even the angels:

For surely it is not angels that he helps, but he helps the offspring of Abraham (Hebrews 2:16).

No, man is not a robot. But it must be said that in the categories under our current study—the category of God’s eternal decrees (the choices He ordains) and the category of God’s providence (His upholding, directing, disposing, and governing of all creatures, actions and things), man is not compared to anything as complex or impressive as a robot.

A Lump of Clay

In this category we are compared to a **“lump”** *phyrana* of **“clay”** *pelos* or mud. And there is nothing fancy about this mud. It is the same word used in the account of Jesus spitting on the ground and making mud with His saliva.

It is precisely here (perhaps more than any other issue) that we must yield to the Creator/creature distinction. God informs us that it is not a healthy curiosity when the creature begins to arraign the Master Architect of all creation for His choices. We are creatures who should enjoy and properly govern that which God has put under our care—the sheep and oxen and beasts and birds and fish (Psalm 8:7, 8). It is when we forget that, and seek a higher station, that things go south. Failure to yield to the godhood of God had produced untold numbers of the deaths of men in this life and the myriad of murder of souls in the next.

We are on the great field of creation and we look about it and marvel. We should appreciate its beauty and seek to make proper, godly decisions. And God reveals Himself through the things that He made (Romans 1:20; Psalm 19:1). Even further,

and more specifically, He reveals Himself through His word (Psalm 19:7, 8). So we are called not merely to look horizontally at the creation but look unto Jesus (Hebrews 12:2).

But when that little piece of hell—that unwanted guest which still resides in our fallen natures—begins to rear its ugly head and say **“I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High,”** “I demand to hear things **‘that cannot be told, which man may not utter,’**” it is that thinking which brings the soul to Sheol (death) and the **“far reaches of the pit” (Isaiah 14:14, 15; 2 Corinthians 12:4).**

Curiosity can be a good thing or a bad thing. To be intrigued by the creation in such a way as to increase our appreciation of it or to seek to know how things work that we may figure out a way for them to work better is good. But when curiosity leads people to fish for gossip it is bad. When God says this is beyond you, it is a good thing to yield—for the sake of what happens in this life and the next. Calvin put it this way:

Since thou art man, thou ownest thyself to be dust and ashes; why then doest thou contend with the Lord about that which thou art not able to understand? ²

I think it is accurately said in Job:

Can you find out the deep things of God? Can you find out the limit of the Almighty (Job 11:7)?

Deuteronomy 29 ends with a very familiar verse where we are informed that the secret things belong to the Lord. The context of that verse is Moses speaking with the Israelites who he had led for forty years, yet they remained in rebellion and disfavor with God. Why? Certainly in a secondary, and very real, sense it was due to their stubborn and stiff-necked hearts. But early in the chapter Moses expresses the primary cause:

² Calvin, J. (1998). *Romans* (electronic ed., Ro 9:20). Albany, OR: Ages Software.

Yet the Lord has not given you a heart to perceive and eyes to see and ears to hear, to this very day (Deuteronomy 29:4).

It is in this great unsearchable and glorious doctrine that we are told that which we find so difficult to accept—though it comes from an infinitely wise and benevolent God:

The secret *things belong* to the Lord our God, but those *things which are revealed belong* to us and to our children forever, that *we may do all the words of this law* (Deuteronomy 29:29).

It is simply beyond the “lump” to ask or know such heavenly things.

That Which is Revealed

But Deuteronomy 29:29 should not be read as if God cannot be understood at all. There are **“those things which are revealed (that) belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.”** Instead of seeking to peer into the secret things—things beyond the creature, perhaps we should set our hearts upon that which is revealed.

Years ago I was invited to debate this subject with a friend at another church. Afterward we took questions. One gentleman stood up and asked me “How do I know if I’m chosen—if I’m elect of God?” He asked the question (I may be wrong here) as if there were no answer to the question. As if the assurance of being chosen of God was as unsearchable as the doctrine itself. Either way, it is a good question.

In his wonderful pastoral epistle to Timothy, Paul once again illustrates his point by using the metaphor of vessels of honor and dishonor.

But God’s firm foundation stands, bearing this seal: “The Lord knows those who are his” (2 Timothy 2:19a)...

Clearly, the Lord knows those who are His. But how do we know? Paul continues:

...and, “Let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity.”²⁰ Now in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver but also of wood and clay, some for honorable use, some for dishonorable.

²¹ Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from what is dishonorable, he will be a vessel for honorable use, set apart as holy, useful to the master of the house, ready for every good work.

²² So flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart.

²³ Have nothing to do with foolish, ignorant controversies; you know that they breed quarrels. ²⁴ And the Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, ²⁵ correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, ²⁶ and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will (2 Timothy 2:19b-26).

Time doesn’t allow a detailed analysis of all the attributes in this passage. Simply put, you know you are a vessel of honor if you know Christ as your Master and seek to make yourself useful to **“the master of the house, ready for good work.”**

But it must be said, especially as we prepare our hearts for the Lord’s Table, that it is not by our good work or usefulness that we manufacture ourselves as vessels of honor. It might be said that **“by nature”** we were all vessels of **“wrath, like the rest of mankind” (Ephesians 2:3)**. The means by which we can have great assurance that we are vessels of honor is not the means by which one is made a vessel of honor.

I may look at my birth certificate, consider the language I speak and the land where I live and have great assurance that I

am an American. But none of those things make me an American. I must, for the sake of the metaphor, be born in America—an event I contributed very little (really nothing) to. So the vessel of honor must be reborn as a child of the kingdom. And similar to my first birth, my second birth was something to which I contributed nothing but pain.

Becoming a vessel of honor is a transformation that came with a price—paid by someone else. As if the Potter poured His very blood into that lump. It might be said that we were all vessels of wrath (at least in a certain sense)

...like the rest of mankind. But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved (Ephesians 2:4, 5).

Let that be the meditation of our hearts as we go to the Lord's Table this morning.

Questions for Study

- 1 What does the Apostle's question in Romans 9:19 necessarily presuppose (page 2)?
- 2 What disposition should we adapt in our interactions with God (pages 2, 3)?
- 3 Why does the doctrine of election cause some to say it makes men robots? What is deficient about that comparison (pages 3, 4)?
- 4 When it comes to the issues of God's eternal decrees and God's providence, what is man compared to (page 5)?
- 5 When is curiosity good? When is it not good? Discuss curiosity as it speaks to election (pages 5, 6).

- 6 How do you know if you're elect of God—a vessel of honor (pages 7, 8)?
- 7 What is the price paid to make one a vessel of honor (page 8)?