

I mentioned last week—that beginning in v14—the apostle anticipates two objections to his doctrine of election—that it's unfair (v14), and that it destroys human responsibility (v19)—inevitably whenever the subject of election comes up—these two objections arise—[1] it's not fair—if God chooses some and not others—then isn't God unjust or unfair, and [2] it destroys human responsibility—if it doesn't depend upon man's will or effort—"but on God who shows mercy"—then how can God hold man accountable for his sins?...

Last week we saw that Paul's response to the first objection was to quote two OT Scriptures, v15—"for He says to Moses" (Ex.33:19), and v17—"for the Scripture says" (Ex.9:16)—he doesn't offer a lengthy philosophical response—he simply quotes Scripture—If God loves Jacob but hated Esau—doesn't this make God unjust or unfair—NO—for God Himself said—within OT Scripture—that He has mercy on whom He wills and He hardens whom He wills...

This brings him to anticipate a second objection (v19)—which he answers it with an extended illustration that's taken from the OT—I want to examine this passage under three main headings—[1] An Objection (v19), [2] A Response (v20), and [3] An illustration (vv21-23)...

- I. Objection—v19
- II. Response—v20
- III. Illustration—v21

I. Objection—v19

1. I want to suggest three things about this anticipated objection—[1] its verifying, [2] its common, and [3] its misplaced...
2. [1] Its verifying—that is—both of these objections (v14, v19)—verify our interpretations of the previous passages...
3. For example—in v14—the anticipated objection was—that if election was unconditional—then God is unfair...
4. This verifies our interpretation of the previous verses—the objector understood what Paul meant by election...
5. In v19—the objection is—if salvation depends on God's will and not man's—how can God hold man responsible...
6. This too verifies our interpretation of vv15-18—the objector understood very clearly—what Paul was teaching...
7. The objector understood that Paul was teaching—that salvation doesn't depend on man's will—but God's will...
8. That is—why does God still hold man accountable—when salvation depends on God's sovereign and certain will...
9. Put another way—if God chooses to show mercy on some men—and chooses not to show mercy on others...
10. If God shows mercy on those whom He wills—and He hardens those whom He wills—how is man responsible...
11. This is the objection that Paul anticipates—in short—if God is sovereign—then how can man be responsible...
12. [2] It's common—by this I mean—while Paul anticipated it from 1st century man—we still hear it from 21st century man...
13. There are those who think—that sophisticated 21st century man—will never except the teaching that of election...
14. This is true—native, unchanged 21st century man won't—but neither did native, unchanged 1st century man...
15. My friends—man has not essentially changed—what he rejected in the 1st century—he rejected in the 21st century...

16. [3] It's misplaced—by this I mean—it's really asking the wrong question—man isn't blamed for resisting God's sovereign will...
17. The objection gives the impression—that men are basically good and that they want to come to God in Christ...
18. The implication of the objection is this—man wants to come to Christ—but God is somehow hindering him...
19. This is a perversion of what the Scriptures teach—a perversion that is often taught in order to vilify the doctrine...
20. In other words—man is so foolish—he willingly misrepresents the truth of election—to make it seem unjust...
21. How can God hold me accountable for not coming to Christ—when—no one can resist His sovereign will...
22. Perhaps I can put it like this—How can God hold me accountable—if salvation depends on God and not man...
23. Now—if you recall—last week PM—I made the necessary distinction between God's secret and revealed will...
24. His secret will is that sovereign will that always comes to pass without exception—everything He wills happens...
25. It is true—that no man can resist this will—it is sovereign and certain—what God has willed—this He does...
26. His revealed will is His will or desire as made know in Scripture—He wills or desires that His word be obeyed...
27. This will is resisted—in fact—by nature—we are all disobey, resist, and refuse to comply to comply with it...
28. No man is condemned because he resists God's secret will—but because he disobeys God revealed will or desire...
29. God's revealed will or desire is made known in two places—[a] conscience and [b] Scripture—[a] conscience...
30. Rom.2:14—"for when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do the things in the law, these, although not having the law, are a law to themselves..."
31. [b] Scripture—that is—God's will for mankind is found within Scripture—that he obey the law and gospel...
32. Lk.12:47-48—"and that servant who knew his master's will, and did not prepare *himself* or do according to his will, shall be beaten with many *stripes*. 48 But he who did not know, yet committed things deserving of stripes, shall be beaten with few. For everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required; and to whom much has been committed, of him they will ask the more..."
33. Every unconverted man will be punished—but those who have the revealed will of God—will be punished more...
34. Thus—in the day of judgment—no man will be condemned because of election—but because of his rebellion...

II. Response—v20

1. Now it's important to notice—that Paul doesn't actually answer the objection—but asks two rhetorical questions...
2. V20—"but indeed, O man, who are you to reply against God? Will the thing formed say to him who formed is, Why have you made me like this..."
3. Both rhetorical questions contain a contrast—"man and God" and—"the thing formed and him who formed it..."
4. [1] Man and God—the original wording of this phrase is—"O man, indeed, who are you to reply against God..."
5. The phrase "reply against God"—is rendered "to answer back to God" (NAS), "to talk back to God" (NIV)...
6. It brings with the idea of defiance—as if man was calling God to task—was demanding from God an answer...

7. In essence what Paul says is—Who are you O created man—to raise such an objection to God your creator...
8. I would simply remind you—that this is a similar way the Lord responded to Job—when he questioned God...
9. Job 38:1—"then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind, and said: Who is this who darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Now prepare yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me..."
10. Job was questioning the way in which God was treated him—he was questioning whether or not it was fair...
11. God—does not even stoop to give him an answer—He responds by reminding him that he was a mere man...
12. [2] Thing formed and him who formed it—this second question fits better with v21 and introduces the illustration...
13. It's a generic principle that brings into sharp focus the audacity and absolute ridiculous nature of the objection...
14. Can a cabinet complain to the carpenter—can a painting complain to the painter—or can a dress complain to the seamstress...
15. Now—we must clarify at this point—Paul is not condemning all honest and humble questions we might have...
16. Some of us—probably most of us—came to see this truth gradually—and even in some cases—rather recently...
17. John Stott—"Paul is not censuring someone who asks sincerely perplexed questions, but rather someone who 'quarrels' with God, who talks back or answers back. Such a person manifests a guilty spirit of rebellion against God, a refusal to let God be God and acknowledge his or her true status as creature and sinner..."
18. John Piper—"Paul has no objection when a person weeps to understand as much of God's dealings as possible, but he objects strenuously when a person criticizes and rejects the truth which he discovers..."

III. Illustration—v21

A. Its OT roots

1. There are several texts—throughout the OT—in which we find similar language and imagery as Romans nine...
2. Isa.29:15-16—"woe to those who seek deep to hide their counsel far from the LORD, And their works are in the dark; They say, Who sees us? and, Who knows us? 16 Surely you have things turned around! Shall the potter be esteemed as the clay; For shall the thing made say of him who made it, He did not make me? Or shall the thing formed say of him who formed it, He has no understanding..."
3. In v15—we have a description of hypocrisy—they sought to hide their actions from God as if He didn't know...
4. They thought that God was like them—because they fooled each other—they thought they could fool God...
5. V16—they thought within their hearts—"He did not make me...He has no understanding"—He's like we are...
6. He responds in v16—"surely you have things turned around"—that is—you've turned things upside down...
7. V16—"shall the potter be esteemed as the clay"—that is—should they be viewed on the same level or as equals?...
8. Isa.45:9-10—"woe to him who strives with his Maker! *Let* the potsherd *strive* with the potsherds of the earth! Shall the clay say to him who forms it, 'What are you making?' Or shall your handiwork *say*, 'He has no hands'? 10 Woe to him who says to *his* father, 'What are you begetting?' Or to the woman, 'What have you brought forth'..."
9. The greater context of this passage—is the anticipated or foretold Babylonian exile—by a pagan named Cyrus...

10. The Lord anticipates an objection—How can you use a pagan to deliver us and not another Hebrew like Moses...
11. First—you're going to bring us into captivity—delay deliverance for 70 yrs—and then use an ungodly king...
12. They were basically complaining against God for what He was about to do—they didn't think He had hands—or skill...
13. His response—"Let the potsherd strive with the potsherd of the earth! Shall the clay say to him who forms it..."
14. He then used another imagery, v10—"woe to him who says to his father, What are you begetting? Or to the woman, What have you brought forth..."
15. Do you see how nonsensical this is—a baby complaining to its parents—about the day or details of its birth...
16. Isa.64:8—"but now, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you our potter; and all we are the work of your hand [Jer.18:3-6]..."
17. Several weeks ago in examining Romans 9:1-5—we learned that, God as a whole, adopted the nation of Israel..
18. Thus—there was a national sense in which God was their Father—as the entire nation was adopted by Him...
19. Furthermore—we learned from Romans 9:6ff—that not every physical Israelite was a part of spiritual Israel...
20. Thus—in this broad and generic sense—the entire nation could say—"you are our Father and we your son..."
21. Now—the point I here want to make is—how did this come to be—why were they the chosen people of God...
22. Notice—"we are the clay, and you our potter; and all we are the work of your hand [you made us to differ]..."
23. In other words—God has the right to take from all the nations of the world—one to be His special people...
24. The principle is exactly the same—it is only sovereign election—that made both physical and spiritual Israel...

B. Its basic meaning

1. Let me simply say—that the basic purpose of the metaphor—is to underscore the creator/creature distinction...
2. God is the potter and mankind is the clay—God has a right over mankind as the potter has a right over his clay...
3. [1] One lump—that is—one lump of fallen humanity as viewed from eternity—this refers to His eternal purpose...
4. For example—think of a potter as he looks upon a pile of useless clay—He determines what to make from it...
5. The clay doesn't determine it—it is all one lump—all the same—the difference lies in the potter not the clay...
6. Thus—God from eternity—in His eternal and sovereign purposes—determined to use the clay in two ways...
7. He would make from the same lump vessels for honorable purposes and vessels for dishonorable purposes...
8. Now—it is very important to notice—Paul is not here speaking about God's decree to create but of election...
9. That is—He is here working with an already created and fallen mass of clay—not with pre-fallen humanity...
10. Let me state more theologically—election and reprobation are the decrees of God with regards to fallen humanity...
11. From eternity past God decreed to create a world—to allow it fall into sin—and then to make some from that fallen mass—vessels of honor and others vessels of dishonor...

12. Nothing within the clay made the difference—for it was all equally clay—it was all equally fallen humanity...
 13. When a potter begins to work with a lump of clay—he doesn't put anything within the clay—to make it clay...
 14. He takes from one lump—some clay to make vessels of honor—and some clay to make vessels of dishonor...
 15. Thus—there is nothing different in the clay itself—the prerogative lies solely and totally with potter's will...
 16. Hendriksen—"The main idea Paul is putting across is this: If even a potter has the right out of the same lump or mass of clay to make one vessel for honor, and another for dishonor, then certainly God, our Maker, has the right, out of the same mass of human beings who by their own guilt have plunged themselves into the pit of misery, to elect some to everlasting life, and to allow others to remain in the abyss of wretchedness..."
 17. [2] Honorable vessels—the word "vessel"—here refers to a clay pot—used for honorable or respectable ends...
 18. In a first century household—they would have used clay pots for various purposes—some were more honorable...
 19. For example—perhaps a family would have a specific set of pots—used only for special or religious events...
 20. This world is likened to God's house—and He has the right to make pots for various purposes as He sees fit...
 21. Now—as I've already asserted—that with regards to God's purpose—He made some vessels of honor from eternity...
 22. But—we must also keep in mind—that while election is from eternity—this results in being called in time...
 23. Perhaps I can put it like this—from eternity—God chose to make in time—certain people vessels for honor...
 24. Now—what is specifically meant by "honor?"—well I think we can say—it refers both to time and eternity...
 25. That is—when He converts us—He uses us for honorable purposes—then bestows honor us for all eternity...
 26. [a] To perform good works—Paul told Timothy (2:21)—if anyone keeps himself from the false teachers—"he will be a vessel for honor, sanctified and useful for the Master, prepared for every good work [1Thess.4:4]..."
 27. [b] To preach good news, 2Cor.4:7—"we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us [Acts 9:15]..."
 28. [3] Dishonorable vessels—while these vessels are for dishonorable purposes—they equally have a purpose...
 29. That is—a dishonorable vessel has a purpose to fulfill within the house—just as much as the honorable vessel...
 30. For example—think back to Pharaoh—God raised him up for the express purpose—to make His power known...
 31. Let me put it like this—every vessel that God makes—He makes for specific purposes within His house [world]...
 32. Every non-elect person—every dishonorable vessel—has been made to serve God's ultimate and sovereign purpose...
 33. Prov.16:4—"the LORD has made all for Himself [for His own purpose], yes, even the wicked for the day of evil"...
 34. That is—the LORD has made for His own purpose—dishonorable vessels—to bring to pass—evil actions...
 35. For example, Lk.22:22—"truly the Son of Man goes as it has been determined, but woe to that man by whom He is betrayed..."
- C. Its practical applications

1. Here I want to suggest three applications from these verses—the first concerns man and the other two God...
2. [1] Man is a very arrogant creature—now at this point I am constrained to say things that will offend some...
3. Man—is so proud—that he will deny God His rights as Creator—just to alleviate his responsibility before God...
4. Now—there are two facts true of man—that combine together to bring man's native arrogance into sharp focus...
5. [a] Man is finite clay—the word "finite" means "limited" and is in contrast to God—who is infinite in wisdom...
6. Man is finite CLAY—in that he is but a creature—made from the dust—and thus—he is limited in wisdom...
7. There is little double brethren—that the doctrines of election and reprobation—are in many ways difficult...
8. In fact—after Paul finishes discussing these things for nearly three full chapters—notice how he responds...
9. Rom.11:33—"oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out! For who has known the mind of the LORD? Or who has become His counselor? Or who has first given to Him and it shall be repaid to Him? For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to whom be glory forever. Amen..."
10. That is—God's wisdom far exceeds mine—His wisdom and knowledge are infinite and without limitation...
11. Let me illustrate—think of a famous painter—perhaps Michelangelo—when he painted the Sistine Chapel...
12. What if—while he was in the middle of it—his 4 year old son—questioned whether he was doing a proper job...
13. What does the 4 year old boy know—in comparison—to Michelangelo's seasoned wisdom, insight and ability...
14. Yet—this is really a poor illustration—as there isn't that big of a difference between Michelangelo and this boy...
15. But—who can even fathom the difference that exists between the Creator and creature—between God and man...
16. Isa.55:9—"for as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts..."
17. [b] Man is fallen clay—that is—he's not only natively limited in wisdom—but what wisdom he has is distorted...
18. Go back to Michelangelo and the 4 year old boy—let's say that the boy was also totally and absolutely blind...
19. How foolish would this boy be—to suggest that he could instruct Michelangelo on the finer points of painting...
20. [2] God is a very gracious Creator—that He would make from a finite and fallen lump of clay—vessels for honor...
21. Most often—as we have seen—fallen man complains about the fact that He makes some vessels of dishonor...
22. This shouldn't surprise us—what ought to shock us—is the fact that God—would use some as vessels of honor...
23. 1Cor.4:7—"for who makes you differ from another"—that is—hasn't the Potter made you to differ from others...
24. [3] God is a very wise Sovereign—this is perhaps the most obvious application of this passage—God is a wise potter...