

**Romans 9:14-24**  
*Objections to God's Sovereignty*

The doctrine of election is a hard teaching

- It runs counter to our human thinking
- It runs counter to the thinking of society around us

Nonetheless, the Bible clearly teaches the doctrine of election

- You may redefine it
- But you can't ignore it

As I said last week, the study of the doctrine of election cannot be studied in a vacuum

- It must be studied within the parameters of God's own person, nature, and character

A grave danger comes in when we go beyond God's Word

- This is especially paramount in discussing the doctrine of election

So at the outset of this message, let's agree to stay within the bounds of Scripture

- Don't go outside the bounds of the Scriptures

I have heard people define election as it relates to human logic or reasoning

- But election is so far beyond human logic and reasoning!
- His ways are higher than our ways; His thoughts are higher than our thoughts

Listen to what Luther wrote regarding election, “**Mere human reason can never comprehend how God is good and merciful; and therefore you make to yourself a god of your own fancy, who hardens nobody, condemns nobody, pities everybody. You cannot comprehend how a just God can condemn those who are born in sin, and cannot help themselves, but must, by a necessity of their natural constitution, continue in sin, and remain children of wrath. The answer is, God is incomprehensible throughout, and therefore His justice, as well as His other attributes, must be incomprehensible. It is on this very ground that St. Paul exclaims, “O the depth of the riches of the knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments, and His ways past finding out!”** Now, His judgments would not be past finding out, if we could always perceive them to be just.<sup>1</sup>”

So the Bible, and the Bible alone, must be the only source of truth for what we believe

- About election
- And about any other doctrine

Any time that the subject of election is brought up, there will be controversy

- There will certainly be objections

I remember over 10 years ago when I was in Mexico on a short-term mission trip

- I was with a team of about 6 or 7 other men

I taught on Ephesians 2

- That the unbeliever is spiritually dead, unable to initiate a relationship with God
- I emphasized that God must take the initiative in salvation

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in John MacArthur, Jr., *The MacArthur NT Commentary*, Romans 9-16, 39..

That Sunday evening, there was quite a commotion among the men on the team

- Some of them became very enraged at the thought that God would choose some while not choosing others
- They were clearly objecting to the truth of election

Perhaps you have your own objections after hearing last week's message

- If so, this morning will answer some of your questions

As the apostle Paul travelled, he encountered a large number of Jews

- Some received his message
- Others rejected his message

No doubt, some of the same objections and issues surfaced time and time again

- Paul used two of these objections here in Romans 9

### **Let's read Romans 9:14-24**

In this section of Romans 9, the apostle anticipates two (2) key objections that may arise when speaking of God's sovereignty in election

- Does election destroy God's righteousness? (9:14-18)
- Does election destroy human responsibility? (9:19-24)

In the first few chapters of Romans, the main issue has been the justification of the sinner before God

- But now the issue switches to the justification of God before the sinner

Paul explains why God can still be glorified and honored, especially in the doctrine of election

#### **I. Does election destroy God's righteousness? (9:14-18)**

##### 14 What shall we say then? There is no injustice with God, is there?

Paul could see that the doctrine of election raises more questions than it solves

- This would especially be the case with Jews

It is impossible for God to commit an act of unrighteousness

- Even with his limited knowledge of God, Abraham acknowledged, "**Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?**" (Gen 18:25)

In election, God is not unjust!

##### May it never be!

In the strongest possible language, Paul refutes the idea that there is injustice with God

- Even to entertain the idea is repulsive to the apostle

15 For He says to Moses, "I WILL HAVE MERCY ON WHOM I HAVE MERCY, AND I WILL HAVE COMPASSION ON WHOM I HAVE COMPASSION."

To support this claim that God is totally righteous in the process of election, Paul turns to the Old Testament

- He has turned to the Old Testament to prove election
- Now he turns to the Old Testament to provide further proof

The particular passage that is quoted here in verse 15 is Exodus 33:19

- We need to go back and understand why Paul chose this one particular passage

God verbalized the Ten Commandment in Exodus 20

- Then for several chapters, God continued to speak various laws to Moses regarding the nation Israel
  - o The Tabernacle
  - o Property
  - o The Sabbath
  - o The feasts
  - o Sundry laws

Moses must have been on the mountain a long time

- Twice we are told that Moses met with God for forty days and forty nights (Ex 24:18; 34:28)

While Moses was on the mountain, an amazing thing was taking place among the people of Israel

- They grew tired of waiting for him!

The people told Aaron to form a god that they could worship

- So Aaron collected gold and formed it into a golden calf and said, "**This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt**" (32:4)

The LORD informed Moses of what was taken place

- Moses interceded for the people, even though they were sinning by committing idolatry

We are told that about 3000 men died that day (32:28)

- There must have been a lot more than 3000 men among the camp of Israel

God told Israel to move further toward Canaan

- Moses continued to meet with God wherever the camp stopped

Moses interceded for the people when speaking directly with the LORD

- Then Moses said, "**I pray Thee, show me Thy glory!**" (33:18)

Listen to the Divine response, "**I Myself will make all My goodness pass before you, and will proclaim the name of the LORD before you; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show compassion on whom I will show compassion**" (33:19)

- This is the verse that Paul uses in Romans 9:15

After listing the chosen seed of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, it may seem strange that Paul skips several hundred years

- He discusses a passage that deals with grave sin on the part of the nation of Israel

Keep in mind Paul's purpose in Romans 9

- The apostle is showing that God's election of nations and individuals cannot be labeled as being unrighteous

Remember when Moses was on the mountain, what was the nation of Israel doing?

- They were asking for an idol to be formed so they could worship it!

How many were killed?

- 3000

Do you think there were more than 3000 people who were guilty?

- You better believe it!

Only the tribe of Levi was able to say that they had not participated in the sin of idolatry

- That leaves 11 other tribes!

How does Paul show that God's election isn't unrighteous?

- The apostle quotes the very words of God, "I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show compassion on whom I will show compassion" (Ex 33:19)

God is the One who decided who will receive mercy

16 So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy.

Out of the example of Israel Paul makes this overarching principle

- God's mercy is not dependent upon man
- God's mercy is dependent upon Himself

Specifically, Paul mentions man's desire ("the man who wills") and man's efforts ("the man who runs")

- God is not entitled or obligated to show mercy based on a person's desire or actions

So what is the basis for God's mercy?

- Himself

17 For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "FOR THIS VERY PURPOSE I RAISED YOU UP, TO DEMONSTRATE MY POWER IN YOU, AND THAT MY NAME MIGHT BE PROCLAIMED THROUGHOUT THE WHOLE EARTH."

Paul reverts immediately back to the Old Testament for further proof that God's election is righteous

- Again, he goes back to Exodus
- In this case, it is Exodus 9:16

Paul switches from speaking of Moses to Pharaoh

- A believer and follower of the LORD
- A staunch antagonist of the LORD

By the time Exodus 9:16 rolls around, Pharaoh has already witnessed six (6) of the ten (10) plagues

- Blood
- Frogs
- Lice
- Flies
- Death of livestock
- Boils

He will also see

- Hail
- Locusts
- Darkness
- Death of firstborn

Pharaoh has refused to allow Israel to go and serve the LORD in the wilderness

- As a man with great power, he has chosen to maintain control over the nation Israel
- After all, they are living under his supervision in Egypt!

After rejecting the first six plagues, the LORD tells Moses to tell Pharaoh, “**But, indeed, for this cause I have allowed you to remain, in order to show you My power, and in order to proclaim My name through all the earth. 17 Still you exalt yourself against My people by not letting them go.**” (Ex 9:16-17)

- The Sovereign LORD reminds Pharaoh who is in control

Specifically, Pharaoh is told of two (2) Divine purposes for his life being spared

- God’s power would be demonstrated
- God’s name would be proclaimed

Paul is continuing to build his case that God is sovereign in the dispensing of His mercy

- God can even use an unbeliever to bring glory to His name!

18 So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires.

Paul repeats a pattern that he used back in verses 15-16

- He cites an OT verse
- Then he cites a principle based on that verse

In verse 17, Paul cited Exodus 9:16

- Here in verse 18, he cites a principle based on that verse

In verse 16 we learned that God’s mercy cannot be guaranteed based on man’s desire or efforts

- It is God’s prerogative alone that determines who will be shown mercy

That is exactly what Paul states clearly in verse 18

- He has mercy on whom He desires
- He hardens whom He desires

Everything depends on God

- His will reigns supreme

As we saw with Jacob and Esau, God had chosen the elect seed prior to their birth

- God made His choice before the foundation of the world

I don't know of any Bible text that insinuates that God hardens anyone who had not first hardened his/her own heart<sup>2</sup>

- Of course God knew the future
- But He didn't initiate the hardening of that person's heart

In the case of Pharaoh, it is written in the book of Exodus that both he and God caused the hardness of his heart

- God simply allowed him to remain in the hardened condition in which he had chosen
- Pharaoh received justice that he deserved rather than mercy which he did not deserve<sup>3</sup>

God's hardening of an individual is similar to His action to give sinners over to their sins, as described in Romans 1

- God takes an action based on what the sinner has already chosen for himself<sup>4</sup>

The first objection dealt with God's righteousness

- Is God still righteous even though He doesn't elect everyone?

The second objection deals with the issue of human responsibility

- It has some pretty serious insinuations that we will examine

## II. Does election destroy human responsibility? (9:19-24)

19 You will say to me then, "Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?"

The objector questions Paul, saying, "Ok Paul. Let's assume that God is sovereign in election. Doesn't that remove human responsibility? How can God hold someone accountable when he doesn't really have a choice?"

If you have been a Christian for very long, you probably have heard this one before

- I hear this objection a lot when the subject of election is discussed

You may have heard this objection phrased differently

- For example, "If God is completely sovereign, then humans are nothing more than robots or puppets. We are just pawns in the hand of God."

Does this objection have validity?

- How does the apostle Paul respond?

20 On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God?

Wow!

- Paul doesn't respond to the objector
- He rebukes the objector!

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<sup>2</sup> Robert H. Mounce, *NAC, Romans*, 200.

<sup>3</sup> Steven A. Kreloff, *God's Plan for Israel*, 38.

<sup>4</sup> Douglas J. Moo, *NICNT, Romans*, 598.

I find it highly instructive that the apostle does not answer the issue of accusing God

- Paul doesn't allow the question to be asked
- Let alone the answer to be given

It is simply improper for the creature to question the Creator in such a manner

- Paul is quick to remind his readers that they are human
- They had better be careful in accusing God

There are certain permissible questions that we can ask of God

- But it is the attitude of the heart that matters

The question here in verse 19 is one that is accusatory

- It is very irreverent toward God

God doesn't have to answer to us for what He does!<sup>5</sup>

- He isn't accountable to us!

The thing molded will not say to the molder, "Why did you make me like this," will it?

Continuing to remind his readers that they are human, finite beings, Paul speaks of them as "the thing molded"

- They are the creature, not the Creator
- They are in submission and subjection to the Creator and Sovereign of the universe

In several Biblical passages, God uses the analogy of the potter and the clay

- God is the Potter
- Humans are the clay

We can't imagine a lump of clay crying out to the Potter, "Hey! What are you doing? I don't want to be a vase; I want to be a flower pot!"

- Clay is at the mercy of the potter

The clay is not in control

- The Potter is in control

Yet here are humans, made from dirt, telling God, in essence, "Hey! What are you doing?"

- It is simply audacious to think that God must answer to us
- On the contrary, it is we who must answer to Him

21 Or does not the potter have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use, and another for common use?

Continuing the theme of the potter and the clay, Paul states a very basic principle in verse 21

- The potter has absolute freedom in deciding what he wants to do with the clay

I have observed a potter forming clay before

- It was at a county fair in North Carolina

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<sup>5</sup> F.F. Bruce, *Tyndale NT Commentaries, Romans*, 184.

The potter picks up a piece of clay

- Then he puts in on the wheel and sets the disc in motion

The potter wets his hands and begins to form the clay

- Undoubtedly, the potter has an idea of what he wants to make out of the clay
- He doesn't simply wait to see what will appear before his eyes

We understand and accept this on a human level

- We don't scream at a potter at the fair, "What do you think you are doing? You didn't even ask the clay what it wanted to be!"

But we have that attitude with God sometimes, don't we?

- We think that He is being unfair by forming the clay as He decides

A human potter decides that a particular piece of clay will be used "for honorable use" or "for common use"

- All clay is the same to the potter
- The issue is how the potter wants to use that clay, for his own purposes

So it is with God

- He is the Potter
- We are the clay

God doesn't ask us what we think is best

- Because we don't know what is best

These verses don't insinuate that God creates the clay in order to be sinful

- If that was the case, then God could be accused of being the author of sin

A potter doesn't create the clay

- He takes the clay as he finds it<sup>6</sup>

22 What if God, although willing to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction?

Verse 22 has been the subject of countless debate and discussion

- The obvious reference to "vessels of wrath" has spurred numerous questions

Does God form certain persons simply for the purpose of showing His wrath?

- Are some people born with absolutely no opportunity for repentance?

Before we try to answer that question, let's agree once again to stay on the tracks of God's Word

- Great danger has come upon the Church when pastors, theologians, and everyday Christians have ventured away from Scripture to human logic in order to answer these hard questions

Let's start with a basic premise that God is the Potter and we are the clay

- Do we agree?

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<sup>6</sup> Kreloff, 41.



Furthermore, God is sovereign

- We are not

Continuing this line of reasoning, we all deserve God's wrath and fury over our status as unbelievers

- So no one among us deserves the opportunity to repent
- So God is not obligated to save anyone

Whether or not God created certain individuals for the sole purpose of showing forth His wrath, I can't say

- I don't think that Romans 9 can objectively support that claim

What does verse 22 teach?

- It teaches us that God is very patient, even toward unbelievers

Paul is clear that God "**endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction**"

- God is patient
- There are certain individuals classified as "**vessels of wrath**"

Listen to these words from Ephesians 2, "**And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, 2 in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience. 3 Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest.**" (2:1-3, emphasis added)

- So who were "**children of wrath**"?
- We all were!

Even those of us who are now children of God were once the "**children of wrath**"

- It was our very nature

So let's state another principle

- Just because a person is now a child of wrath does **not** mean that he/she will always be a child of wrath

Why is God's patience with unbelievers mentioned here?

- Because God could be perfectly just in destroying unbelievers at any time during their unbelief
- Do you agree?

Let's go back to that example from Exodus 32

- Sure, 3000 were judged immediately
- But surely there were more than 3000 who were guilty

Why did God spare them?

- Because the nation of Israel was the special people of God
- The very name of God was tied to the nation of Israel

This is precisely what Moses said to the LORD, "**O LORD, why doth Thine anger burn against Thy people whom Thou hast brought out from the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? 12 Why should the Egyptians speak, saying, 'With evil *intent* He brought them out to kill them in the mountains and to destroy them from the face of the earth'? Turn from Thy burning anger and change Thy mind about *doing* harm to Thy people. 13 Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, Thy servants to whom Thou didst swear by Thyself, and didst say to them, 'I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heavens, and all this land of which I have spoken I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit *it* forever'**" (Ex 32:11-13)

- Moses said, "Remember Your covenant with these people!"

If God were to kill every single guilty person, there would be no one left!

- Even the ones who didn't engage in the idolatry of the golden calf were guilty of other sin

In 2 Peter 3:9, the apostle Peter says, “The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance.”

- Why is God patient with unbelievers?
- Because He doesn't want any to perish, but for all to come to repentance

Paul has already stated in Romans 2:4, “Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance?”

We must make a distinction between God's stated will and His sovereign will

- His stated will is what He has revealed in the pages of Scripture
  - o This is what we know about God
- His sovereign will is what He has not revealed about Himself
  - o This is what we do not know

In 2 Peter 3:9 we are told that God does not wish for any to perish

- Even though we are wretched sinners worthy of His wrath and judgment, He still does not relish when such a sinner dies in his sin

The Lord speaks in the book of Ezekiel, “Do I have any pleasure in the death of the wicked,” declares the Lord GOD, “rather than that he should turn from his ways and live?” (18:23)

- He answers his own question later in the book, “As I live!’ declares the Lord GOD, ‘I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that the wicked turn from his way and live. Turn back, turn back from your evil ways! Why then will you die, O house of Israel?’” (33:11)

Even in God's sovereign election of individuals, He does not take pleasure in the death of the wicked

- He does not rejoice when a sinner goes to hell

But what about the vessels of wrath that Paul is speaking of in Romans 9:22?

- What does he mean by the phrase, “vessels of wrath prepared for destruction”?

Some would argue that Paul is stating the principle of double predestination

- This is the view that God actively chooses the elect to be saved
- But that He also actively chooses the reprobate to be damned

In other words, God makes a deliberate choice to save some and He made a deliberate choice not to save others

- Does Romans 9:22 state this?
- Does the Bible clearly teach a double predestination?

This is a thorny issue

- It depends on how you define the terms

Biblically speaking, God didn't have to spare anyone from judgment

- No one is deserving
- No one is worthy of being saved

In election, God actively selects certain people to be spared from judgment

- Not that they are deserving
- But that God wants to extend His mercy upon them

What about the rest?

- Did God make an active choice to judge them?

With a clear conscience, I can't say that Scripture teaches the doctrine of double predestination

I don't doubt that God could have exhibited a double predestination

- No one was worthy of being spared
- God was merciful in sparing any

Again, I am reasoning exclusively from a Biblical basis

- Not from human reasoning or logic
- Not from a systematic theology perspective

Look at how Paul writes verse 22, “**vessels of wrath prepared for destruction**”

- Who prepared these vessels of wrath for destruction?
- Be careful not to answer too quickly

God could have prepared these vessels for destruction

- Or the individuals could have chosen that path for themselves

This goes back to Pharaoh

- In certain places, God hardened his heart
- In other places, Pharaoh hardened his heart

Do you see the dilemma?

I take great comfort in the fact that election is always viewed with an eye toward mercy and grace

- God is sovereign
- He can do as He wills

It is not our task to untie all the theological knots that exist in our mind

- As Peter said of Paul's writings, “**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.**” (2 Pet 3:16)

Before we move on to verse 23, let me just remind you of a few things

- Absolutely, categorically no one deserves to be spared from God's wrath
- Consequently, God is not obligated to save anyone
- Therefore, the doctrine of election is grounded in God's mercy, grace, and love

**23 And He did so in order that He might make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory.**

Why did God exhibit great patience toward the vessels of wrath?

- I love the answer that Paul gives, “**that He might make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy**”

Did you catch that?

- God was patient so that some “vessels of wrath” would become “vessels of mercy”

God wanted to make known “the riches of His glory”

- God is glorious, especially in the arena of salvation

Psalms 19:1 states, “The heavens are telling of the glory of God; and their expanse is declaring the work of His hands”

- Creation is awe-inspiring

But I would say that creation pales in significance to redemption

- Angels long to look into the details regarding redemption
- They don't have a similar attitude toward creation

Here in verse 23 we are told very clearly that God “prepared beforehand” the vessels of mercy “for glory”

- There was an active choice on the part of God to elect some to be spared

I don't know of any passage in the Bible that says, “Before the foundation of the world God chose some to be reprobate.”

- The language of the Scriptures says, “Before the foundation of the world God chose some to be spared.”

Consider this as well

- It is possible to know if someone is elect
- But it is impossible to know if someone is non-elect

You may think that someone will never come to faith in Christ

- But you don't know that
- Such knowledge is available only to God

I am sure that many people had given up on the thief on the cross

- Perhaps some thought, “He will surely go to hell and be punished for his sins!”

But very near his death, what did Jesus say to this condemned criminal?

- “Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise” (Lk 23:43)

Never, ever write off someone as being beyond the reach of God's grace

- Leave such matters to God!

24 even us, whom He also called, not from among Jews only, but also from among Gentiles.

Who are the “vessels of mercy” of which Paul speaks?

- In a word, Paul says, “us”

It is those who are “called” who are shown mercy

- This takes us back to Romans 8:29-30, “For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the first-born among many brethren; 30 and whom He predestined, these He also called; and whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified.”

Only those whom God “foreknew” would be “predestined,” “called,” “justified,” and “glorified”

- God’s foreknowledge took place before the foundation of the world

Paul adds a final note on the subject of God’s mercy

- The vessels of mercy are “not from Jews only, but also from among Gentiles”

Hallelujah!

- The Gospel “is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek” (Rom 1:16)

Let’s never lose sight of what God has done in our lives

- Let’s never take the cross of Christ for granted

Every one of us here this morning who is a believer and follower of Christ was once an object of God’s wrath

- But God had made a choice in the past to spare us from His wrath

How this should foster a sense of gratitude, forgiveness, hope, and assurance!

- But so often, we grow unthankful, unforgiving, distraught, and doubtful

The doctrine of election should excite us for evangelism!

- That’s right!

God knows those who are His

- But we don’t

So let’s spread the seed of the Gospel far and wide

- God will do the saving of the souls
- We are called to do the spreading of the seed

If you are here this morning and are not a born-again child of God, I want you to listen to me

- If you remain in your unbelief, you will die and spend eternity separated from God in a physical, literal lake of fire

You can’t blame God for your sin

- You can’t blame God for your actions

Every one of us will make eternal decisions this morning after this message

- You will choose to obey and respond appropriately to this message
- Or you will choose to disobey and ignore the need to change

Regardless of what choice you make this morning, you will make a choice

No sinner can stand before God and say, “It’s not fair! You didn’t choose me!”

- Rather, God has given ample opportunities to every person to witness His creation
- Creation screams out in witness of God

To many others, His Gospel message has been clearly proclaimed

- And yet sinners will reject it

“Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all everywhere should repent, 31 because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead.” (Acts 17:30-31)

It is not your responsibility to figure out whether you are elect or not

- It is your responsibility to repent when the Gospel message is proclaimed

When a person goes to hell, it is his own fault

- He/she is only getting what he/she deserves

When a person goes to heaven, it is entire God's mercy

- He/she is receiving something that he/she doesn't deserve<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Alva J. McClain, *Romans: The Gospel of God's Grace*, 183.