

Romans: The Mystery of Righteousness (part 2 of 9)

Is Election Unfair?

Romans 9:14-18

Mark Vroegop

¹⁴ What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means! 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." ¹⁶ So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy. 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." ¹⁸ So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills. Romans 9:14–18 (ESV)

There are some truths in the Bible that are very hard to reconcile. Somewhere, somehow truths that appear to be incompatible are actually not incompatible. They just appear that way because of the limitations of our human understanding.

For example, I remember my pastor talking about this kind of truth category as a teenager, and he used the illustration of a set of train tracks. He compared our understanding to the illusion of tracks that cross in the distance when in fact they do not. The limits of our vision give us an incorrect perception of reality.

My title today highlights this tension very candidly: "Is Election Unfair?" The issue in verses 14-18 and continued next week in verses 19-26 is how to reconcile God's sovereignty and divine freedom on the one hand with our sense of justice or fairness on the other.

J.I. Packer, in his excellent book *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*, calls this tension an antinomy. According to Packer, the word antimony is helpful because it identifies that there are things in the Bible that appear to be contradictions, but they are both in fact true, logical and reasonable. Here is what he says:

"An antinomy exists when a pair of principles stand side by side, seemingly irreconcilable, yet both undeniable. There are cogent reasons for believing each of them; each rests on clear and solid evidence; but it is a mystery to you how they can be squared with each other. You see that each must be true on its own, but you do not see how they can be true together."¹

This is important to keep in mind because we are going to be focusing very intensely on one "rail" of how God works. Romans 9 is probably the most cogent and clear chapter on God's sovereignty and the doctrine of election. But chapter 10 will also say things that emphasize our responsibility to believe and confess that Jesus is Lord (Rom 10:9-10). And Romans 10 says, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

¹ J.I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*, (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, 1961), 24.

So please stick with me over the next few weeks and resist the urge to draw conclusions about all of what I'm saying that this text says based upon one sermon. We need Romans 8 to understand Romans 9, and we need Romans 9 to understand Romans 8. But we also need Romans 10 and 11 to complete the picture.

Last Week: Israel's Unbelief

We started our study last week by identifying the main problem that Paul is addressing in these three chapters. The issue was simply that Israel, the chosen people of God, had rejected their Messiah, and they were cut off from God despite numerous Old Testament promises about a future spiritual renewal where Israel becomes a light to the nations. Additionally (but unstated) is the problem that Romans 8 also contained many promises, so how can someone trust the promises of Romans 8 if the promises regarding Israel have not been fulfilled?

The solution to this problem was that there was always a chosen remnant within Israel (see Romans 9:6). There always is an "Israel within Israel." And, as we will see in Romans 11:26, Paul looks forward to the day when "all Israel" will be saved.

Underneath this solution is the doctrine of election, the teaching of the Bible that God chooses people to be saved apart from any condition of good or evil in them. This is most clearly stated in 9:10-11.

¹⁰ And not only so, but also when Rebekah had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac, ¹¹ though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad—in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of him who calls— Romans 9:10–11 (ESV)

Paul holds up God's sovereign choice of Jacob and not Esau as a prime example of the electing grace of God. And he uses this illustration in order to provide comfort to God's people that the promises of Romans 8 are true because God is personally applying his promises to individual people not just the nation of Israel. In other words, God's promises are applied to those whom he has chosen – an Israel within Israel.

Now if you are reading Romans 9 correctly, there could be a question that is raised regarding the fairness of God in the midst of all of this. Paul anticipates this objection, and then provides three answers.

The Objection: "Is there injustice on God's part?"

In verse 14, Paul once again uses a question and answer format in order to make his point. He has used this method before (e.g., 3:5, 6:1, 7:7) in order to anticipate the objections of people who would be receiving his teaching.

What is the objection? The basic question is whether or not election is fair. Romans 9:11-13 identified that God's choice of some and the rejection of others ("Jacob have I loved, but Esau I hated" – 9:13) was based only upon God's decision / calling (v. 11) and not based upon any works, whether good or bad. Or to state it even more bluntly: God's election of certain individuals was God's decision alone and regardless of any condition in any person.

This notion of election challenges some very fundamental human assumptions. It would be one thing for God to choose between Jacob or Esau after they were born. At least in that case both sons would have been given a chance to choose which way they would go. Or maybe it would be another thing for Paul to say that Jacob or Esau's future orientation to the things of God were known in the womb, and that is how God made his choice. Or Paul could have used another example, maybe even highlighting God's choice of David after rejecting Saul because of God's desire for a man after his own heart. These examples would fit with what is a typical understanding of how the world works. But that is not how Paul talks about election. The text is very clear, and that is why there is an objection raised.

Fairness and justice are very good and biblical ideals. And if you are reading what Paul is saying here in Romans 9, it will likely raise the question about fairness. It is as natural as an 8 year-old child crying "not fair" when he has to go to bed at 8:30 p.m. and his brothers are able to stay up until 10 p.m. Fairness is appropriately built into our humanity.

How can God choose people apart from anything in them? Doesn't that make God unjust? Paul's short answer is: "By no means!"

Three Answers to the Objection of Injustice

Paul flatly rejects any notion that God is unfair or unjust, and then he expounds on that denial in verses 15-18. There is a particular pattern in the text that is helpful to see. In verses 15-16 and 17-18 Paul first cites an Old Testament / Exodus narrative text, and then he follows with a summary statement. The word "for" begins each Old Testament citation and the words "so then" begins each summary. So Paul is once again drawing on the Old Testament to demonstrate the truthfulness of what he saying about God's election.

Now there are three answers given in this text. Two are clear and easily identified, and one embedded in the other two points.

- 1) God is free to be merciful
- 2) God is free to harden
- 3) The display of God's glory (not fairness) is the ultimate goal

Let's see if we can understand these answers.

1) God is Free to be Merciful

The first answer is found in verses 15-16 where Paul establishes that God's sovereignty and supremacy over all things means that he is free to be merciful to whomever and whenever he chooses. In other words, there is no other controlling force, governing law or principle informing God's decision to be merciful other than his rule as God over the created order. God is free because he is God.

To make this point clear, Paul quotes a statement that God made to Moses in Exodus 33:19 – *"I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion."* At first you might think that this passage is just an affirmation of God's mercy and his kindness. It is that, for sure.

But this passage is much more. It is a statement about God's freedom to be merciful and compassionate to whomever he chooses. Exodus 33:19 is about God's *freedom* to be merciful not just his *ability* to be merciful.

There is a reason why Paul chose Exodus 33 as his Old Testament illustration. Let me explain. Exodus 32 records the disastrous failure of Israel with the Golden Calf. At the base of Mt. Sinai, and as God was giving the Law to Moses, the people created a gold idol and they worshipped it as the one true God. Moses broke the Law, and the people are in jeopardy of being destroyed by God (see Ex. 33:1-6). The central problem is that Israel was a "stiff-necked people," and God threatened to not go with the people into the Promised Land (33:3).

In Exodus 33:12-16 Moses appeals to God making the case for the vital necessity of God's presence. Moses does not want to go anywhere with the Lord's presence (33:15), and God reaffirms his promise to go with the people of Israel in verse 17 – "*this very thing that you have spoken {the request for God's presence} I will do...*" Don't miss this. God reaffirmed his commitment to be present with his people even though they are a stiff-necked people.

In response to this promise, Moses asked something from the Lord. He asked to see God's glory. God's answer to Moses is recorded in 33:19, the text that Paul quotes:

¹⁹ And he said, "I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name 'The LORD.' And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. Exodus 33:19 (ESV)

There are two very important things to notice here: 1) Moses asked to see God's glory it was God's character not the character of the people which would guarantee God's continued presence. Moses knew the people and their weakness. His only hope was in God's ability to be God, not in Israel's ability to be faithful. 2) God promised to proclaim his name to Moses as He passed by, and then God said, "I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and I will show mercy on whom I will show mercy." Since God's name is the expression of his character, the additional statement ("I will be gracious...") is equally an expression of his character.

Why does Paul quote Exodus 33:19 in the middle of Romans 9? He does so because Exodus 33:19 is a very powerful Old Testament example of God's promises being rooted in who God is and the freedom that is central to his sovereignty. In other words, the essence of God's name is the sovereign freedom that he has, as God, to be "gracious to whom I will be gracious." There are no other constraints on God other than who He is. The essence of who God is the fact that there is nothing else more foundational than himself, his glory or his name.

Therefore, Paul uses this quotation to answer the objection that God is unjust in choosing Jacob over Esau apart from anything in them. Exodus 33:19 shows us that God's ability to freely administer mercy on whomever he will be merciful is based upon the very essence of who he is. God is free to be merciful based upon his sovereignty because he is God.

That is why Romans 9:16 follows with this implication: ¹⁶ *So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy. Romans 9:16 (ESV).* God's mercy is not dependent upon human will (what humans will decide) or exertion (what humans do), but on God. In other words, underneath the promises of God is divine election and underneath divine election is God's freedom to be God.

I think that this challenges some assumptions that we have as human beings as to what is most foundational in the universe. At first it seems like the choices that humans make or the freedom of our wills or the principle of justice should be at the foundation. But this text is very clear that the foundational reality underneath all other realities is God's freedom to be God. Now it is not that his freedom violates justice or fairness. His sovereign freedom is fair and just, but in ways that we cannot see or comprehend.

What's more, we should read this text and keep in mind that the human race does not deserve any mercy. We should be more stunned that God offers any mercy. Sinful human beings only truly deserve judgment, so to think that any are the recipients of mercy is an unbelievable grace.

Our problem, really, is with our perspective. When an 8-year old child cries "unfair" when he has to go to bed, he only has his perspective in view. He only sees what an 8-year old sees, and he only values what an 8-year old values. Explaining the rationale behind the decision is not really going to help either because he simply cannot see what his parents can see: an 8-year old child is in no position to know what is truly fair when it comes to bed time. There is something more foundational than an 8-year old value-set. The foundation of bedtime is a parent's ability to know what is best. Parental values trump eight year-old values when it comes to bedtime.

As we walk through Romans 9, keep reminding yourself about that illustration. I think it will help you with some of the challenges, not the least of which comes next.

2) God is Free to Harden

Hopefully you can see where I am getting this notion of God's freedom to be merciful based solely upon who He is as God. I say "hopefully" because verses 17-18 push this point even further – uncomfortably so.

It is one thing to say that God is merciful to some and not to others. It is another to wrestle with the fact that God's decision to harden some while being merciful to others. It is easier to think about the mercy side of this equation, but we have to acknowledge that God's glory is revealed in both mercy and in judgment.

Once again Paul turns to an example in the Old Testament and in the context of the Exodus narrative. This time Paul quotes Exodus 9:16, and he uses the example of Pharaoh as someone who was hardened by God. Now you need to know that the book of Exodus says that Pharaoh hardened his heart (Exodus 8:15), but Paul does not make any reference to that point here. Instead the focus is only on the fact that God hardened Pharaoh's heart as Exodus 4:21 and 7:3 clearly say. Both are equally true, but in Romans 9 it is God's activity that we are focusing upon.

Here is what verse 17 says: 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" Romans 9:17 (ESV).* This is direct quote of Exodus 9:16 where Moses delivers that message to Pharaoh after the sixth plague of the boils and before the seventh plague of hail. It is one of the few places where God explains his purpose behind his actions. God aims to demonstrate his power and his supremacy over Pharaoh and the so-called gods of Egypt.

The Exodus story is not just about the deliverance of Israel. It is about God. Here is what God says to Moses about his intentions. Listen for the themes of God's name and redemption through judgment.

⁶ *Say therefore to the people of Israel, 'I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from slavery to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgment. ⁷ I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God, and you shall know that I am the LORD your God, who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. Exodus 6:6-7 (ESV)*

Additionally, God told Moses before the plagues began that Pharaoh's heart would be hardened by God:

²¹ *And the LORD said to Moses, "When you go back to Egypt, see that you do before Pharaoh all the miracles that I have put in your power. But I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go. Exodus 4:21 (ESV)*

Romans 9:17 summarizes God's supremacy over Pharaoh by stating that God is not just more powerful than Pharaoh. God has raised Pharaoh up in order to display his power over him. It is not that Pharaoh and God are equals with the exception of God being stronger than him. This text shows us that God is powerful in categories that are not even possible for Pharaoh. God's supremacy, freedom, and power are other worldly. God's power is mind-blowing. He not only defeated Pharaoh; he raised him up to show his power through him.

This argument from God's supremacy is the same thing that we find in the book of Job. After Job's suffering, which came at the hands of Satan but by permission of God (Job 1-2), God addresses Job's complaint by highlighting his supremacy over everything. In Job 38-41 God says things like, "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?" (38:4), and "Have you commanded the morning since your days began?" God talks to Job this way because there are activities in God's plan that are only explained by the fact that "God is God."

The key to understanding all of this is the phrase "that I might show my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth." This is the same rationale that we observed when I came to God's mercy. Namely, that the foundation of the universe is not fairness or justice as we would define it. But the foundational purposes and the ultimate justification for what God does is the display of his name. In other words, the center of the center of everything is God and his glory.

I wish that this text buttoned everything up in a way that was less jarring. But I do not know any other way to read it, especially considering the conclusion that Paul draws in 9:18 – ¹⁸ *So then he has mercy*

on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills." There can be no mercy unless there is judgment, and God's is so free in and of himself that he can dispense mercy or hardening without any conditions outside of himself. There is no force, no person, no thing, and no power in the universe that God is beholden to other than himself. The "Who?" question is more foundational than the "Why?" question. The glory of God, free from any other constraints, is the essence of what it means for God to be God.

God is free to have mercy. And he is free to harden. Now this creates a real tension for us, and that is why verse 19 says, "Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?" And we will unpack how Paul answers that question next week.

3) The display of God's glory (not fairness) is the ultimate goal

Now this is not a new point but merely a summation of what I have been saying through out this message, but it is critical to understand. It is one of the keys to getting this passage right.

Remember that this entire discussion began with a question about God's justice, and I have argued that our understanding of justice, what is fair, and what is right is not the foundational value in the universe. Instead, the glory of God is the foundation, and there is nothing in the universe that is more valuable than his glory. Therefore, God's righteousness and justice are directly connected to his glory.

We will talk about this more next week, but here is a succinct way to summarize this truth: "God's righteousness is essentially his unswerving allegiance to his own name - his own glory. God is righteous to the degree that he upholds and displays the honor of his name. He is righteous when he values most what is most valuable, and what is most valuable is his own glory."²

Sin is the valuing of something other than God's glory, and righteousness is the display of God's glory. This is exactly what Romans 3 taught us previously, but now you may see that text differently. Look at Romans 3:23-26 through this lens of God's righteousness as the display of his glory:

*²³ for all have sinned and fall short of **the glory of God**,²⁴ and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,²⁵ whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was **to show God's righteousness**, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins.²⁶ **It was to show his righteousness** at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. Romans 3:23–26 (ESV)*

Remember what God said about Pharaoh? "*For this purpose I have raised you up to that **I might show my power in you and that my name {glory} might be proclaimed in all the earth**" (Rom 9:17). The parallels are so clear!*

Is election unfair? Not in the slightest if we understand that the most valuable thing in the universe is the glory of God, and anything – mercy or judgment – that displays God's glory is truly righteous. God is free and his glory is supremely valuable. That is what makes him God, and that is why election is not unfair.

² <http://www.desiringgod.org/sermons/the-fame-of-his-name-and-the-freedom-of-mercy>

Now What?

We have talked about a lot this morning, and there are many tensions that this text creates. Some of you have never thought about God like Romans 9 suggests, and I'm sure that you have many questions. But let me bring you back to some big picture applications:

- 1) The sovereignty of God is a great comfort.** In the midst of all the tensions and challenging implications of this truth, remember that Paul is talking about this in order to reassure us that God rules over everything. His promises to his people are planted in the soil of who he is as God.
- 2) The sovereignty of God does not negate the call for you to believe.** Romans 10 will contain important and familiar passages calling us to believe and to confess with one's mouth (Rom. 10:9-10). And Paul will say "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Rom. 10:13). So this Romans 9 must not make you shirk back in coming to faith in Christ nor make you less enthusiastic about evangelism nor make you stop praying for lost loved ones. God's sovereignty and human responsibility are both clearly taught in the Scriptures, and they do not contradict one another.
- 3) The sovereignty of God in election put God in his place and we in ours.** This text calls us to renew our passion to treasure God's glory as what is most valuable in the universe, to set our hearts on knowing him, and to repent of the ways that we value anything as more fulfilling than him. What's more, this text shows us the disgusting reality of our pride, the foolishness of any boasting, and how ridiculous it is to make much of ourselves.

Romans 9 challenges our understanding of ourselves, what we mean by fairness, and what our vision of God really is. It is a text that is meant to leave us stunned, humbled, and awed. It is a text that leads us to understand why Paul ended Romans 11 with this summary:

³⁴ "For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?" ³⁵ "Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?" ³⁶ For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen. Romans 11:34-36 (ESV)

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