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IS GOD UNFAIR?

Romans 9:14-18

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Romans Lesson 59

Is God Unfair? Romans 9:14-18

If you are a parent you have heard the repeated refrain from your children, "That's not fair!" And when you heard that complaint you responded, "Life's not fair!" But we all *want* it to be fair! And we want God to be fair—or so we think!

In Romans 9:11-13 Paul wrote, "For though the twins were not yet born and had not done anything good or bad, so that God's purpose according to His choice would stand, not because of works but because of Him who calls, it was said to her, 'The older will serve the younger.' Just as it is written, 'Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.'" Paul knew that if we were tracking with him, we would respond, "That's not fair!"

As I pointed out last time, if Paul was saying that God made His decision to bless Jacob and reject Esau based on the fact that God foresaw that Jacob would decide to trust in God, but Esau would reject God, no one would have thought to accuse God of being unfair. That's perfectly fair. There's no problem with that.

But, clearly, that's *not* what Paul meant. He goes out of his way to make it clear that God chose Jacob and rejected Esau apart from anything that they would do, "so that His purpose according to election would stand." But we don't like that! We want things to be equal and fair. We want everyone to have an equal shot at salvation and we want that salvation to be linked in some small way to something that we do. We want to be able say, "I'm saved because I made a decision by my own free will to believe in Jesus!" Then I can take some credit for my wise decision and my faith.

Also, note that even though Paul knew that his line of reasoning would provoke objections, he does not soften it in any way to avoid controversy, but instead he asserts it even more strongly (see John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries* [Baker], pp. 354-356). Some pastors, to avoid controversy, will not teach the doctrine of election. They know that it upsets people, so they soften it or explain it in a way that makes God seem completely fair. But Paul didn't do that!

He raises the objections that he knows we will have and then rather than softening his point, he strengthens it (9:16, 18).

Why did he do that? First, he did it because the Holy Spirit inspired him to do it. Paul's epistles are the inspired Word of God, given to him for our spiritual understanding and profit. Even though some of his writings are hard to understand and the untaught and unstable distort them, they are Scripture, given by the Spirit to make us wise unto salvation (2 Pet. 3:16; 2 Tim. 3:15-17).

Second, Paul wrote these things because they are in line with the rest of Scripture. If you have a Bible that puts Old Testament quotations in small caps, you can easily see that Paul builds his argument in Romans 9 on the Old Testament. He cites it in 9:7, 9, 12, 13, 15, 17, 25-26, 27-29, & 33. Furthermore, Paul believed that what Scripture says, God says. In 9:17, he says, "For the Scripture says to Pharaoh..." He then quotes from Exodus 9:16, which is actually God speaking to Moses. Moses had not yet written the Torah (the first five books of the OT). But what God said to Moses is what Scripture said to Pharaoh. Scripture is authoritative because it is God speaking to us.

So Romans 9 does not consist of the opinions of the apostle Paul, which we are free to accept if we agree or ignore if we disagree. Romans 9 is God speaking to us with His authority through Paul to tell us what we need to know to be assured about our salvation, which is Paul's main subject in the context. How can we know that God's promise of salvation will not fail? Paul's answer is that our salvation is secure because it does not depend on us, but rather on God's purpose according to election. As the sovereign of the universe, God always accomplishes what He purposes to do. He chooses some for salvation apart from anything that they do, and He rejects others apart from anything they do (9:11, 13). We need to submit joyfully to this truth because it is God's authoritative revelation of Himself.

But Paul knew that some would still sputter, "But that's not fair!" So he teaches here:

As the righteous Sovereign over all, God is not unjust to grant mercy to some and to harden others,
because all deserve His judgment.

The structure of this paragraph is: First (9:14), Paul raises and responds vigorously to the objection that God may be unjust to choose some and harden others. Then (9:15), he cites Exodus 33:19 to support his earlier statement (9:13, quoting God), "Jacob I loved." He concludes (9:16), "So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy." Next (9:17), he cites Exodus 9:16 about God's purpose with Pharaoh to support his earlier statements (9:11, 13), "so that God's purpose according to election would stand," and, "Esau I hated."

Paul's concluding summary (9:18), "So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires," supports 9:13-14, that God is not unjust to love one man and to keep his wrath on another. On the basis of justice, some (like Esau and Pharaoh) receive judgment. On the basis of mercy, others (like Jacob) are the objects of love and salvation. But no one gets injustice, because all deserve judgment. With that as an overview, let's work through Paul's reasoning:

1. As the righteous Sovereign over all, it is outrageous to think that God could treat anyone unjustly (9:14).

Paul is responding to what he knew many would think about his statement in 9:13 that God loved Jacob and hated Esau: "What shall we say then? There is no injustice with God, is there? May it never be!" Paul is saying that the very question is outrageous! By virtue of who He is, God cannot possibly be unjust (Gen. 18:25). Calvin comments (p. 354), "Monstrous surely is the madness of the human mind, that it is more disposed to charge God with unrighteousness than to blame itself for blindness."

James Boice (*Romans: God and History* [Baker], 3:1071) points out, "Even if God should save people on the basis of something in them—faith, good works, or whatever—this would actually be injustice, since people's backgrounds are unequal." Due to their natural temperament or their being raised in a believing family, or whatever, it's easier for some to be more trusting. And for the same reasons, it's easier for some to be good, moral people. If God's election were based on these factors, it would not be fair to those who were raised in a violent, immoral, or pagan background.

Also, to raise the question of fairness presupposes that you have rights and that your rights are being violated. If you have no rights, then you have no basis to claim that someone is treating you unfairly. Because we all have sinned without excuse thousands of times against God's holy standards, we have no right to accuse Him of being unjust if He did not grant us mercy and salvation. His justice would only bring us what we deserved.

Jesus illustrated this truth with a parable (Matt. 20:1-16). Early in the morning, a landowner went into the marketplace and hired some workers for his vineyard, agreeing to pay them a denarius for their day's labor. Midmorning, he went back and hired more workers, agreeing to pay them whatever was right. He did the same at noon and at mid-afternoon. Then, an hour before sunset, he hired more workers.

When evening came, he called the workers and began to pay them, beginning with the last group. Even though they had only worked one hour, he paid them a denarius. Those who had been hired first and had worked all day thought that they would receive more. But they only received a denarius. So they grumbled against the landowner for being unfair. But he told them, "I paid you what we agreed on. Take your wages and go. But I'm free to be generous to these last workers if I want to."

The landowner would have been unfair if he had not given the first group what they deserved. They agreed to a denarius; he paid them a denarius. That's fair. The last group received grace, which the owner was free to give. As sinners, Jacob and Esau both deserved God's wrath. Esau received wrath; Jacob got mercy. There is no unfairness on God's part for treating them in that way.

2. As the righteous Sovereign over all, God is free to show mercy to whomever He wishes (9:15-16).

In 9:15 Paul cites Exodus 33:19 to explain why ("For") God is not unjust to show mercy, while 9:16 draws the conclusion: "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 does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs but on God who has mercy."

At first, the quote from Exodus 33 does not sound like an explanation, but rather just a restatement of the problem, namely, that God is arbitrary and unfair. So we need to understand the context in which God spoke these words to Moses. He had gone up on the mountain to receive the Ten Commandments. While he was there, the people grew restless and asked Aaron to make the golden calf, which they all worshiped. They were all guilty of gross idolatry. After Moses destroyed the golden calf and executed judgment on the leaders, he went back up the mountain to make atonement for their sin (Exod. 32:30). In that context, Moses (like Paul in Romans 9:3) prayed that if God would not forgive the people, then He could blot Moses out of His book. God replied that He would punish those who had sinned.

Moses continued to plead with God for His presence to go with them. Then Moses boldly asked God to show him His glory (Exod. 33:18). God replied (Exod. 33:19), "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."

To paraphrase, God is telling Moses, "This is the essence of who I am (My name). My glory is displayed by My freedom to show mercy and compassion to whomever I wish. I am not obligated to show mercy to any, because all have sinned and justly deserve My judgment. But I am free to show My glory both by giving mercy to some and by withholding it from others. That is who I am." Thomas Schreiner (*Romans* [Baker], p. 507) explains,

No human being deserves his mercy. The choice of Isaac over Ishmael and Jacob over Esau must be construed as a merciful one. In other words, the stunning thing for Paul was not that God rejected Ishmael and Esau but that he chose Isaac and Jacob, for they did not deserve to be included in his merciful and gracious purposes. Human beings are apt to criticize God for excluding anyone, but this betrays a theology that views salvation as something God "ought" to bestow on all equally... What is fundamental for God is the revelation of his glory and the proclamation of his name, and he accomplishes this by showing mercy and by withholding it. God's

righteousness is upheld because he manifests it by revealing his glory both in saving and in judging.

There is only a slight difference, if any, between *mercy* and *compassion*. *Compassion* focuses on the feelings of sympathy for those in misery, while *mercy* is the action to relieve their misery. Both words point to the underlying fact that all have sinned and thus all deserve judgment. If you want to talk about justice, we all justly deserve condemnation. But God doesn't give everyone what they deserve. To some, He shows mercy and compassion, according to His will, not according to anything that sinners merit or deserve.

Paul reinforces this by his conclusion (9:16), "So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy." It refers to "God's bestowal of mercy" (Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* [Eerdmans], p. 593). It does not depend on a man's decision to accept Jesus or on human effort ("runs"). Rather, it depends on God who has mercy. Schreiner comments (508), "This verse excludes in the clearest possible terms the notion that free will is the fundamental factor in divine election." Paul is saying that God freely determines according to the counsel of His own will those to whom He shows mercy.

Also, verse 16 excludes the idea that we determine our salvation by exercising faith that originates in us. As Martyn Lloyd-Jones explains (*Romans: God's Sovereign Purpose* [Zondervan], p. 161), if man can originate faith, then it's something that *he* can do. It becomes a work that merits the reward of salvation. If that were so, then no one would ever bring the charge that God is unfair or unjust: Jacob believed and God rewarded him with salvation; Esau did not believe and was judged. That's fair! But Paul is asserting that the difference between those two men was not anything that they did or didn't do. The difference was that God showed mercy to one, but withheld it from the other. As the Sovereign and righteous God, He is free to do that. Sinners have no claim against Him.

But some contend that God's love demands that He show mercy to all equally. Dave Hunt brazenly states (in *Debating Calvinism* [Multnomah], by Dave Hunt & James White, p. 260, italics his), "It is not loving—period—for God to damn for eternity *anyone* He *could* save." He compares this (p. 280) to a doctor who has a cure for a plague, but only gives it to a select group. His contention as-

sumes that God is not able to save anyone. He'd like to save everyone, but because of man's "free will," God can't pull it off. But Paul's next two verses soundly refute the assertion that God *would* save everyone if only He *could*:

3. As the righteous Sovereign over all, God is free to harden whom He wishes, to display His glory (9:17-18).

Verse 17 defends God's righteousness in withholding mercy from some, according to His purpose, as He did with Esau (9:11, 13): "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.'" Then (9:18) Paul draws a conclusion that sums up the entire discussion: "So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires." To point out the obvious, Paul does *not* say, "He has mercy on whoever believes in Him and He hardens whoever does not believe in Him." That would stand Paul's meaning on its head.

Again, we're not dealing here with Paul's opinions, but with what *Scripture* says, which is what *God* says. As such, we need to submit to it *joyfully* (as I explained last week), because it reveals something about God's perfection as God that we need to know. Paul is saying that God is not unjust to raise up a proud sinner on the stage of world history and use him for God's greater purpose of demonstrating His power and causing His name to be widely proclaimed. God did that by hardening Pharaoh's heart and bringing the plagues on Egypt, culminating in the destruction of Pharaoh and his army as they pursued Israel across the divided Red Sea.

God could have chosen to be merciful to Pharaoh and the Egyptians by softening their hearts and by telling them about the need to put the blood on their doorposts to escape the wrath of the destroying angel, who killed all their firstborn. But God chose rather to harden Pharaoh's heart for the greater purpose of displaying God's glory in power and judgment, so that His fame would spread throughout the earth. As the righteous Sovereign over all, God has the freedom to harden sinners for His greater purpose of displaying His glory and power in righteous judgment.

Some try to get God off the hook by arguing that God only hardened Pharaoh's heart *after* Pharaoh hardened his own heart.

But Schreiner (p. 510) counters, "A careful analysis of the OT text also reveals that God's hardening of Pharaoh precedes and undergirds Pharaoh's self-hardening ... and it is an imposition on the text to conclude that God's hardening is a response to the hardening of human beings." God announces twice to Moses in advance that He will harden Pharaoh's heart; it is only *after* this that the account says that Pharaoh hardened his own heart (Exod. 4:21; 7:3; 8:15; 11:10).

This does not mean that God coerced or caused Pharaoh to sin. God does not cause sin (Hab. 1:13; 1 John 1:5). Pharaoh was responsible for his own sin (James 1:13). But the Bible has many examples of God using evil people and even Satan himself to accomplish God's sovereign purpose for His glory (e.g., Gen. 45:5; 50:20; 1 Kings 22:19-23; Acts 4:27-28). All He has to do is to withdraw His restraint and leave sinners to their own sin (Rom. 1:24, 26, 28). When He is through using these sinners for His purposes, He justly judges them for their sin (2 Thess. 2:11-12).

But it is blasphemy to accuse God of being unloving because He did not save them all! Everyone justly deserves God's judgment because of sin. He is not unjust to grant mercy to some to display the glory of His grace, and to harden others to display the glory of His righteous judgment (Rom. 9:22-23).

Conclusion

I heard R. C. Sproul (at the 2004 Shepherd's Conference) tell about the time when he taught a freshman Old Testament class of 250 students at a Christian college. He told them in the first class that there would be three papers: The first would be due on September 30th; the second on October 30th; and the third on November 30th.

On September 30th, he received 225 papers, while 25 students came to him begging for mercy: "Please, Dr. Sproul, we didn't budget our time wisely. We're still getting used to the rigors of college. We'll do better next time. Please, don't give us an 'F.' Can we have just a little more time?" Dr. Sproul said, "Okay, you have two days to get those papers in."

"Oh, thank you, thank you, Dr. Sproul!"

On October 30th, he received 200 papers. Fifty students were late. They pled, "Please, Dr. Sproul. We had midterms. We had homecoming. We had all sorts of other pressures on us. Please, give us one more chance." He said, "All right, you have two more days." The students were literally singing, "We love you, Professor Sproul." He was the hero on campus.

On November 30th, 150 turned in their term papers on time. One hundred students were late. "Where are your term papers?" he asked. "Don't worry about it, Dr. Sproul. We'll get them to you soon." He got out his grade book: "Johnson, your paper is late. F!"

"But that's not fair!"

"Harrison, F!"

"That's not fair!"

"Is it justice that you want?"

"Yes!"

"All right. You were late on your paper last month. I'm changing your grade on that one to F. Does anyone else want justice?"

Dr. Sproul explains, "If we experience grace once, we're grateful. If we experience it twice, we're a bit jaded about it. The third time, we expect and demand it. If God doesn't choose me, then there's something wrong with Him, not with me!" But grace, by definition, is something God is *not* required to give. It's undeserved. Rather than asking, "Why not everyone?" we should ask, "Why me?"

God forbid, but if any of you are damned on judgment day, you will not be able to blame God by saying, "It's not fair! You didn't choose me!" Rather, God will be glorified in judging you for your sin. On the other hand, if you are saved, you won't be able to boast in your faith, but only in God's grace. If you have not yet received God's abundant mercy, then cry out like the publican in Jesus' parable (Luke 18:13), "God, be merciful to me, the sinner!"

Application Questions

1. Does God's love demand that He save everyone? Why/why not? Use Scripture to support your answer.
2. How would you answer someone who accused God of being arbitrary in His choice of some and rejection of others?
3. Will God grant mercy to all who plead for it or does He withhold it from some who want it? Cite Scripture.
4. How would you respond to someone who said, "I guess I'm just not one of the elect?"

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