



## Is This Your God? (Part 2)

### Romans 9:19-24

1. The Problem (verses 1-6a) - Israel doesn't believe.
2. The Solution (verses 6b-13) - Salvation depends on God's choice.
3. The Objections (verses 14-24) - God isn't fair.

Objection #1 (verses 14-18)

Objection #2 (verses 19-24)

1. **He is the Infinite and You are the Finite (verse 20a).**
2. **He is the Potter and You are the Clay (verse 20b-21).**
3. **He has a Purpose and You have a Part in it (verses 22-24).**

Last week, we went through the first half of Romans 9 which is a wonderful chapter. Today, I plan on finishing the study that we began last week. So let's turn our Bibles once again to Romans 9. Again, we are on a slight detour from the exposition of the book of Matthew. Jesus brought it up an important issue at the end of Matthew 11 which has caused us to take a close look at the doctrines of the sovereignty of God and the responsibility of man.

I decided to look closely at these doctrines because I am saddened by the view of God that runs loose across many churches in our day. Many proclaim a sentimental, inspiration, Hallmark-card sort of God. They see Him as a God who comes in helpful little phrases and sayings. Many proclaim a great, loving, compassionate God who is in dreadful need of your help to build His kingdom for Him as if He is incapable of doing it Himself. Many proclaim a great, loving, compassionate God who has "granted the human race a measure of self-determination, [which] he would be hard pressed to steamroller it when people misuse it" (Gracia Burnham, *In the Presence of My Enemies*, p. 304). There is a distortion in each of these views of God, which misrepresents the God of the Bible.

It is interesting to me that in times of distress, people are willing to tell others and to believe lies (about God and about salvation) if they think that they will be helped by it. Funerals are often a bastion of wrong theology. Last week, we were in Romans 9, which puts forth our God as entirely in control of everything, including our salvation. I believe that we need to trust in God, as He has revealed Himself, rather than a God that we have fabricated in our own minds, especially in times of distress. When your teenage child dies (as happened to a friend of ours this past week), will you find comfort in a God who couldn't save your child? Or will you find comfort in a God, who has a greater purpose for you and your child? When you get cancer (as several in this room have experienced), what will sustain you? A God who wants to heal you, but can't? Or a God who can heal, but, in His sovereign pleasure, has brought this affliction upon you? When your finances are tight, where will you turn? To a God who is poor and desperate? Or, to a God who owns the cattle on a thousand hills. When people slander you for your faith in God, what will help you? A God who really wishes that people wouldn't say such things? Or, a God who is patient to deal out His retribution upon them someday? When you are in depression and struggling with your faith, what will sustain you? Your momentary choice to believe in Jesus? Or, God's choice and preparation of you as a vessel of mercy? You will find help with a proper view of God.

I feel a burden to communicate to you the God of the Bible. An improper understanding of God won't help us build this church. It won't help us when difficulties come. And it won't help us proclaim His name to those who need Him most. There is no better place for us to look at these things than Romans 9.

We began by looking at ...

#### 1. The Problem (verses 1-6a) - Israel doesn't believe.

I am telling the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit, that I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed, [separated] from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh, who are Israelites, to whom belongs the adoption as sons and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the Law and the [temple] service and the promises, whose are the fathers, and from whom is the Christ according to the flesh, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen. (Rom. 9:1-5)

The fact that Israel is lost in their sins is a huge theological problem for Paul. Israel was God's covenant people. It was with Israel that God had made His promises. It was from Israel that the Christ came. Yet, when Israel failed to receive their Messiah, it cast a doubt upon the credibility of God and His words of promise to the Israelites. Perhaps you remember the story of Moses, when the LORD was ready to destroy Israel for their stubborn and rebellious hearts, and raise up from Moses a nation "greater and mightier than they" (Num. 14:12). Yet, Moses knowing what was at stake, said to the LORD,

"Then the Egyptians will hear of it, for by Your strength You brought up this people from their midst, and they will tell it to the inhabitants of this land. They have heard that You, O LORD, are in the midst of this people, for You, O LORD, are seen eye to eye, while Your cloud stands over them; and You go before them in a pillar of cloud by day and in a pillar of fire by night. Now if You slay this people as one man, then the nations who have heard of Thy fame will say, 'Because the LORD

could not bring this people into the land which He promised them by oath, therefore He slaughtered them in the wilderness." (Num. 14:13-16)

Moses was concerned with the reputation of God among the Egyptians. If God destroyed Israel in the wilderness, it would give the other nations reason to blaspheme God as a weak God, who couldn't sustain His people. This is the exact same concern for Paul. Paul is concerned for the reputation of God and His word. Israel has received mighty promises, but is currently in unbelief. This is why Paul says in verse 6a,

But [it is] not as though the word of God has failed. (Rom. 9:6a)

As I told you last week, this verse is the key thought in chapters 9 through 11 of Romans. If you write in your Bible, I encourage you to highlight this verse somehow. Draw a box around it, put asterisks beside it, draw an arrow to the side of this verse, or write a short note in the margin explaining this. I have written in my Bible beside this verse, "the key to Rom. 9-11 - if God's word fails, then chapter 8 has no foundation!"

The problem Paul faces is this: it appears as if the word of God has failed. Paul spends Romans chapters 9 through 11 defending God from the accusations that He has failed in His pursuit of Israel. In the next 8 verses, Paul gives...

## 2. The Solution (verses 6b-13) - Salvation depends on God's choice.

But [it is] not as though the word of God has failed. For they are not all Israel who are [descended] from Israel; neither are they all children because they are Abraham's descendants, but: "THROUGH ISAAC YOUR DESCENDANTS WILL BE NAMED." That is, it is not the children of the flesh who are children of God, but the children of the promise are regarded as descendants. For this is a word of promise: "AT THIS TIME I WILL COME, AND SARAH SHALL HAVE A SON." And not only this, but there was Rebekah also, when she had conceived [twins] by one man, our father Isaac; for though [the twins] were not yet born, and had not done anything good or bad, in order that God's purpose according to [His] choice might 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 used two Old Testament illustrations to demonstrate that salvation depends only upon God's choice. Paul shows it does not depend upon being born of the right parents or doing the right things. Perhaps the clearest verse in this section is verse 11, "...for though [the twins] were not yet born, and had not done anything good or bad, in order that God's purpose according to [His] choice might stand, not because of works, but because of Him who calls. (Rom. 9:11)

Salvation doesn't depend upon having the right mother, having the right father, or doing good things. Nor does salvation depend upon God's looking down through the corridors of time to see who would believe. It isn't foreseen faith. It isn't foreseen choice. It isn't foreseen goodness or badness. Paul said that it is "that God's purpose according to election might stand" (verse 11). Salvation is founded upon God's choice. In other words, **God unconditionally elects to salvation**. There are no conditions in a man that compel God to choose. Faith has its place in the plan of salvation. Faith is like the walls of a house that are built upon the foundation of unconditional election.

So, Paul first solves the problem of why Israel doesn't believe by arguing that salvation depends on God's choice. The assumption is that God hasn't chosen for Israel to believe in Jesus. Paul picks up this theme beginning in verse 24. However there were a few objections that he needed to answer first.

## 3. The Objections (verses 14-24) - God isn't fair.

Paul deals with two objections. We see the first objection come up in verse 14, "What shall we say then? There is no injustice with God, is there? May it never be!" The answer comes in the next four verses...

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. 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." So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires. (Rom. 9:14-24)

Paul answers those who object to God's fairness by saying that God will be God! God has the freedom to be merciful to whomever He desires. God has the freedom to harden whomever He desires. This is what it means to be God. I've heard it said that "if God is not sovereign over all, then God is not sovereign at all!" If he's not sovereign over all, he's not God. In the freedom of God, He has determined to be merciful to Gentiles. In Romans 11:11, Paul writes, "Salvation has come to the Gentiles." In the freedom of God, He has determined to harden the Jews. In Romans 11:25, Paul writes, "A partial hardening has happened to Israel." God is in control of salvation and has softened the Gentiles, but hardened the Jews for a time. There will be a day when God will pour out His Spirit upon Israel and "all Israel will be saved" (Rom. 11:26). But that was not the case in Paul's day, and that is not the case today. This is where we ended up last week. We got through two and a half points in our message last week: (1) The Problem; (2) The Solution; (3) The Objections. This morning, we will look at Objection #2. It is important enough for us to spend our whole time on it this morning. In some ways, I suppose, you will get only half a sermon this morning.

This past week, I spent with a family from this church at Gitche Gumee Bible Camp in upper Michigan. We had a delightful time. If you would like to take a week's vacation and attend next year, I would wholeheartedly encourage you. It was a very spiritually focussed time as well, as we had 45 minutes in our schedule allotted for family devotions. Vacations are often difficult times to keep up on Bible reading, but the camp encouraged it. Additionally we heard two sermons every day (one in the morning and one at night). I never realized before how important it was for preachers to have alliterations (i.e. every point starting with the same letter). In every sermon we heard, each of the points started with the same letter. Apparently many people like this sort of thing. I noticed that my outline didn't do this. So, if ever I find myself preaching at Gitche Gumee Bible Camp, I came up with several different outlines that I might use. If you like alliterations, you can take your pick of which one you would like to use.

<b>1. The Problem</b>	<b>1. The Situation</b>	<b>1. The Omission</b>
<b>2. The Pronouncement</b>	<b>2. The Solution</b>	<b>2. The Ordination</b>
<b>3. The Protests</b>	<b>3. The Satisfaction</b>	<b>3. The Objection</b>

Let's get back to the subjection at hand: the second objection (verses 19-24). Paul writes, ...

"You will say to me then, 'Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?'" (Rom. 9:19)

Here is the thought: If God is the one who hardens whom He hardens (in accordance with verse 18), then how can God find fault in the one whom He condemns, since He was the one who hardened the condemned person in the first place? After all, "who resists His will"? (verse 19). This is essentially the same objection that came about in verse 14. They are different words, but the thought is the same: "God isn't fair!" Now, why would Paul bring up the same objection? Because he knows that people won't be satisfied with the first answer He gave. Think about what Paul has said. In verse 11, Paul had clearly communicated that God elects unconditionally. He has said that Salvation is totally dependent upon God's choice. The objection comes, "This isn't fair! I thought that God was fair!" (the essence of verse 14). In answer to this objection, notice that Paul says that God elects unconditionally. Three times he states the same thing:

Verse 15 - "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion."

Verse 16 - "It does not depend on the man who will or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy."

Verse 18 - "He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desire."

Paul seems to have ignored the crux of the objection. The objection was, "Is God unjust because He elects unconditionally?" (i.e. verse 11). Paul answers the objection by saying that God elects unconditionally (verses 15-18). In other words, Paul answered the objection with a restatement of what led to the objection in the first place. So, it makes sense that the same objection would come up in verse 19, "Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?"

Paul gives a three-fold response to these questions. (Though I may be preaching only half a sermon, you still will get your full dosage of three points this morning). Before we look at these response to this question, let me note by way of parentheses that of any place for Paul to say, "He can find fault with Pharaoh, because Pharaoh hardened his own heart first" it is here. Or, Paul could have said, "He can find fault with us because we first resist Him before He ever resists us." But, Paul didn't seek to vindicate God by any of these arguments, because this hasn't been his point. Paul's argument hinges upon God's choice of mercy or hardening, irrespective of our actions. Romans 9 says that God is completely free to have mercy and harden according to His choice, not our first resisting Him. Verse 18, says, "He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires" (Rom. 8:18).

1. He is the Infinite and You are the Finite (verse 20a).

Paul simply says, "On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God?" (verse 20). At this point, we are to be humbled and placed in our finiteness. There are things that God knows and understands and has in His total control, of which we, as His creatures simply cannot grasp. We cannot understand them. We cannot object to them. We are ignorant. In Psalm 139, David writes,

"O LORD, Thou hast searched me and known me. Thou dost know when I sit down and when I rise up; Thou dost understand my thought from afar. Thou dost scrutinize my path and my lying down, And art intimately acquainted with all my ways. Even before there is a word on my tongue, Behold, O LORD, Thou dost know it all. Thou hast enclosed me behind and before, And laid Thy hand upon me. *Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; It is too high, I cannot attain to it.*" (Psalm 139:1-6)

With these matters, we need to resolve ourselves that God knows far more than we do. God is far wiser than we are. God has created and established our world in such a way that we, as His creatures, are limited in our understanding. God is God. He is to be worshipped. He is to be trusted. He is to be believed. He is to be treasured.

How can God have mercy upon whom He will have mercy and harden whom He will harden, and yet still be fair in His condemnation of some and salvation of others? We must be content with the fact that the answer to these questions is in God's hands and not in ours. We must be content with the fact that God is faithful and trustworthy in these matters. Were the whole truth known, we would find God to be perfectly righteous in His dealings. As I said earlier, I spent the week at Gitche Gumee Bible Camp. One afternoon we went on a bus trip and the director was talking about the camp and the troubles that it has faced with the community. One issue came up about why they were tax-exempt. The city was thinking of getting more income. The director was able to stand up at a city council meeting and explain why they are a religious, non-profit organization and entitled to tax-exemption. He described the spiritual focus of the camp by saying that "We schedule every time for the families who attend to have family devotions. We also have two church services every day. All who attend our camp are

required to attend these services. These meetings are open to the public. We have a spiritual focus to our camp. We are a religious organization. In fact, in our summer, we have more services than most churches have all year." One man later commented to him, "Thanks, that helps me to understand." By explaining the details of the camp, the director was able to help people understand the camp's entitlement to tax-exemption. Now if God were to stand and explain His fairness in these matters of election and responsibility, and if we were capable of understanding such things, we would at last be able to say to God, "Thanks, now I understand." But, as His creatures, God has chosen to hide these things from us. We have no right to respond with any sort of accusatory tone in our voice. We are called to trust Him.

There is an earthly parallel to these things. Those of you who are parents know what it is like to have one of your children ask you for something. Perhaps when your children were small, they wanted to have some ice-cream for breakfast. Perhaps when your children were older, they wanted to have a sleep over at a friend's house. Perhaps when your children were older still, they were interested in some activity that could lead easily to sin. And your response has been, "No, you can't do that." Often times, there comes a "Why can't I do that?" You may explain why in a sentence or two. Then, there comes another "Why is that so?" You may explain further. Then, there comes another, "Why?" And another, "Why?" And another, "Why?" Finally, you say, "Please stop asking, 'Why.' You just need to trust me." The issue is that you, as a parent, know more and are wiser than your children are. You know that ice-cream for breakfast will cause your child to be a wreck by 10:30 in the morning, but they don't. You know the bad character of the friend in whose house your child wants to spend the night, but they don't. You know of the end result of tempting activities, but they don't. You want them to accept what you say. You want them to trust what you say, though they don't fully understand everything you are telling them.

This is close to what Paul is saying here. God knows more of the facts than we do. After all, He created the world and ordained how it is to work. He has revealed to us what we are to know. He has not revealed to us what He has been pleased to withhold from us.

Deuteronomy 29:29 says, "The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us." The answer to these questions we have raised in the past few weeks falls into the category of "secret things." We are simply called to trust Him in these matters. Though God finds fault with those whom He hardens (verse 18-19), God will be fair with them (verse 14). We as finite creatures are not allowed to question His wisdom in these matters.

Let's now look at the second aspect of Paul's three-fold response to the objections:

## 2. He is the Potter and You are the Clay (verse 20b-21).

In the last half of verse 20, we pick up a metaphor that Paul uses to help us. He says, "The thing molded will not say to the molder, 'Why did you make me like this?' will it? 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?" (verses 20-21). Paul takes the illustration from clay and the potter. To us, the illustration is a bit foreign. Sure, we understand clay and pottery. But, we don't understand it quite like those of Jesus' day did. They had pottery everywhere. Their cups were made of pottery. Their plates were made of pottery. All of their cooking utensils were made of pottery. Their sinks were made of pottery. Their toilets were made of pottery. Their storage containers were made of pottery. Their candle holders were made of pottery. If you go over to Israel today, you will find pottery scraps all over the place. In fact, much of what we know of the ancient civilizations is what we find on their pottery, which doesn't decay.

Today, we have aluminum cans, metal pots, steel sinks, card-board boxes, crystal glass, plastic bottles, Tupperware containers, and Longaberger baskets. Back then, they had pottery to fulfill all of these needs. And so, they knew what it was like to use clay for a variety of usages. And they knew that it was totally right for the potter to use some clay for a nice vase for flowers, and to use some clay for a toilet. The potter can take these from the same lump of clay. Let me try to put some modern day context to these things. I have in my hands two items made from plastic: a toilet bowl cleaner, and a plant holder. What right do these plastic items have to object to their usages? Neither of them have a right to answer back to the plastic maker in protest of how they were made. Likewise, the Creator has a right to create people to use however He wishes. Some can be created for "honorable use." Some can be created for "common use" (literally, "dishonorable use"). God can create some as "vessels of mercy" (verse 23). God can create others as "vessels of wrath" (verse 22), according to His pleasure.

There are other places in the Bible where these concepts arise. We see vessels of wrath in Proverbs 16:4, where we read, "The LORD has made everything for its own purpose, even the wicked for the day of evil." We see vessels of mercy in Ephesians 2:10, which says that believers in Christ "are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them."

It is just like a potter. The potter is sovereign over His choice of how he is going to use the lump of clay that is before Him. Paul didn't come up with this illustration out of the top of his head. It saturates the Old Testament. In my notes I have 7 Old Testament references to this same concept...

"Remember now that You have made me as clay; and would You turn me into dust again?" (Job 10:9).

To those who rebel against Him, God "will break them with a rod of iron and ... shatter them like earthenware" (Psalm 2:9).

"Shall the potter be considered as equal with the clay, that what is made should say to its maker, 'He did not make me'; or what is formed say to him who formed it, 'He has no understanding'" (Is. 29:16).

"I have aroused one from the north, and he has come; From the rising of the sun he will call on My name; And he will come upon rulers as upon mortar, even as the potter treads clay" (Isaiah 41:25).

"Woe to the one who quarrels with his Maker--An earthenware vessel among the vessels of earth! Will the clay say to the potter, 'What are you doing?' Or the thing you are making say, 'He has no hands'? Woe to him who says to a father, 'What are you begetting?' Or to a woman, 'To what are you giving birth?'" (Isaiah 45:9, 10).

"But now, O LORD, You are our Father, we are the clay, and You our potter. And all of us are the work of Your hand" (Isaiah 64:8).

"Behold, like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in My hand, O house of Israel" (Jeremiah 18:6).

The picture is quite poignant in Jeremiah 18, where Jeremiah is directed to go and visit the potters house. Jeremiah watches as the potter took a lump of clay and formed a vessel on his wheel. Yet, "the vessel that he was making of clay was spoiled in the hand of the potter; so he remade it into another vessel, as it pleased the potter to make" (Jeremiah 18:4). The potter has total right to do this. Think about my modern day examples. When your toilet scrubber gets scummy and dirty, what do you do? Do you take extra time and scrub it clean, so that you may use a clean toilet scrubber? Or, do you simply throw it away and purchase another one?

It is worthy to note that in every instance of the Old Testament usage of this metaphor, the imagery describes the clay as having no rights over the potter. Could you imagine how silly it would be for clay pots to rebel against their potter? This week I was reminded of a humorous story that might help to illustrate the plight of those who would rebel against God.

It was one of the greatest houses on the outskirts of a great city. The master managed it with a firm hand; he was a kindly lord, but he was a lord for all that.

But one night, there was a violent disturbance in the pantry -- on the back of the third shelf. A surly earthen pot began to call, in a loud voice, for a great congress of the pots. At first, some of the others who wanted to sleep told him to be quiet. But as he was very angry, and refused to keep his peace, it was not long before some of the others began to listen to his complaint. And after listening to the complaint, it was a short time until they shared it.

The word spread slowly through the entire house -- the convocation was called; the parliament of the pots was begun.

Because it was the middle of the night, the pots began to assemble in the large ballroom downstairs, at the far end away from the good master's chambers. Slowly they filed in -- ornate vases, kitchen and pantry pots, flower pots from outside, and of course, off by themselves, the noisome chamber pots.

When they were all assembled, a delicate vase from the entry hall spoke. "Why have we been summoned?"

The earthen pot from the pantry, whose name was Sullen, answered. "The day of despotism is over; the final reckoning has come. It is time for the master of the house to settle accounts with us. We demand justice, and we shall have it!"

There was silence for a moment, and then a murmur of agreement ran through most of the assembled pots. Some, however, were clearly dismayed at the direction of events. The vase from the entry hall (her name was Charity) spoke again.

"But the master is very good to us. He . . ."

An envious hiss ran through the assembled pots. Sullen turned on the vase with a snarl. "Yes, indeed, the master has been very good to you. And that is one of the grievous injustices which we insist that he correct."

Off to the side, the chamber pots nodded in agreement. One of them shouted. "Sullen is right! Why shouldn't we be allowed in the entry way?"

This outburst of radical egalitarianism seemed a bit much, even for Sullen, but he passed it by without comment. He turned, and continued to address the listening pots.

"Why do we need a master? Why do we need his rules? We do not need man -- pots are for pots!"

The assembled crowd roared their approval. "Pots are for pots!"

Charity knew it would be useless to try to dissuade anyone. But she also knew the master, and knew it would be folly to remain in that room. She nodded to some of her friends from the entry way, and they began to slide quietly out of the room. Here and there other clear-minded pots were doing the same, but the rest were giving full attention to Sullen, clapping their lids enthusiastically.

Sullen had found his stride, and was propagating his millennial vision for the future of the great house -- a house where no pot had to contain things it did not want, where all pots had a say in how the house was governed, where there was no discrimination against crackpots, where no shelf was overcrowded, where pots and kettles lived in racial harmony, and where there was a chicken in every pot. Sullen had spent a lot of time thinking there in the pantry, and knew exactly what he believed -- he called it secular potism. He had waited for this moment for a long time, and his thoughts were boiling over furiously.

For the pots who remained in the room, it was a fine moment of exhilarating liberation. They eagerly caught at Sullen's intoxicating phrases, and with the zeal of new converts, bellowed them back to him.

"Pots are the measure of all things!"

"Government of the pots, by the pots, and for the pots!"

"One pot, one vote!"

It was his moment of glory, and he knew it. By this time, Charity and her friends were back in the front of the house. They

were all very dismayed, and somewhat frightened -- but not for the master. Charity had just resumed her place on the table by the front door when she turned, and there, coming down the staircase, was her master. He had an iron rod in his hand. (Douglas Wilson, *Credenda/Agenda* Vol. 4, No. 3).

Perhaps you remember Psalm 2, which describes the vanity of kings and rulers fighting together against the LORD, and against His anointed (Psalm 2:2). Though they wage war, God is never out of control. We are told that God "will break them with a rod of iron and shatter them like earthenware." (Ps. 2:9) This is our plight as God's creatures. He has created us as He delighted for His own purposes. We are creatures. We are clay. We have no right to complain to the Lord for how He has made us and for what purposes we have been created.

### 3. He has a Purpose and You have a Part in it (verses 22-24).

Paul continues his discussion in verses 22-23, which are some of the most glorious of all texts of the Bible. In these verses, he sheds a bit of light on the illustration of the potter and the clay by describing God's purpose in creating all people both those who will be destroyed, as well as those who will be saved. Let's read these verses:

What if God, willing to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction? 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, even us, whom He also called, not from among Jews only, but also from among Gentiles (Rom. 9:22-23).

These verses pick up on the potter illustration by speaking of "vessels." Verse 21 speaks of two different types of "vessels." There are vessels for common use, and there are vessels for honorable use. There are two types of vessels here. There are "vessels of wrath" (verse 22), and there are "vessels of mercy" (verse 23). God has made this world in much the same way that a potter has made different vessels for different purposes such as cups for drinking, plates for eating, vases for displaying, and toilets for using. Every created person has a part in God's plan. The "vessels of wrath" will be destroyed. This is clear at the end of verse 22: they were "prepared for destruction." The "vessels of mercy" on the other hand, will learn. In verse 23, we are told that they will learn "the riches of His glory" (verse 23).

But notice that God is patient with the vessels of wrath. Rather than destroying them in an instant, like they deserve, God is patient with them, so that He might teach the vessels of mercy about His glory. In the case of Pharaoh, God was patient with him (see verse 17) so that He might demonstrate His power throughout the whole earth. Other Biblical examples abound. God was patient with the Sihon and Og, two pagan kings, to give them power and to sustain them until they encountered Israel. In God's perfect timing, they were both destroyed by Israel, which led Rahab, the harlot, a vessel of mercy, to fear the LORD and hide the spies of the land (Josh 2:10). God was patient with the pagan nations in the land of Palestine, who worshipped idols. They continued to prosper, until it was time for God to demonstrate His power by using Israel to destroy them. This story has been told down through the centuries (Psalm 78:54, 55). God was patient with the Babylonian and Persian kings during the exile of Israel, so that He could demonstrate His power to bring back His remnant using the Persian king, Cyrus (Isaiah 44:28; 45:1; 2 Chron. 36:22-23). God was patient with the Jews and Romans of Jesus' day. Rather than burning against them in indignation for their rantings and ravings in the mistreatment of Jesus, God allowed them to execute their plan (which was really His plan) to crucify Jesus. God was patient so that He could demonstrate His power through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. God was patient with Paul's "thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan" (2 Cor. 12:7). Rather than removing it (or him) from Paul, God allowed Paul to continue to be afflicted, because "power is perfected in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:8). The power of Christ in Paul has become a testimony to vessels of mercy for 2,000 years.

Romans 1:16 says that "the gospel is the power of God." We learn of God's graciousness to undeserving sinners. This is a demonstration of His power. Ephesians 2:7 is a great parallel to these things. God saved us, "in order that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus." God is patient with some, that He might demonstrate the greatness of His grace to others forever!

When you take a big-picture view of this world, you see God's plan unfold in line with these verses. God has two types of people in this world: vessels of wrath, and vessels of mercy. With much more skill than any potter who has ever lived has done, God has chosen to use the vessels of wrath to communicate His great power to the vessels of mercy. The world isn't out of God's control. The wicked aren't getting away with their wickedness. Rather, God is being patient with them, and at a later time will give to them what they deserve for their rebellion against the LORD. God is being patient with a purpose: "to make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy" (verse 23). The vessels of mercy deserve destruction, but God, with undeserved favor, has spared them so that they might forever praise God for His glorious grace to them. They see His power. They see what they deserve. They see that they received mercy.

Several of us men are about to embark on reading some of Charles Spurgeon's sermons. On his tomb in London are written the words, "Redeeming love has been my theme and shall be till I die." This ought to be our theme. This is God's theme. He is patient to allow the vessels of wrath to continue to flourish, that His power in the gospel might be proclaimed. Yet, when we pass away and stand before Him in glory, this will be our theme even more. The words continue on Spurgeon's tomb, "When this poor, lisping, stammering tongue lies silent in the grave, Then in a nobler, sweeter song, I'll sing thy power to save!" This is our eternal cry! God uses the vessels of wrath to teach us of what a great privilege it is to be a vessel of mercy. This is glorious.

Let me ask you, "What is the difference between a vessel of mercy and a vessel of wrath?" Is it not God's pleasure that makes all of the difference? To one, God gives what he deserves: wrath and destruction. To another, God withholds what he deserves. He deserves wrath, but God gives him mercy. It is God's sovereign pleasure to do this. Notice the emphasis upon the mercy of God in this passage:

Rom. 9:15 - "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy."

Rom. 9:16 - "It does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy."

Rom. 9:18 - "He has *mercy* on whom He desires."

Rom. 9:23 - "He endured vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, to make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of *mercy*"

At the end of verse 23, we read of that those who would receive mercy, that "God prepared beforehand for glory." God's sovereign hand is all over this passage. He gives to the vessels of wrath what they deserve. He is gracious to the vessels of mercy to show them His glory. There is no place for pride. There is no place for egotism. There is no place for elitism. Vessels of mercy are to be merciful! Jesus said, "Freely you have received, freely give" (Matt. 10:8). James warned, "Judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy" (James 2:13). We ought to be the most joyful people on the planet. Romans 12:8 says, "He who shows mercy, do it with cheerfulness."

Who are these vessels of mercy? Verse 24 identifies them, "even us, whom He also called, not from among the Jews only, but also from among Gentiles." If you sit here today and have embraced Jesus Christ, you are a vessel of mercy. God has called you from among the Gentiles to believe in His name. Don't ever think that you have come to receive the gracious promises of God and privileges of being one of His children because of your own doing! It was God's calling. It was God's mercy to give you life to prepare you beforehand for mercy to see His glory and to praise Him for all eternity. God has created you to glorify Him!

We don't have time this morning to look at verses 25-33, but they tell the story of how the Gentiles, who weren't God's people (verses 25-26) and who weren't seeking salvation (i.e. righteousness) (verse 30) found it. But, the Jews, who sought after salvation (i.e. righteousness), didn't get it (verses 31-33). It may have appeared to be an accident, but it was no accident at all. God had given mercy to whom He desired and hardened whom He desired. When we say that we believe in "Salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone." When we say this, we are saying that we believe that God has saved us by His grace. There was nothing that we did to earn it or merit it. Left to ourselves, we would be "vessels of wrath," who would burn in hell forever because of our sin against God. Yet, by His grace, He has given us faith (Eph. 2:8, 9) to place our trust in Jesus Christ, as the only way to God. You don't deserve to be a "vessel of mercy." God's grace has made you a vessel of mercy. God has a purpose and you have a part in it.

This is the answer to Paul's second objection: "Why does He still find fault?" (Rom. 9:19).

You ought to be humbled by these thoughts. They ought to drive you to your knees. You ought to give God all praise and glory from your mouth forever! You ought to be merciful. As we close this morning, I want to direct your attention to my sermon title: "Is This Your God?" This is the God of the Bible. This is the God of our Lord Jesus Christ. Is this Your God? When you think of God, do you think that He is like this? Or is Your God a bit different than this? If this isn't your God, you may be guilty of idolatry (to one degree or another).

**Is your God in the infinite and are you are in the finite?** (verse 20a). Are there things about God that you simply cannot comprehend? Perhaps you can't understand how "He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires" (verse 18) and yet still finds fault with those whom He has hardened. Perhaps it seems a bit unfair of an infinitely just God to do these things. There are two ways to take these things into your mind. You can humbly submit your ways to God. There have been enough evidences of His goodness in your life that you will trust Him. Or, you can arrogantly argue with the Almighty, as if you know better about running this world than He does. When a child argues with his parents, both of them are brought low. The child is seen as a rebellious, little brat. The parent is seen as one who isn't in control. May neither of these things be said of us. The same is true when you rebelliously question God. You are brought low and so is God.

Now, there is a righteous questioning of God. David says, "How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will You hid Your face from Me?" (Ps. 13:1). Yet, in the same Psalm, David said, "I have trusted in Your lovingkindness" (Ps. 13:5). But we always need to remember that He is God and we are not. He is far wiser than we are. He knows far more than we do. He is worthy of being trusted. But, He is the Infinite and You are the Finite (verse 20a).

**Is your God the Potter and are you the clay?** (verse 20b-21). Do you really believe that God has created you exactly as He wanted to? Do you really believe that God has placed you exactly where He wanted to place you? Or, are you a rebellious clay pot, who will cry out and complain to God that you have received a bum deal in this thing called life? There is a certain relationship that a potter has over the clay. He is sovereign to do as He wills. The clay is His instrument in His hands. Many people don't like this imagery. They can't stand the thought of being like clay. But, He is the Potter and you are the clay (verse 20b-21).

**Does your God have a purpose and do you have a part in it?** (verses 22-24) The purpose of God in this life is to show forth His glory. God uses "vessels of wrath" and "vessels of mercy" in order to display His glory to the "vessels of mercy." Are you a "vessel of mercy" or a "vessel of wrath"? If you believe in the atoning work of Christ, you are a vessel of mercy and ought to give all praise and glory and honor to Jesus Christ for saving you.

You should continually ponder the undeserving mercy you have received.

Alas and did my Savior bleed? And did my Sov'reign die?  
Would He devote that sacred head for such a worm as I?  
Was it for crimes that I have done He groaned upon the tree?  
Amazing pity! Grace unknown! And love beyond degree!

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on July 27, 2003 by Steve Brandon.  
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