

God is Just and Fair in His Display of Mercy *Romans 9:14-24*

Do you ever have questions about God and how He works in this world? Most of us do at some point, right? Fifteen years ago when my sister died of a brain tumor I had questions. She was 39 years old; a faithful and fruitful Christian, a pastor's wife and a mother of five children ranging from 11 to 6 months old. I had questions about God and how He works.

For most of us as we journey through this life, we eventually experience things that make us question God – disappointments, loss, sickness of body or mind, death of people we care about, good plans frustrated. The list and go on and on. When we face such things we can find ourselves wondering about God. Is He just? Is He fair?

Today as we come to Romans 9:14-24, we come to a passage in which questions about how God works arise from the things that Paul has taught about God. Paul is in the midst of a section, Romans 9 – 11, where he is discussing God's purposes and plans for the Jews. The truth that so few Jews have believed the gospel has raised questions about whether God has been faithful to His Word and the promises made to Israel. And so that's the overall context.

And, of course, the immediate context flows from what we looked at last week. Paul said this in the final verse that we looked at last week: *Just as it is written, "JACOB I LOVED, BUT ESAU I HATED"* (9:13). Before Jacob and Esau were born, before they did anything good or bad, God chose Jacob and he rejected Esau. Paul anticipates that his argument that God chooses some and not others will lead to questions about God's justice and His fairness so he confronts these questions. And I think as he does, we can get insight into how to address our questions about justice and fairness in how God works.

The first thing that Paul says is that God is just in His display of mercy.

I. God is Just in His Display of Mercy (vv. 14-18)

¹⁴ What shall we say then? There is no injustice with God, is there? May it never be!

The question that is posed here is about God's justice. Is God just in choosing Jacob and rejecting Esau before either had done anything good or bad. Paul's strong reply is, *May it never be!* There is no injustice in God's electing activity. Paul denies the conclusion and then goes on to argue the point from Scripture. And he does this by looking at how God is revealed in the Scriptures. In verse 15, he cites Exodus 33:19 where God revealed Himself to Moses.

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."

In Exodus 33, Moses had asked God to show him His glory - "Show me who you are." In response God told Moses that He would cause "all of [His] goodness to pass in front of [Moses]" and that He would cause His name to pass by Moses. God gave one of the fullest revelations of His nature to Moses. And in that revelation of Himself God said that He is the One who will have mercy and compassion on whomever He wills.

Paul is saying that any evaluation about whether God's activities are just should be based on God's self-revelation, not on the basis of human standards. And God has revealed Himself to be One who has the right to show mercy to whomever He wants to show mercy. And Paul then adds this statement:

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

"It" is left vague. In the context I think it refers to God's choice to bestow mercy on whomever He chooses. His choice to do so has nothing to do with man's efforts. To "will" and to "run" are terms that speak of man's desires and efforts. These aren't negative things, but the point here is that they have nothing to do with election. It is simply up to God *who has mercy*. And so God had mercy on Jacob, who represents Israel, not because of anything he had done. It was simply God's choice to show mercy to him.

The other side of this truth is that God did not choose Esau, which leads to verse 17. In the Exodus experience, God showed his mercy to Israel by delivering them from Egypt. And in doing this, God did not show mercy to Pharaoh. Pharaoh in a sense is Esau.

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

In the Exodus experience, God hardened Pharaoh's heart. And as a result Pharaoh continually refused to let Israel go. And that created a situation where God demonstrated His power by working all sorts of miracles in Egypt. These works of power revealed God's covenant mercy to Israel. And they became known throughout the whole earth as the story of Israel's deliverance became known.

And so the great salvation event of Israel illustrates what Paul summarizes then in verse 18 that God has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires. Paul is articulating a principle that explains God's activity in delivering Israel from Egypt and that explains what God was doing among the Jews and the Gentiles in his day.

And so God chose Jacob and hated Esau. God delivered Israel and he hardened Pharaoh. That was how God had worked throughout history. And it was how God was continuing to work in Paul's day. In the next couple of chapters, Paul will continue to flesh out what this truth now means for Jews and Gentiles.

Is there injustice with God in working out His divine purposes in this way? May it never be! If we think that God is unjust in working this way, we are simply wrong. We must evaluate God's activity based on God's self-revelation, not based on human reasoning. And according to God's self-revelation, God is acting consistent with His nature when He does this. He is just in His display of mercy.

Now, if we rightly understand what Paul has just taught that raises a second question. Is God fair? And to this question Paul says that God is fair in His display of mercy.

II. God is Fair in His Display of Mercy (vv. 19-24)

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

In other words, how can a person be responsible at judgment (at the end of time) if at election (at the beginning), God is the One who determines if one is chosen or hardened? How can God find fault in that system? Paul replies to the question with a series of questions:

²⁰ On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, "Why did you make me like this," will it? 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?

When Paul says, *on the contrary*, he is making the point that it is improper for the one who is created to question the Creator in this way. God, the all-powerful Creator, is free to do whatever He wants to do with His creation.

Paul uses the imagery of a potter and clay to illustrate this point. God is the divine potter. Humans, we are the clay. And as the potter, God has the *right over the clay* to make it any way that He sees fit that will accomplish His purposes. This imagery would have been very familiar for any of Paul's Jewish readers because it was used in a number of places in the Old Testament. And it illustrates the point that God is free to do whatever He sees fit to do.

Note: It is interesting to the current discussion in Romans 9-11 that the most prominent Old Testament use of this imagery is Jer. 18:1-11. In that passage God, the potter, remakes a vessel that was "spoiled" in his hand into something that pleased the potter. And God makes the point, "Can I not, O house of Israel, deal with you as this potter does (v. 5)?".

And so Paul understands how one can get to this question based on what he has taught. But he essentially replies that the creature does not know better than the Creator. As humans we think we know what is fair, but Paul is saying that God is not bound by our ideas of fairness.

It's sort of like the little child who is having a fit because he is told to go to bed when his older siblings get to stay up a little longer. What does little Johnny say, "That's not fair. Bill and Mary get to stay up!" He evaluates fairness based on his own knowledge as a 3 year old. But his parents have very different ideas about fairness. They know that Bill and Mary used to go to bed earlier. And they know that Johnny will stay up later when he gets older. And they also know that if they let him stay up longer tonight, no one is going to want to be around little Johnny tomorrow because he will be a bear. Does a 3 year old really have sufficient wisdom to figure out issues of fairness?

In the same way, do we as created beings really have sufficient wisdom to figure out issues of fairness when it comes how God works? Paul's point is that we don't. We are humans. God is the Creator. And so, who are we to answer back to God? That's how Paul responds to this question.

Now as Paul comes to verse 22, he moves from the illustration of the potter and the clay to an application of it. In these verses Paul continues to make it clear that God has the right to do whatever He wants.

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? ²³ And He did so to make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory,

Paul says that in the course of human history, there have always been two kinds of people – vessels of wrath and vessels of mercy. There has always been Jacob and Esau; Israel and Pharaoh; and in Paul's day, there were those who did not believe and those who believed. And what he will continue to make clear is that though the Jews wanted to think that just because they were God's chosen people that they were vessels of mercy, many in fact were vessels of wrath due to their unbelief.

Paul says that God is willing to *demonstrate His wrath*. He has said as much earlier in Romans. God's wrath will be revealed "against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness" (Rom. 1:18). And so one day God will reveal His wrath and through that demonstration of wrath, His power is going to be made known just as it was through Pharaoh.

But the emphasis of verse 22 is God's patience - He *endured with much patience vessels of wrath*. Now, why God is patient can be understood in a couple of different ways. It could be that He is being patient so that the wickedness of man can come to its fullest expression and then His wrath be poured out upon it.

The other way it can be understood is that God is patient so that those who now are objects of wrath can come to their senses and believe and become objects of mercy. As 2 Peter 3:9 says:

⁹ 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.

I tend to think that this is what Paul is saying. He is being patient so that people have the opportunity to move from being an object of wrath to an object of mercy.

Now, some would argue that this could not be a possible way to understand this because these are vessels of wrath *prepared for destruction*. The assumption is that God is the one who prepared them for destruction. But this is not actually stated in the verse. It IS stated in verse 23 that God is the one who prepares the vessels of mercy for glory. But in verse 22, the subject is not given. And so one way to understand that is that it is actually the person who continues to remain in unbelief who is doing the preparing for destruction.

And so God is patient so that he can make known the riches of His glory upon those who are vessels of mercy. And in verse 24 he clarifies that the vessels of mercy are not just from among the Jews and they are not just from among the Gentiles. It is both.

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

And since most of us are not Jewish, how grateful we are that God's plan involved not only saving people from among the Jews, but also from among the Gentiles. God is fair in how He demonstrates His mercy.

Now, I'm sure after going through this passage many of us still have questions. I do! Some of you may have more questions than when we started. But even with our questions the heart of what Paul is teaching is clear. And that is that as God works out His purposes in human history, He is both just and fair in how He displays His mercy. These core truths that Paul is teaching are completely clear.

And so regardless of what is going on in our lives or the lives of those that we love, how God displays His mercy is just and it is fair. It was just and fair with Jacob and Esau and with Israel and Pharaoh. It was just and fair with the Jews and Gentiles in Paul's day. And God's display of mercy continues to be just and fair in our lives as well.

Now, I want to take some time to talk particularly about those situations in which some of us find ourselves where we cannot get our minds around how it could be true that God is just and fair. Maybe it is a situation where we've prayed and prayed for a loved one to come to faith in Christ, but we see no response. Or, if we broaden it up to other areas besides issues of salvation, maybe it is a situation where something so devastating happened to you or a loved one. And as you try to get your mind around how God could let that happen if He is just and fair, you just can't do it. Or maybe its just looking at events in our world – things like the refugee crisis in the Middle East and we see the suffering of the children and we wonder about how God can be just and fair. What about these situations? What do we do?

What we tend to do in these situations is to try to figure it out in our own minds how God can actually be doing something just and fair. We expend so much energy trying to get our minds around how it can be true that this thing has happened and God is just and fair. The problem with this approach is that sometimes there will be things that we can never get our minds around and understand.

And so the main thought I have for you if you are facing something like this is this: **Work to believe THAT it is true more than HOW it can be true that God is just and fair** in how He is working. We are so inclined to want to figure these things out. Sometimes we can. But sometimes we can't. And in those times we have to choose to believe what the Bible declares to be true about God.

The theology that Paul has been teaching the Romans has raised some difficulties. And though he gives some explanation, he also simply declares it to be true that God is just and fair in everything He does. We need to remember that the created should not think that we could ever fully comprehend God's ways.

And so, as you face whatever difficulty you are facing, work to believe what the Bible says. And I say, "work" because sometimes it isn't as easy as just saying, "Oh, I'm going to believe that now." Sometimes it takes wrestling with God in prayer and real struggle to get to the place where we settle these things in our hearts. But we must, because the ability to ever get to a better place will probably never happen until you get these truths about God settled in your heart and you believe them regardless of your circumstances. So work to believe THAT they are true more than trying to figure out HOW they can be true.

Now, it might be that when you hear me encourage you to believe these things, deep within you are thinking: "If you knew what I've experienced, you would never urge me to believe that God is just and fair. It feels unkind of you to ask me to believe these things."

As I've thought about this this week, I've thought about the situations that some of you are facing – things that are so devastating; things that are so hard to understand; things that are so painful. I wish you were not facing those things. But you are. And you have a choice. You can either continue to try to figure out how God is just and fair or you can choose to believe that He is. And if you continue on the path of trying to figure it all out and can't you might end up at a place where you conclude that God is NOT just and fair. And if that's where you end up, what are you left with? You will be left with a diminished relationship with God. Because if in your heart you conclude that God is not just and God is not fair, it will not be possible to trust Him. And if we don't trust God, we are truly in a desperate place.

I am asking you to trust Him. I'm not saying to deny the pain or difficulty or the confusion. I'm not saying that you should just stuff all those feelings down and act like they aren't real. I'm saying bring those things to the feet of the One who made you and trust

Him. Trust the One who Romans 8:31 says is for you. Trust the One who did not spare His only Son but gave him up for you (Rom. 8:32). Trust the One who says that nothing can separate us from His love (Rom. 8:35). God loves you. God cares about you. Trust Him. He is just; He is fair is His display of mercy. Amen.