

Is God Unjust?

Romans 9:14-18

"That's not fair!" All of us as parents have heard this phrase from our children. It seems all people from the earliest age are concerned about fairness. When Kathy hears the kids say, "It's not fair!" She usually responds with, "Life's not fair!" We all want life to be fair. And we want God to be fair—or so we think!

This is the issue that Paul addresses in our text today. Please follow along as I read it—Romans 9:14-18:

14 What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? Certainly not!

15 For He says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I will have compassion."

16 So then it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy.

17 For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I may show My power in you, and that My name may be declared in all the earth."

18 Therefore He has mercy on whom He wills, and whom He wills He hardens.

We can outline Paul's argument in Romans 9 by noting the questions that Paul asks and deals with. In verse 14 he asks, "**Is there unrighteousness with God?**" In other words is God unjust? Is God not being fair?

And the reason he asks this question is that he is anticipating the objection that some will have to what he has just written. Remember, Paul is dealing with the problem of Israel. Although they were chosen by God and had all the privileges of verses 4-5, most of the Jews rejected Jesus Christ as their Messiah and were accursed because of their unbelief. If Israel who was chosen by God was now separated from God, how can we know that we cannot be separated from God?

So the issue at stake is: *Does God keep His promises?* In proving that God is faithful to keep His promises and that His word does not fail, Paul has given us some examples of how God has worked in the Old Testament in electing the nation of Israel. In verse 6 he said that God's word has not failed because not all Israel is truly of Israel. And he gave us two examples of that. Although both were sons of faithful Abraham, God chose Isaac rather than Ishmael to inherit the promises. And second, although Jacob and Esau were twin sons of Isaac, God chose Jacob rather than Esau even before they were born.

Verse 11 says that God did it this way in order, "**that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works but of Him who calls.**" So we saw that God does not call people according to natural descent—it's not by who your parents are; and God does not call people based on human merit—it's not how good or bad you are or according to anything that you have done or will do. It is only according to God's election, God's choice.

Now this is where the question of verse 14 comes in, because if God's election and calling have nothing to do with who we are or what we do, is it fair for God to chose some and not chose others? Was it fair for God to chose Isaac and not Ishmael? Was it

fair for God to chose Jacob and not Esau? So Paul asks, **“Is there unrighteousness with God?”**

Paul’s immediate reaction to such a question is an empathic No! “Certainly not!” (verse 14). In our hearts we already know the answer. God is not unjust. It is unthinkable that a holy God should ever do something unrighteous. Throughout the scriptures we see God is righteous. He is just. But in our limited understanding of God, to us it may seem like God how and why God chooses is not right. It least we can admit that it is hard for us to understand God’s election.

Before going any further, let me point out that Romans 9 is heavy with emphasis on God’s sovereignty. Paul goes to great lengths to demonstrate that the problem of Jewish unbelief (a huge issue in the first century) can only be understood in light of the character and promises of God. Romans 9 is all about God’s activity, what He does, how He chooses. In Romans 10 we will come to the other side of the story—Israel’s unbelief and the Christian call to preach the gospel to the nations. But we must not rush ahead of ourselves. We must let the scriptures speak to us. If we wish to argue with the text, let’s at least make sure we understand what it is saying.

God’s Fairness Seen In ...

1. His mercy to Moses and the Israelites. Rom. 9:14-16:

14 What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? Certainly not!

Should we even entertain the possibility that God might be unjust? The answer Paul gives is literally translated, *“God forbid! Perish the thought!”* God is totally fair and his justice is not tarnished by divine election.

So the example is in verse 15: **For He says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I will have compassion."**

At first, this quote from Exodus 33:19 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 try 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). It was then that God replied (Exod. 33:19), **“I will make all My goodness pass before you, and I will proclaim the name of the Lord before you. I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.”**

To paraphrase, God is telling Moses, “This is My name, this is the essence of who I am. My glory is displayed when I 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.”

Paul reinforces this by his conclusion (9:16), **“So then it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy.”** It does not depend on a man’s decision or on human effort. Rather, it depends on God who has mercy. If it depended on our character or works, then Paul would not need to defend the charge that God is unfair or unjust. If it was that Jacob believed, did good, and therefore God called him and Esau did not believe, did evil, and therefore God judged him, then that’s fair! But Paul says that is not the basis on which God chose. God showed mercy to one simply based on His sovereign purpose.

Second, God’s fairness is shown in:

2. His justice to Pharaoh. Rom. 9:17-18

17 For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I may show My power in you, and that My name may be declared in all the earth."

Let’s remember two facts about Pharaoh: *First, he was a pagan and never becomes a believer. Second, Pharaoh hardened his own heart ten times against the Lord.*

God raised up Pharaoh as the ruler of Egypt. When Moses said, “Let my people go,” Pharaoh said, “No.” Not just once but over and over again. So God used his stubbornness as the backdrop against which he displayed his power to the entire world in the 10 plagues. Think about all the miracles that Pharaoh saw that demonstrated God’s power and sovereignty. Those same plagues that brought the Israelites to believe, caused Pharaoh to harden his heart.

The same sunshine that melts the ice, bakes the clay. It softens the one and hardens the other. It reveals their true nature.

Is that fair? Sure it is. Pharaoh got what he deserved—God’s judgement for his sin. Think of it this way. Did Moses and the Israelites deserve mercy? No, but they received it anyway. Did Pharaoh deserve mercy? No, he deserved God’s justice. And that’s what he received. Don’t miss the stated reason behind His mercy to Moses and His justice to Pharaoh -- God’s power was put on display so that ***“His name might be proclaimed in all the earth.”*** The word “proclaimed” means to announce everywhere, to publish abroad.

The case is settled. *God is completely free to do whatever He wants. And He is completely fair in the way He treats each person.* We all deserve God’s judgment. The fact that anyone receives God’s mercy is nothing short of a miracle.

What does this mean for us?

When you stand back and survey this passage, it is easy to understand why some commentators call it one of the most difficult in the entire Bible. It raises many questions about God’s sovereignty and human responsibility. Let me close by making some summary statements in way of application.

1. God’s election humbles us by putting us in our proper place.

Salvation begins with God, not with us. We often talk about freewill as if that were the central issue of life, but these verses ignore it altogether. Don’t get me wrong. The Bible does teach that we all have choices to make, and we’ll get to that in Romans 10 but the central issue is God. *Without God choosing us we would never choose him.* We can either respond to God’s sovereignty with rejection and anger or with submission and

praise. Incidentally, God does not feel the need to resolve all our questions about election, predestination and His sovereignty. But, He does want us to be humble. He calls us to believe, even when we don't understand.

2. It glorifies God by putting him in his rightful place as the ruler of the universe.

This text states it with almost shocking bluntness.

He shows mercy on whom he wants to show mercy, and judgment on whom he wants to show judgment. *God does exactly what he wants to do.* No one can question him. No one can stand against Him or overrule Him. Psalm 115:3: ***“Our God is in heaven; He does whatever pleases Him.”***

3. It challenges us to consider the basis of our relationship with God.

This passage teaches us that not everyone is going to heaven.

Isaac is in, Ishmael is out. Jacob is in, Esau is out. Moses is in, Pharaoh is out. Just because you call yourself a Christian doesn't mean you are truly born again. Just because you go to church on Sunday doesn't mean you truly are a child of God.

Salvation is not about fair; it's about mercy. If you want fair you'll get hell; if you want mercy you'll gain heaven. What will it be for you? Are you going to trust your merits or God's mercy?

4. It gives us assurance of salvation and eternal security.

God's mercy doesn't come to us because of what we've done and therefore it cannot be lost because of something we do.

5. If we won't accept God's mercy we will one day face his justice.

It was C.S. Lewis who reminded us that there are only two possibilities in the universe. Either a man says to God, *“Thy will be done,”* or God says to man, *“All right then. Your will be done.”* If you choose to do your will in this life instead of God's will, then one day you will face God's justice.

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!”***

Have you ever believed on Jesus Christ as your only hope for eternal salvation? Let's skip ahead a chapter to Romans 10:9: ***“That if you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.”***

God's Word cannot fail because He is faithful and He is fair.