

But That's Not Fair!

Romans 9:14-18

July 22, 2018

Introduction:

If you have kids, then it's inevitable that at multiple points throughout your parenting career you'll hear the angry protestation from your child crying out, "But that's not fair!" Perhaps you allowed one child to stay up later than another or you sentenced one child to a lesser punishment for a crime the other committed many weeks ago and so now you're accused of being a monstrous ogre. I could easily multiply the examples, but if you're a parent then I'm certain you've all experience in this common complaint.

One thing I find interesting about this is how kids intuitively understand the concept of fairness. I never once taught any of my daughters about the abstract notion of fairness, but nevertheless from a very young age each of them was well attuned to what fairness was and were especially vocal whenever they perceived it being transgressed. Of course, we all grow up to learn the hard lesson that often "Life's not fair," but that doesn't mean we dislike it any less. We all have an innate sense of fairness and we get prickly when we believe some kind of injustice is being committed, especially when we see ourselves as the recipient of the short end of the stick.

Because of this inborn sense of fairness, we readily understand the objection the apostle Paul raises in our passage today, because most of us feel it too. We've been talking about the doctrine of election in Romans 9 and if there's any doctrine in Scripture that can cause us to cry out, "But that's not fair!" it's this one. Chances are, if you listened to my sermon last week, you had that very objection rise up within you. If so, then if nothing else, I know I explained the passage correctly because that's exactly the objection Paul anticipates his readers will raise.

So we need to begin by reviewing what the apostle Paul said prior to our passage today. Paul's making a tight, logical argument in Romans 9 and so we need to mind the forest for the trees by making sure we're following along with the discussion up to this point. So please open your Bibles to Romans 9, which can be found on pg. 945 of the pew Bibles should you need to use one of those this morning. Our focus today is on v. 14-18, but we need to first review v. 1-13 so we can properly understand why Paul is raising the question he does. So let me read just the first five verses of Romans 9. **"I am speaking the truth in Christ - I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit - that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh. They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen."**

Paul begins by expressing this deep concern for his fellow Jews because they on a whole aren't coming to faith in Christ. Now this is both a personal concern for Paul as well as a

theological one. Since God made all these promises to the Jews throughout the OT, and now they're not being saved, it begs the question as to whether God can be trusted. If God didn't come through on his promises to Israel, then what assurance can we have that he'll be true to his Word when it comes to us as Christians?

So Paul goes on to say this in v. 6. **“But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but ‘Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.’ This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring.”** Let's stop there.

Paul's answer is that God's promises to Israel haven't failed because not every single Jew is a child of Abraham. The promises of God were only intended for the children of promise, not every individual who could trace their lineage back to Abraham. That then raises a few other questions: Who then is a child of promise? How does one become a true child of Abraham? If not by biological ancestry, then how?

For that answer, look back in your Bibles at v. 9-13. **“For this is what the promise said: ‘About this time next year I will return, and Sarah shall have a son.’ And not only so, but also when Rebekah had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac, 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 - she was told, ‘The older will serve the younger.’ As it is written, ‘Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.’”**

While God's choosing of Isaac over Ishmael is mentioned here, the point is put in sharpest focus when discussing Jacob and Esau. Although the twins both shared exactly the same mother and father, we're told God chose Jacob over Esau. The covenant promises went to the younger son instead of the older because of God's sovereign choice alone. In fact, Paul specifically disavows any notion that God's choice was conditioned upon something in them, saying God chose Jacob instead of Esau before they were born or had done anything either good or bad, **“not because of works but because of him who calls.”** In other words, salvation comes to those God chooses and his choice is not based upon anything in the person that would cause God to choose one over another, but rather it is simply by his sovereign purpose, apart from anything in us.

Do you see the problem now? As I read those verses and explained them to you, is there not inside of you that inner child protesting, “But that's not fair!” If God's choice of Jacob over Esau had nothing to do with anything in them, such that God choose Jacob before either were born or had done anything good or bad that might cause God to favor one over the other, then I can't help but imagine that you have this objection rising up inside of you right now. God choosing to love Jacob and hate Esau before they were born seems to many us to be grossly unfair. So assuming I've understood this correctly thus far, let's see what Paul now goes on to say in the passage we'll be studying this morning. So we're moving off the very long on-ramp and getting on to the main highway of our sermon now by considering the first point of the message, which asks this question...

1. Is God being unjust in choosing to save some and not others?

Look first at just v. 14. **“What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means!”** As Paul has done elsewhere in Romans, he raises up objections he expects his readers to have as a result of his teaching. Remember, Paul's been at this for many years now. He knows from experience what to expect when he teaches about certain things and so he tries to anticipate what his readers will object to and address it.

Now the fact that Paul raises this objection confirms he's teaching exactly what he seems to be teaching: that God chooses who he will save apart from anything in them. There's no sense in raising this objection unless he expects people to understand him to be saying that God's choice of whom he will save has absolutely nothing to do with a person's character or decisions or nationality or anything else. And let's be honest here: don't you feel the weight of that question as well? If God chooses to love Jacob over Esau before they had done anything either good or bad, if God accepts or rejects individuals totally apart from their own merit or faith, then doesn't it seem to you that God is unjust? Unfair? Unrighteous? For Paul to raise this question here tells me I've understood this passage correctly, that God chooses who he will save based upon nothing in the person but purely in accordance with his own good pleasure, and what he did with Jacob and Esau is what he does with all people.

But according to Paul, if we reach the conclusion that God is unjust, then we've made a mistake in our thinking. In reply to this objection he says, **“Is there injustice on God's part? By no means!”** He emphatically denies that such a conclusion is warranted. If you think God is unjust for saving some and rejecting others apart from anything they do or not do, then you've made a huge error in your thinking. But now he has to prove it. How is it that Paul can insist there isn't injustice on God's part?

Now at this point we reach an important place in Paul's argument and in our thinking. I need you to pay close attention here. I know your attention can wander off in sermons and so if you were drifting, I need to call you back because you need to be fully engaged with me here. This is the moment where Paul should give the answer that many of you believe when it comes to how election works. This is the place where you'd expect Paul to say something like this: “Your objection is misguided because you've misunderstood me on this point. God is not at all unjust because God of course takes a person's free will into account. What I mean here is God foresees our future faith and then chooses us on the basis of that faith. As a result, God's choice is conditioned upon our act of faith which we freely exercise first and he responds to. Therefore God is not unjust.”

If Paul believes this, if God's choice of us is based on our future choices that we freely make, then this is the moment to state it. Right here, right now. There's no other place in Scripture where the issue is so clearly raised, the objection so clearly stated, and the opportunity to affirm the primacy of man's free will so clearly given than it is right here. Paul has the chance to correct our mistaken view once and for all by clearly and unambiguously stating for us that God's choice of whom he will save is based upon our free choice of him and therefore God is neither unfair nor unjust because he's only responding to the decision we've already made.

So what does Paul then say? Look back in your Bibles now at v. 14-16. **“What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means! 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 depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy.”** So moving on now to our second point... Is there injustice on God's part?

2. No, because God is sovereign in mercy

Instead of affirming that man's prior choice of God is the basis for God's electing grace, Paul actually doubles down on God's absolute freedom to have mercy on whomever he chooses. Paul quotes from Exodus 33 where Moses asks to see God's glory and in response to this God says this about himself, that **“I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.”** In other words, part of the glory of God is that he's absolutely free to have mercy and compassion on whomever he wants. He's not dependent on us to muster up good deeds or faith to incline him favorably to us. God chooses to whom he will show his loving kindness in according with his own divine sovereign free will and acts according to that freedom.

In fact, Paul goes further and directly asserts that human willpower or deeds have nothing to do with God's choice of whom he will save. He says this explicitly in v. 16. **“So it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy.”** I know how many people today (and that includes many of you in this room), would claim that God gives grace equally to everyone and that the determining factor in whether a person is saved or not depends on what he or she does with that grace, whether it is rejected or believed, but if you think that way, please, I must call you to look at this passage again. Paul says salvation **“depends not on human will.”**

My friends, the fact that Paul does not appeal to human freedom and instead doubles down on God's absolute freedom to choose to show mercy on whomever he wishes should compel you to reject any view that would claim God's choice of us is conditioned upon our choice of him. I understand this makes us uncomfortable and it challenges the way many of us think about these things, but I implore you to stare open-eyed at what Paul says here. Paul can't be any clearer on this point. This is the moment when Paul should be ushering in the free will argument in defense of God and he doesn't. He doesn't go there. Instead, Paul calls us back to Scripture and reminds us of God own self-revelation of himself that emphasizes his sovereign freedom to show mercy on whomever he wishes. Both the logical flow of the argument and how Paul specially and repeatedly denies any role that human will has in determining God's choice clinches the matter for me. God's choice of who to save is made according to his divine freedom and is not conditioned or influenced by anything in us.

And if that wasn't enough to close the case, Paul doubles down even further, tripling down by reminding us that God is also sovereign over who he wishes to harden. So let's move us on now to the third point which answers the question of whether there is injustice on God's part by saying this...

3. No, because God is sovereign in hardening

Look at v.17-18. **“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.’ So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills.”**

God also has absolute sovereign freedom over whom he hardens. Paul goes back to the Exodus to remind us of Pharaoh’s disobedience. God’s purpose in raising Pharaoh up as ruler of Egypt was to show his power through the ten plagues and the crossing of the Red Sea, which came as a result of Pharaoh’s hardness of heart. Thus the freedom of God cuts both ways: God is free to have mercy on whomever he wishes, apart from anything in the individual, and he’s free to harden the heart of whoever he will, such as he did in the case of Pharaoh.

Now I recognize the notion of God hardening Pharaoh’s heart raises even more questions and difficulties - because this passage can’t be difficult enough to preach on as it is! This leads to the next objection Paul raises in v. 19, which we’ll get to next week. But for now let me say by way of explanation and defense that God isn’t acting against Pharaoh’s will in the hardening of his heart. Or to be more specific, God isn’t creating something that wasn’t already there, such that Pharaoh would have responded favorably to Moses’ request if only God hadn’t interfered. In hardening Pharaoh’s heart, God was simply confirming the sinful stubbornness that already existed.

In fact, we’ve already seen an example of this back in Romans 1. When we started Romans, we were told three times at the end of the first chapter that God “*gave them over*” to all kinds of sins. Do you remember that? But Paul wasn’t speaking of morally good or even morally neutral people that God imposed his will upon and thereby prevented them from doing the good things they really wanted to do. Those people had already shown their contempt for God by refusing to honor him or give him thanks through what they knew of him through nature. Instead, they created false gods out of animals and birds and worshipped what was created instead of the Creator. So when God “*gave them over*” in Romans 1, he was in effect hardening them in the sin they had already freely chosen. So when it comes to Pharaoh, God’s hardening of his heart is a matter of God simply confirming the sin that already existed in his heart.

So what this means is there’s asymmetrical relationship between God’s mercy and God’s hardening. I know, big words, but don’t zone out on me here. I need you all in mentally. It’s asymmetrical because the way this works is not the same for each. In God’s hardening, God is simply letting us continue on the path we’re already walking on in our sinful rebellion. He’s only confirming what’s already there. But in his mercy and grace, God is actively interfering in us. Rather than allowing us to continue to do the sin we want, God cuts in and changes our hearts, causing us to be born again, so we don’t want to walk down the wide road that leads to destruction any longer. When God saves us, he causes a change in us that wouldn’t be there otherwise. But when it comes to hardening, God judiciously confirms us in what we’ve already chosen for ourselves.

But either way, God is the one who's making the decision, and he's doing so apart from anything within us. He saves who he wishes to save not because they're any better or smarter or more moral or are intellectually superior, but simply because he chooses to do so. And he doesn't harden anyone because they're more evil or nasty than someone else. His choice of whom to save or not save has nothing to do with us. As with Jacob and Esau, God chose one over the other before they were born or had done anything good or bad. And as he states here in v. 16, it doesn't depend on **“human will or exertion, but on God who has mercy.”**

So that then brings us to the final point which might be on your mind and that is...

4. **But wait! How does this answer the question?**

It doesn't seem like Paul really answered the objection: all he did is double-down and triple-down on what he already said in regard to Jacob and Esau: God has mercy on whoever he pleases, and his choice is not based or affected by anything we do or don't do, or by any act of human will or exertion. So how does this repeated assertion that God acts according to his own sovereign freedom without being conditioned by anything in us, answer the initial objection that God is unjust? Let me make a few statements to hopefully help us.

First, *God isn't unjust to send anyone to hell - it's what we all deserve.* We're all sinners who rightly deserve to face the wrath of God for our sins. Were God to send everyone to hell as punishment, God would be perfectly just. So if God chooses not to save Esau, or Pharaoh, or Judas, or anyone else, then God hasn't done anything unjust. Those people are getting exactly what the wages of their freely chosen sins have earned for them.

Second, *God isn't obligated to save anyone.* No one has earned salvation, so if God decides to save some and not others, then there's no wrong-doing on his part. For example, if Bill Gates went to an orphanage in India and decided to adopt ten kids, would you be right to criticize him because he didn't adopt more, even though he could have? Should we regard Bill Gates as a moral monster for only choosing to save ten children from poverty when he could have saved a hundred? No, of course not. We would praise Bill Gates for his kindness and compassion because we recognize that he didn't have to adopt anyone to begin with. He was under no obligation to do so, so the fact that he adopted any is not an example of injustice but rather of grace. So it is with God.

Then third, connected closely to this is, *since grace is a gift not an obligation, God can extend it to whoever he pleases.* What's amazing about grace is that I don't deserve it. I didn't meet any conditions that obligated God to save me. God's grace is a unilateral decision he makes to save a unworthy sinner. God is not duty-bound to save you, me, or anyone. There's absolutely nothing in me that would oblige God to treat me with kindness rather than wrath. God grace is given freely by God's own choice and since he's not under any obligation to give it, we cannot accuse him of injustice if he chooses not to give it. He is totally free to give or withhold grace to sinners.

Which then brings me to the fourth statement I'd like to make which is this: *Therefore, God isn't unjust, but God is unfair.* We must make a distinction between being unjust and being unfair. God is just in that everyone gets justice - either we must suffer for our sins or Christ suffers for them, but God sees to it that justice is done. Sin is punished. But God isn't fair in that God doesn't save everyone. Yet that's not unjust because none of us deserve it. If you want God to be fair, then he must either send everyone to hell or no one to hell. To be fair means God must extend grace to none or grace to all. But if God must grant grace to all, then grace becomes an obligation and thus not grace at all.

So if we read that God chooses those he'll have mercy on apart from anything in them and say to ourselves, "But that's not fair," you're right. God isn't fair. Grace isn't fair. But God is not unjust. God is just. God punishes all sins. He can choose to save some and not others. He's free to do that because he's under no obligation to save anyone, so the fact that he saves some and not others is not fair, but it is just. God is no more unworthy of praise for only choosing some to save than Bill Gates would be for only choosing ten orphans to adopt. God is free to save whomever he wants to and we have no right to complain about it because God doesn't owe us salvation; he owes us wrath, a wrath he pours out on Christ on our behalf. So God is indeed just, but he is also unfair because in grace he grants salvation only to those he has sovereignly chosen in accordance with his good will and pleasure.

Conclusion

Now I recognize this is difficult to get your head around and much of this sermon has been trying to demonstrate to you the unrelenting logic of what Paul is teaching here. I believe this doctrine not because it's easy to believe but because I'm compelled by the Word of God to believe it. I don't know how to come to any other conclusion than the one I've made throughout this sermon: God chooses who he will save purely on the basis of his own sovereign choice apart from anything in us, including our willful decisions. But I want to close in recognizing that struggling with the doctrine of election isn't merely a head issue, it's a heart one, and that's what makes this especially difficult. So let me speak to that for a few minutes before we're done.

My father died suddenly back in 2002 of a heart attack that took his life immediately. He quite literally fell down and died. Although I had been witnessing to him for a dozen years, he never came to faith in Christ and so I don't harbor any hopes he ever came to believe because his death was sudden and immediate. There was no chance for any deathbed conversions for him. As a result, I believe my dad will spend eternity in hell, apart from the God he rejected all of his life. It doesn't bring me any joy to say that, but I can't come to any other conclusion in light of Scripture and his lifelong rejection of Christ.

But here's where the rubber hits the road: then that means according to Romans 9, the reason my dad never came to faith is because God didn't choose him. God allowed him to remain spiritually deaf and blind. My father is responsible for his own sin, but God never caused him to be born again so that he would have believed. God could have extended grace to him, but chose not to. Yet, God chose me and called me to himself. Why? Why me and not my father? It certainly wasn't because of anything in me that made me better

than my dad. We were both sinners worthy of God's just wrath against our sins. It wasn't because I was smarter and I figured out I needed to decide to become a Christian. As I've often said, I didn't choose to become a Christian. When God called me, I wasn't seeking him or longing for him in any way. All I can say is that God in his sovereign mercy chose to save me and yet God did not choose to save my father.

That's hard. It's really hard. I've had to struggle over the years with that reality. God could have saved my father but didn't. I recognize God is just to send him to hell, but that's cold comfort when I know God could have done otherwise. God wasn't obliged to give saving grace to my dad, but still, it would have been really nice if he had. God could have, but he didn't. And so I have to wrestle with that very difficult truth. I'd love to think that God really, really tried to save my father, but God just couldn't do it because my dad wouldn't let him, that God couldn't break through his stubbornness and unbelief, but Scripture is clear it doesn't work that way. God chooses to save whom he chooses apart from anything in us and so for reasons I can't understand, God chose me and not him.

So I know the resistance to the doctrine of election isn't just an intellectual one: it's an emotional one. You don't like what it implies. It makes the grace of God sound arbitrary. I feel that with you. Although I affirm what this passage teaches, I feel the deep discomfort and nagging sense of injustice of it in my soul. When Paul raises the question about there being injustice on God's part, I find my voice joining in the chorus. So if you're resistant to this, if this message has been nothing more than fingernails running down a chalkboard, I get it. I really do. I can't think about this passage without thinking of my father and what it implies. This isn't abstract to me; it's personal and I know it is for many of you as well.

So here's where I need to leave us this morning: believe this to be true because it's clearly taught in Scripture, and then come to God with your emotional struggles and questions and be honest with him about it. If Scripture teaches that God chooses who he will save apart from anything in us, that he gives mercy to whomever he wishes to give mercy to, and hardens those he wishes to harden, then we need to humbly submit to it and believe it. No matter how uncomfortable it might make us, we need to believe God's Word. So as your pastor I need to call you to do that.

But also as your pastor I need you to know I recognize the difficulties that come with it. I'm in the trenches with you. And I'd invite you to be honest with God about the struggles and question you have. Paul recognizes this doctrine will raise some serious questions in the minds of his readers, so don't be surprised if it does for you as well. That's okay. I've been there too, and in some ways, I still am there. I don't have all the answers and still struggle with the emotional aspects of this, but at the end of the day, I need to submit myself to Scripture and trust in the goodness of God in spite of my own confusion and concerns. I can only ask for you to join me in doing the same.

With that said, won't you please join me as we close our time together now in a word of prayer? Let's pray.

This sermon was addressed originally to the people at Grace Fellowship of Waterloo, IA by Pastor Rob Borkowitz. Copyright 2018.