

The Absolute Sovereign Freedom of God - Part 1

Romans 9:19-21

July 29, 2018

Introduction:

I'm not a huge fan of the actor Jim Carrey. In spite of the dozens of movies he has been in, there's only one I like and that's a film from 1998 entitled *The Truman Show*. In it, Jim Carrey plays a man named Truman who was adopted and raised by corporation inside a reality TV show. Basically, his life takes place on an enormous television set he thinks is the real world, full of actors playing the part of his friends and family. Eventually, due to a series of mishaps, Truman begins to get suspicious and decides to investigate whether his reality is really real. He takes a boat and begins sailing off the island he's lived on for all his life and, in spite of the violent storms the television producers create to try to stop him, eventually his boat runs dead-end into a wall. He discovers the ocean he thought went on for miles and miles actually ended with a solid barrier painted to look like the horizon. Truman quite literally hits a wall and his voyage can go no further.

Today we're going to hit a wall, not physically, but rather theologically. We're coming to a place where we can travel no further in our understanding. We've been sailing through some choppy waters in Romans 9 as the apostle Paul has been making the case for the primacy of God's sovereign choice in salvation. He's been trying to demonstrate that God never promised salvation to every single Jew simply because they were related to Abraham, but rather God chooses to save apart from any works or decision on behalf of the individual.

As a result of this, Paul anticipated an objection that we talked about last week, asking in v. 14 if there's injustice on God's part for choosing to save people apart from anything about them, either good or bad. But instead of appealing to man's free will as the basis upon which God chooses one person to save over another, Paul doubled-down, asserting God's freedom to give mercy to whomever he wanted and to harden whoever he wanted, using Pharaoh as an example of someone he hardened according to his free sovereign choice. Paul then ended the passage right before our text today with this bold assertion: *"So then [God] has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills."*

That's not the answer most people were expecting. Paul doesn't give one inch of ground on this point. Paul has stated repeatedly over and over again in this chapter that God's choice of whom he'll extend saving grace to is not conditioned upon anything in us, be it our actions or decisions, but is freely given according to his own sovereign choice. But that answer doesn't satisfy Paul's readers. This rubs their fur the wrong way. So this morning Paul is anticipating yet another objection to his teaching on election, one I would imagine some of you share as well. So if you would, please open your Bibles to Romans 9, which can be found on pg. 945 of the pew Bibles should you be using one of those this morning. I'm going to read starting at v. 19 through v. 21. Paul writes, **"You will say to me then, 'Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?' But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, 'Why have you made me like this?' Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use?"**

Much like last week's passage, today's text starts with an objection to what Paul has been teaching. Like I mentioned earlier, Paul just got done saying in v. 18 that "[God] has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills." So he follows on the heels of that statement with this next objection, which is our first point this morning...

1. The Objection: Why does God hold us accountable if we can't resist his will?

The objection Paul's expecting from what was just said in v. 18 goes like this, "**You will say to me then, 'Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?'**" Now this objection makes sense if Paul is indeed teaching that God saves whomever he wants, regardless of anything they have done. If Paul believes God chooses us on the basis of our foreseen future faith, then this objection and the one we looked at last week doesn't make any sense. Think about it for a moment: why would anyone raise this question if we choose God by our own free volition and God then simply responds to what we want? There would be no objection at all, right? But if Paul is indeed saying God chooses who he will save and who he will not, if "God has mercy on whomever he will and hardens whomever he wills," then this objection makes perfect sense. So it's only this understanding of God's absolute unconditional freedom to choose who to save and who not to save that would lead us to the objection we find here in v. 19.

So that's why the objection is there but now let's consider the objection itself. The heart of this objection is ultimately raising a question about the relationship between God's sovereignty and human responsibility. If God chooses who to save apart from anything we do, and hardens those he wishes to harden, then how can God rightly hold us responsible? This gets to what I see as one of the core objections to the doctrine of election and predestination many people have. The doctrine of election seems to rob us of our responsibility. How can God blame us for not believing in Christ when we didn't have any option to do otherwise? As Paul says, "**Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?**"

If you've been struggling with what I've been preaching on over the past few weeks, you should be asking this very question. And let me add that it's a sensible question. I wouldn't fault you for raising this objection because it's a perfectly reasonable one to make. If you're resistant to the doctrine of God's unconditional election, I would not be surprised if your objection to it sounds something like this. If nothing else, be comforted that Paul recognizes exactly how you're feeling! If we really have no choice whatsoever in whether we're saved or not, if it's all based on God's choice of us, then how can God blame someone for not believing? If he's really sovereign, then who can resist his will if he decides not to save someone and instead hardens them in their sin?

Given that, we need to see how Paul goes about answering this objection. Now if we're misunderstanding him, this would be the point where Paul should reply by saying that we can resist God's will because his choice of us is conditioned upon whether we first repent of our sins and believe in him. If that's what he believes, this is the moment to say it. If God's choice is based upon our free will that first chooses him, this is absolutely the time for Paul to state it. So let's see how he responds by looking back in your Bibles at v. 20-21. "**But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to**

its molder, ‘Why have you made me like this?’ Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use?’ We’ll stop right there. So the second point of the sermon this morning concerns the response Paul gives to this objection and that is...

2. The Response: The created is in no position to question the Creator

Paul says in effect: “Who do you think you are? You’re in no position to question God. You have absolutely no right to sit in judgment upon God’s sovereign choices. He has the right to do whatever he wants with what he has created.” So notice first of all Paul doesn’t try to counter this objection by explaining how our choices influence God’s decision. He makes no defense on the basis of our free will. None. Instead, he doubles down just as he did previously in the passage before this and insists on God’s absolute sovereign freedom to do whatever he wants, but this time he adds a rebuke, saying we dare not sit in judgment on God because we’re not God. We’re mere mortal men, and the created cannot accuse the Creator.

There’s only one other place where we find an answer like this in Scripture. Do you know where it is? It’s in the book of Job, when Job questions God’s righteousness for causing him to suffer even though he had done nothing to deserve it. By the end of the book God shows up in a whirlwind and confronts Job with a blistering series of pointed questions that puts Job in his place, reminding him that God is God and Job is not. In fact, God never provides an answer to Job’s objection other than to silence him by humbling him through a litany of questions he can’t answer in order to demonstrate that Job is in absolutely no position to sit in judgment on God Almighty.

So it is here. The answer to the objection is not found in appealing to man’s free will: it’s rather a case of Paul saying in effect, “Silence foolish mortal! How dare you think you can sit in judgment upon God and his ways.” It means we’ve finally reached the wall in our understanding beyond which we cannot pass. Paul doesn’t solve the puzzle for us. We cannot understand how God is right to hold us responsible for our actions when he is at the same time totally sovereign over who gets saved, but we cannot sit in judgment on him for it and we dare not. God is God and we are not. This objection to God’s sovereign freedom is met with a rebuke and says in effect, “You can go no further.”

Now let me make something clear before we move on: the mystery we face here in this passage is not whether our choice determines God’s choice. This isn’t a “What came first, the chicken or the egg?” (God’s choice or our choice) type of riddle. Some think that’s the unsolvable problem, that we can’t understand how God’s choice and our choice work together, but that’s not it. Scripture is abundantly clear on this point: God chooses who he will save apart from anything in us, including our decisions. There’s no mystery about that. Over and over again Romans 9 has been crystal clear on this point: God chooses whom he will save according to his good pleasure, totally unconditionally.

Rather, the mystery is this: given God’s absolute sovereign freedom to save and harden those he wishes, how is it that God can rightly still hold us responsible for our actions? That’s the mystery. That’s the theological wall our boat has hit. Why is a person held

responsible for his unbelief if he couldn't have done otherwise because God didn't choose him? And implied in this objection is that God's therefore unjust to do so. So that's the real sting behind this question. It's not mere intellectual curiosity: what Paul's teaching here seems to imply that God is an unjust deity who holds people accountable for something they had no choice in.

Now the most difficult part of this reply is Paul doesn't resolve this tension. He doesn't clear up the mystery or give us much of an answer beyond a sharp rebuke for daring to insinuate that God is unjust and by curtly reminding us we're in no position whatsoever to question God. We may not like this answer, and may be annoyed that the riddle isn't solved, but this is the answer we're given to the objection: **“But who are you, O man, to answer back to God?”**

I'll be honest with you: this answer is the most emotionally unsatisfactory answer in all of Scripture. If you don't like this passage because of it, believe me, I understand you. No one likes being rebuked. No one likes raising a question and not getting a real answer for it. So I'm not preaching this because it satisfies my intellectual curiosity or is emotionally comfortable. I preach it because it's what I believe the passage is teaching, even if I don't like the answer either. Like Job, once we try to place God on the dock and accuse him of wrong-doing, we're immediately put in our place by being reminded that we're the created and he's the Creator. God can do whatever he wishes with those he's created and thus we have absolutely no right to question or judge him for it.

In order to illustrate his point that God has absolute freedom to do as he wishes when it comes to salvation and that it is not unjust for God who save some and harden others, Paul utilizes an analogy that would have been familiar to his readers to help demonstrate that God's sovereign choice in no way calls into question his righteousness. So moving on now to our third point, we need to consider...

3. The Analogy: A potter has absolute right over the clay

Notice how after rebuking us for our implied judgment of God's character, Paul uses an analogy. He asks in the middle of v. 20, **“Will what is molded say to its molder, ‘Why have you made me like this?’ Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use?”** Of course, the answer is the potter has every right to do as he deems fit with the clay. It is not the place of the clay to ask, **“Why have you made me like this?”** I've worked with clay and while clay of course cannot speak, if it could, it would be in no position to debate with me over why I used some to create a fancy vase for let's say a wedding gift and another to make a chamber pot. I have the absolute right over the clay to create a vessel for an honorable use as well as to make a vessel that's merely a bedpan.

So it is with us. We cannot question God for making some people that he'll save and others that he won't. God has every right to do what he wants with what he's created. We're his creatures and if he wishes to take from the lump of humanity some whom he will forge into a special people called to be his own and if he chooses not to call others but instead allow them to remain in their sin, he's absolutely free to do so.

Do you see how Paul isn't backing down one bit on his emphasis on God absolute sovereign freedom? He will not give one inch of ground when it comes to God's total freedom to do what he wants with his creation. Regardless of whatever injustice we perceive, Paul relentlessly reminds us that God's grace isn't an obligation: God can extend grace to whomever he wants and is free to withhold it if he wants and not one of us can dare question his sovereign goodness or justice in doing so. In fact, should we attempt to call God to account and accuse him of unrighteousness or injustice on his part, we're rebuked and reminded that we're not God and like clay, we have no right to question the potter for the choices he has made regarding any of us. To attempt to put God on trial for saving some and hardening others is to go too far. Humble silence before the Almighty Sovereign Lord of all Creation is the only proper response we as creatures should have.

That then brings me to the last point I want to talk about this morning, and it's not so much further exegesis of the passage as it is trying to help us wrestle with it personally. So our fourth and final point is...

4. The Rub: Making it personal

One of the difficulties I, along with many others, have with accepting this passage is wrestling with the hard ramifications of it. This is a bitter pill to swallow and I don't want to come down on you harshly if you're having a tough time with it. I get how you feel, I really do. This is possibly the most difficult, harshest passage in Scripture and it doesn't give anyone fuzzy warm feelings. I'm trying my best to do it justice and let it say what it seems to be saying because even if I don't like it, I have a responsibly to explain it and not explain it away.

But much like I did last week, let me talk about how the ramifications of this passage affect me personally. My father died about 15 years ago as an unbeliever. God didn't choose to save my father. He could have, but he didn't. And according to this passage God had every right to do whatever he wished: he could have chosen to save my father or he could have chosen to let my dad to remain in his sins, harden his heart, and allow him to be punished for his unrighteousness. God chose the latter and I can't accuse God of injustice because of it. If I want to object and say, "But God, my dad couldn't choose you because you didn't first choose him, so what right do you have to send him to hell since he couldn't have done otherwise?" then the only answer Scripture gives me is, **"Who are you, O man, to answer back to God?"**

That's not a very comforting answer. I don't personally find the answer satisfactory. And the realization that God had the power to save my dad, but chose not to is also incredibly difficult to reconcile myself to. It's far easier to believe God tried his hardest to get my dad to believe but my dad just refused but this passage won't allow me that option. So I'm left with having to realize I've hit a wall here and I can't go any further in my understanding. God has mercy on whom he has mercy and he hardens whoever he decides to harden. It's his sovereign right to do so and yet I cannot accuse him of wrongdoing because of it.

As I said last week, I don't know why God chose me and not my father. I'm not given an answer to the "why" question. I know it had nothing to do with anything in me or my dad that made God favorable toward me over him. We were both sinners worthy of God's wrath. I also know grace is a gift, not an obligation, so if God chose to give the grace to me to believe and not to my father, I have no grounds to complain. And if I want to complain and accuse God of not being good or just or say, "But it's not my dad's fault he didn't have any choice!" I have to stop myself and realize I'm clay accusing the potter.

So I want you to know that if you're struggling with this, I get it. This is a terribly hard passage of Scripture that raises more questions than answers. And it doesn't give us much in terms of answers other than to silence us and remind us that God is sovereign and is free to save whoever he wishes and yet is just to hold us responsible for our sins.

Conclusion

Paul has more to say regarding this issue, but I don't have time to get into that right now because it adds yet another layer to the challenge we face from the doctrine of election. So we'll have to hit the pause button here and take up part two of the passage next week.

But as I close, I want to make explicit something that needs to be said here regarding the doctrine of election that I think I've been unclear on, and for that I apologize. Let me say it specifically and then unpack it a bit: It's okay to disagree on this issue. It's perfectly okay to disagree about this. Not everyone agrees on how best to understand the relationship of God's sovereignty and man's free will. Some people, like myself, see the weight of the evidence falling on the side of God's sovereignty. Others see the role of our choices and decision as being the decisive factor in who is saved and who isn't. Let me state it clearly: there are godly, Scripture-loving, Jesus-following people on both sides. You aren't bad or stupid or it doesn't mean you don't care about the Bible if you disagree with me. Please don't hear that because I don't think that.

I recognize I can come on strong from the pulpit. I'm not wishy-washy about doctrine. I have to preach in accordance with my convictions and of course I want to convince you of my position and so I do so passionately. I can't preach what I don't believe and I know none of you expect me to. So I'm going to do my best to help you understand and believe what I believe the Bible teaches. As your pastor, I cannot do any less.

But you need to know that I don't fault anyone here for disagreeing. I recognize you can quote your own passages of Scripture to support your position. I respect that. I may disagree with you, but I do so respectfully. As with many areas of doctrine, I want to give us space here to disagree on secondary issues. I like to use a house and yard analogy. We all need to agree on house doctrines – the central doctrines to our faith such as the Trinity, the inspiration and authority of Scripture, the deity and humanity of Christ, that salvation is by faith alone, to name a few. We all need to be in the house by affirming those core doctrines as part of the family of God. But there are plenty of yard doctrines that we have freedom to disagree on. The yard is the place where we have freedom to roam in our disagreement, such as who should be baptized, or the timing on the return of Christ, or how we understand the days of creation, or questions about church government.

Well, the doctrine of election is one of those yard issues. We can disagree about this. It's okay not to see eye-to-eye. Regardless of the position you take, whether you come from a Reformed perspective that emphasizes God's sovereignty or one that emphasizes man's choice, both positions are still in the yard of orthodoxy. Both positions are welcomed here. Let me repeat this so I'm abundantly clear: whether you agree with my understanding of Romans 9 or not, you are absolutely welcomed here.

So as we go forward, I would ask a few things of you. First, I ask for both forgiveness and grace. Preaching on Romans 9 isn't an easy task. I'm trying to convince you of something many people find extremely distasteful: that's not a walk in the park. Plus I know I can be a bull in a china shop sometimes and I probably come out of the gate too strong and as a result offend you. Those are my weakness and my sins I recognize I have and that I'm constantly trying to work on. So please accept my apology if I've come across as insensitive or arrogant at any point. That's not my intention so please forgive me for when I've done you wrong and please give me grace for the future.

Second, I would ask you to strive to always go back to the Word of God and let it speak into our lives. Just because we disagree on yard issues such as these doesn't mean every perspective is correct. I want Grace Fellowship Church to be a place where we can talk about these secondary doctrines with charity and grace, but also with openness and honesty. I know I get to monologue every Sunday and so I have an unfair advantage in stating my case. But that doesn't mean we can't talk during the week. I'm willing to sit down and listen to you as well. I'm trying to create space for that on Sundays after the service. If you can, please come to Room 5 after the service today and let's talk about the message. I know this was a harsh passage so let's dialogue about it. Please don't sit here with your arms crossed and walk out angry – be open to change and willing to ask questions and make your case for why you think the way you do. If these messages on Romans 9 challenge you, then use it as an opportunity to either grow more firm in your position or be open to possibly change your position if you find what I'm saying convincing. This is an opportunity for growth, so let's make the most of this opportunity together be having respectful, charitable conversations with one another.

So with that, I invite you now to please bow your heads as I close our time in prayer.