

Sermon 100: Romans 9:14-16: The Justice and Mercy of God

OUTLINE

The innocence of God
The unity of God
The mercy of God
The goodness of God

INTRODUCTION

What is the most important lesson in Romans 9? Let me surprise you and tell you that I think the most important lesson in Romans 9 is not the doctrine of sovereign election by grace, and that is very important. I believe that the most important lesson of Romans 9 is the lesson of learning humility in all our thinking about God. This portion of Scripture is one of the biggest mine fields for misrepresenting the glory of God, this portion of scripture more than any other has been the victim of man's logic, philosophy, rationalisms, objections and exalting of himself to test and question God demanding explanations. As sinful human beings have dashed themselves against the truths of the scriptures before us the glory of God has been the greatest casualty as we have remade Him into an image that fits neatly into our assumptions, expectations and rationalizations.

As we stand on the brink of exploring what the bible has to say about God's motivation in saving some and not all I want to put a bridle on us. Let us not be like the fool of Prov. 18:2, 'A fool takes no pleasure in understanding, but only in expressing his opinion.' I want to draw attention to our ready rationalizing when it comes to the profound things of God, we are sinners who cherish our own opinions as if they were our children defending them not because they are right but because they are ours. I am wanting us to begin our consideration of this passage with minds prepared, minds that are full of a fear for God, minds that are reigned in and ready to submit to Scripture. We come to ideas that are difficult and our stubborn demanding pride finds it hard to accept what the bible has to say. As for myself I have meditated on Moses in Numbers 20:11-13 where Moses was commanded to speak to the rock for water to come out for the people, but instead he struck the rock twice in his anger. On account of this act God punished Moses so that he would not cross over the Jordan and enter the promised land. God was angry at Moses because Moses misrepresented God before the eyes of the people. He portrayed God as unwilling to give water, he portrayed God as taking orders from a man who could add to His words, and had to jump at man's anger, as it says in Numbers 27:14, 'because you rebelled against my word in the wilderness of Zin when the congregation quarreled, failing to uphold me as holy at the waters before their eyes.' (These are the waters of Meribah of Kadesh in the wilderness of Zin.)' Will you commit with me to come with minds ready to accept the Bible's teaching when clearly understood? Will you come with all your own thoughts ready to be changed and reviewed by the bible? I want us all to commit to stand on a very small plot of ground, the bible, and resist from stepping out in our own folly into idolatry, blasphemy, speculation, etc.

You will remember that Paul has just made the statement that God never intended to save every Israelite, defending God's power to perform His purpose by limiting its scope in election. He is demonstrating that God does not save us on the basis of race or works but on the basis of a sovereign free gracious election. He has just clarified that our salvation does not depend upon any foreseen works, or anything in us but is determined by God alone. Jacob was chosen for salvation before he was born and Esau was not. Paul knows that this sounds like God is being unjust. And so Paul anticipates objections and answers them. We see that he has two questions in mind in v14 and v18, the first relates to God's justice, the second to man's will and accountability. The topic of our portion is about asking difficult questions that relate to the mysteries of God; questions and issues that appear to put God in a bad light. Paul is engaged in what we call theodicy, theodicy is the defence of God against accusations against his goodness. We live in a world that hates God and looks to establish atheism on the basis of the problem of evil. Even in the church we find a way of thinking that refuses to submit to scripture because it has embraced worldly assumptions about how God has to satisfy human logic before things in the bible can be believed. Today as we look at Romans 9:14-16, as Paul answers the charge that sovereign, free election is unfair, we will learn the proper way to think about God when there appears to be a question mark over His character.

The innocence of God

Paul teaches us a fundamental assumption we need to emulate in v14, 'What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means! Paul acknowledges that the doctrine of election if pushed in a certain direction can raise the question as to whether God is being just or not. He does not run from the question but raises it. Now I believe that there is any number of arguments that Paul could have used here to settle the issue. He could have argued that Esau was sinful in Adam and that the only obligation God had toward Esau was judgement. However, instead of entertaining our God accusing enquiries he speaks in the most emphatic terms of the impossibility of God being unjust. His answer is 'By no means!' or 'God forbid.' We could say 'absolutely impossible.'

I find Paul default approach in these questions to be a stark contrast to the accusing way we normally think about. We find God guilty until He gives a satisfying logical explanation that warrants my faith. God has to give a credible answer to every possible answer I can conceive and if He doesn't pass I judge Him inadequate. He is guilty until proven innocent. Notice Paul's approach, God is of course innocent, and He never gets put on trial. We see Paul silencing the possibility of God being unjust. He does not live in a world that is indebted to Descartes who doubted everything in order to establish truth, making scepticism a basic premise for Western thought. He does not live after the enlightenment that sees man as the measure of all things and thinks himself competent and has the right to question the motives of God's workings. He does not live in a post-modern society that doubts the possibility of certainty. Paul's worldview is biblically informed. He is treating God as God not as an object of scrutiny for our amusement. He refuses to entertain our playful scepticism as if the character of God is another abstraction we can playfully remake in a game. God's innocence is not something to be doubted but assumed. He will not tolerate

man to toy with remaking God as He is not. He will not allow the majesty and glory of God to be trivialised. He does not indulge conspiracy theories, or the constructions of what you think might be clever or possible. He believes in the God as He has revealed Himself in Scripture and sees any line of questioning that views God as an object for observation and not a God to be worshipped as blind. Look at v20, '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?"

We play with God as if He were Lego or clay. Our irreverent bias that flows from our unbelieving hearts infiltrates all our thinking of God and Paul is a healthy remedy to this. For Paul when human logic seems to make an accusation he has a choice, he can trust the God who cannot lie, or he can believe his own rationalisations. Where do you put your confidence when strike up against a difficulty like this one? Is your default setting to be distrustful of self or of God? We have ample evidence to never doubt God even when we don't understand everything. We have a demonstration of His love and goodness in the cross, we can see His wisdom and power in the beauty and harmony of creation which we can see, we have His word and His promises, revelation about Him from Him and He cannot lie. As we ponder this problem and others be aware of your enculturation, that you have a lot of cultural baggage which has sprung from a sinful bias with which you resonate as deep unto deep, and so renew your minds by the Scriptures. God is not guilty until proven innocent, He is innocent and never gets put on trial.

The unity of God

Now if that line of argument does not satisfy your questions, your frustration has only just begun because Paul does not give a logical explanation for how God can be just in election, instead Paul appeals to the OT word of Scripture as an authority and affirms God's sovereign choice in election, v15, 'For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." Please notice that Paul answers the question of injustice by stopping it in the water (negation) and then by asserting God's sovereign right to save whoever He wants. He also changes the topic from a question of justice to the more pertinent issue of mercy. We will see that this subject change addresses our concerns of injustice and much more bringing our whole of thinking back on track. If you are asking questions that relate to justice and are not thinking in terms of mercy you have been thinking in the wrong way altogether.

Paul is quoting from Exodus 33:19. You remember in Exodus 32 that Moses was on the mountain receiving the 10 Commandments, but Aaron made the people a golden calf. God wanted to destroy the people but Moses interceded for them. In Exodus 33 God commands the people to leave the foot of Mt Sinai to go to the promised land, however God says He will not go with them lest He destroy them (v3). The people mourned (v6) and Moses prayed and God told Moses that His presence would go with them (v14). It was then that Moses asked God to show him His glory (v18). God told Moses that no one can see God's face and live and so God told Moses that he would see His back and not His face (v22-23). But God proclaimed His name to Moses, and it is this sermon on God's own name that Paul quotes, Ex. 33:19, 'And he said, "I will make all my goodness pass before you and will

proclaim before you my name 'The LORD.' And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy.' The significance of this verse is that God's name, which reveals His character, is a name that speaks of sovereign and electing love. Paul's response to how can God only save some, is to quote the sermon God preached on His own name which speaks of His freedom and sovereignty, that God is Lord and self-determining and needs no one and nothing and purposes all things according to His own good pleasure.

Ironically when those who disagree with the doctrine of God's free election argue they usually make appeals to God's character specifically God's love. They rationalise that God is a God of love so He must love everyone equally! Paul too makes appeal to the character of God, namely His mercy and instead of saying that God is at the mercy of His mercy he teaches that God is free in who He has mercy upon not obligated to have mercy on all. This is the second way of thinking about God that we need to learn from Paul. Paul does not see God as a slave of His nature, but free. We can easily fall into abstracting God and forgetting that He is a person. Systematic theology can be a danger that leads to this because in systematic theology we tend to speak of God's attributes, that is those characteristics of God or those things fundamental to His nature, God is holy, gracious, loving, merciful, etc. However, there is a danger of abstracting God and making His actions a direct effect in relation to certain attributes. So instead of seeing God's mercy as something that is applied by a person in keeping with His nature, we can abstract God's mercy so that it becomes a driving principle that He must submit all things to. Many errors in theology come from making one attribute a tyrannising principle that dictates to the person of God. The most classic examples being those who say that a God of love would never send anyone to hell, or that a God of love will finally save everyone. Rob Bell's book, Love Wins suffers from this tyrannising principle. Lloyd-Jones in his discussion of this points out a helpful picture that the Puritan Stephen Charnock used. He used the picture of the sun and its light. The Sun gives off its light universally, the sun has heat and light and heat and light flow without distinction from the sun. God is not like the sun. He is merciful but His mercy is not bestowed in the same way light flows from the sun. He is gracious but God is a person who determines who He will be gracious to. He is not subject to the principle of grace, He is gracious; He is not subject to the principle of mercy and be obliged to be merciful at all times and in all ways to all people, as the sun gives its light, no He is a person who is merciful. His mercy is not the driving principle of His nature under which all other things must submit but God is unified and all the attributes we see described in Scripture must not be made into principles that drive God according to a mechanistic model depersonalising God, they must be seen in unity in His person. This way of thinking is typical of human causal thinking, we think in terms of cause and effect in order to understand how things work, we must be very careful not to make God work like something created. We can think that way when we try and understand gravity and its impact upon an object but we must be careful not to make mercy to God what gravity is to any object.

This is a very basic mistake when we think about God and there are two opposing extremes we need to avoid. On the one hand we need to avoid making God's will subject to His love or mercy or grace forcing God to be at the mercy of any one of these. And on the other

hand we have to avoid so exalting will that it is no longer informed by the person of God. We must guard against these extremes by viewing God as a unity and using the bible to tell us how God's will and mercy interact. Paul tells us that God does not have mercy upon all but on who He wills to have mercy. Paul is emphatic about this point that God's mercy is free, for not only is God not the slave of His mercy but He does not give it based on anything in us, v16, 'So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy.'

The mercy of God

Let us consider the significance of Paul introducing the concept of mercy in answer to a question about God's justice. Firstly, notice that Paul uses two words, mercy and compassion. These words overlap in meaning and are very similar. Compassion has to do with those emotions of sympathy that are evoked when we see suffering; mercy has to do with giving good to those who do not deserve it. Once again notice that God is not the victim of our tear jerking stories, He cannot be milked for compassion by a moving story as we would be, He cannot be manipulated by our sad stories. He has compassion on who He would have compassion. This is another important way we need to think about God. You and I watch heart-warming stories and are moved to agreement not through analysis but emotion. We can be sold many things through clever emotional tactics, we are prone to give approval to characters in a movie who have a sad story, we even justify things like adultery if the woman comes from an abusive home and husband. We tend to make God in our image and think He must have the same processes as we do. Paul tells us that God is free in His compassion not a victim, He cannot be manipulated.

We said earlier that Paul answers a justice question by changing topic and talking about mercy, why would he do that and how does it defend the glory of God in election? Firstly, let me say that Paul is doing this deliberately. I do not think that Paul randomly changed topic in order to merely affirm God's sovereign right to elect whom He will. The change of topic from justice to mercy is central to the whole question of salvation. You see if God were to be just and treat each and every one of us according to justice, how would it end for us? Each one of us would go to hell! Justice for sinners is a fearful thing, we need mercy not justice. Now concerning Jacob and Esau, both are sinners in Adam, both have an imputed guilt and are through their federal head, their covenant representative came under condemnation and if God were to be just both would be damned. Jacob and Esau are not neutral but children of Adam. So instead of justice for both God has mercy on Jacob. He does not treat Jacob according to his standing in Adam, He deals with him according to mercy.

This reminder that Jacob did not deserve salvation but was a sinner in Adam also helps us see that God's passing over Esau for salvation was not neglecting someone who was sinless but someone who was a sinner in Adam. Esau did not deserve salvation, neither did Jacob; God was not obliged to save Esau and didn't, nor was He obliged to save Jacob, but in His mercy He chose to. His choice to save was not coerced, there was no good in Jacob foreseen or otherwise that influenced God's choice; there was no faith or works in Jacob

foreseen or otherwise that twisted God's arm. God could have rightly overlooked Jacob for salvation as fallen in Adam but chose not to deal with him according to justice as He did with Esau, but according to mercy and saved him.

So we see that God passing over Esau for salvation is not a matter of injustice, but justice. Jacob's election to salvation was a case of mercy and not justice. One more question with regards to justice can be asked, did God or does God violate justice in order to give mercy? Does God deny His justice in order to be merciful? The answer is no! Paul takes great pains to point this out in Romans 3:25-26, here Paul tells us that all those times He forgave sin in the OT was not a violation of His justice but with a view to Jesus who would one day come and make by one perfect payment a perfect satisfaction for all the sins that God ever forgives, 'whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. 26 It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.' Here we see that God is most concerned to be just and to communicate that He satisfies His justice. He would not be seen as an unjust God and so we must labour to defend His justice when giving mercy. This is the wisdom of God. God is able to save the sinner and punish the sin and still be just. This is our only hope for salvation, forgiveness through satisfaction, justification through the payment of Christ as the sacrifice that satisfies all of God's righteous demands with regards to our sins.

The goodness of God

So then, let us draw all our thinking together. Anyone who is ever saved is saved on the basis of an unearned mercy, a mercy that is God's prerogative to give, a mercy that is not given to all. This is the essence of Paul's point, God is not unjust He is merciful. Now Paul answers some questions but leaves us with many more. Let me be a fool and multiply the questions but then try and show you based on what we have seen in Paul's method how we are to deal with these difficult questions. Here are some other questions we could add to the mix.

Why doesn't God decide to save all why does He save only some?

Why did God predestine all of humanity to fall in Adam?

Why did God create the devil to cause mankind to be plunged into sin?

Why didn't God stop Adam from sinning by His sustaining grace as He did with the angels who did not follow satan?

I am sure that you could add to that. But I gladly place those conundrums before you in order to show you that we need not fear questions that might imply an accusing finger at God. Like Paul we need not run from them in fear but can face them as long as we face them in the right manner. There is more that we will learn from the next section but let me gather up what we have learnt so far.

First, be aware of your sinful inclination to accuse God and counter it with a deliberate submission to Scripture. Refuse to allow any forced conclusions that are based on guess work,

reductionism, or a preference for your own ideas. Submit yourself to Scripture in accepting that it can make affirmations about God without explanations. We believe the bible not when it makes sense but when it doesn't, it is not faith when we accept things when they have been explained to our satisfaction but when they don't seem to make sense. Ground your confidence in God not in a full explanation of every conceivable question you may have but on the fact that He can be trusted and does not lie. Remember that you are a creature that does not have an infinite mind, nor do you have all the facts, therefore you are ill equipped to judge God's methods and motives, never mind the fact that you are a creature and He is the Creator. Remember that His ways are not your ways and all the logic that we find useful for life in time and space with other finite creatures is not all there is, and is not a fit toolkit to judge God. But we are not without props for faith. We have the bible which gives us a partial picture, it gives us the beginning and the end, and something of God's workings. We have the promises and a clear picture of God's character who cannot lie or deny Himself, He can never be unjust. We also have creation which through the things that we can see can have an assurance that God does things well and in an orderly way. The revealed things can bolster our confidence in God's working in the hidden things. But most of all we have the cross. If you doubt that God is holy see Him satisfy His holiness at the cross; if you doubt that He is just see Him satisfy His justice at the cross; if you doubt His love, His mercy, His goodness, His wisdom, behold them all fulfilled at the cross. You may not understand every thought and motive of God, but you do not need to in order to know that He can be trusted and He does save. Take your thoughts captive to the cross!