

Sermon 101: Romans 9:17-18: Double Predestination

OUTLINE

Active mercy
Passive hardening

INTRODUCTION

The main reason why people reject the teaching of God's free sovereign and gracious election, is not so much because God is sovereign in showing mercy, but that He is sovereign not only in election but reprobation as well. Many can see the logic of God's sovereign mercy for the elect, but the other side of election, the dark side, the side of reprobation, this is the main reason why people reject the teaching altogether. Some will accept single predestination, that God elects to have mercy on some; but will not accept what is known as double predestination, that God also elects to harden the reprobate. One of the key verses which catches in the throat on this issue lies before us, Romans 9:17-18, '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." 18 So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills.'

Paul has clearly outlined the truth that God is the one who sovereignly decides who will be saved, and that this salvation is not because of any initiative in man but rests on God's will. We have seen that this is an act of mercy because there is no human being who deserves to be saved, and any who are saved are saved by mercy. It is time for us to go where others fear to tread as Paul asserts that God is as sovereign in reprobation as He is in election. There is no part of the universe where God is not in control and this includes the eternal destiny of those who are not saved. Paul uses the example of Pharaoh as proof for the proposition that he is as sovereign in hardening as He is in mercy. God willing the hardening of sinners is the needle in the eyeball. It has been called the horrible decree and many have rejected it. To hear the words, God hardens whoever He wills sounds shocking and terrible and is rejected because it seems to contradict the picture we have of God from the bible in three ways. Firstly, if it is God who directly hardens the sinner in unbelief, then that would make God the author of unbelief and thereby the author of sin. Secondly, if God is the one whose will in hardening the sinner is determinative and secures the final destiny of the reprobate then this destroys the will of the creature. Please notice that this is exactly what Paul anticipates will be said in v19. Thirdly, this appears to contradict the love of God when it says that God hated Esau.

Today I want us to agree with Scripture that God is equally sovereign in hardening as He is in mercy. The objections that we have just noted are the most common perceptions about this doctrine and let me tell you from the outset that they are false, and all three of these objections are answered in a biblical understanding of double election. The one main assumption that brings about a wrong understanding is that God works in the same way to harden as He does to save. That God's sovereign determination to bring about His will is

enacted in the same way in mercy and hardening. This is not the case. God does not create unbelief as He does faith in the believer. He does not act directly to make unbelief in the reprobate as He does in the believer. This true view has been called asymmetrical double predestination. And in seeing that God is sovereign to accomplish His will but in two different ways we will see that many of the misunderstandings are alleviated and the logical problems solved.

Today we will be looking firstly at the direct and immediate way in which God brings about salvation, demonstrating how God works His mercy in the lives of the elect. We will then look at the other side in hardening showing that God works differently but no less sovereignly, and in this avoids the charge of being the author of sin, unloving and overriding the will. We will see that God is active in saving, passive in hardening, He acts directly for faith but indirectly in unbelief, He works immediately in salvation but mediately in reprobation.

Active mercy

How does God save a sinner? To answer this question we will look at Ephesians 2:1-10. Verses 1-3 describe our predicament in sin, please notice that these verses highlight our three problems, that we are dead in sin, subject to the devil and under the wrath of God, 'And you were dead in the trespasses and sins 2 in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience--- 3 among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.' In particular we want to focus on our state and inability to save ourselves. Paul describes us as dead, what does this imply? Amongst other things it describes our spiritual inability to turn from sin and turn to God. This state of sin affected our minds and wills as well as our bodies. We could not accept the things of the Spirit unless drawn by God to do so, 1 Cor. 2:14, 'The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.' John 6:44, 'No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day.' We would not submit ourselves to God's law, Rom. 8:7, 'For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot.' Left to ourselves we would have willingly rejected God and pursued sins, we would have been vulnerable to the devil who sought to manipulate us through our wrong desires. In this condition we could not seek for God because we would not, we could not receive the gospel because we would not. We had a will but our wills were not free from what we were as sinners. We willed for what we wanted, and we wanted sin. This leaves all men born to Adam in a terrible predicament, they must be saved, but they don't want to be, they will not to be, and flesh can only give birth to flesh and they cannot manufacture from their fallenness true faith and repentance, or true power by which they can free themselves from themselves. In order to will rightly, in order to choose for God, in order to choose against sin and take the saviour freely offered we need help from outside of ourselves.

And this is where God has to sovereignly move towards us in mercy. We do not deserve to be saved, we have no will to be saved, we have done nothing that could merit God to save us or even make it fitting that He save us. Paul tells us that we were children of wrath, the only thing that God owed us was justice. Paul speaks of this sovereign mercy of God taking the initiative towards us in 2:4, 'But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us.' 'But God', these are the most precious words in the bible. We were lost and damning ourselves, but God. We had no way to save ourselves, but God. We were at the mercy of our sinfulness and Satan, but God. We deserved to be judged to hell, but God. Who is the one who takes the initiative? God! Who is the one who seeks when we are not seeking? God! We see Paul describing God's great mercy, and His great love. What love is this that Paul is speaking of? It is the love mentioned in the beginning of this very letter, the love that God had for Jacob, the love that He has for His elect from before the foundation of the world, the love which chose to save us in Christ and not leave us in Adam, Eph. 1:4-6, 'even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved.'

What did this great mercy and love from eternity do? V5-7, 'even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ---by grace you have been saved--- 6 and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, 7 so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.' Many think that unbelievers are like men drowning in the ocean, that they are drowning but that they can still reach out for a life ring if we will just throw one. The idea is that God does 99% by providing a saviour and casting the life ring to us, but then we have to close our hand upon it taking hold of it, and it is this last 1% that is left up to us. This is not the teaching of the bible. The natural man cannot believe or repent unless enabled by God. God must first resurrect us from the dead and breathe new life into us before we will repent and believe. We are not men who are drowning, we are dead we are lying dead at the bottom of the sea and God breathes life into our corpses and we live to believe and repent. Notice in these verses how God unites us to Christ that we might taste the power of His resurrection, how God plugs us into His life that we might come alive and only after this how we then believe as it says in v8-9. 'For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, 9 not a result of works, so that no one may boast.' Grace saves us by resurrecting us, and with a new heart we believe in the Christ we rejected and receive the free gift of righteousness won for us by Christ. Regeneration comes before faith to enable faith, that is why faith is a gift, just as repentance is also said to be a gift (Acts 11:18).

So we see how God works. He comes to dead people and He mercifully and sovereignly resurrects us from the dead, enabling our wills to have faith in Christ, that our faith might be free and not God writing the order in us like we would for a computer. We see God works sovereignly, graciously, directly, and without violating the will of the creature. If we think that God works to create unbelief in the same way that He creates faith we will be making a big mistake, so let us then outline how God hardens.

Passive hardening

Perhaps the greatest difficulty with what the bible says about hardening and who does it, is that it at first sounds as if God is the author of unbelief and thereby sin. The impression one can get is that God comes up to people who want to go to heaven and drags them off to hell against their will, while He drags others to heaven kicking and screaming. Some might think that neutral human beings have been the victim of God putting unbelief in their hearts. All of these conceptions are most certainly false and unbiblical. And when we affirm that God sovereignly hardens sinners we are not affirming that God is the author of sin. This notion is only aggravated and not relieved by what we find in the portion before us, phrases such as, 'For this very purpose I have raised you up that I might show my power in you,' and 'He hardens whoever He wills.'

There is one basic truth that the bible teaches that we have to keep in mind that answers all the questions we have raised. Simply that God does not act directly but indirectly when He hardens people. He is not acting actively but passively. He is sovereign but He is not the author of sin. How do we make such affirmations that sound contradictory? The main truth that gets neglected but which is essential to all our thinking is that man is fallen and does not deserve salvation, and because of his fallenness he needs no help to unbelief but tends to unbelief naturally. In other words if God, as an act of justice and not merely an arbitrary act, God decides to pass over a sinner for salvation, all He has to do is nothing and the tendencies of man's heart will do the hardening. Let me remind you of some former illustrations we have used to show this.

Now picture with me the way that the Bible describes mankind, as a lump of clay, Romans 9:21 (ESV) "Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honored use and another for dishonorable use?" (Job 10:9, 33:6; Is 29:16, 45:9, 64:8; Jer 18:6; 2 Cor 4:7). Now think as a 1st Century Hebrew about the nature of clay, what happens to clay when exposed to air and sunlight? It hardens, it is the natural tendency of clay to do so. So in order to keep it soft it needs to be kneaded and worked over by the potter. We are not talking here about Polymer clay. However, when He stops influencing it, and leaves it to its natural properties its tendency is to harden. And so it is with the human heart.

Phil Johnson shares another illustration,

"When I was in high school, I had an old car, a beautiful 1954 Chevrolet Bel Aire. (I wish I still had it.) But in those days it was not quite the antique it would be today, and far from being a classic, it had some rather severe mechanical problems. One was that it steered left all the time. If I wanted to make it go straight down the road, I had to exert a steady pull to the right. But if I wanted to change to the left lane, I simply had to release that pressure, and the car would automatically veer left."

So when we speak of God hardening a sinners heart, He is not forcing anything upon the sinner, He is simply allowing the sinner to be himself. God is not the author of our unbelief we are. When God hardens He does not intrude upon us and download a virus onto our

hard-drives so that we do things we do not want to, no He just leaves sinners to themselves and they harden their own hearts.

Lloyd-Jones points out 4 ways in which the sinners heart is hardened by God but without God being the author of sin. Firstly, as we have mentioned God withdraws His restraining influences and allows sin to well up within us and overtake us, this is illustrated in Romans 1:24-25, 'Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, 25 because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.' Secondly, the law is said to multiply sin. Now this might confuse you because you would think that the law is a good thing and could not possibly provoke sin, but we see this to be true in Paul's own experienced recounted for us in Romans 7:7-8, 'What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, "You shall not covet." 8 But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. For apart from the law, sin lies dead.' Calvin described this effect of the good gifts of God to be like the effect of the sun, the sun causes trees to grown but corpses to rot; God's blessings given to sinful hearts result in hardening effects. The same sun that melts butter also hardens clay. Thirdly, we continue to see good things harden bad hearts when we see displays of God's mercy harden self-righteous hearts. This is clearly seen in the reaction of the Pharisees when Jesus condescends to eat with tax collectors and sinners. Fourthly, God allows the devil to deceive His enemies, we see this in 2 Thess. 2:11-12, 'Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false, 12 in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.' For those who reject truth God sends a judgement of lies.

Let us consider now then the case of Pharaoh. We it clearly said in the text that God hardens whomever He wills, and by implication this is what He did with Pharaoh. This truth of God hardening Pharaoh's heart is mentioned about ten times, Ex. 4:21; 7:3; 9:12; 10:1, 20, 27; 11:10; 14:4, 8. We would say that God did not cause His word through Moses to be accompanied by the Spirit for faith, but that Pharaoh was left in His unbelief. This is an act of justice against a sinner, and an act that is sovereignly ordained by God to be brought to pass but not without the use of secondary means, not by doing any violation to the will of the creature, and without God being the author of sin. Now the common comeback is that the Scripture says Pharaoh hardened his own heart, this is found about 4 times Ex. 7:13; 8:32 (28); 9:34. This is usually introduced as a way of denying that God is sovereign in who He hardens. We do not think that this is the necessary conclusion. We believe that God is always in control over everything that ever comes to pass, but also uses secondary means and without violating the will of the creature. So that although we see Pharaoh hardening his own heart, this was all revealed to Moses prophetically before it happened in Ex. 4:21, 'And the LORD said to Moses, "When you go back to Egypt, see that you do before Pharaoh all the miracles that I have put in your power. But I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go.' Paul quotes Ex. 9:16 which occurs after the 6th plague, and this does not mean that Paul forgot that Pharaoh hardened his own heart, or that he is denying that

Pharaoh hardened his own heart, but rather that God's will was to harden Pharaoh's sinful heart not by direct means but simply by allowing Pharaoh's natural unbelief to go uncontested by the Spirit. Both God and man were willing their own wills, but man's will was always controlled to the end that God's sovereignty ordains without violating man's will, and without God being the author of sin.

In theology we call this concurrence, we see God's will and man's will being exercised simultaneously without one cancelling out the other, but God's will is ultimately sovereign and His will is fulfilled, this however does not violate man's will, and God using secondary means is not the author of sin. Here are some other well known examples. 2 Samuel 24:1 (ESV) "Again the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he incited David against them, saying, "Go, number Israel and Judah." 1 Chron. 21:1 (ESV) "Then Satan stood against Israel and incited David to number Israel." From the context we can clearly see that David sinned, (2 Sam 24:10), yet the language of the text is emphatic. God is said to have 'incited David', and even to have told him to do it. Yet as we turn to 1 Chronicles 21:1 we see that Satan did it, so who did it, God or Satan? And the answer is, both! We would describe it in terms of primary and secondary causes. However, this still puts God in the driving seat, let me read you a few comments others have made about these texts. Walter Kaiser an OT scholar says, "It is also true, according to Hebrew thinking that whatever God permits He commits. By allowing the census taking, God is viewed as having brought about the act. The Hebrews were not very concerned with determining secondary causes and properly attributing them to the exact cause. Under divine providence everything ultimately was attributed to Him; why not say He did it in the first place"¹ The Bible understands the devil's allowed actions as God's willed actions.

I have saved the most important example till the end. A greater sin than the fall of man, or Satan is the killing of Jesus Christ. Who ordered this sin, exerted His power and ensured that it came to pass? Acts 2:23 (ESV) "this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men." Acts 4:27-28 (ESV) "for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place." God planned the death of the most innocent man. When those sinful rulers murdered Christ, they did all that God wanted. Yet if we continue to look into this topic you will see that Pilate and his co-conspirators are viewed as having sinned, Jesus in discussion with Pilate says, John 19:11 (ESV) "Jesus answered him, "You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above. Therefore he who delivered me over to you has the greater sin."" This greatest of sins was planned before the foundation of the world, it was prophesied in the OT, and was brought to pass by God's enabling. But let me ask you, is God the author of the sin, and the approver of the sins involved? I bet that you have a knee jerk and instinctive, 'No!', in response. Even those who do not view God's sovereignty in the Reformed tradition would believe that God willed the unjust death of Christ. And so it lies upon me then to highlight that the death of Christ was the greatest sin

¹ Walter Kaiser quoted in Dale Ralph Davis' *2 Samuel* (Tain, Great Britain, CFP, 2007), 260.

ever committed, and God willed it, and brought it to pass. And so how does God's involvement in this act differ from all the others under discussion? There is no difference, God willed it, brought it to pass, did not sin, nor approve the sin in willing it, and wrought His good purposes through it all.

As we have sought to understand God's word when it talks about God's sovereignty over all things and how He appoints that some are to be hardened we have not been to address every concern but in studying it we can see that God is indeed sovereign, He does determine the eternal destinies of all men in double predestination. He is able to praised in all that He does. We have demonstrated that God is not the author of sin, is loving but is not obliged to love sinners and loves some, and does not violence to the will of the creature. And yet in all this He is the sovereign God works out all things according to His will. We must stop and worship this God who transcends our conceptions who is perfect in every way and even a small look into His ways causes us to wonder at His love, His justice, His power, His sovereign control over all things, and our confidence can rest assured this this God who has loved us and sent His Son for us will also accomplish His will to save us.