

Sermon 102: Romans 9:19-21: Correcting wrong attitudes about God's sovereign election

OUTLINE

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INTRODUCTION

One of the most frustrating things you come across when you are trying to have a good argument is when someone answers your questions with questions. There you are trying to nail someone with a dilemma caused an inconsistency in their beliefs and they play the slippery eel by avoiding the question by asking a question. Once again Paul offers frustration to the person who comes to him with certain questions. Paul has just made the statement that God's hardening comes to pass by God's sovereign willing and providence, and Paul being a good teacher anticipates the next logical question. V19, 'You will say to me then, "Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?"' Please notice a few things about these questions.

Firstly, Paul expects this question as the logical objection to his former statements. In other words, if you think that what Paul said about God hardening people is difficult to accept and implies a removal of our responsibility, you have understood Paul's previous point perfectly. Secondly, appreciate the flow of logic that Paul is expecting. If God is the sovereign determiner of who will be hardened, and this hardening is certain as part of God's will, this seems to imply that God would be wrong for finding fault with us, as is implied from the first question, 'Why does He still find fault?' In other words, if our unbelief is ordered and brought to pass by God's will, how can God judge us for unbelief if all we are doing is His will? But Paul also expects a question along the lines of our responsibility and free will seen in the second question of v19, 'For who can resist His will?' In other words, if God causes the hardening, and this hardening is wrought by God's unchangeable plan and irresistible power, aren't we just a puppet on a string? How can we be held responsible for things that He causes to come to pass? Paul anticipates arguments along the lines of our accountability and our responsibility, our guilt and our free will.

Now these are questions that have probably occurred to ever one of us, and aren't you dying for the answers? Well here is where Paul frustrates his questioners and answers questions with questions. Now let me make clear Paul is not being evasive and deceitful and trying to avoid the issues, he shoots back with questions that are contrived to correct wrong thinking about God's sovereign election; 2 questions in v20, 1 in v21, and a long involved question spanning 22-24.

Now before we look at how Paul does answer the questions with questions let me highlight as many have done what Paul does not say at this point. Paul does not say, 'No, of course we are accountable and do our own will. God didn't harden anyone He simply looked into the future saw who would and wouldn't believe and reacted to our free will.' Any ideas that

Paul entertains these Arminian thoughts are crushed by Paul disregarding the whole instinct to defend God in this way and by his asserting the sovereign right of God to harden whomever He will making one vessel for honour and one for dishonour.

First Pastoral response

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?"' More important to Paul than having the answer to difficult questions is how you think about God and ask questions of His mysterious workings. Now some people have got the wrong impression from this verse thinking that Paul is against all forms of questioning, he is not. He is not against those questions asked by a genuine enquirer who is seeking to understand in order to better obey and worship. No, he is against the person who comes with a challenging attitude, a demanding attitude, a judgemental attitude who wants to sit in judgement upon God, subjecting God to the scrutiny of man trying to measure Him and find Him wanting. He is against the unbelieving and blasphemous tendency in the heart of every person that forgets itself and who God is when we are thinking about these things.

Paul's response is pastorally genius. He by passes the question and goes for the heart of the asker. He does this by reminding the questioner of three contrasts that remind him of who we are and who God is. He uses the contrast between man and God, 'who are you, *O man*, to answer back to *God*.' He reminds us of the difference between God the Creator and us the creature in two other pictures, molded-Molder, Potter-clay. Paul confronts us with God trying to pull us out of our mental abstractions and remember that we are not dealing with an idea but the Creator of the universe who made us. In other words, if God were to answer none of our questions and do everything without explaining Himself to us, that would be perfectly good because He is God and we are not. He does not owe us explanations, nor does He need to justify Himself to us, He is God. In fact, this is the answer that silences all questions. Questions are endless and if allowed we will keep asking why, but this is the answer to every question. 'Because God said so..., because God willed it..., because He is God..., this should be reason enough for anything God does. This most basic of truths is the one we forget the quickest and we have several examples in Scripture.

Remember Job, he was a righteous man who was not looking for trouble, but God decided to draw the devil's attention to him, and the devil took all his children, possessions and health. Job's initial response was saintly, but after a while he began to grow discontent with God's wisdom and wanted a hearing before God so that he could plead his case because if God would just hear his point of view God would change his mind and do things differently. The end of the book of Job is taken up with the longest speech by God in the bible when He appears to Job. Now imagine you are Job and God appears to you, what would you hope God would say? Perhaps you would like a good explanation thinking that God owed you an explanation because of all the pain you had been through. Instead God asks questions of Job, Job 38:1-7, 'Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind and said: "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Dress for action like a man; I will question you, and you make it known to me. "Where were you when I laid the foundation

of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements--- surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone, when the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy?" With these questions Job is reminded that he is finite, small, clueless and created. God parades His amazing and astounding wisdom by what He made. God doesn't answer any questions till Job is satisfied, God doesn't come with a look of embarrassment for all the trouble He has caused, He speaks of His power and His wisdom. Job's response is the attitude that Paul is trying to remind us of in his rebuke of the questioner, Job 42:1-6, 'Then Job answered the LORD and said: "I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted. 'Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?' Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. 'Hear, and I will speak; I will question you, and you make it known to me.' I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes.'" These are the words of a man who has realised that his thoughts of God have been too small, than any questioning of God's ways demanding answers and implying it could have been done better has been a sin of criticizing Him.

I have heard many people say, and I have even said it myself, 'When I get to heaven I am going to ask God about the holocaust, or why He made the devil, or why He allowed the fall, etc.,' Let me suggest to you, no you won't! When you get to heaven you will fall on your face. That idea that entertains the possibility that God could have done anything wrong will evaporate in the presence of His infinite and overwhelming glory. Every thought will be swallowed and drowned and penetrated through with the glory of His overwhelming majesty and the notion of wanting an explanation from the God whose glory you see will seem like the devil's revolt. 'But now my eyes see you....' He will be the answer before any question can arise. His glory will answer any questions before they come. Let me suggest that if you live a life of terrible pain and suffering like Job and you get to heaven and God never explains Himself to you, you will be satisfied. The reality of who He is unveiled to you will put to bed all doubts and questions, any thoughts that we presently have which spring from our ignorance and sinful bias and pride will be gone. This reminds me of an experience that David Brainerd which he recorded in his diary, 'Having been thus endeavouring to pray— though, as I thought, very stupid and senseless—for near half an hour; then, as I was walking in a dark thick grove, unspeakable glory seemed to open to the view and apprehension of my soul. I do not mean any external brightness, for I saw no such thing; nor do I intend any imagination of a body of light, somewhere in the third heavens, or any such thing of that nature; but it was a new inward apprehension or view that I had of God, such as I never had before, nor anything which had the least resemblance of it. I stood still, wondered and admired! I knew that I never had seen before anything comparable to it for excellency and beauty; it was widely different from all conceptions that I ever had of God, or things divine. I had no particular apprehension of any one person in the Trinity, either the Father, the Son, or the Holy Ghost; but it appeared to be *Divine glory*. My soul rejoiced with joy unspeakable, to see such a God, such a glorious divine being; and I was inwardly pleased and satisfied that He should be God over all for ever and ever. My soul was so captivated and delighted with the excellency, loveliness, greatness and other perfections of God, that I was even swallowed up in Him; at least to that degree that I had no thought (as

I remember) at first, about my own salvation, and scarce reflected that there was such a creature as myself.'

Maybe now you will understand what Isaiah felt. Isaiah 6:1-5, 'In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. 2 Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. 3 And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!" And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. 5 And I said: "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!"' an Israelite amongst Israelites, the only people with the true revelation of God and who declared His praises fell short and were considered unclean. All the praise they had ever uttered, all the majesty they had ever declared, every time they took His name for themselves and lived the lives they did, in all of their theological ruminations, these were all nothing more than insults that missed the mark.

We are all in need of this humbling just like the humbling of Nebuchadnezzar. He credited himself with all of his success and became proud, and God struck him with madness for 7 years, listen to what the most powerful man in the world confessed, Dan. 4:34-37 reads, 'At the end of the days I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven, and my reason returned to me, and I blessed the Most High, and praised and honored him who lives forever, for his dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom endures from generation to generation; all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, and he does according to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, "What have you done?"' At the same time my reason returned to me, and for the glory of my kingdom, my majesty and splendor returned to me. My counselors and my lords sought me, and I was established in my kingdom, and still more greatness was added to me. 37 Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and extol and honor the King of heaven, for all his works are right and his ways are just; and those who walk in pride he is able to humble.'

When we think to try and understand God we dare not trifle with His majesty reinventing Him as we please in sceptical unbelief, listen to John's encounter with Jesus Christ, Revelation 1:9-17, 'I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. 10 I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet 11 saying, "Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea." Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, 13 and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest. 14 The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, 15 his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters. 16 In his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth

came a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength. When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand on me, saying, "Fear not, I am the first and the last." Paul is rebuking the questioner because he has forgotten himself and his God, he has slipped into a way of thinking where they are equals.

I appreciate what Lloyd-Jones points out with regards to Moses encounter with God at the burning bush. Exodus 3:1-3, 'Now Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Midian, and he led his flock to the west side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. 2 And the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush. He looked, and behold, the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed. 3 And Moses said, "I will turn aside to see this great sight, why the bush is not burned." Look at verse 3 Moses is a keen observer and curious mind, and he approaches the burning bush as an object of curiosity to scrutinize it. He wants to do a little scientific observation and make some deductions. But look at what God does to Moses, v4-6, '4 When the LORD saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." 5 Then he said, "Do not come near; take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." 6 And he said, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.' How dare we approach God to scrutinize Him as if He were an animal in a zoo, or as if He were a performer on a stage and we the critic, or as if we were the judge and He had to satisfy us that we could let Him off the hook.

You may have come here this morning with your doubts and your criticisms and confidence in your own intellectual powers to weigh God and find Him wanting, have you considered who God is and who you are. True wisdom begins with a fear of the LORD, a trembling joyful respect of who He is and humility before Him. If your enquiring into God's ways has not begun with worship you have begun wrong. Can you see now the wisdom of Paul's approach? He seeks to remind you that we are not in a public debate and trying to show off our intellectual skills as we argue the various sides of a case. We are worshippers before an Almighty and majestic God and our highest duty is to praise and honour Him not to test Him or treat Him as an object. The questions that Paul anticipates are questions that are not submissive in their asking but accusatory.

Second Pastoral response

The second pastorally genius thing that Paul does, and is something that he does throughout chapters 9-11 is he appeals and hides behind the Word of God. V20b-21, 'Will what is molded say to its molder, "Why have you made me like this?" 21 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?' The idea of the Potter and the clay is a common one in the Scriptures. Paul here is not quoting any one verse but is alluding to the collective sense of three verses from the OT.

Isaiah 29:16, ' You turn things upside down! Shall the potter be regarded as the clay, that the thing made should say of its maker, "He did not make me"; or the thing formed say of him who formed it, "He has no understanding"?'

Isaiah 45:9, '"Woe to him who strives with him who formed him, a pot among earthen pots! Does the clay say to him who forms it, 'What are you making?' or 'Your work has no handles'?"

Jeremiah 18:1-6, 'The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: 2 "Arise, and go down to the potter's house, and there I will let you hear my words." 3 So I went down to the potter's house, and there he was working at his wheel. 4 And the vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as it seemed good to the potter to do. Then the word of the LORD came to me: 6 "O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter has done? declares the LORD. Behold, like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel.'

Paul is essentially saying this, can one think badly of the one who made thought, can one speak badly of the one who made speech. We have as little right and competence to criticise God as a canvas does the painter, stone the sculptor, or clay the potter. All of these verses tell us that God is sovereign. Paul quotes the Bible's sentiments in support not of a rational explanation defending His justice but to assert the truth of God's sovereign right to do as He pleases. Do you agree that God can do whatever He pleases? Do you agree that God has the right as creator and governor to do whatever He wills with His creation? Paul is not addressing the questions of justice because there is a much deeper question of submission to God's supreme right as creator and ruler that we have not submitted to. Will you accept that God does not have to please you before He can do something or will something? Will you accept that He governs the universe according to is good pleasure?

There is much more that we have to say about the issues raised in these verses but today I want you to be confronted with what Paul is confronting our questions with in the text. As you think about God and His ways, are you first worshipful and respectful in all your considerations? Have you reigned in your pride as it seeks to make you think of God as on object of scrutiny instead of falling down as a worshipper and not a sceptic? Do you stop to marvel and wonder at the gap between you and God and allow humility to enter into all your dealings with Him? And have you stopped to consider that this God of immeasurable glory and infinite holiness has condescended to leave His throne to become a man and allowed Himself to be abused, tortured and killed by the clay He made? Have you considered that this God thinks of you with love and has paid with the blood of His most precious Son to justify, sanctify, call, regenerate, use, glorify and reward you?; to bring you into an eternal relationship of the greatest intimacy with Him? 'What is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him?'