

THE LETTER THAT CHANGED THE WORLD - The Biblical Theology of Romans - Part twenty-five
Sunday, April 21st, 2019 - 6:00 p.m. - Teaching #2127
Pastor Don Horban - Cedarview Community Church, Newmarket, ON

THE MOST DIFFICULT CHAPTER IN THE BIBLE - AND WHY WE NEED TO STUDY IT (Part 3)

Romans 9:19-29 - "You will say to me then, "Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?" [20] 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?" [21] 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? [22] What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, [23] in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory— [24] even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles? [25] As indeed he says in Hosea, "Those who were not my people I will call 'my people,' and her who was not beloved I will call 'beloved.'" [26] "And in the very place where it was said to them, 'You are not my people,' there they will be called 'sons of the living God.'" [27] And Isaiah cries out concerning Israel: "Though the number of the sons of Israel be as the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will be saved, [28] for the Lord will carry out his sentence upon the earth fully and without delay." [29] And as Isaiah predicted, "If the Lord of hosts had not left us offspring, we would have been like Sodom and become like Gomorrah."

Paul knows that his words in **verse 18** will bring a strong reaction from his Jewish protesters - "**So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills.**" God *isn't* bound to only show love and compassion to the ethnic descendants of Abraham. God can't be locked-in to any one race. He said He'd pass the blessing of justification through the line of Isaac and then welcomed Ishmael into the covenant through circumcision. He raised up Pharaoh and used his stubborn heart to reach out to Rahab, a Gentile. God is sovereignly free to extend the blessings of His grace to *any* and to *all* who put faith in His promise. So, as Pharaoh proves so clearly, God "**....has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills.**"

And Paul knows in advance the idea that eighteenth verse seems to carry like baggage on an airplane. Those words *seem* to suggest a kind of *fatalism*. If God chooses on whom He will have mercy and then sovereignly hardens the hearts of others there is nothing left for us but to wait and see how He plays His cards. If God determines both mercy and unbelief, **how can we be held responsible either way?** That's exactly what Paul brings to the table in **verse 19** - "**You will say to me then, "Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?"**"

Remember the "**he**" and the "**his**" in this verse are **God**. So here's the issue Paul wants to address - How can **we** be held in any way responsible for the condition of our hearts? Let's face it, who can do anything **other** than God's sovereign will? God can't blame **me** for my heart. My heart is **His** doing.

This is the way many people interpret Paul's illustration in **verses 20 and 21** about the ***potter and the clay on the wheel*** - "**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?" [21] 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?"**

If God **has** the power to make our hearts either good or bad, and I **don't** have any such power, then **God** is responsible for the bad hearts that exist, not the possessors of those wicked hearts. And I hope you see the **terrible impact** of those thoughts. **God** becomes the **only** real sinner in the universe, because only **He** could make all the hearts good but deliberately chooses **not** to do so.

This is why Paul can't let this argument stand. Our text today is directly related to the preceding account of Pharaoh. It's directly related to God hardening Pharaoh's heart. Most important of all, it's especially related to the **way** in which God hardened Pharaoh's heart and the **purpose** God had in hardening Pharaoh's heart.

1) **GOD IS SO POWERFUL AND SO SOVEREIGN, HE USES ALL PEOPLE FOR HIS PURPOSE WHETHER THEIR HEARTS ARE OPEN TOWARD HIM IN FAITH, OR CLOSED IN STUBBORN, FREE REBELLION**

Romans 9:19-21 - "You will say to me then, 'Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?' [20] 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?' [21] 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?"

I know these are hard verses. But, for me, the key for interpretation is found in the last part of **verse 21** - "**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?" The key word - the **controlling** word - in this text is that word **"use."** This is a verse about God's sovereignly free **use** of any person or any group He chooses.

Obviously, these words have their most immediate application to the person Paul has just been describing - **Pharaoh**. As we saw last week, Pharaoh hardened his heart against God and God hardened Pharaoh's heart in judgment of Pharaoh's stubbornness. We won't go over that ground again here.

But there's a **new** point Paul is unpacking in today's text. And once we see it, we'll see how it ties in very intentionally with Paul's initial concern for Israel and the Jews. The point Paul brings out is **God's plan - His word - His covenant - whatever term you choose to use, isn't falling through the cracks just because people rebel against it.** God uses all people and groups for His own purpose.

Please take note of this. These verses aren't about God determining people's **character**. There is absolutely no mention of **character** in this text. These verses are about God determining people's **use**. Please look honestly at **verse 21** again - **"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?"** There's honored use and dishonorable use. But that's all there is. It's all about **use**.

This is a passage about how God **uses** people for the accomplishment of His sovereign will. He uses **believing, faithful people** and He uses **unbelieving, rebellious people**. God doesn't **make** the people believe or make them rebellious (except in the sense we've already studied as God hardened Pharaoh's heart, abandoned the moral sense of those who rejected Him in **Romans 1:18-32**, hardened the hearts of His own people, the Jews, as they persisted in unbelief in **Matthew 13:14-15**, and what God will again do to rebellious people in the last days - **2 Thessalonians 2:9-12**).

And there's a **reason** the story is so important for Paul. It fits his purpose in these three chapters (Romans 9 through 11). Many of God's own people - the Jews - have responded in unbelief. Not all the **descendants** of Abraham have exercised the **faith** of Abraham. Does this mean God's word has **failed**. That's the whole issue Paul initially set out to deal with in **Romans 9:6** - **"But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel...."**

But not only has God's word **not** failed, God will sovereignly **use** the **unbelievers** in Israel to accomplish His great purpose. Later on Paul will tell us God will use even the rebellious among Israel to reveal His mercy and grace to the Gentiles - **Romans 11:11** - **"So I ask, did they stumble in order that they might fall? By no means! Rather through their trespass salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous."** Like Pharaoh, God will use even the rebellious to accomplish His sovereign purpose. That's the central message of today's text.

2) **GOD'S USE OF PEOPLE ISN'T ARBITRARY, FIXED OR STATIC, BUT TURNS AND MOVES AND VARIES IN A PROCESS AS THEY TURN EITHER AWAY OR TOWARD GOD'S REACH OF MERCY AND GRACE**

This truth is **implied** in the image of our text and **stated explicitly** in other passages. The **implied** form of this truth is conveyed in the very image of a lump of clay on a potter's wheel. In fact, this is, in my opinion, **why** Paul chose this famous Old Testament picture. This is not a picture of a magician pulling a rabbit out of a hat. There is nothing **instantaneous** conveyed in the picture of the potter. Everything points to a **process**. There is shaping, wetting, smoothing, perhaps even **remaking** - all of it done slowly, gradually, over time.

There's a **reason** for this gradual working of the clay. As I said earlier, what is **implied** in the image is made **explicit** in other New Testament passages. Here's one: **2 Timothy 2:20-21** - **"Now in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver but also of wood and clay, some for honorable use, some for dishonorable. [21] Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from what is dishonorable, he will be a vessel for honorable use, set apart as holy, useful to the master of the house, ready for every good work."**

It is no reach to apply this to our Romans text. Whenever the **same author** used the **very same words** in the very **same context** we have reason to stand and pay attention. Here are vessels (same word), significantly, they are set aside for both **honorable use** and **dishonorable use** (again, the very same terms). But here we are told **explicitly** what the pottery wheel image only **implies**. People can change. They can turn from wickedness. They can leave what is dishonorable.

And when they do, God uses their lives in magnificently different ways from when they were dishonorable. Dishonorable use can turn to honorable use. In fact, it is the repentant, faithful transformation of **character** that

determines the *divine use*, *not* the other way around.

3) **WHILE GOD PREPARES PEOPLE FOR FAITH WITH UNIVERSAL, PREVENIENT, RESISTIBLE GRACE, IF PEOPLE STUBBORNLY RESIST THIS GRACE, THEY PREPARE THEMSELVES FOR DIVINE WRATH AND DESTRUCTION**

But even here, and this is the important point, God will sovereignly use *all* people to accomplish a fuller eventual revelation of His mercy:

Romans 9:22-24 - “What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, [23] in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory— [24] even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles?”

There is no getting around those opening words about God “*desiring to show his wrath....*”(22). In words today’s market-driven church can’t easily digest, Paul talks about God’s willing, wrathful judgment on wickedness and unbelief. And this needs to be carefully read and proclaimed as part of the gospel. But there are then *two questions* that come to mind. *First, why* does God want to reveal his wrath in these “*vessels*”? And *second, how* do all these vessels get “*prepared*” for either mercy or wrath?

Let’s look at the second question first: *how do all these vessels get prepared for wrath or mercy?* The vessels of mercy are easier to deal with because the text tells us how these vessels are prepared and by Whom - “*....in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory....*”(23).

God *prepares* vessels for mercy. Of course, it *must* be a work of God or it wouldn’t be *mercy*. If people *earned it* or *got themselves* in a good place to qualify, it might be *blessing* they received, or *reward*, but it wouldn’t be *mercy*. So far, so good.

There are also vessels of *wrath* - “*What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction....*”(22). This verse is actually quite different. Study the words carefully and you’ll find Paul says *God* reveals his wrath and power against them, but it *doesn’t* say God *prepared* them for that wrath. All Paul tells us is these vessels are “*prepared*” for wrath.

But how did they *become* prepared? If Paul doesn’t tell us specifically in this verse, could it be because he has already told us, perhaps even in this very letter to the Romans? This, to my mind, is the best solution to this difficult issue.

I think Paul doesn’t go into the details of this preparation for wrath precisely because he just *finished* a picture of this process *five verses earlier* in the description of Pharaoh. Pharaoh certainly *did* experience God’s wrath in the hardening of his heart. But this was only *after* Pharaoh *calcified his own heart* by spurning the warnings and revelations of God through Moses.

That’s not all. There are other very important passages in *this very letter* of Romans that spell out the exact same truth about how people become “*prepared*” for wrath, rather than *mercy*. Perhaps the most important of all is **Romans 2:4-5** - “*Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? [5] But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed.*”

What are these people going to *get* from God. Paul says, unless they repent, they’re going to get *wrath*. *Why* are they going to get wrath? Is it because God doesn’t want to show them mercy? No. The text is very clear. In fact, the reason God is giving them so much *time*, the reason He still *waits with patience* is He wants them to repent. But it’s not likely they’re *going* to repent. It’s not likely because they have set a bad direction for their hearts. Exactly like Pharaoh, as they resist God they *store up wrath*. That’s just another way of saying they’re *preparing* for wrath.

In other words, just like in Romans 9:22, there is no contradiction between these people *being prepared for wrath* and God waiting for them with “*much patience*”(9:22b). The two processes proceed along the same track of human history at the very same time.

I said there were *two* questions about these vessels of wrath and mercy. The *second* question was *why would a*

loving God “desire” to show His wrath? - “What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power....”(22a).

Paul tells us. God wants to use even ***stubborn, bent on wrath vessels to extend His mercy to a wider audience*** - **Romans 9:23-24** - “....in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory— [24] even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles?”

And the last part of our text shows that this was not some last minute adjustment to God’s covenant of salvation. Both the ***inclusion*** of the Gentiles and the ***remnant of faith*** in Israel were predicted long ago by God’s prophets. All of this, though too big for our total comprehension, fits into the perfect, complete plan of God Almighty:

Romans 9:25-29 - “ As indeed he says in Hosea, "Those who were not my people I will call 'my people,' and her who was not beloved I will call 'beloved.' "[26] "And in the very place where it was said to them, 'You are not my people,' there they will be called 'sons of the living God.' "[27] And Isaiah cries out concerning Israel: "Though the number of the sons of Israel be as the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will be saved, [28] for the Lord will carry out his sentence upon the earth fully and without delay." [29] And as Isaiah predicted, 'If the Lord of hosts had not left us offspring, we would have been like Sodom and become like Gomorrah."