

God's Humbling Mercy

Romans 9:1-29

Key Verse: 16

"It does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy."

The passage that we are going to study today is a hard one for me to accept. It goes against my thoughts because I am the kind of person who likes happy endings, everyone to get along and where everything works out for the protagonist of the story and they walk away happily ever after. In this chapter Paul talks about the issue of predestination. This can be a very hot topic depending on who you talk to. What does it really mean? If we break predestination down we find the root to be "destine" which means to "set apart for a particular use or purpose". And we use that word in phrases like, "he was destined for greatness," or "success was her destiny." So if destine means "to set something apart for a particular use or purpose," then predestine means to set something apart for a particular use or purpose, "beforehand," or "in advance." For example, many newlyweds get fancy dinnerware sets as wedding gifts. And the bride says, "I want to use these for special occasions," and the husband says, "Ummm, Okay." That couple has predestined those cups & plates for special meals. Now the Biblical meaning of predestination is the act of God setting apart certain people who are chosen for salvation.

When we hear that some people are chosen and others are not, that raises a whole lot questions like: Why does God get to pick and choose? Doesn't this make God unjust and unfair? Doesn't the Bible teach that God wants all people to be saved so why would he not choose everyone? What about my choice, how can it say that God loves us if we don't have the freedom of choice?" Doesn't this mean that prayer, evangelism, and frankly all of my actions, are pointless if it's all about God predestining individuals? And lastly, how do I know that I have been chosen by God? These are good questions and you probably have more. I don't pretend to have all the answers. God is greater than my small brain and after all you have to remember that before I graduated from IIT, I was kicked out twice. So I will do my best to share God's word today.

Our passage today takes a sharp turn in the mood and tone. Paul had concluded the previous chapter by saying, "We are more than conquerors and nothing can separate us from the love of God," but this chapter starts off very somber. Take a look at verses 1-3. "I speak the truth in Christ—I am not lying, my conscience confirms it in the Holy Spirit—²I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. ³For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race." If Paul just got done saying that nothing can separate us from God's love, why does he have such anguish in his heart? He was sorrowful because realized that his own people, Israel, had rejected Christ and if they don't repent, they would be cursed and cut off from God and their destiny was everlasting punishment. And so his heart ached. Paul's agony was so great that he was willing to exchange his own soul for the salvation of his people. He even risked his life to go to Jerusalem just so that he could preach the gospel to the Jews knowing that they wanted to arrest him. Paul was a real shepherd for his people. Moses also had a heart like this. After the Israelites sinned against God at Sinai by making an idol in the form of a golden calf, God was angry and he was ready to destroy them. (Ex 32:10) But Moses interceded for them. In his shepherd's anguish, he pleaded with God to

forgive them, or otherwise to blot him out of his book. (Ex 32:32) We find a true shepherd's heart in Moses and in Paul who loved their own people so much that they were willing to bear their punishment. They bear the image of our Lord Jesus Christ. (Isa 53:5) Here we learn that those who know the love of God have a broken shepherd's heart for others. They cry for the salvation of others' souls. How beautiful it is! Strangely, in our time, many people are indifferent toward the spiritual plight of others. We are just struggling to survive. May God help us have concern and love for the people around us, like Jesus.

Paul, seems to be lamenting for his people for they had been blessed so much and yet some of them will not share in the blessings of heaven. Take a look at verses 4-8. "Theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises."⁵ Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen."⁶ It is not as though God's word had failed. For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel."⁷ Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham's children. On the contrary, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned."⁸ In other words, it is not the natural children who are God's children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring." Paul anticipates that the readers of this letter to the Romans are going to raise this question, "If the blessings of salvation are not because of a person's Jewish heritage, or following the Law, what are we to make of all the Old Testament scripture that seems to indicate the God has reserved a great blessing for the Jews? To answer this Paul is going to introduce the concept of predestination. And God's choosing is not based upon a person's heritage, but rather on the promise of God. And we can break this down into three observations: First, predestination is an act of God's compassion, Second, predestination does not negate human responsibility and Third, predestination reveals God's glory.

First, predestination is an act of God's compassion

When we think of predestination a couple of questions that I mentioned in the beginning come to mind. Why does God get to pick and choose? Are his decisions arbitrary? Doesn't this make God unjust and unfair? In other words, what kind of a God looks down from heaven and says nonchalantly, you're in and you're out? When we think of this, we are surrounding it with our own bias and prejudices. However it's important for us to note that the Bible never speaks of predestination as if it is arbitrary. The Bible ALWAYS connects predestination to the grace and love of God. Verses 6-13 show us that God's choice of Jacob over Esau had nothing to do with their actions. When God chose Jacob it wasn't because he had done anything good or bad, it says "Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad—in order that God's purpose in election might stand:" (v9) God went against the tradition of choosing the first born to reveal his sovereignty, that he can pick the one he chooses. How God's choosing was not a random choice, for we see in verse 15, that God's choice was based upon his mercy and compassion. Paul anticipates a question that you may ask when read this, "What then shall we say? Is God unjust?" (v14) In other words, if God is up there in heaven picking and choosing whoever he wants doesn't that make God unjust? It might feel that way but Paul says, at the end of verse 14, Not at all. Why? Look at verses 15-16, "...I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion."¹⁶ It does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy." Paul's point is that choice, Biblically speaking, is not unjust but rather it's an act of mercy and compassion. Esau probably wanted to complain

that he was not picked but in reality he was not in a position to say that God was unjust in choosing Jacob over him because God's can choose to have mercy on who he wants. This has nothing to do with their human will but everything to do with God's mercy. Therefore God's choosing is not at random but it's based upon his mercy and compassion.

Still not clear? Maybe this will help. This week I read an article about a married couple that went out for dinner. The woman was nine months pregnant and about to burst. When their meal was over and the bill was brought to their table, the restaurant owner came over and she showed compassion on the expecting mother and removed her meal off the bill and put a little smiley face next to it and wrote, "This one's on me." What would you say if that happened to you? Think about this what if there were two people who lived it up and charged an enormous debt on their credit cards until there was absolutely no way for them to pay. And the credit card company comes along and completely out of mercy and grace says to one of the people, "Your debt's completely forgiven. You don't owe anything." Does that make the creditor unjust? Does the person whose debt that wasn't forgiven have any right to say to the creditor, "You forgave his debt, it's not fair if you don't forgive mine too?" No. It doesn't make him unjust. If anything, forgiving the first person's debt and taking the loss of it on himself shows his mercy. And actually refusing to forgive the first person's debt is the perfectly just thing to do. After all, the person is the one that who ran up the bill in the first place. I read another story this week about a guy who was arrested after eating a meal in a expensive restaurant told them that he could pay because he forgot his wallet and he want a bus boy to come with him to get it. Forgiving the debt is completely an act of mercy.

This is how we should look at predestination. God is not obligated to have mercy on anyone and he would be perfectly just to condemn the entire human race because we are all guilty of sin. And none of us would have the right to say that it's not fair for him to do so. So if God in his mercy and compassion decides to forgive the debts, the sins, of some people does that make him in any way unjust? Of course not, it reveals that he is merciful. When we begin to see that we are the recipients of mercy, and it's only because that God chose us in Christ before the foundations of the world that we cry out to him. God's mercy is actually enhanced and you understand more deeply how you are loved. It humbles you even more because there is no difference between you and an unbeliever except that God had mercy upon you. (other passages to consider Dt 7:6-8, Eph 1:4-6)

Second, predestination does not negate our human responsibility

Another question that is often raised is "Well, if it's all God's choice then we are just like robots because we don't have anything to do with it. There is nothing that we can do to affect our situation or standing before God so we might as well not do anything because it's all predetermined anyway." But the Bible does not present predestination in that way. God does not achieve his sovereign purposes apart from our human action. This is difficult to understand how it works, but this is the way the Bible presents it. In verses 17-21 we see an example of how God's interaction with Pharaoh is his right to do what he wants with his creation. Let's read those verses. "For the Scripture says to Pharaoh: 'I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.'"¹⁸ Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden.¹⁹ One of you will say to me: "Then why does God still blame us? For who

resists his will?”²⁰ But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? “Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, ‘Why did you make me like this?’”²¹ Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use?” In these verses we see how God has mercy on whomever he wants and hardens whoever he wants. But it’s important to remember what the book of Exodus says about the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart. If you remember when the plagues were coming down on Egypt, several times it talks of the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart. Sometimes it occurs because of Pharaoh and other times it happens because of God. It is almost interchangeable. And what we see is that it’s happening together. What this means is that Pharaoh hardened his own heart but God also sovereignly hardened his heart. Therefore Pharaoh was completely responsible for his own actions despite the fact that God was working sovereignly over the whole thing. It’s almost as if Pharaoh decided to harden his heart and God strengthened him in his stand. Now I admit that this is hard to understand, how God can be sovereign over the whole situation and yet we still bear the responsibility for our actions. It’s similar to how the trinity is explained God is three in one. The Bible doesn’t explain it, it just states it. Or how Jesus can be 100% fully man and 100% fully God at the same time. The Bible affirms both, so we have to affirm both. We can’t say it’s all our actions and that God doesn’t matter and the flip side of that as well, we can’t say that it’s all God and our actions don’t matter. Rather we have to affirm both. God does not predestine apart from human actions, he works together with us. That’s why we have to be careful of our thoughts and actions because they do matter.

Notice how Paul anticipates the objections over what he has just said about Pharaoh. He raises the very objection that is still raised even today. Look at verse 19, “One of you will say to me: ‘Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?’”, in other words, “If God is behind the whole thing and I have no control over anything how can I be responsible for sin?” The objections to this are not new, they have been around for over 2000 years. How did Paul respond? Take a look at verses 20-21. “But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? ‘Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, ‘Why did you make me like this?’’”²¹ Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use?” He doesn’t get very theological. Basically Paul asks the question, “Who the hell do you think you are.” Even just the fact that we ask this question reveals the contempt that we have hidden in our heart. And really it’s just an excuse that we use to take the blame off of us for our actions and we try to blame someone else. But the one thing that we have to remember that when God works, he works for the good of those who love him and are called according to his good purpose and he is not doing things apart from our actions. God is working in concert with us using our actions for his good purpose.

So how in the world does this apply to our life? What practical use is this? If God predestines then why bother sharing our faith with others? Or why should we pray? Why do anything at all? However, when you see that God accomplishes his work through the actions of people, it gives you great incentive to share your faith and to pray. Why? Because when you see that God has chosen to bring people to himself through your actions, you begin to see God’s big plan and he is actually involving you in it. He is involving you in bringing his chosen people to salvation. And when you speak the gospel, God is using that message to awaken people’s hearts and bring them to God through the help of the Holy Spirit. And it’s amazing to see that God also works through our prayers to bring the people that we love to have faith in him. For it’s through

those prayers that people are healed and blessed. And when we finally realize that God working together with us, our response is not, we don't want to do anything, but rather our response should be to do as much as we can because that is how God works. God doesn't just zap the one he wants. No, he works through people who have repented of their sin and put their faith in Jesus. (other passages to consider Gen 50:15-21, Acts 4:23-31- the disciples see how God predestined everything around the crucifixion and yet no one was absolved of their part in it.)

Third, predestination reveals God's glory

We see this in verses 22-24, "What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath—prepared for destruction?"²³ What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory—²⁴ even us, whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles?" This is a little mind blowing. Paul says that God desires to show his wrath and make known his power. Why would God have any interest in displaying his wrath? The reason is because he wants to show us, those who believe, how great his grace & mercy really is. The picture here is, in the last day when we see those who have rejected God be destroyed, we will realize that we deserve that too but God has been so gracious to us to keep us from that destruction by choosing in love not to allow us to suffer his righteous judgment for our sin. The destruction of the wicked shows us the riches of his glory. We will look upon this great display of God's power. We see this in 2 Thessalonians 1 when Jesus Christ comes back in the clouds inflicting vengeance upon those who do not know God and yet the believers are marveling at him. We will look upon God's great display of wrath and power and worship him because we will see just how great his grace towards us really is.

This is a tough message because we are not used to thinking about God like this. We are not used to thinking that we will give God glory when we see the destruction of sinners. But if you read the Old Testament you will see this truth repeated over and over again. God destroys his enemies in order that people will know that he is the Lord and there is no other. He is glorified in the destruction of his enemies. Those who do not suffer his punishment see the right and just destruction of the wicked and they bow down and worship him acknowledging that he is God. And that leads to incredible humility. At the end of the day, predestination strips you of any boast that you can make before the Lord. You can't even boast in your own faith and you have no choice but to bow down and say, "Lord I do not deserve this. I should be condemned along with the world, but you haven't done that to me. I don't know why but I praise and thank you for the mercy you had upon me." The prophet Isaiah understood this and said in verse 29, "It is just as Isaiah said previously: 'Unless the Lord Almighty had left us descendants, we would have become like Sodom, we would have been like Gomorrah.'" Isaiah gave all the glory to God, as he meant it's only because of God's grace that we weren't destroyed like Sodom and Gomorrah.

Another question that people often ask is, "How do I know that I've been chosen?" John 6 & 17 contains some of Jesus' teaching on this issue. Jesus says things like, "no one can come to me unless the Father has enabled him" (Jn 6:65) and "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day." (Jn 6:44) There is a hope in predestination in resurrection life. Jesus will raise up those who were given to him by the Father. But in verse 40 of John 6 you see the key to knowing that you were chosen by God. Jesus says, "For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have

eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day” (Jn 6:40) If you believe in Christ for salvation you are chosen by God. Nobody who truly puts their faith in Jesus will be cast out. So if you are trusting in Jesus for your salvation, that is the evidence that you are chosen by God. If you believe, ultimately it’s because God has graciously brought you to himself. There is an analogy that I heard used to explain this. It goes something like this. A sinner who is standing outside of the gates of heaven, see the banner on the top of it that says, “For who so ever will, may come.” And so the sinner walks through the gates and as he looks back he sees above the gate on the other side another banner that says, “Saved from before the foundation of the world.” Can you imagine what a glorious thought it is that as weak as you are, you have been in the mind of God from all eternity. And he has chosen to save you for all eternity? How humbling is that. Who are we to deserve God’s love?

This brings me back to Paul and his heart for his people. His longing and love for them, so that they might not be destroyed, but receive life. And I think about myself and I wonder, why don’t I have the same heart and longing that Paul did for people. And sometimes I wonder if I have a heart of stone. And I remember a song by Brandon Heath called “Give me your eyes.”

Give me Your eyes for just one second
 Give me Your eyes so I can see
 Everything that I keep missing
 Give me Your love for humanity

Give me Your arms for the broken hearted
 The ones that are far beyond my reach?
 Give me Your heart for the one's forgotten
 Give me Your eyes so I can see

May God forgive my hard heart and give me his heart for his people so that they may have his life.