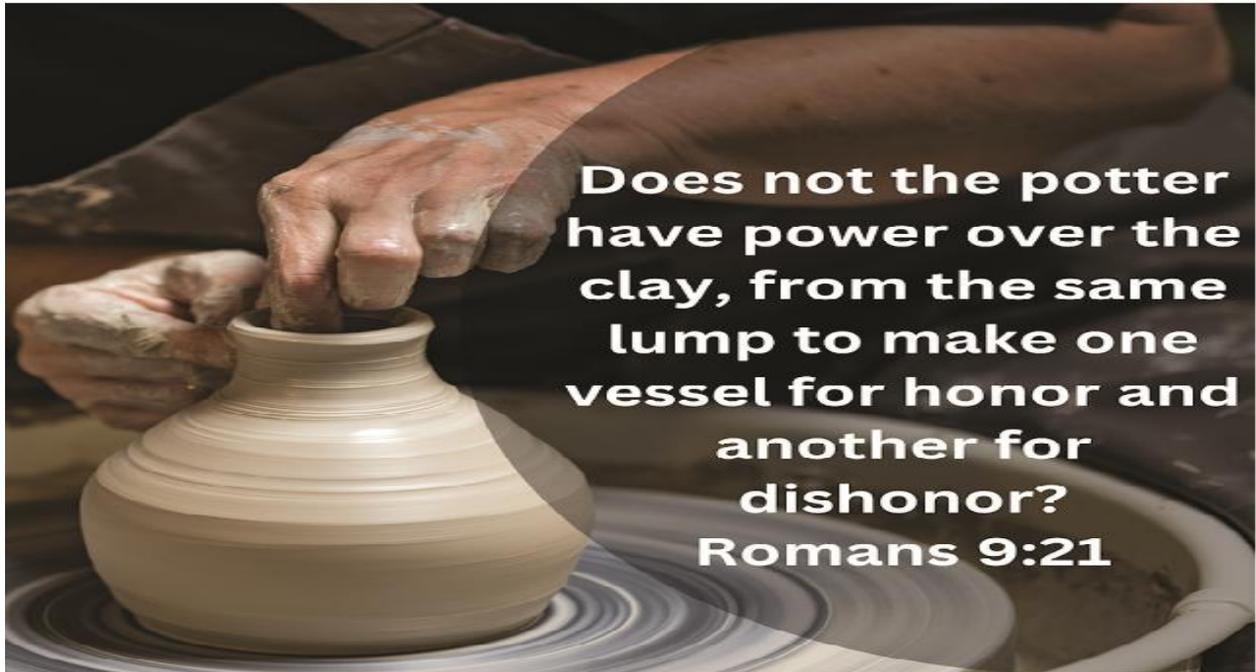


# Ministry of Grace Church

## Romans 9:14-21 – That’s Not Fair!

### Sermon Notes



Does not the potter  
have power over the  
clay, from the same  
lump to make one  
vessel for honor and  
another for  
dishonor?  
Romans 9:21

### Background

Back in chapter 8 Paul began laying the groundwork for God’s choosing some to be saved and not others. He said:

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to His purpose. Because those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brothers; and those whom He predestined, He also called; and those whom He called, He also justified; and those whom He justified, He also glorified. (Romans 8:28-30)

Now that Paul has very clearly stated the case for God’s choosing (election) of those whom He wishes, he asks another of his rhetorical questions. He is doing this in anticipation of the expected objection to election, namely that it isn’t fair. To say that it isn’t fair is to say that it is not right, it is unrighteous. So, Paul asks the question, “Is there unrighteousness with God?” However, the Greek text says: “Is there not unrighteousness with God?” In Greek, the double negative is not improper as it is in English. A double negative in Greek is a statement of emphasis of the negative. So, this verse could be read, “Is there any unrighteous at all with God?”

We have no right to tell God who should be saved and who shouldn’t. In fact, we have no right to tell God what to do at all! He is the creator and sustainer of everything in the world.

## **Romans 9:14-16**

**What shall we say then? Is there any unrighteousness with God? May it never be! For He says to Moses, “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.” So then it *does not depend* on the one who wills or the one who runs, but on God who has mercy.**

We tend to think from the human perspective that some people deserve God’s divine grace and others don’t. That is, we think that those of us who “accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior” deserve God’s grace and, therefore, are chosen. But that’s not how it is from God’s perspective. From His perspective none of us deserves His grace. Here’s what Paul said in chapter three:

as it is written, “There is none righteous, not even one; there is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God; all have turned aside, together they have become worthless; there is none who does good, there is not even one.” (Romans 3:10-12)

In other words, none of us deserve God’s grace. We all deserve eternity in Hell! We are unrighteous but God is not. That’s why Paul proclaims once again regarding God being unrighteous, “May it not be!”

When God told Abraham that He was about to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham pleaded with Him not to destroy the righteous people along with the wicked people. Here’s what Abraham said.

“Far be it from You to do such a thing, to put to death the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous and the wicked are treated alike. Far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do justice?” (Genesis 18:25)

Abraham recognized that God always does what is right; therefore, he pleaded for the righteous inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah (even though we know in reality that there is none righteous). The bottom line is; we are totally unrighteous, and God is totally righteous.

By way of further explanation of his current rhetorical question (**Is there any unrighteousness with God?**), Paul is going to show a few examples of God’s sovereignty over mankind demonstrated through His actions. The first example involves the Israelites and Moses.

Allow me to set the background for this first quotation from the book of Exodus. God has just led the people out of Egypt, through the Red Sea, and up to Mount Sinai. There, Moses was called by God to come up the mountain where he remained for forty days to receive the Law.

While Moses was up on the mountain, however, the Israelites grew impatient with him and his God. They demanded that Aaron, Moses’ brother, create a golden calf for them to worship. On coming down from the mountain, Moses saw the golden calf and the people partying and worshipping their false god. He became so angry that he broke the tables of stone containing the Ten Commandments.

After this, Moses went before God and confessed the sins of the Israelites asking that they be forgiven. As he met with God in the tabernacle in the wilderness, a pillar of smoke appeared before the door of the tabernacle. Moses was speaking to God face to face but could not see him because of the smoke. God proclaimed that Moses had found favor in His sight (Moses was chosen) so he pleaded

... “I pray You, show me Your glory!” (Exodus 33:18)

This is the point at which God proclaimed that it was His choice alone to show mercy to whomever He chose, and that He would feel compassion for whomever He chose.

Remember, this letter was written to Jewish Christians in Rome who would have recognized this quotation of the Old Testament as a proclamation of God's righteousness and His sovereignty over all of mankind, to do as He pleases without violating anyone's righteousness. He was refusing to show mercy to all the Jews but was expressing his feeling of compassion toward Moses by His own choice. Then He allowed Moses to see some of His glory.

In the preceding few verses Paul talked about God's loving some people and hating others, about God having mercy on some and not on others. He has made the point that He does so in complete righteousness because He is a holy and a righteous God who can do no evil. Paul now makes his first summary of these points. He says that the choosing is not about the one willing, nor the one running, but of God, the one showing mercy. It's not about the person who determines or decides to get saved. Neither is it about the one who works hard to keep all the rules. It's all about God determining who He will show mercy to.

In other words, Paul is saying that salvation is not based on someone choosing to be saved nor is it about someone keeping all the rules or completing a course of action to earn righteousness. You see, both of these imply that a person deserves salvation because they did something to earn it. Instead, according to Paul, it is based on God showing mercy to those who do not deserve it.

But Paul does not stop here. In the next verse he will use Pharaoh as an example of someone whose heart God hardened so that He could demonstrate His power.

### **Romans 9:17-18**

**For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, “for this very purpose I raised you up, in order to demonstrate My power in you, and in order that My name might be proclaimed throughout the whole earth.” So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires.**

Paul has demonstrated that it is God who directs the destiny of mankind. All of us deserve eternity in Hell because we are sinners; we are not righteous. God on the other hand cannot sin and cannot allow sinfulness to be in his presence. Therefore, the only way for God to have any fellowship with mankind is to choose to declare some of us righteous even though we don't deserve it and can't do anything to earn it.

But God's sovereignty goes even further than choosing to whom He will show His mercy, who He loves, and who He hates. In order to demonstrate his sovereignty and power, God allows some to fully demonstrate their sinfulness.

God instructed Moses to go into Pharaoh's presence and demand that he allow the Israelites to go into the wilderness to offer sacrifices to God. However, Pharaoh wouldn't allow them to go. Moses then told Pharaoh that God would visit various plagues upon Egypt. However, Pharaoh still would not let the Israelites go because his heart was hard. In chapters seven through fourteen, we repeatedly see the hardening of Pharaoh's heart:

**Exodus 7:14** Pharaoh's heart is hard with firmness.

**Exodus 7:22** Pharaoh's heart was hardened with strength.

**Exodus 8:15** Then Pharaoh saw that there was relief, and he hardened his heart with firmness.

**Exodus 8:32** Then Pharaoh saw that there was relief, and he hardened his heart with firmness.

Exodus 9:12 And Yahweh hardened Pharaoh's heart with strength.

Exodus 9:34 But Pharaoh ... sinned again and hardened his heart with firmness.

Exodus 10:1 Then Yahweh said to Moses ... I have hardened his heart and the heart of his servants with firmness.

Exodus 10:20 But Yahweh hardened Pharaoh's heart with strength.

Exodus 10:27 But Yahweh hardened Pharaoh's heart with strength.

Exodus 11:10 Yahweh hardened Pharaoh's heart with strength.

Exodus 14:8 And Yahweh hardened the heart of Pharaoh.

We can see from these verses that God did not make Pharaoh evil; that was Pharaoh's own doing (his sin nature). God simply chose not to change Pharaoh's heart; instead, He hardened it further. It was not out of spite or malice on God's part; it was done so that He would be glorified. That's what Paul is referring to in the current verse when he says regarding Pharaoh,

for this very purpose I raised you up, in order to demonstrate My power in you, and in order that My name might be proclaimed throughout the whole earth.

Paul now makes his second summary statement regarding God's sovereignty and his purpose in election. He has just shown that it was God who controlled the heart of Pharaoh after he had hardened his own heart against the Israelites and their God. And Paul has shown in the previous verses that God chooses whom He will love and whom He will hate.

Paul then used Pharaoh as his example of this declaration, and he now restates it as a summary statement of fact:

So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires.

Here you will see that it was Pharaoh who initially hardened his own heart out of his own sinful, prideful nature. But eventually, God took over and caused him to harden his heart even more. There are two principles to understand here. The first is that we are all sinful and, left to our own devices we will commit sinful acts against God. The second is that God is overall sovereign and will, at His own choosing, either pardon that sinfulness and declare us righteous through the blood of Christ, or He will allow our sinfulness to send us to everlasting punishment in Hell, which is what we all deserve.

"But what about man's free will?" you may ask. Nowhere in the Bible are we taught that unregenerate man has a free will. That is a concept of theologians and others who don't think it is fair for God to make all the decisions regarding our eternal future. The only free will that is spoken of in the New Testament is the free will that born-again Christians have regarding how they behave **after** salvation. As children of God, Christians can choose to obey God or to obey their sin nature.

### **Romans 9:19-21**

**You will say to me then, "Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?" On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? Will the thing molded say to the molder, "Why did you make me like this"? Or does not the potter have authority over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use?**

Paul has been very methodically and meticulously describing God's sovereignty in choosing some and not choosing others. Every Jew knows that God chose Abraham and called him out of Ur of the Chaldeans. From there Paul showed that Isaac was the chosen son of promise rather than

Ishmael, the first born of his flesh. He then gives the example of Jacob and Esau. Even though Esau was the first born, God said “Jacob have I loved but Esau have I hated.” And He did so without taking into account anything either of them did in their lives.

Paul’s next example is Pharaoh. Pharaoh had a hardened heart toward God and toward His chosen people. But God hardened Pharaoh’s heart even further so that He (God) might receive praise and glory. Thus, Paul declares

**He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires. (Romans 9:18)**

From our human perspective we look at this and say, “That’s not fair!” This is the first objection most people have to God’s sovereignty. Paul now gets to the other objection. If God is in total control and no one can resist His will in election, then why does he condemn sinners? Why doesn’t He just forgive everyone their sins and not send anyone to Hell for being a sinner?

Actually, this is just the same as saying, “That’s not fair! God shouldn’t choose some to go to Heaven and allow others to go to Hell.” Paul will address this in his response in the next verse. So, at the risk of taking all the wind out of his sails, let me simply state that the problem with this objection is that it assumes that we know better than God. But how can we who are finite beings with a sin nature ever suppose that we know better than an infinite, loving, holy, righteous God.

So, Paul’s response is, “Now wait a minute! Who are you to argue with God?” Do we have the right to tell our maker that He made a mistake? Do we who are imperfect and sinful have the right to tell the perfect, eternal, sinless, all-knowing, all-powerful God that He is wrong? I don’t think so! In this verse Paul is quoting from Isaiah who says,

**You turn things around! Shall the potter be considered as equal with the clay, That what is made would say to its maker, “He did not make me” Or what is formed say to him who formed it, “He has no understanding”?** (Isaiah 29:16)

Isaiah is chastening the Jews for making themselves and their actions more important than God. In effect, Isaiah says, “You turn the order of things all around, putting yourselves in place of God.” That is the same message that Paul is declaring to the Jewish Christians in Rome. They had made their desires and intentions to be of more importance than God’s; they had accepted a little God, big man theology just as many Christians have today.

Similarly, who are we to tell God who is to be saved and who isn’t? It’s His choice, not ours! He chooses us, we don’t choose Him. We have no right to tell God that He can’t decide who is to be forgiven their sins and declared righteous and who should suffer the agony of Hell.

As I stated previously, God is righteous, which means that He always does what is right, and He is holy, which means that He is without sin. Therefore, He always does the right thing without even a hint of sinfulness in it. If He chose to allow most of humankind to go to Hell because of their sinfulness and chose to save some of mankind from that fate by declaring us righteous, then we have no right to question Him in doing so. He is God! Do we have the right to tell the perfect, eternal, sinless, all-knowing, all-powerful God that He is wrong?

You see, that is arguing from the human point of view. Paul now completes the argument by making it from God’s point of view. He does this by making reference to another Old Testament passage. This one is also quoted from Isaiah:

**For all of us have become like one who is unclean, And all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment; And all of us wither like a leaf, And our iniquities, like the wind, carry us away. There**

is no one who calls on Your name, Who awakens himself to take hold of You, For You have hidden Your face from us And have melted us into the hand of our iniquities. But now, O Yahweh, You are our Father; We are the clay, and You our potter; And all of us are the work of Your hand. (Isaiah 64:6-8)

In making this argument Paul is clearly showing that God is the one who has made us and not the other way around. Since He made us, He is the potter, and we are the clay. This is not just a metaphorical statement. We really are made of clay. Our father Adam was made from the dirt.

Then Yahweh God formed man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and so the man became a living being. (Genesis 2:7)

Paul is declaring that God, as the potter, has the power and the right to make one vessel (man or woman) unto a dishonorable end and another one to an honorable end.

As I have said before, this expresses a big God, little man theology. Unfortunately, today it is in vogue to believe in a big man, little God theology, where we are the ones in control and we tell God what we want Him to do. But that's not the way it really is! We have "turned it all around."

### **So What?**

None of us deserves God's grace and God is not obliged in any way to show mercy to any of us. We are not chosen because we have accepted Christ as Savior; we accept Christ as Savior because we are chosen. That is why all of us who are born again Christians should proclaim

### **Thank you, God, for choosing me!**

God can harden the heart of whomever He wants. But He can also open the spiritual eyes of a lost sinner, allowing him or her to see and believe that Christ died on the cross to pay for his or her sins - and He gets all the glory! God is ruling over all of creation, including you and me. If you are a born-again Christian, do you choose to submit to Him, or do you want to be in control?

We have no right to criticize God for the way He chooses to run His creation. Instead of complaining and fighting His will for us, we need to better understand Him and His will for us. As we do, we will fall on our knees asking for forgiveness for even questioning His will and His sovereignty.

In the final analysis it really is fair for God to allow most of mankind to go to Hell and save a few from that fate. It is fair for Him to make that choice! After all, God did it that way and He is sinless and He is always right!

God is in control, and He will do as He pleases. He will have mercy on whom He will have mercy and whoever he wants to He will harden. He makes one vessel unto honor, pardoning him or her by His grace, and He makes another vessel unto dishonor, condemning him or her to Hell for his or her sinfulness and impenitent heart.

Who are we to tell God, "That's not fair!"?

Let's pray