

“Is There Injustice on God’s Part” (2)

Jeremiah 18:5-11; Romans 9:19-29

By Rev. Nollie Malabuyo • September 26, 2021 (BSCC)

Dear Congregation of Christ: One of the easiest ways to see what our culture and many people believe in today is to read protest signs. A couple of LGBT signs say, “Jesus is Gay” and “Born This Way.” From where did they get these ideas? Then, a couple of pro-abortion signs say, “My Body, My Choice, My Control” and “Abortion is a Civil Right.” One wonders how murder is a “civil” act. Then, there was this sign carried by several college women saying, “Going to Hell and Proud of It,” obviously laughing at Christians like us who believe in eternal hell.

But our text this morning has something to say about unrepentant sinners like them who are proud of going to eternal hell. They are what Paul calls “vessels of wrath” molded by God himself. And the apostle also says that God molded “vessels of mercy” as well.

The last few Sundays, we have been studying one of the hardest chapters in the Bible, Romans Chapter 9. Why is it hard? In our Saturday Bible studies, we have been discussing some of the most difficult sayings in the Bible. They are hard for two reasons. First, they are really hard to understand, some of them deep theological issues. The second reason is that some of them are difficult to accept because it goes against our human understanding or logic. Many passages in Romans Chapter 9 are hard in both ways: they are hard to understand, *and* they are hard to accept.

Last Sunday, we studied the first part of Romans 9, which are verses 1-18. This text tells us about a doctrine we call unconditional election. It teaches us that before the creation of the world, God chose to save from sin, Satan, death and eternal hell a fixed number of people from out of the whole human race. In this text, Paul teaches that God is absolutely sovereign over all his creation and whom he chooses to save. He has mercy on whom he has mercy.

This means that those whom he did not choose to save are hell-bound. Paul knew how his readers would react to this teaching, *“What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God’s part?”* He answers, “Absolutely not!” To explain his answer, he gives as examples God’s choice of Isaac over Ishmael and Jacob over Esau. Then, the apostle also cited God’s choice of the Israelites over Pharaoh and the Egyptians. In his sovereign will and good purpose, he had mercy on Israel but hardened the Pharaoh, *“So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills”* (verse 18). Paul says that God does whatever he pleases to show his glory and power. Of course, whatever he does is perfectly righteous and just.

The next verse, verse 19, is another hard question that people ask when confronted with the seemingly contradictory teachings of God’s sovereignty in salvation, and man’s responsibility, *“Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?”* If God does not choose others for salvation, when why does he still send them to eternal wrath in hell? He is so unjust, they say. So our theme is the second of two parts on, **“Is There Injustice on God’s Part?” (2)** under two points.

When the Potter Makes Vessels of Mercy and Vessels of Wrath?

If God is absolutely sovereign over his decree not to save some people out of the whole human race, then why does he still punish them with his eternal wrath? If God is in total control of the whole universe, who can resist his will? No one. So, if he wills that a certain person would reject him, and he is judged with eternal hell, then God must be a most unjust God, more unjust than the mythical Greek and Roman gods. For most people, this is absolutely untenable, absurd, illogical, senseless. You will run out of words to describe the “unsoundness” of this idea. Paul has heard this and other objections to the doctrine of predestination all throughout his ministry. We who believe in this doctrine are all too familiar with these questions as well.

Yet, Paul insists on both God’s sovereignty and man’s responsibility for his willful sins. These two teachings are not incompatible. They cannot be one or the other. They are both true and also simultaneously true. How does he explain it? He explains it in two ways.

First, God is God the Creator, and man is man the creature. There is an infinite difference between the Creator and the creature. God is infinite in his whole being—all-powerful, all-knowing, all-present—man is a finite being, limited in power, knowledge and presence. While God created the heavens and the earth from out of nothing and can destroy the whole universe with one word, all the nuclear weapons of man combined can never destroy the earth completely that it melts into nothing. While God has foreordained from eternity everything that happens in the world, man is powerless against a virus that can only be seen through powerful microscopes. While God fills the whole universe, man’s inventions will never, never make him physically present in two different places at the same time.

This is why Paul confronts everyone who disagrees with his choices in predestination, *“But who are you, O man, to answer back to God?”* (v 20) In our day, we say, “Who do you think you are?” If you really think you are in control of your destiny by your own “free will,” then you are God, and God is your servant. No, God is your sovereign King, and you are his servants, willingly or unwillingly.

Next, Paul uses the illustration of the potter and the clay to explain that God is God the Creator and man is man the creature. Paul asks a series of rhetorical questions. The first is, *“Will what is molded say to its molder, ‘Why have you made me like this?’”* What if Leonardo da Vinci painted Mona Lisa with a frown or a scowl, instead of a mysterious smile? Can the painted Mona Lisa say to da Vinci, “Why did you make me with a frown?” Or can someone rebuke God, saying, “Why did you not make me as tall and big as Shaquille O’Neal so I would be rich and famous?” Those complaints would be ridiculous!

Then, in verse 21, Paul continues with another rhetorical question, *“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?”* God has made all mankind from the same dust of the earth. From this same dust, he made some for honorable use and others for dishonorable use. What does he mean by this? Note that “vessels of dishonor” and

"vessels of honor" are parallel to "vessels of wrath" and "vessels of mercy." To be a vessel of dishonor is to be under God's wrath, and to be a vessel of honor is to receive God's mercy. Both have no participation whatsoever in their creation; God alone chose to mold them one way or the other even before they were created.

In his letter to Timothy, Paul explains the same point, *"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. 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"* (2 Tim 2:20-21). Therefore, vessels of honor have been set apart by God for his holy use. Before he created them, God has already prepared for them all kinds of good works they will be doing as fruits of their salvation. By their good works, they will give honor and glory to God, and they will be honored by God on Judgment Day.

His last rhetorical question is a follow-up of his previous question, *"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, in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory?"* (vv 22-23) Previously, Paul explained that God created Pharaoh as a vessel of destruction to show his power and glory. God sent disaster after disaster to Egypt, but Pharaoh hardened his heart more and more against God. It was only after the tenth plague that Pharaoh relented and set the Israelites free. But through these ten plagues, God demonstrated his power and glory over all his creation to both Egyptians and Israelites. God was extremely patient even with the defiant and rebellious Pharaoh.

Why did God endure Pharaoh's hard heart with much patience? He was giving him every chance to repent and believe in God. From the day that Adam fell into sin to the day of Noah's flood, God endured man's ever-intensifying sin, rebellion and unfaithfulness. Before he destroyed all mankind, except for eight people, every man's heart was filled with wickedness continually (Gen 6:5). He endured Israel's rebellion and unfaithfulness for hundreds of years before he sent the Babylonians to destroy them.

Our Lord Jesus Christ endured three years discipling Judas Iscariot, even washing his feet, all the while knowing that he was a "son of destruction." Today, after 2,000 years, our Lord is still waiting patiently for his elect to come to him in faith and repentance. Are you one of those for whom God is waiting patiently to come to him? The psalmist says, *"O Lord, you are a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness"* (Psa 86:15). He is *"patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance."* He is patient even to those who are proud of going to hell, proud of murdering unborn and newborn infants, and proud of opposing God's creation of man and woman for marriage and sexual relationship. But there will be a day when even God's enduring patience will finally run out. On that day, God will pour out his vengeance against all vessels of destruction because of their own willful acts of evil (2 Pet 3:9).

God the Potter is righteous and just when he molded some clay to be vessels of wrath, and some to be vessels of mercy.

When He Adds Godless Gentiles to His Unfaithful Chosen Nation?

Paul then goes back to the problem of the unbelief of his own people, the Jews. He first explains that God has molded some Jews as vessels of mercy, but he also molded some Gentiles as vessels of mercy. This he does to demonstrate his glory and mercy (vv 23-24).

To explain this action, Paul cites a prophecy from Hosea 2:23 in verses 25-26, *“Those who were not my people I will call ‘my people,’ and her who was not beloved I will call ‘beloved.’”* In the Old Testament, who were God’s people? Almost exclusively, it was Israel. Very few Gentiles or non-Jews were saved, such as Rahab, Ruth and the wicked Ninevites. But through Hosea, God revealed that he has a plan for Gentiles to be vessels of mercy. They were to be included in God’s chosen and beloved people.

Who are these Gentiles? These are those whom God will call from every nation, tribe and language of the world. These are those nations whom God will bless through Abraham. These are those from all the earth who will worship God with songs of praises (Psa 66:1-3). These are those of whom God prophesied in Isaiah 19:24–25, *“In that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the LORD of hosts has blessed, saying, ‘Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my inheritance.’”* Wicked unbelievers who were formerly enemies of God’s people will be called by God from Egypt, Assyria, and all the nations of the earth. These are those chosen ones from the ends of the earth to whom all the apostles in the first century and the ministers of Christ will preach and disciple (Matt 28:20).

But Paul also has good news to the Jews. At the beginning of Chapter 9, Paul says that even though Jews are in unbelief and rebellion against God, God’s promise to them has not failed. And it will not. Beginning in verse 27, Paul quotes another prophecy, this time from Isaiah 10:22-23, *“Though the number of the sons of Israel be as the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will be saved, for the Lord will carry out his sentence upon the earth fully and without delay”* (vv 27-28). God promised Abraham that the number of his descendants will be as numerous as the sands on the seashore (Gen 22:17). However, only a remnant from this great multitude will be saved from destruction. And if God was not merciful to Israel, they would be completely destroyed like Sodom and Gomorrah (v 29). As only a small remnant of Jews returned to Israel from Babylon, so also only a remnant of Jews will be saved on Judgment Day.

Paul then goes into another, “What shall we say then?” in verses 30-33. Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness through doing good works according to the law in their hearts actually attained righteousness. How? They attained it by faith. The reverse is true for Jews. They pursued righteousness through the law of Moses, believing that they will gain God’s promise of salvation through doing good works according that law. What they did not realize was that they will never meet God’s requirements in the law because of sin. Perfect sinlessness is the only way to salvation, but all mankind—Jews and Gentiles—have sinned and come short of the glory of God (Rom 3:23). Not even one soul will be saved by doing the good works of the law, because one sin will condemn a person to eternal hell.

God is righteous and just and merciful in his election of both Jews and Gentiles.

Beloved brothers and sisters in Christ, are you a member of God’s people through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ? You can only be a citizen of heaven through him. Be not deceived: Jews believe they will attain salvation by doing the requirements of the law of Moses, so they reject Jesus as the Messiah, the Savior of the world. They hated him so much that they crucified him in shame as one cursed by God.

Paul warns us just as he warned his fellow Jews. They stumbled over a stumbling stone, a rock of offense, who is Christ. Many people today stumble and fall over Christ because they want to be independent of God. They want to be sovereign over their own rebellious wickedness, rejecting any sense of punishment and judgment by from a wrathful God.

Who knows if you are one of those whom God has chosen for salvation before the creation of the world? Who knows if your family and friends or some stranger you meet are also one of the elect? But the Apostle Peter exhorts us who believe in Christ, *“Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to confirm your calling and election, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall. For in this way there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ”* (2 Pet 1:10-11). Therefore, you have assurance of your election and entrance into the kingdom of Christ through the good fruits of your salvation.