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**The Second Objection:
“We’re Not Responsible!”
Romans 9:19-23**

Introduction:

As we continue on in our study of **Romans 9**, which focuses **primarily** on the **sovereignty of God** in salvation, we now come to one of the most **awe-inspiring** but theologically **heavy** and **difficult** passages in the entire Bible. It is one that **stretches** us **beyond the limits** of our **finite** and **fallen** understanding. This is why I want to **begin** by **reminding** you that the **truths** Paul reveals here about God did **not** have a **detrimental effect** on how much he personally **prayed** and **witnessed** to others, which people so often **think** will happen if you believe what he says. For **1 Thessalonians 5:17** says he “**prayed** without ceasing” and **1 Corinthians 15:10** states he labored in **evangelism** “**harder** than any of the other apostles.”

Now thus far, we have seen in **vv. 1-5** that Paul was in great **sorrow** over the **fact** that in his day the **majority** of **Israel**, his fellow kinsmen who had been given **amazing privileges** by God, had **rejected** the **Messiah**, Jesus Christ. Since this **painful reality** called into question God’s **promises** to Israel, and thus His very character, Paul states his **thesis** in **v. 6** that “the **word of God**,” His **saving promises** to Israel, has not “**failed**.” He then went on to **prove** this **thesis** in **vv. 7-13** by showing that God never **guaranteed salvation** to every individual Israelite and that **physical descent** from Abraham alone offers no security. Instead, God insured a “**spiritual**” Israel within “**ethnic**” Israel

by **sovereignly choosing** or **electing** some, such as **Isaac** and **Jacob**, and **rejecting** others, such as **Ishmael** and **Esau**. His primary example in **v. 11** was where God chose **Jacob** over **Esau** **before** they were even **born** and had not **done** anything **good** or **bad**.

Knowing people would **react negatively** to what he just said about God's **unconditional election** of **individuals** to their respective eternal destinies, he anticipated the **first objection** in **v. 14**, which in essence is "**God isn't fair!**" After sharply rejecting this objection "**May it never be,**" Paul went on to explain in **vv. 15-18** why his rejection was justified. Revealing what God did to both **Moses** and **Pharaoh**, Paul showed God's **sovereign freedom** to declare the glory of His name in bestowing **mercy** on whom He desires, and **hardening** whom He desires.

But having revealed God's sovereignty in **both** showing **mercy** and **hardening** whomever He determines, Paul now **anticipates** and another **negative reaction** and **objection**. This **second objection** is what we will be looking at this morning. Turn in your Bible to **Romans 9**.

In Romans 9:19-23 we see **three aspects** concerning the **second objection** to Paul's teaching on the **sovereign calling of God**. The **first aspect** is this:

I. The Objector's protest against Paul

- A. Look at **v. 19** where Paul quotes an **imaginary objector's** protest:
You will say to me then, "**Why** does **He** (i.e. God) **still** find **fault**?
For who **resists** His will?"
 1. In other words, the objector is saying, "If God sovereignly shows **mercy** on whom He desires, and **hardens** whom He desires, and it is **impossible** to successfully **resist** His sovereign predetermined will, then how can people be held **responsible**?"

God is **wrong** to “**still find fault**” or **blame** them for their **hardened hearts** when their **destiny** has **already** been determined by Him?

2. The essence of this **second objection** is: “**We’re not responsible!**” The **fact** that the objector says this shows that he **clearly understood** what Paul was saying about the eternal destiny of individuals being attributed to the sovereign will of God. This is why he **protests!**
3. Now if Paul **knew** the objector had simply **misunderstood** what he said all he needed to do to **clear things up** was to state that the **ultimate factor** in peoples’ **salvation** is not God’s **sovereign choice** but their own human **free will** and **faith**. **But he doesn’t** and that’s **very telling!**
4. Paul didn’t have a **problem** with people asking **sincere questions** and **humbly** seeking to better understand God’s **mysterious ways**. But the objector’s **heart attitude** here is **wrong** and we see this in the **second aspect** concerning the second objection, which is this:

II. Paul Rejects the objector’s Presumption

- A. In **vv. 20-21** Paul sharply **rebukes** the objector and then gives the **first of two answers** to this objection. His **first answer** is: The **absurdity** of **creatures** contending with their **Creator**. Look at **v. 20**: On the contrary, **who** are **you, O man**, who **answers back** to **God?** (Stop there)
 1. Standing in **direct defiance** to the objector’s **protest** Paul declares, “**On the contrary.**” He then **rebukes** the objector and **puts** him in his **proper place** as he contrasts **finite “man”**

in his creaturely weakness and ignorance to the **infinite Creator “God”** in His sovereign majesty and wisdom—“...**who are you, O man, who answers back to God?**”

2. The one Greek word translated “**answers back**” (antapokrinomenos) means to **reply against** or **contend with**, which is similar to what **Job** did to God of which he later **repented** (10:1-2; 13:3, 15b, 18-19; 19:7; 23:3-4; 31:35; 42:1-6).
3. Despite the **infinite gulf** between the **creature** and His **Creator**, the objector has the **audacity** to **lip off** to God. Therefore, Paul **rebukes** him for his **arrogant presumption** in **challenging** God’s character and **accusing** Him of being **unjust** and **unrighteous** in capriciously showing **mercy** to some and **hardening** others.

B. To **further explain** the **absurdity** of presumptuously **talking back** to God, Paul then gives a familiar Old Testament **illustration** of a **potter** and his **clay**, probably distilled from **Isaiah 29:16** and **45:9-10** (Job 10:9; Ps. 2:9; Isa. 41:25; 64:8; Jer. 18:1-6). Look at the **rhetorical questions** Paul asks the objector in **vv. 20b-21**: The thing **molded** will not say to the **molder**, “**Why did you make** me like this,” will it? (The obvious answer is “**Of course not!**”) Or **does not** the **potter** have a **right** over the **clay**, to **make** from the **same lump** one **vessel** for **honorable use** and another for **common use**? (The obvious answer is “**Absolutely!**”)

1. Paul is **driving home** the **point** that just as it is **absurd** and **unthinkable** for a **molded object** to **talk back** to the **molder** who made it and **challenge** his design and purpose, so it is the height of presumptuous **arrogance** and **foolishness** for the

finite creature to challenge the justice and wisdom of the infinite Creator and demand that He account for His actions.

2. Using a **human potter** to **illustrate the divine Potter**, Paul makes it very clear that the **potter** has the “**right**” (exousian) or **authority** to fashion his **clay** into whatever kinds of “**vessels**” (skeuos) he desires. Likewise, in an infinitely greater degree, the **divine Potter** has the **sovereign right** and **authority** to do with **people**, whom He created out of dust (Gen. 2:7), whatever He desires.
3. Notice that the potter has the **right** “...to **make** from the **same lump** one **vessel** for **honorable** use and another for **common** use.” The word “**vessel**” (skeuos) here refers to individual people, and the phrase “**from the same lump**” (ek tou autou phuramatos) refers to the **totality of fallen humanity**.
4. Now it is important to understand that the **perfectly holy** God is **not responsible** in the slightest way for the **sinfulness** of His creatures (Hab. 1:13; Jam. 1:13). Although God **makes** no one sinful and is not the **Author of sin**, He is here dealing with people as **sinners** by **nature** and by **deed**, which obviously takes **human responsibility** into account.
5. **John Murray** accurately states, “It must be borne in mind. . . that Paul is not now dealing with God’s sovereign **rights** over **men as men** but over **men as sinners**.” (pg. 32)
6. And **Charles Hodge** says, “It is not the **right** of God to **create sinful beings** in order to **punish** them, but his **right** to deal

with **sinful beings** according to his good pleasure, that is here asserted.” (pg. 319)

7. Therefore, the **divine Potter** has the **right** and **authority** to make from the **same dirty** (i.e. sinful) **lump** of clay, **two different kinds of vessels** that are **equally underserving**. Notice again that He makes “...**one vessel for honorable use** and **another for common use**.”
8. The word “**honorable**” (timen) refers to that which is precious and noble. The word “**common**” (atimian) here is the opposite of honorable, and refers to that which is without honor or dishonorable, and despised.
9. Now since the **divine Potter** has this **right** to do whatever He wants with His **sinful creatures**, the objector has **no grounds** whatsoever for **talking back** to God for His **sovereign choice** to bestow **mercy** on whom He desires, and to **harden** whom He desires.
10. **John MacArthur** rightly states about this, “Many **critics** of such doctrine, supposedly coming to the **defense** of **God’s justice**, fail to acknowledge that **every human being** since the **Fall** has **deserved nothing** but God’s **just condemnation** to an **eternity** in hell. If God were to exercise **only His justice**, **no person** would ever be **saved**. It is therefore hardly **unjust** if, according to His **sovereign grace**, He **chooses to elect** some sinners for salvation.” (pg. 37)
11. And **F.F. Bruce** said it like this, “The **point** on which Paul insists here is that **all are guilty** before God; **no-one** has a **claim** on his **grace**. If he **chooses** to extend his **grace** to

some, the **others** have **no ground** for arguing that he is **unjust** because he does not extend it to them. If it is **justice** they **demand**, they can have it.” (pp. 190-191)

12. Therefore, Paul’s **first answer** to this objection is that it is absolutely **absurd** for **creatures** to **contend** with their **Creator**.

13. The **third aspect** concerning the objection is this:

III. Paul’s Application of his Illustration

A. Here Paul gives his **second answer** to this objection, which is: **Nothing** about God’s sovereignty **violates** His righteous **character**. Look at **vv. 22-23**: What if **God, although willing** (probably better translated “**because** He willed) to **demonstrate** His wrath and to **make** His power **known, endured** with much **patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction?** And He did so to **make known** the **riches** of His **glory** upon **vessels of mercy**, which He **prepared beforehand for glory**.

1. Here again Paul **contrasts two different kinds** of **vessels**—the “**vessels of wrath**” (skeue orges) and the “**vessels of mercy**” (skeue eleous). These correspond to the **two vessels** in **v. 21** for “**common use**” and “**honorable use**” respectively and again represent **individual people** within the **totality** of **sinful humanity**.

2. Notice that Paul says that God “**...endured with much patience** vessels of wrath.” Although it may **appear** that God’s “**patience**” here is an expression of His **kindness** by which He **withholds** His final judgment to give men time to **repent** (2:4; 2 Pet. 3:9), this is not the case.

3. **No one** has the **capability** to **repent** and turn to **saving faith** in Christ **apart from** God's **initiative** (Jn. 6:44; Rom. 3:11). And those whom God is **patient** with here are **heading** for **final judgment** and there is **no indication** that they will later become vessels of mercy.
4. Therefore, just like He did with **Pharaoh** in **v. 17**, God is here patiently **withholding** His final judgment with a view to a **greater display** of His **glory**. In these **two verses** Paul gives **three reasons** why God patiently **withholds** His **final judgment** from the **vessels of wrath**.
5. The **first two** are in **v. 22** and the **third** is in **v. 23**. The **first reason** is because God willed "...to **demonstrate** His **wrath**."
6. God's "**wrath**" (orgen) is His **settled attitude** of fierce anger and displeasure against man's sin and His **abiding determination** to **punish** those who commit it. If God had **immediately** destroyed **Pharaoh** the **first time** he rebelled against God, no one would have seen God's **demonstration** of His **majestic holiness** expressed in His **wrath** being poured out upon **Egypt** in the **ten plagues**.
7. The **second reason** is because God willed "...to **make** His **power known**." Remember what God said to **Pharaoh** in **v. 17**: "FOR THIS VERY **PURPOSE** I RAISED YOU UP, TO **DEMONSTRATE MY POWER** IN YOU, AND THAT **MY NAME MIGHT BE PROCLAIMED** THROUGHOUT THE **WHOLE EARTH**."
8. God's mighty power that was originally **displayed** in **creation** is **equally made known** in His punishment of sin and sinners.

God demonstrated His power and proclaimed His glorious name in His powerful plagues upon Egypt and especially the parting of the Red Sea for Israel's deliverance and the Egyptian armies destruction.

9. **Thomas Schreiner** summarized these **two reasons** well, "In Pharaoh's case God demonstrated his **patience** by not destroying Pharaoh **immediately**, even though he resisted God's command. By **delaying** his judgment on Pharaoh, however, God **magnified** his name and exhibited more forcefully the **greatness** of his salvation and the **terror** of his judgment....God **defers** his **immediate** judgment of vessels of wrath so that he can unveil the **full extent** of his **power** and **wrath** on those who continually **resist** his offer of **repentance.**" (pg. 521)

- B. Now notice the **two opposite eternal ends** of these two vessels.
 1. Paul says the "**vessels of wrath**" are "**prepared for destruction,**" and the "**vessels of mercy**" are "**prepared for glory.**" Here Paul makes more **explicit** than ever that he is speaking about the **eternal destinies** of **individuals**, not the historical roles of corporate nations.
 2. The word "**destruction**" (apoleian) when used of **persons** as here means **eternal destruction** or **damnation**, to **perish** away from the presence of the Lord (Matt. 7:13; Jn. 17:12; 1 Cor. 1:18; 2 Cor. 2:15; Phil. 1:28; 3:19; 1 Thess. 1:7-9).
 3. And the word "**glory**" (doxan) at the end of **v. 23** refers to those who have received God's **mercy** to **eternal life** (Rom. 2:7, 10;

5:2; 8:18, 21; 1 Cor. 2:7; 2 Cor. 4:17; Eph. 1:18; Phil. 3:21; Col. 1:27; 3:4; 1 Thess. 2:12; 2 Thess. 2:14; 2 Tim. 2:10).

4. Paul says the “**vessels of wrath**” are “**prepared** for destruction.” This is one of the **most tragic** identifications of **unbelievers** in all of Scripture.
5. The word “**prepared**” (katertismena) here means to be fitted or made ready. But the point of **greatest controversy** is the question, “**Who prepared them?**”
6. Some scholars say the word “**prepares**” is in the **middle voice**, signifying that these people “**prepared themselves**” for destruction. But not only is the middle voice not appropriate here, but it misses the whole point of the potter-clay analogy where the potter is completely **sovereign** over the clay.
7. Therefore, it is **best** to see this as in the **passive voice**. But since there is **no expressed agent**, some scholars say that **Satan** is the one who is ultimately responsible for preparing them for destruction.
8. And others say this simply refers to these peoples’ **ripeness** of sinfulness and **readiness** for judgment unless they turn to God in repentance and faith.
9. However, the **context** clearly shows that it is **best** to see the **unnamed agent** here as **God Himself**, whereby this is called a “**divine passive.**” **John Murray** brings this out well, “It is **true** that Paul does not say that **God** prepared them for destruction as he does in the corresponding words respecting the **vessels of mercy** that “he afore prepared” them unto glory. It may be that he **purposely refrained** from making God the

subject. However, we may **not insist** that God is not viewed as **fitting** them for destruction. In **verse 18** there is the agency of God in **hardening**. In **verses 22 and 23** the analogy of **verse 21** is being **applied** and the **vessels of wrath** correspond to the potter's vessel unto **dishonor** which he prepares for this purpose. They are also **vessels of wrath**. . . .and **wrath** corresponds to **destruction**. For these **reasons** there is nothing **contrary** to the teaching of the **context** if we regard God as the **agent** in fitting for destruction. . . .The **main thought** is that the **destruction** meted out to the **vessels of wrath** is something for which their **precedent condition** suits them. There is an **exact** correspondence between what they **were** in this life and the **perdition** to which they are consigned. This is another way of saying that there is **continuity** between **this life** and the **lot of the life to come**. In the **general context** of the apostle's thought there is **no release** from **human responsibility** nor from the **guilt** of which **perdition** is the **wages**." (pg. 36)

10. Remember that God is **not responsible** for peoples' **sinfulness, we are!** But unless He **sovereignly chooses** to bestow **mercy**, God does not make peoples' **soft, sensitive** hearts into a **hard, rebellious** hearts; He merely **confirms** the **hardness** that already **characterizes** them, like He did **Pharaoh**.
11. Now although Paul **sees** the **divine action** behind the **passive**, he presents the **agency of God** very **differently** with the **vessels of wrath** than he does with the **vessels of mercy**,

which we will see in v. **23**. God accomplishes all things by the counsel of His sovereign will, but He does not bring about all things in the **same way**.

C. We now see the **third reason** why God patiently **withholds** His **final judgment** from the vessels of wrath in v. **23**: And He did so to **make known** the **riches** of His **glory** upon **vessels of mercy**, which He **prepared beforehand** for **glory**.

1. God has **patiently withheld** His final judgment that could rightfully fall on His rebellious creatures at any time not only because He wants to **display** His **wrath** and **power**, but also because **ultimately** He wants “...to **make known** the **riches** of His **glory**.” This is His **greatest reason**!
2. God’s “**glory**,” like His **name**, is the **sum-total** of **all** His attributes. And “the **riches** of His glory” refers to the **splendor** and **fullness** that characterizes these attributes.
3. And notice **those** to whom God is intent “to **make known** the riches of His glory”—the “**vessels of mercy**.” These are the **redeemed**, all those who have been the personal **recipients** of the **mercy** of God.
4. Notice what Paul says about these vessels of mercy, “...which He **prepared beforehand** for **glory**.” The one Greek word translated “**prepared beforehand**” (proetoimasen) here is in the **active voice** here, meaning there is **no question** that **God** is the **active agent** in the salvation of people.
5. By saying “**prepared beforehand**” we cannot **escape** the **explicit fact** that Paul is speaking of God’s **predetermined** or **predestined decision** in **eternity past** to bestow His **mercy**

on certain individuals whom He sovereignly elected for “**glory**” (doxan), which means **eternal life**. (Eph. 1:4-6)

6. But the **great work** that God does in **saving** the **elect** is to **put on display** before them the **fullness** of His **glory**. In His unwavering commitment to **magnify** His **glorious name**, God makes known to the **vessels of mercy** the **full range** of His glory—on the one hand, His **wrath** and **power**; on the other hand, His **mercy**.
7. But since God **delights more** in His **mercy** than His **wrath**, He sets forth the **priority** of His **mercy** by placing it against the **black backdrop** of His **wrath**. It is the **reality** of God’s **wrath** that causes us as **believers**, to **see** the holy fierceness of God against sin and sinners and the fact that we **deserve** the same, and therefore, more fully **appreciate** His inexplicable **mercy** and **grace** that He has showered upon us, which should **fill** our hearts with **praise** and **adoration** to Him.
8. Therefore, Paul’s **second answer** to this objection is **nothing** about God’s sovereignty **violates** His righteous **character**. He **justly punishes** the wicked for their sins and He extends **undeserved mercy** to the objects of His grace.
9. But **Douglas Moo** is correct in saying, “We must not allow the **preeminence** of God’s **purpose** in bestowing **mercy** on some to **cancel out** the **reality** and **finality** of his **wrath** on others. Paul is clear here, as he is elsewhere: **some** people receive God’s **mercy** and are **saved**, while **others** do not receive that mercy and so are **eternally condemned**.” (pg. 608)

10. Although **all** are **equally underserving** of eternal hell, the **divine Potter** not only has the **sovereign right** and **authority** bestow mercy on some and harden others, but He is also **active** in **both** yet in **different ways**. This is what theologians call “**double predestination**,” which I believe is **biblically correct** as long as it is **stringently restricted** by the **checks** and **balances** of Scripture.
11. For the Scripture teaches that **both** the absolute **sovereignty of God** and the full **responsibility of man**, which we will see in **9:30-10:21**, are **true**. You say, “**How can that be?**” **We don’t know!**
12. Although there is **no doctrine** that **stimulates** more **negative reactions** than this one, for it **flies** in the face of our **own perceptions** of human **freedom, equality** and **justice**, it **perfectly balances** in God’s **perception**.
13. Therefore, we must simply **accept it by faith** and **live** with the **tension** because God has **revealed** it to be **true** in His **Word**, which is our **final standard**, not **our perception**. But if we **don’t** and instead try to **balance** this at the **expense** of **one** or the **other**, we will end up being **guilty** before God of **adding** to or **taking away** from His Word.

Conclusion:

In closing, Paul never offers a **logical solution** to this biblical tension. He is **content** to hold **both** of these **truths** as revealed by God without **reconciling** them and continues to **praise God** for His **wonderful grace** and **mercy** upon him, as he **faithfully obeys** the Lord

in **praying** without ceasing (1 Thess. 5:17) and **evangelizing** the lost (1 Cor. 15:10). And **beloved**, we would do **well** to **follow** his **example**.