

Romans 9:14-24 - The Potter and the Clay

© 2004 [Tony Garland](#)

9:14 - Is God Unrighteous?

- **"Is there unrighteousness with God?"**
Paul anticipates our line of thinking. God's right to choose *seems* unjust from our perspective. We elevate our own ideas of justice above God's electing purposes and divine sovereignty. This tendency of man to question his Maker is illustrated in Job ([Job 40:7-8](#)).
- **"Certainly not!"**
The Greek phrase is *me GEnoito* , "not it should become!" The optative mood stands apart from the conditional clause to express the strongest possible wish regarding an event. Other examples of this usage include: [Rom. 3:4](#) ; [6:2](#) ; [11:1](#) ; [1Cor. 6:15](#) .

9:15-16 - Mercy on Whomever

- **"I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy"**
The setting is God's revelation of His character to Moses ([Ex. 33:18](#)) . This statement is connected with God revealing His *glory* (honor, splendor, reputation) and his *mercy* (undeserved favor). His favor is extended according to His sovereignty and purpose.
- **"not of him who wills, nor of him who runs"**
His favor is not according to the will or decision of man, nor does it depend upon human exertion (works). Those who *do* exhibit works favorable to God only do so by His empowerment ([Php. 2:12](#)) , having already been the recipients of His choosing.
- **"but of God who shows mercy"**
His mercy is extended according to His sovereign purpose, to achieve His desired outcome ([John 1:11-13](#)) .

9:17 - For This Purpose

- **"I have raised you up"**
Pharaoh was only Pharaoh because God had placed him there for His purpose. It is God who appoints kings ([Pr. 21:1](#) ; [Isa. 44:28](#) ; [Dan. 4:32](#) ; [Rev. 17:17](#)).
- **"that I may show My power in you"**
"Might show" is *enDEIKnumi* : "to give outward proof, demonstrate." Power ([Gen. 9:16](#)) is *Kochiy* , "the working power of Me:" a visible manifestation of God's power through the life of Pharaoh.
- **"that my name may be declared in all the earth"**
God's sovereign favor and determination are not arbitrary. Nor does His choosing of individuals indicate they are inherently better than others. His actions are for His *own sake* -- to reveal His glory and character. What God is doing with Israel is *not about Israel*, but **about God!**

9:18 - Whom He Wills

- **"whom He wills He hardens"**

Having a sinful nature, we have a tendency to harden our own hearts ([Ps. 95:7-11](#)).

- **Pharaoh's Hardening**
 1. God predicts **He** will harden Pharaoh's heart ([Ex. 4:21](#) ; [7:3](#)).
 2. **Pharaoh** is said to harden his own heart ([Ex. 7:13](#) ; [8:15](#) , [19](#) , [32](#)).
 3. The **LORD** hardened Pharaoh's heart ([Ex. 9:12](#)).
 4. **Pharaoh** hardened his own heart ([Ex. 9:34](#)).
 5. The **LORD** hardens Pharaoh's heart ([Ex. 10:1](#) , [20](#) , [27](#) ; [11:10](#)).
- **Other passages where God hardens hearts.**
 1. Sihon, king of Heshbon ([2:30](#)).
 2. Cities of the promised land ([Jos. 11:19-20](#)).
 3. Men of Israel ([Isa. 63:17](#)).
- **Sovereignty and Judgment**

When numerous passages are taken into account, there is both a *sovereign aspect* where God initiates hardening and a *judicial aspect* where God responds by hardening (e.g., [Rom. 1:24-32](#) ; [Rom. 11:5-8](#)).

9:19 - Why Does He Find Fault?

- **"You will say to me then"**

Paul anticipates our tendency to: (1) judge God; (2) elevate our puny logic over God's wisdom; (3) require an answer from God for His actions (like Job). Here we meet again with the tension between *divine sovereignty* and *human responsibility* ("free will"). **The Bible teaches both** which we are unable to fully reconcile ([Mtt. 26:24](#) ; [Acts 2:22-24](#) ; [4:27-28](#)).
- **Sovereign vs. Judicial Hardening**

Take note! If God's hardening is *always* judicial (in response to man's initial rejection) then this verse is unnecessary for no accusation would be made. Furthermore, man's response would be determinative of history rather than God's predestined purpose.
- **A Dog and his Tail**

The bottom line will always be this: *Does the tail wag the dog or the dog wag its tail?* Wherever we minimize God's sovereignty and elevate man's "freedom," we will have the "tail wagging the dog" and the creature is indirectly determining the actions of the Creator. God is no longer sovereign.

9:20 - Who Are You To Reply?

- **"who are you to reply . . . ?"**

"To reply" is *antopoKRINomai* , *anta* = "against," + *apo* = "away from," + *krinō* = "to judge." Who is man that he should **talk back** or **contradict** God ([Job 40:2-5](#)) ?!
- **"the thing formed say to him who formed it"**

Paul emphasizes the *Creator vs. creature* distinction. "Thing formed" is *PLASma* from *PLASSō* from which we get our word "plastic" . It is something which can be formed or molded by an external agent.
- **"Why have you made me like this?"**

Why does the Creator create? Because He has a **purpose!** The thing created does not impose its own purpose upon the Creator--the pot exists only by the potter's initiative. This phrase recalls several Old Testament passages emphasizing God's sovereignty over His creation, especially mankind ([Isa. 29:15](#) ; [45:9-11](#) ; [64:8](#)).

9:21 - The Potter and the Clay

- "the potter . . . the clay?"

The larger context of this passage is reinforced by the Old Testament context regarding the *potter* and the *clay*. These typically refer to God and **Israel** ([Isa. 29:1](#) ; [45:11](#) ; [64:8-11](#) ; [Lam. 4:2](#) ; [Jer. 18:1-6](#)). Remember that Paul is still speaking about *Israel* and her failure to accept Messiah, although the principles of sovereign election apply to all men ([Rom. 9:24](#)).

- "Does not the potter have power over the clay"

"Power over" is *exousia*, "the right to act decide, or dispose of one's property as one wishes," a technical term, especially in wills.

- "the same lump"

"Lump" is *fuRAMatos*, "that which is mixed or kneaded" (from *fuRAō*). The raw materials are *uniformly mixed - the same*. This is analogous to the "by one man" (one sexual union) in [verse 10](#). The difference is *not found in the clay itself, but in the purpose of the potter*. All of the clay is sinful and deserving of judgment and inclined away from God. None of the clay would choose God without His calling ([John 6:37-39](#) , [64-66](#)).

9:22 - The Potter and the Clay

- "wanting to show . . . to make known"

God's election and sovereign purpose is intended to demonstrate:

1. His wrath and power,
2. His riches of glory and power.

These are both aspects of His character. When we minimize one or the other, we are guilty of misrepresenting Him and presenting a caricature of God.

- "wrath"

Wrath is the divine reaction toward evil. God's wrath has two primary aspects. He has an *ongoing* wrath which abides on those who reject Him ([John 3:36](#)), and there is a specific future time where God's wrath will be exhibited toward the ungodly (e.g., [Rev. 6:15-17](#))

- "endured with longsuffering"

"The withholding of His grace from the non-elect is but the negative cause of their perishing, just as the absence of a physician from the sick man is the occasion, not the efficient cause, of his death." Loraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, 115.

9:22 - Vessels of Wrath

- "vessels of wrath prepared for destruction"

"Prepared" is *katērtisMENa*, a perfect passive participle. Although it is conceivable the form is middle-voice (the vessels participated in their own preparation), the preponderance of evidence favors the **passive** form:

1. *Katartizō* is nowhere else used in the NT as a direct or reflexive middle. When coupled with the perfect tense, the verb implies something which is a "done deal" and that the vessels do not dynamically change their state over time.
2. The potter vs. clay motif is most naturally understood in a way where the potter is completely sovereign over the clay--the clay does not form itself, nor determine the potter's use.
3. Paul has specifically excluded the idea that God's election is dependent upon the actions or

will of the individual ([Rom. 9:11](#)) .

"The LORD has made all for Himself, Yes, even the wicked for the day of doom" ([Pr. 16:4](#)) . Yet, **God is not the Author of evil!** He desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of truth ([Eze. 18:23](#) ; [1Ti. 2:4](#) ; [2Pe. 3:9](#)) .

- **"What about the Angels?"**

The idea that God does not predestine all men equally to salvation is repugnant to some Christians. But what about fallen angels? Scripture records no possibility that *any* of the fallen angels may be redeemed. Why can we accept this fact with hardly any comment, yet stumble on the teaching of election concerning man? Could it be we are happy to support God's sovereignty so long as it doesn't involve us?

9:23-24 - Vessels of Mercy

- **"vessels of mercy prepared beforehand"**

"I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy" ([Ex. 33:18](#)) . God is *demonstrating* in history what He showed Moses -- His reputation and character.

- **"He prepared beforehand"**

"He prepared beforehand" is *proēTOImasen* , used only of God's work in the NT. *Pro* = "before " + *hetoiMAzō* ="to prepare." Those prepared beforehand are those who are called and predestined ([Rom. 8:30](#)) .

- **"even us whom he called"**

A different verb for preparation is used than for the vessels of wrath. This verb explicitly emphasizes the previous preparation in time past whereas the other is implied by the perfect tense. This verb is related to "predestine" *prooRIzō* . This verb emphasizes the *means* whereas "predestine" emphasizes the *end (purpose)*.

Application

1. **God's Sovereign Right** - God's sovereign right of determination dominates history. His plan and purpose is not dependent upon the will and actions of his creatures.
2. **When We Don't Understand** - When we don't understand God, how do we respond? Do we, who are unrighteous, dare accuse Him of being unfair?
3. **The Greater Purpose of History** - God's greater purpose in history is God's glory. Our job is to understand what He has revealed concerning His program of glory and to accept it fully--no matter where it leads and no matter our personal prejudice. His purpose is greater than our individual salvation or even the salvation of men.
4. **God's Election Within Israel Today** - The rejection of Messiah did not catch God by surprise so that He had to reinterpret or reapply His OT promises concerning the nation. The national aspects of the promises (e.g., promised land, restoration of Jerusalem) continue in the believing Jewish remnant.

