

Electing love and human responsibility

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[0 : 00] Now let us turn our thoughts this evening to Romans chapter 9 at verse 14. What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? God forbid.

For he saith to Moses, I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. So then it is not of him that willeth, not of him that runneth, but of God that showeth mercy.

For the scripture saith unto Pharaoh, Even for this same purpose have I raised thee up, that I might show my power in thee, and that my name might be declared throughout all the earth.

Therefore hath he mercy, on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth. Thou wilt say then unto me, Why doth he yet find fault, for who hath resisted his will?

Nay, but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus?

[1 : 05] Hath not the potter power over the clay of the same lump, to make one vessel unto honour, and another unto dishonour? What if God, willing to show his wrath, and to make his power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction, and that he might make known the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy which he had aforeprepared unto glory?

That's the section that we would like to deal with this evening. We don't pretend that we can go into a passage like this in great depth.

But as we have seen in our studies in Romans, we come across doctrines, and we are not allowed to go round these doctrines, but we have to face them, and to look at what God is saying to us. And as he reminds us of his sovereignty on the one hand, and as he reminds us of our responsibility on the other, So we have to give consideration to these two aspects of the truth of God.

Well, as we said last Sabbath evening, Paul has taken us into the heart of the doctrine of God's electing love.

[2 : 29] It's a mysterious, and yet it's a wonderful truth. We, of course, must not be wise above what's written. We mustn't presume that we know all that there is to know about the predestination of God.

We can only understand the doctrine of God's predestination, the doctrine of God's sovereignty, the doctrine of God's electing love, insofar as God leads us to understand it through the scriptures.

And we mustn't go beyond the scriptures, nor must we speculate beyond the scriptures. And in the same way, wherever God leads us in the field of human responsibility, there we must go.

It may seem paradoxical to us, when we consider these two great truths, on the one hand, the electing love of God, on the other hand, human responsibility.

It may seem paradoxical, yet nonetheless, these are the facts given to us in the scriptures, and we must consider them. Some of you have read the Confession of Faith, and you will recall the chapter in the Confession, which is called God's Eternal Decree.

[4 : 02] Indeed, I might say that it would be a very good exercise for the congregation to take the Confession of Faith and read it through. And one of the best copies of the Confession of Faith on the market today is the copy that has been produced by the Free Presbyterian Church.

I have a copy of it myself. It's an excellent production. Well bound, good print, big print, so that it's easily read. Now in their definition of God's eternal decree, this is what the Westminster Divines say.

The doctrine of this high mystery of predestination is to be handled with special prudence and care, that men attending the will of God revealed in his word and yielding obedience thereunto may from the certainty of their effectual vocation be assured of their eternal election.

So shall the doctrine afford matter of praise, reverence, and admiration of God, and of humility, diligence, and abundant consolation to all that sincerely obey the gospel.

See how well and how wisely they have framed these words. Well, Paul has illustrated from the stories of Isaac and Ishmael and Jacob and Esau that the purpose of God according to election must stand.

[5 : 50] You see, here is Abraham and he has got two sons, Isaac and Ishmael. Certainly they both come from different mothers. God's purpose of election is seen in the choice of Isaac.

Here we have Jacob and Esau. They are twin sons. They are Isaac's sons. Born of the same mother, they have come into the world at the same time, into the same home, under the same circumstances, brought up in the same atmosphere.

And yet God has set his love upon Jacob, but not upon Esau. Now having established the truth concerning personal selection or election on the part of God, the apostle goes on now to defend that teaching and he does this by posing two objections to the doctrine of God's electing love and he answers these objections.

What are the objections? Well, the first objection that is posed against this truth is this. Is it not unjust for God to show mercy to one and not to another?

I put that question again. Is it not unjust on the part of God to show mercy to one and not another? And this is the second question that the apostle puts and which he endeavors to answer and which he does answer through the scriptures.

[7 : 42] Why does God hold men responsible for their actions when God extends mercy to one and he withholds it from another?

Indeed, it comes precisely to this. In pardoning some and not others is God not an unjust God. Now as we ponder these questions we might well feel that the answers given by the apostle are not what we would wish. But let us remember that we are on a sinful human level.

And being on a sinful human level it's not possible for us to understand the absolute holiness of God in his dealings.

I say it's not possible for us on this human sinful level to understand that. To understand that God is absolutely holy.

[8 : 53] And being absolutely holy and remembering this that he is God he is free to do as he wills with his own. Well let's consider these objections that the apostle raises here.

is it not unjust for God to show mercy to one and not another? What shall we say then says the apostle is there unrighteousness with God?

God and he comes in right immediately and he says God forbid as far as Paul is concerned the thought of injustice is intolerable.

The thought of injustice on the part of God must be dismissed at once. God you see cannot be unjust.

God is absolutely holy in his being so that in everything that he does God must be free from wrongdoing.

[10 : 15] God cannot do anything that is wrong. God must be free from wrongdoing. What we have to remember and that is this that God is free to do as he wills according to his own sinless freedom.

We don't know what sinless freedom is until we are delivered from sin. And God is free to act according to his own sinless freedom.

And he cannot be bound by the dictates nor can he be bound by the quimms of godless and God dishonoring men.

And that is what we always have to remember that we cannot bind God and God cannot be bound by the quimms of sinful men.

And in support of the freeness of God in his choices Paul takes us back in history to that occasion when after Israel had sinned by making a golden calf at Mount Sinai and worshipping it God had said to Moses I cannot bear those people they are a stiff necked a rebellious people I'm no longer going to go with them said God I'll send my angel and my angel will take charge of them and my angel will go with them and will lead them through the wilderness but that wasn't sufficient for Moses and Moses said to God if you if your presence doesn't go with us if you won't go with us in your own presence then don't carry us up hands destroy us in this wilderness we don't want an angel we don't want any other being or any other creature we only want you to go with us well

[12:48] God consented and at the same time what God did to Moses was this he revealed to Moses himself in all the awesomeness of his being in the absolute freeness of his being and God said to Moses stand here in this cliff I'll pass by you I'll allow you to see something of my glory and my majesty you will only see my back parts my hand will cover your face you will not be allowed to see me by face and God said to Moses on that occasion I will make all my goodness pass before thee and I will proclaim the name of the Lord before thee and I will be gracious to whom

I will be gracious and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy so then this is Paul's argument it's not unjust on God's part to show mercy on whomsoever he wills is it God is a free agent and in his absolute perfection he can do no wrong nor can his choices be wrong I was reading Dr.

Shedd's commentary on the Romans and he says the key to the doctrine of election and reprobation is in Christ's parable of the laborers you remember that parable the parable of the householder and how he hired laborers to go out into his field and to labor on in that field for a penny a day and then at the end of the day he gave every man a penny some found fault with them we've been there said some of them from the very beginning from the very outset of the day and we are only getting the same as these people who have come in at the last moment and the householder said is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own I set before you the terms is it not lawful for me now said the householder to do what

I will with mine own and that's the point it's lawful for God to do as he wills with his own and Paul now goes on to give us this practical instance of the freeness of his God in his dealings with sinful men you see there is this notable instance of Pharaoh the Egyptian monarch and the story of Pharaoh is well known to you you see God had sent Moses to this Egyptian king because he held the children of Israel in bondage and captivity and Moses was sent to plead with Pharaoh to let the children of Israel go to give them their freedom to allow them now to leave the land of Egypt to depart and to go back to the land of promise the land that

God had given to Abraham Pharaoh wouldn't listen to Moses eventually God sent plagues plague after plague came upon Pharaoh but instead of Pharaoh yielding he became more obstinate and and he was drowned there in the

[17:33] Red Sea with his army now if you read that story through carefully you will see how it says on the one hand that Pharaoh hardened his heart and there are four occasions when it says God hardened Pharaoh's heart what are we to understand by that well we are to understand by that surely this that a sinner who goes on sinning and who perpetrates wicked actions more perhaps than other sinners perpetrate wicked actions becomes an object of abhorrence and not only does that sinner become an object of abhorrence but this is what you will notice about that sinner his sin pays him back in its own coin there are many people in

Britain tonight and they've discovered that it might be that they've been guilty of sexual license they're suffering the consequences some of them riddled with syphilis which will inevitably lead them to blindness and to madness you see once you begin to harden your heart once you begin to let sin take you by the throat as it were and drag you down the road to hell you become harder and harder and more obstinate and what God does is this he allows you to do it he removes his restraints and this is the process of hardening that takes place because sin hardens and as far as Pharaoh was concerned God didn't move him in the direction of sin God didn't force Pharaoh to do this or to do that God merely allowed Pharaoh unrestrained license to sin you know it's like this when you have a dog and you put the dog on a leash you can determine where the dog is going to go and what the dog is going to do but slip the leash let the dog away from the leash what is the dog now going to do the dog is going to act according to its instincts and will go here there and anywhere wherever there is filth I remember Professor Finlayson a professor of systematic theology giving us one of these illustrations that he used to give us about these things telling us about the woman who had the dog

Fido she called it and she tried to train this dog clean habits and she had a clean dish and the best of meat everything was so clean for the dog and she trained the dog to be clean and she was horrified one day when she saw the dog going up to the carcass of a rabbit and beginning to eat it you see the dog was acting according to its instincts listen to Charles Hodge he puts it like this Pharaoh was no worse than many other men who have obtained mercy yet God for wise and benevolent reasons withheld from him the saving influence of his grace and gave him up to his own wicked heart so that he became more and more hardened until he was finally destroyed and

Hodge says this God did nothing to Pharaoh beyond his strict deserts he did not make him wicked he only forbore to make him good by the exertion of special and altogether unmerited grace and so Pharaoh as Paul tells us here is set up as a warning to all generations he is a monument of sin and the destructive nature of sin he is a monument for all generations to see that this is what becomes of a man when he becomes hardened in sin when he remains obstinate in his sins and when God gives him up to his own wickedness and to his own uncleanness God is not unjust when he leaves men in their sins but what we can say and that is what

[23 : 23] Paul is saying here that God is exceedingly merciful when he calls and when he draws men out of sin and when he reconciles them to himself through his son the saviour that's the wonder of God's electing love you see we get caught up in looking at the hard side of election as it were in looking at reprobation what we should be looking at as we consider God's electing love is this the wonder of it all and that God in his infinite mercy and grace should stoop down and should take a wretch like Jacob like Moses like you and like me and should make us the vessels of his mercy that's the wonder of it isn't it now another objection to the doctrine of election is this as

Paul tells us why does God hold men responsible for their actions when he extends mercy to one and withholds that mercy from another this is how Paul deals with the question in verses 19 to 23 thou wilt say then unto me why doth he yet find fault for who hath resisted his will nay but oh man who art thou that repliest against God you see how Paul won't have you find fault with God over anything it's as if the apostle is saying to us you know it's nothing short of irreverent for any creature to criticize the actions of his creator I sometimes read

Anders Nygren on Romans and perhaps one has to be careful about all the things that Anders Nygren has to say in his theology but there are some very choice things that he does say and he puts it like this in the nature of the case there is something incongruous in man's attempt to confront God and call him to judgment man against his creator says Nygren man calling God to judgment the whole thing is incongruous and again you see Paul brings us back to the Old Testament and he asks us to consider the lesson taught by God to Jeremiah that prophet was told to go down to the potter's house and to watch the craftsman at his work and as the potter watched the craftsman at his work he saw something going wrong with the clay in the hands of the potter it was marred in the potter's hand the clay and then the potter decided that he would reshape the vessel as seemed good to the potter to make it now as

Jeremiah watched that to him you see here he was being given a never to be forgotten lesson on the doctrine of God sovereignty here is the potter here he has the clay in his hands he is fashioning it he makes a vessel that seemed good to the potter to make it it's left entirely to the wise discretion of the potter what he's going to do with the clay and here Paul is reminding us that this is something that we must never forget and don't let you forget it nor let me forget it and that is the sovereignty of God and so the apostle says nay but oh man who art thou that repliest against God what right have you to criticize your creator what right of you to find any fault with a

God who is holy you who are sinful shall the thing form to say to him that formed it why hast thou made me thus hath not the potter power of the clay of the same lump to make one vessel unto honor and another unto dishonor you see it boils down to this in pardoning some and not others there is no injustice on the part of God because God is not obliged to pardon any I remember reading B.B.

[29 : 13] Warfield in one of his books saying this God is not in heaven at our convenience and that's what we sometimes think that God is just there at our convenience to be a benevolent father and to look after us while we are here in this world and then to take us to be in heaven at last at the end of our days no other it's the other way about we are here at God's convenience and let us remember all have sinned and come short of the glory of God there is none righteous no not one and going back to the shorter catechism you remember what it says in answer to the question what doth every sin deserve what doth every sin deserve even supposing you had only committed one sin and one sin only what does it deserve every sin deserve

God's wrath and curse both in this life and in that which is to come and God would have been perfectly just had he bypassed the whole human race God looking down upon this sinful universe of ours God seeing the sin of man wouldn't he have been just if God had said very well then keep your world with all its sin and let it be a hell to you but God didn't do that he chose to save some and he did so not on the basis of any personal merit on their part but solely out of his own good pleasure God chose this people and provided for them a saviour in the person of his own son and in the

fullness of time

Christ the saviour God's son came forth from glory and what God's son did was this he propitiated his father for the sins of this people by dying in the Roman stead and the wonder and the God loved any and that he gave his only begotten son over to the death of the cross for them again I take you back to Nigren and he says this the concept he says of predestination is the most theocentric idea there is when it becomes clear that man's salvation doesn't rest on his own works or exertions but alone on the fact that it pleased God in his divine purpose to take man out of this age of death and place him in

Christ in the new age of resurrection life then it becomes genuinely clear that all really depends on God's free grace all human claims are thereby dismissed the issue is not what man is or does but what God does with him in his sovereign grace God allows men to go on in their corrupt ways but at the same time he demonstrates his compassion and his love and God endures with long suffering the vessels of wrath fitted for destruction God allows these men to have their day these vessels of wrath it might have been that many people especially the godly people of

Israel might have said well look at Pharaoh in his palace how well it's going for him the good food he eats every day the lovely clothes he wears the servants that he has to attend him everything is done for this wicked man in his long suffering God allows it and this is the point isn't it that's the only heaven poor Pharaoh will ever know and what a short heaven it is and as you and I look at some perhaps person and we say to ourselves well what hope have these people got for eternity and yet they seem to be on the crest of the wave enjoying this or enjoying that remember this is the only heaven here in this world and it's a gay short heaven and so

[35 : 03] God endures he might well blast them into eternity but he endures with long suffering these vessels of wrath but at the same time he makes known the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy which he had afford prepared unto glory there is no injustice when God calls men to account for their sins indeed it would be strange wouldn't it and passing strange if God didn't call men to account for their sins if God did nothing about their sins that would be strange indeed but the wonder is this that God extends his mercy and provides a saviour for these vessels of mercy fitted for glory and he provides that saviour in the person of his son now we come to the end of our sermon and I want to end it in this way the doctrine of God's electing love is not a doctrine that should leave us in a state of paralysis as far as salvation is concerned rather it's a doctrine that should encourage us to make sure that we have used the means that God has provided and placed at our disposal for our personal salvation are we using the means that

God has provided are we making use of what God has placed at our disposal for salvation that's the question that must come to us tonight we mustn't allow any paralysis to hold us back I can do no better than quote again from Charles Hodge he says the fact that the character of the harvest depends on the sovereign pleasure of God does not render the labor of the husbandman of new account and listen to Hodge the same God who says I will have mercy on whom I will says also work out your salvation with fear and trembling the sovereignty of God says Hodge and the necessity of human efforts are both clearly taught in the scriptures we have looked at the one side tonight just as on other occasions we look at the other side we thank

God that he is a God who is in control we thank God that he is not a God who can be frustrated or disappointed by the whims of men and we thank God that having looked down upon the wreckage of the human race and having looked down upon this world and its awful misery and degradation by sin God stooped down and he took out of this wreckage a people and placed them in Christ and they are the vessels of honour fitted for glory will you be among them will you see to it then that you make your calling and your election sure and give no God rest day nor night until you have the assurance keep knocking at the door of heaven keep crying to God he won't turn you away he has never said to any of the seed of Jacob seek ye me in vain seek and ye shall find knock and it shall be open to you ask and it shall be given let us pray oh

Lord our God we thank thee for the wonder of thy love we bless thee for what thy word says to us and all the encouragement that it gives to us in thy good providence it has pleased thee us all here this night in this church under the sound of thy word that's a great privilege we are thy debtors for it and thou art calling upon us to repent and to be reconciled to thee through the saviour may we repent may thy spirit be given to us to enable us to accept Christ as he is freely offered to us in the gospel take away our sins for Jesus sake amen to