

Romans Part 30 – Chapter 9:13-19 (a dissection)

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Last week we investigated the difference between the Old Covenant (Moses) and the New Covenant (Jesus). With that backdrop we now dissect the verses individually to see the argument Paul builds.

Romans 9:13 is a quote from Malachi where God declares His greatness and sums up what the whole Hebrew Bible has been pointing to—God's people cannot be faithful to the covenant. They've failed again and again. And while God will deal with their sin, he will not abandon them. He promises to redeem a remnant and send a Messiah to fulfill his covenant promises.

Malachi 1:1-3:

The oracle of the word of the LORD to Israel by Malachi

² “I have loved you,” says the LORD. But you say, “How have you loved us?” “Is not Esau Jacob's brother?” declares the LORD. “Yet I have loved Jacob ³ but Esau I have hated. I have laid waste his hill country and left his heritage to jackals of the desert.” ⁴ If Edom says, “We are shattered but we will rebuild the ruins,” the LORD of hosts says, “They may build, but I will tear down, and they will be called ‘the wicked country,’ and ‘the people with whom the LORD is angry forever.’” ⁵ Your own eyes shall see this, and you shall say, “Great is the LORD beyond the border of Israel!”

Romans 9:13:

As it is written, “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.”

Notice that Paul is building on this quote from Malachi 1:2–3. Paul has just established that God chose between Jacob and Esau which of them would receive the covenant promises and which would serve the other. God made this choice before they were born based on nothing other, apparently, than **His own will and purpose**.

The quote from the lips of God seems contrary to our usual understanding of Him. We easily understand that He would love an unborn child, but why and how could He have hated Esau, let alone before birth? That's not the God we think we know. We have to keep in mind that cultures differ in how they speak, which involves more than just the specific words they use. Different societies use different forms and figures of speech, as well. In that era, the love-hate phrasing is meant to show a contrast, not to imply that one side is looked at in some insulting way.

It helps to look at another example of the word "hate" in the New Testament. Jesus said this to those who were deciding about whether to follow Him or not: "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:26). Clearly, Jesus doesn't want us to carry bitter, angry feelings toward our fathers, mothers, wives, and children. After all, we are commanded in Scripture to honor our parents, love our wives, and to raise our children wisely. In this case, the word "hate" is about comparison. Jesus wanted disciples who were so deeply committed to Him that their love for their family members looked like hate by comparison.

The same idea is at work in God's use of these contrasting words in Malachi and quoted by Paul here. God's act of love for Jacob, in choosing to give to him the covenant promises, was well beyond His actions towards Esau, in declaring that Esau would serve Jacob. There is a strong contrast there: one is clearly being given the preferred treatment, the other is not. Using dramatic, contrast-enhancing language, it can be said that one was "loved" and the other "hated."

The bigger issue for Paul's argument is that God made this decision based on nothing more than the fact that God has the right to decide. Is that fair? Paul will address that in the following verses.

Romans 9:14-15

14 What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means!

15 For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion."

"What shall we say then?" That's the phrase Paul often uses to address an objection his readers might be having in response to what he has just written. Then he will phrase the imagined objection in the form of a question, as he does here. As is his custom in the book of Romans, Paul follows up by rejecting the idea with the Greek phrase *mē genoito*, translated as "by no means" or "may it never be!"

In this case the question is about God's fairness or justice. Paul has just described how God chose to whom His covenant promises to Israel would be given—and to whom they would not be given. In the case of Rebekah's twins, God made this decision before they were even born. God's judgment was in no way based on either Jacob's or Esau's actions or birth order or parents. It was entirely a matter of His omniscience and sovereignty.

In the previous verse, Paul quoted the Old Testament prophet Malachi, who recorded God's words saying that He "loved Jacob" and "hated Esau" even before they were born. This was not a reference to the emotion we describe using the English word "hate" today. "Love" in Scripture is usually a reference to how one acts, and "hate" here is meant as a contrast to it. Exaggerated parallels were common in speech of ancient times (Luke 14:26). God simply chose to give extreme blessings to Jacob, and—relatively speaking—none to Esau.

Now Paul puts the question in the mouth of his readers, "Is that injustice on God's part?" By no means! But this naturally leads one to ask how is it just, then? Paul will address that in the following verses.

Then in verse 15 Paul quotes God's words to Moses from Exodus 33:19. God was providing reassurance that He would be with Moses while leading the children of Israel. In fact, God was preparing to reveal Himself to Moses by passing by and allowing Moses to see a glimpse of his glory. He had agreed to show Moses a physical manifestation of His true nature (Exodus 33:21–23).

In that context, God said that He would show mercy and compassion on whomever He so chose. The right to decide who received benefits from God was a decision left to exactly one being: God Himself. Paul offers this quote to show that God retains the right to choose for Himself, based only on Himself, to whom He will give His favor. God is under no obligation, whatsoever, to rely on other criteria or some "higher" standard to make such a choice.

Perhaps that's not a very convincing argument against the idea that God is "unfair" in choosing one over another. However, this already eliminates the suggestion that God is being "unjust." And, as this passage shows, Paul is not yet done making his case.

16 So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy.

Paul is making the case that God retains the right to give His mercy to whomever He wants. He's not obliged to do anything for anyone, so God choosing some for mercy and not others cannot be unfair in the negative sense that word most often means. In fact, the most "fair" thing to do would be to withhold mercy from all people; mercy is a benevolent form of "unfair" treatment.

Now Paul makes it clear that receiving God's mercy, or not, has nothing to do with human will or work. God is not being unfair, in choosing only some for mercy. No person can ever earn His mercy, so nobody has more of a claim to deserve it than any other. God owes His mercy to absolutely, positively no one. By definition, "mercy" is something given to those who do not deserve it or have not earned it. If it's earned or deserved, it's not an issue of grace or mercy, an idea Paul frequently uses in this letter (Romans 4:2–5; 11:6).

In the following verse, Paul will offer one additional Old Testament example, about a time God chose to particularly withhold mercy for His own purposes.

17 For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth." 18 So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills.

Paul showed that God chose Jacob over Esau while the twin boys were still in their mother's womb, having done nothing right or wrong to earn God's favor or rejection.

Those examples involve an "active" sense of God's mercy. He is not obligated to be merciful to anyone, so there is nothing unjust about God selecting only some to benefit from His grace. If grace was earned, it would not be grace (Romans 4:2–5; 11:6).

Now Paul references the Pharaoh of Israel's liberation from Egypt, with a quote from **Exodus 9:16**: *But for this purpose, I have raised you up, to show you my power, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth.* This comes from God's words to Moses about what to say to Pharaoh before sending another plague. God wanted Pharaoh to know that He had raised Pharaoh—or Egypt—to power and prominence so that God could show His own, much greater, power in bringing Egypt to her knees. God's stated reason for doing this was that His own name would be proclaimed in all the earth.

In other words, God raised up Pharaoh and brought Pharaoh down for the sake of His own glory. This is meant to be understood in the context of Paul's upcoming remarks about a potter having the right to mold clay for his own purposes (Romans 9:20).

The question for us today is: Does God still bring down a country and/or its leaders to accomplish His will? There can be a conflict between being a follower of Christ and being a conservative moralist when God doesn't appear to reward moral unbelievers. Our own current understanding of this passage is that the key to understanding "good people in Hell," revolves around the Book of Life and the Books of Works.

Revelation 20:12-15

And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. 13 And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. 14 Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. 15 And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

Most people believe they will go to Heaven or Hell based on how good or bad they were on earth. While most people think it will be close, they do believe that they'll make it to Heaven. Unfortunately, the opposite is true. "Just as people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him" (Hebrews 9:27-28).

In Romans 3-7 Paul shows us how all have sinned and are guilty. In Romans 1-2 Paul shows us why good men and women aren't good enough for God's heaven. Good people need forgiveness for their sins just like everyone else. Christians have their sins forgiven at the cross. Because of God's grace and mercy Christians will never face their sins again. Not so with those who died without a Savior.

Romans 9:18-19

18 So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills.

19 You will say to me then, "Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?"

God is not obligated to be merciful to anyone, or obliged to bless some more than others. Nobody "deserves" mercy, so there is nothing unjust or inappropriate about God's choice. That applies as much to moments when God pointedly withholds mercy as it does to those times when He grants it.

In fact, in the previous verse, Paul cited the example of God's words to Pharaoh **just before delivering one of the plagues on Egypt**. Through Moses, God told Pharaoh that God had raised him up to show His own power over Egypt and to make His own name proclaimed in the earth. In other words, God raised Pharaoh up in order to rain down plagues upon Egypt for the sake of His own glory.

Paul states again that God will have mercy on anyone He wants to. Now, though, Paul adds a new statement: God will harden whomever He wishes to, as well. This, too, is a reference to Pharaoh. This ruler had made a clear choice to reject God's will (Exodus 7:13; 8:15). Exodus 10:1 quotes God telling Moses that He had hardened Pharaoh's heart to keep Pharaoh from letting the Israelites go. This was so God **could continue showing Himself** through the signs of the plagues. God does the same thing to Pharaoh's heart at least four more times after this.

Pharaoh, then, is the one God held responsible for saying no to Moses' request from God to let the Israelites go. In particular, his refusal of the initial request set up the rest of Egypt's troubles. After that, God clearly intervened to make Pharaoh continue in his hard-heartedness towards Israel.

Paul is insisting that God has every right to do this because He is God. He owes no one anything. The fact that He gives mercy to some of us—any of us—is a gift, not an obligation (Romans 4:2-5; 11:6). He is God.

Chuck Swindoll on Romans:

Let's put Romans 9 in perspective. Remember where we have been. In Romans chapters 6 through 8 we learn 'We Don't Have to Live as We Used To' Staying one step ahead of his readers, Paul anticipated the inevitable question: "What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase?" (Romans 6:1).

In other words, since we're justified and will remain so even if we sin, can't we just live however we want? "May it never be!" exclaimed Paul. "How shall we who died to sin still live in it?" (6:2).

Salvation doesn't free us to sin; it frees us not to sin (6:2-11). As believers in Christ, we are united with Christ Himself and His strength. Sin no longer has a claim on our lives. We're "alive to God in Christ Jesus" (6:11).

We learned the daily process of living this new life in Christ is called "sanctification" (6:22). Whereas justification is God's declaration of righteousness, sanctification is our development in righteousness. Justification has to do with our position in Christ. Sanctification is the process of becoming more like Christ.

As growing Christians, we no longer live under the law, which showed us our sin and condemned us. Instead we live in the Spirit, who frees us to love and serve Christ.

Old habits die hard, though, as we all know. Even though we're new creatures in Christ and will one day be perfect, we retain the vestiges of our old, sinful nature in this life (Romans 7). This war of the two natures is a struggle for the Christian who truly wants to grow.

But even in the midst of the struggle, the Spirit who dwells within us gives assurance that we are children of God who will one day stand in His presence (8:16-18). We will one day be free from all sin and suffering (8:23-25). The Spirit even helps us pray when we can't find the words (8:26-27).

The Spirit is our source of strength but also a sign of our security in Christ. Security that God works for our good (8:28). Security that we were chosen by God and will one day see Him face-to-face (8:29-30). Security that God is for us and not against us (8:31). And security that nothing, either in heaven or on earth, can separate us from the love of God (8:38-39).

Now Paul must address the future of Israel (Romans 9-11) because not everyone, however, has that sense of security; not everyone is saved. And that grieved Paul, especially because many of the unsaved were fellow Jews. How could it be that God's covenant people of old could be so resistant to the gospel?

Paul explained that Israel's rejection of God is both a matter of God's sovereign choice (Romans 9) and Israel's stubbornness and self-righteousness (Romans 10).

Does that mean God has given up on Israel? Paul's vivid depiction of an olive tree in chapter 11 assures us that He hasn't. Though unbelieving Jews have been "cut off" from the olive tree (the community of the redeemed) and believing Gentiles have been grafted in, "all Israel" will one day be saved and grafted back in (11:26).

This divine plan caused Paul to praise God for His “unfathomable” ways (11:33). Though we can’t always explain why God does things the way He does them, we can trust that He is God. And His plans, like His person, are perfect.

How, Then, Are We to Live? (Romans 12:1-15:13)

Having laid out the truth of what Christ has done for us, Paul, in his usual style, turned his attention to how life changes for those who are in Christ.

In light of the “mercies of God” (Romans 1-11), Paul urges us to “present [our] bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is [our] spiritual service of worship” (12:1).

What does this mean? It means that the Christian life is a sacrificial offering of gratitude to the God who has set us free to serve Him.

How do we serve Him? Rather than being “conformed” to the world, we’re to be “transformed by the renewing of” our minds (12:2). And rather than dwelling on our own importance, we’re to consider the value of others (12:3-8). We’re to live in a way that serves and benefits others and that combats evil with good (12:9-21).

The realm of civil government also takes on new meaning for the Christian. We’re to pray for our leaders, submit to them, and live exemplary lives under their reign (Romans 13).

Life in Christ also brings freedom from external standards of righteousness. Though we’re all to be sensitive to and respect the convictions held by others, righteousness isn’t defined by our participation or abstinence. “The kingdom of God,” said Paul, “is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (14:17).

Pleasing ourselves isn’t the goal of the Christian life (15:1). We’re to follow the example of Christ and work for the good of our neighbor, “accept[ing] one another, just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God” (15:7).

The Christian life is a different life. And all the resources we need to live it are found in Christ Himself.