

Series: The Reign of Grace

Today's Message: Is There Unrighteousness in God?

Jeff Kennedy / December 11, 2022

Romans 11:33–36 “Oh, the depth of the riches and the wisdom and the knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments and untraceable his ways! ³⁴ **For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?** ³⁵ **And who has ever given to God, that he should be repaid?** ³⁶ For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen.”

Introduction: If you had to give your life for someone—*your life in place of theirs*—who would it be? Soldiers may give their lives to save their fellow warriors. Parents would give their lives for their children. Occasionally we hear of selfless acts of sacrificial love, as a teacher shields her students from a hail of bullets in a school etc.

Paul's answer in Chapters 9, 10, and 11 is that he would give up his own salvation if it meant the salvation of his countrymen—ethnic Jews.

Last week, we discovered that just because Paul's kinsmen find themselves cut off from the salvation in Christ—doesn't mean that God's plan for ethnic Israel had failed.

We surveyed five examples of God's sovereign choice. God's choice of Isaac over Ishmael, Jacob over Esau, Moses over Pharaoh, and God's choice of the individuals who comprise what he calls “the remnant” from among the Jews and Gentiles.

Today, we're going to look at some objections Paul anticipates and some interpretive questions routinely raised from the text.

The two objections Paul will address are: (1) Is there unrighteousness in God (v. 14) “Is God the author of sin?” and (2) How can God hold us responsible if we have been chosen and designated to glorify him, either as objects of his wrath in judgment, or objects of his mercy in salvation (v. 19). Now, ***if we find ourselves repeating these same objections then we find ourselves in opposition to Paul on this matter.***

The first question arises...

1. Are we God's elect because we have faith, or do we have faith because we are God's elect? This question arises from Rom 9:11–12 “For though her sons had not been born yet or *done anything* good or bad, so that God's purpose according to *election might stand*— ¹² *not from works* but from the one who *calls*—she was told, ‘The older will serve the younger.’” So, we learned last week that God's election of one individual over another was not dependent on anything they had done, good or bad. “Anything” means just that—it encompasses any actions the individual might have done or would do. ***God's will to choose Jacob over Esau was not based on any actions they took or would take, nor upon any works of righteousness they performed.***

Now, what does Paul contrast their works with here? Up until Chapter 6, ***Paul had contrasted works and faith.*** So someone might say, “If Paul contrasts faith and works, then surely our faith cannot be considered our work.” That is, the act of expressing our belief in Christ cannot be counted here. So maybe God doesn't take into account our works, but looking down on history, wouldn't he take into account our faith? Fair point, except...Notice ***here he does not contrast works and faith. Instead, he contrasts works and God's calling.*** Why is this significant? Because God's calling precedes our justifying faith. *Note the sequence...*

Romans 8:28–30 “We know that all things work together for the good of those who ***love God, who are called*** according to his purpose. ²⁹ For those he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, so that he would be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. ³⁰ And those he predestined, he also called; and those he called, he also justified; and those he justified, he also glorified.” Notice the progression—there is a definite sequence here: *the foreknown are then predestined; the predestined are then called (singled out chosen), and the called are then justified (by faith).*

Here in 9:11–12, Paul is not contrasting works and faith as he has so often done. Here, he's contrasting works and calling. So I would submit that God does not look down the halls of history to see who will believe and who won't—because his calling precedes our faith—and his calling is according to his purpose/will, not according to anything we would do, including faith and works.

We're not God's elect (God doesn't call us) because we have justifying faith; ***we have justifying faith because we are the foreknown, predestined, called children of God.***

So, now that's the context for his statement about Esau being hated. Let's unpack that.

This leads to the second question in the text...

2. How can God “hate Esau” if he loves the whole world? Rom 9:13 “As it is written: I have loved Jacob, but I have hated Esau.” How can this claim square with **John 3:16**? “For God loved the world in this way: He gave his one and only Son so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.”

What about **Romans 5:8** “But God proves his own love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

1 John 2:2 “He himself is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for those of the whole world.” Jesus taught, “You have heard it said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you’ (Matt 5:44). Jesus’ whole life is characterized by his love for the outcast, his compassion, and mercy on people who ultimately rejected him. But he loved them anyway.

Illus. When the rich young ruler came to Jesus asking for a bulletproof loophole in the law that would guarantee him eternal life in God’s Kingdom—Jesus responded by telling him, “Sell everything, give it to the poor and come follow me.” The young man went away sad—he rejected Jesus. And it says, “Jesus looked at him and loved him.”

Isn’t it the character of God revealed in Jesus of Nazareth that God loves sinners? Yes.

But God also hates sin. And sin is not some abstract object that exists apart from the sinner. We live in a culture that celebrates individuality to the point where reality is just being denied. People are praised and celebrated for living their “authentic truth” or declaring their “authentic selves.” Yeah, but if that so-called “authentic self” involves the denial of God’s image in us through sin and depravity—then God hates that. So he hates sin, he hates what sin does to us (total corruption of our human nature), and he hates us in our sin.

This is why the Psalmist can say in Psalm 5:5 “The boastful cannot stand in your sight; you hate all evildoers.”

Psalm 11:5 “The Lord tests the righteous, but his soul hates the wicked and the one who loves violence.”

Psalm 45:7 “You love righteousness, and you hate wickedness.”

Understand God hates sin because it is an affront to his holiness and distorts and defaces his image in us.

But Esau’s case is awfully specific. He’s the only person in the OT named where God says, “I hate this person.”

Paul quotes Malachi 1:2–3

This word for “hate” can mean to “despise, revile, or loathe.” When God says he “hates wickedness,” that is just what he means. God despises it. But the term can also be a relational term meaning “to love less.”

- Rachel and Leah: Gen 29:30 “Jacob slept with Rachel also, and indeed, he loved Rachel more than Leah.” So now, does Jacob think she’s just ugly old, useless Leah? No, it already said that Jacob saw that she had a pretty face. It’s just that when he saw Rachel—he saw that she had a curvy body. It says right here that he just didn’t love Leah as much as he loved Rachel. 29:31 “When the Lord saw that Leah was hated, he opened her womb, but Rachel was barren.” The author here interprets his own statement...Leah was less loved, which is interpreted as “hate.”
- Matt 10:37 “The one who loves a father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; the one who loves a son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.” Now Luke records this same saying and maintains the Semitism, the Hebraic idiom. Luke 14:26 reads, “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, and even his own life—he cannot be my disciple.”
- But Malachi writes about Esau’s descendants, Edom, who have done enormous harm to the Hebrews in their land. Esau’s lineage becomes antagonistic to Jacob’s descendants. Repeatedly the subject of God’s retribution in the Prophetic literature. But Amos foresees a day when there will even be a remnant of people among Edom who, along with a remnant from among the nations, be saved. Amos 9:11–12 “In that day I will restore the fallen shelter of David: I will repair its gaps, restore its ruins, and rebuild it as in the days of old, so that they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations that bear my name.”

While salvation does not come *through them*, salvation does come *to them*. ***God’s “hatred” for Esau in this respect is the equivalence of his preference for Jacob to bring forth the line of the Messiah.***

We come to the 3rd question; Paul anticipates an objection...

3. Is God the author of sin? Paul perceives that his Jewish hearers might have a visceral reaction to this doctrine—that God’s choice of Jacob was an act of preferential love, and his rejection of Esau and his descendants (Edom) was an act of unfairness.

Rom 9:14 “What should we say then? Is there injustice with God? Absolutely not! The word translated “injustice” is *adikia*, and it means “unrighteousness” it’s the same word he uses in Chapter 1 to describe the wrath of God revealed against all unrighteousness—and then lists their idolatry, unbelief, and moral insanity. But, the objection, as I have stated it is not as bad as the one Paul raises here. It’s one thing for God to be the author of someone’s sin. But it’s another thing for God to have unrighteousness in him—that is—for God to be a sinner. Paul thinks this is a preposterous objection. On what basis?

Paul responds in two ways to this:

- God has the Sovereign right to show mercy or not. It’s not sinful for God to not show mercy. v. 15 “Absolutely not! For he tells Moses, I will show mercy to whom I will show mercy” But on what basis? On what does it depend? God has the right to show mercy to whomever he will—and he has the right to withhold it. The world is under a standing condemnation—it stands condemned already. And God has no obligation to save anyone— The world is already in a state of sin and rebellion. Earlier I mentioned John 3:16. Now, let’s read the rest of John 3:17–19 “For God did not send his Son into the world to **condemn** the world, but to **save** the world through him. ¹⁸ Anyone who believes in him is **not condemned**, but anyone who does not believe is **already condemned**, because he has not believed in the name of the one and only Son of God. ¹⁹ This is the **judgment**: The light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil.” This is a “salvation-from-condemnation” passage. It’s not that people just could “do without” the light, or didn’t prefer the light. It’s that they hated the light. They loved evil and darkness. Listen, God owes no one mercy in the first place. Offering it to anyone is purely an act of grace, and no one obligates God to save us.

He then appeals to the fact that...

- God’s mercy is dependent on his Sovereign grace, not our human will. Notice the second part of his answer to this objection in Rom 9:16 “So then, it does not **depend on human will or effort** but on God who shows mercy. ¹⁷ For the Scripture tells Pharaoh, I raised you up for this reason so that I may display my power in you and that my name may be proclaimed in the whole earth. ¹⁸ So then, he has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy and he hardens whom he

wants to harden.” Now, his point here is that it does not *depend on man’s will or effort*—that is, ***man’s will or effort is the basis on which he makes the judgment***—he doesn’t say it does not *involve man’s will or effort*.

Exod 4:21 “But I will harden his heart so that he won’t let the people go.” (7:3; 13; 9:7, 12, 35; 10:1, 20, 27; 11:10).

Exod 8:15 “Pharaoh...he hardened his heart and would not listen.” (8:32; 9:34)

1 Sam 6:6 The priests’ answer to the Philistines as to why they should return the Ark of the Lord to Israel: “Why should you harden your hearts as the Egyptians and Pharaoh hardened their hearts?”

Here’s the question: ***Did God hardening Pharaoh’s heart involve Pharaoh hardening his own heart?*** Yes. Romans 9:16 says that it “did not depend on the will or effort of man.” Meaning it was not the basis on which God chose one over the other. Instead, God’s choice was depended on *HIS will and His effort*.

The more shocking claim of the passage is not that God loved Jacob more than Esau—or that God raised up Pharaoh to display his power and glory in judgment—*NO*. ***The more shocking claim of the passage is that God has shown any sinner mercy and kindness because no sinner is owed it.*** Indeed, that is why God’s grace is grace and not payment for personal righteousness. Does God’s election of Pharaoh to demonstrate his power and thus his glory implicate God as a sinner, unrighteous, and the author of sin? Paul says the question is nonsense because God doesn’t owe a condemned sinner mercy in the first place—and if God chooses to glorify himself by punishing the wicked, there is no one who can gainsay that decision.

4. How can God hold us morally responsible if we're just acting according to his will? Now, this is another objection he anticipates. Notice Paul's response: Rom 9:19 "You will say to me, therefore, 'Why then does he still find fault? For who resists his will?'" How does God find Pharaoh blameworthy if the emperor was raised up for that very purpose?

- As the Creator, God alone has the right to determine our purpose. This really is his point in these verses. 9:20–21 "On the contrary, who are you, a human being, to talk back to God? Will what is formed say to the one who formed it, 'Why did you make me like this?' ²¹ Or has the potter no right over the clay to make from the same lump one piece of pottery for honor and another for dishonor?

Paul clearly appeals to God's right to create Israel and choose them from among the nations, and he had the right to choose individuals like Isaac, Jacob, and Moses to lead them—and he has the Sovereign freedom to choose from among Israel a remnant—individuals from within Israel (9:27).

- God makes known the riches of his mercy through the objects of his wrath. Rom 9:22–24 "And what if God, wanting to display his wrath and to make his power known, endured with much patience objects of wrath prepared for destruction? ²³ And what if **he did this to make known** the riches of his glory on objects of mercy that he prepared beforehand for glory —²⁴ on us, the ones he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles?" That is to say, the means by which God displays his mercy to vessels prepared beforehand for resurrection glory is by first condemning the world in sin. God raises up people whom he's prepared as vessels of destruction in order to make known the riches of glory in salvation to us—those called from among Jews and the Gentiles.
- Human beings maintain the capacity to choose freely but are currently bound and imprisoned to sin. Paul seems very clear about this. The innate ability to freely choose remains a part of our image-bearing nature. The Fall has not obliterated mankind's ability to choose any more than it has annihilated our capacity for love or goodness. Sinners make choices all the time. Sinners love their families and the natural world and have the capacity to work for the general good of others. What the sinner doesn't have, however, is libertarian freedom to believe in Christ as a matter of their own free will. Rom 11:30–32 "As you once disobeyed God but now have received mercy through their disobedience, ³¹ so they too have now disobeyed, resulting in mercy to you, so that they also may now receive mercy. ³² For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may have mercy on all."

Illus. Someone serving a life sentence in a maximum security prison has the capacity for free choices. They retain the innate ability to choose freely. What they don't have is freedom—they are *imprisoned, and many of their choices are*

predetermined for them. When they eat, what they eat, which hour of the day they'll be let out in the prison yard, which 23 of their 24 hours they'll be confined to their cell or the cafeteria. The NT consistently uses these kinds of metaphors and word pictures: we're blind in our sins, and our minds are darkened to the truth (Rom 1). We're dead in our trespasses and sins (Eph 2). We're enslaved to sin and need to be set free from imprisonment (Rom 6, 7, 11). So what do we need?

- Our darkened minds need enlightenment by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 2).
- Our dead souls need resurrection life by the Holy Spirit.
- Our enslaved and imprisoned nature needs to be set free from sin by the Holy Spirit.

Paul says to the Galatians, "It is for freedom that Christ has set you free." This presupposes that before you had Christ, you weren't free. We were blind such that we couldn't see the truth; we were dead such that we couldn't respond in faith. We were enslaved to our passions and sins such that we couldn't break free. But now Christ by the Holy Spirit has set us free—and we are free.

And if the Son has set you free then you are free indeed. But until he does, you are not free.

Are you free from the burden of your sin this morning?

Conclusion: What is our conclusion today?

Romans 11:33–36 "Oh, the depth of the riches and the wisdom and the knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments and untraceable his ways!

1. God works everything out for the good of those whom he foreknew, predestined, and called as his own. And those he called he also justified and given the promise of resurrection glory.
2. And there is absolutely nothing that can separate the called, justified saints of God from the love of Christ—nothing in all creation.
3. We learned that God's plan with ethnic Israel has not failed, but it succeeded because through them came the Messiah who is now the Savior and Lord of the World.
4. And from Israel and the Gentile nations—God has called an elect people—chosen and called as his very own. Set free from our imprisonment and enslavement to sin; from our blindness to the truth of salvation in Christ; set free from spiritual death and partakers of resurrection life as we await resurrection glory with Christ.

