**The Potter and the Clay**

**Romans 9:19-24 (ESV)**

May 21, 2017

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We’ve been in this great letter. And in this great letter, there is this great chapter that is so heavy and weighty with God explaining who He is and how He acts in His sovereignty and in His mercy. As we read this chapter, we really become undone, undone in ourselves, in our minds, in our hearts, and we just fall before God in worship. And so today, in the midst of this very, very difficult chapter, perhaps the most difficult chapter in all the Bible, we come to the most difficult paragraph in this most difficult chapter. That is verses 19-24. As I gave evidence this morning at the first service, you’re only going to get about a half a sermon or so today. So, it’ll be full-length, but only half a sermon. We’re going to take this passage again next time together. There is so much here for us to chew on and then apply. God has been explaining His sovereign working in the midst of the salvation of people. And then this question is posed as a result of that teaching.

***19*** *You will say to me then, “Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?”* ***20*** *But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, “Why have you made me like this?”* ***21*** *Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use?* ***22*** *What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction,* ***23*** *in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory—****24*** *even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles?*

May God encourage us through His Word this morning!

This morning, we wade once again into the deep end of the Gospel pool. Few truths challenge our natural thoughts more than the paragraph that the Holy Spirit leads the apostle Paul to write in Romans 9:19-24. If you find the teaching here challenging to understand and to grasp, you are in very, very good company. Even the apostle Peter wrestled with the truth God reveals here. I think that this is the passage that Peter references in 2 Peter 3 when Peter writes:

**2 Peter 3:15-16** And count the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him,as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures.

Paul and Peter in both these passages are thinking about the patience of God in reference to salvation. Peter is acknowledging that what Paul wrote is not from Paul, but it’s from the Holy Spirit. “the wisdom given him…” Peter goes on to say there are some things in Paul’s letters that are hard to understand. In 2 Peter 3, Peter even uses the same word Paul does in Romans 9 to reference the patience of God. The patience of God is God’s restraint in executing immediate judgment upon sinful people. God would be right to execute immediate judgment. But in patience, He holds Himself back. I believe that as Peter reflects upon Romans 9 that he comments that there are some things in Paul’s letters that are hard to understand. And yet notice, Peter doesn’t argue with Paul. Rather, he testifies that Paul’s letters are indeed Holy Scripture given to us by the Holy Spirit.

Still some may ask the practical question, “Pastor, why would we spend several Sunday morning’s teaching on a passage that is so difficult to understand?” I hope to win you first to the value of this chapter before I try and attempt to explain it to you. We want to begin this morning with five applications. We normally save applications for the end. But because I want to hearten you with the call to allow your mind to work as we wrestle through this passage and its meaning. There is great practical value that comes to us when we do. There are five practical blessings that we receive from Romans 9.

Blessing #1: Romans 9 provides a needed defense against our natural man-centered way of thinking about God.

This chapter sets God before us as King of kings and Lord of lords. God is sitting on the throne and He is ruling absolutely in almighty power. The truth of God’s sovereignty pushes aside our small inadequate, unworthy views of God that make us yawn in our worship, almost bored with Him. The God described here causes us to tremble and quake in awe and admiration before Him. When we see God through the lens of Romans 9, we cover our faces and we cry out, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty!”

Blessing #2: Romans 9 fuels amazement and joy in God over our own salvation.

When we read Romans 9, we cannot believe that God in mercy would rescue us! We gasp in joyful disbelief that God would choose to include us in His royal family and our glad hearts rejoice. He is our good, good Father and we are loved by Him. We do not deserve to be in His family, yet He has adopted us. He has chosen us before the foundation of the world. We do not deserve to be forgiven. God deserves all the credit for every part of our salvation from beginning to end. Even the will to desire God comes from God! It doesn’t come from our own natural hearts. Our own natural hearts are given completely over to rebellion and waywardness. What a gift God gives us when He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!

Blessing #3: Romans 9 breathes confidence and hope into our hearts as we live in a world that is very broken.

When we read the morning newspapers, we do not read them from a position of frustration, anger, fear, anxiety, worry. We don’t read them and think this worldis so unsteady and chaotic. But we view all the events we read in every report from the perspective of God’s sovereignty. God sovereignly orders every part of human history for His glory. There is not one small aspect of human history that is outside of His ordaining design. God never is the author of evil, but He is not the victim of it either. He ordains and channels every part, even the sins of this disordered world, to bring about His good plan, and He does so perfectly. He does so without fail. God absolutely will succeed in everything He decides to do to bring about His glorious outcome. And so our hearts find their rest in Him!

Blessing #4: Romans 9 fuels our enthusiasm for prayer and evangelism.

Remember, Romans 9 began with Paul expressing his longing and heart’s desire for his own Israeli brothers and sisters to be saved. We do not base the effectiveness of our praying or of our witnessing on properly executed techniques or on our own talented performance. We know that the God who orders the end has ordained the means by which He would fulfill His purposes. And those means surprisingly include us! God allows us to enter in to His sovereign workings in this world and to accomplish His purposes through humble, heartfelt prayers of His people, and through the simple, bold, faithful proclamation of His Gospel. We are not adequate for these things, but that matters not. Our adequacy is found in Him. We do not have to sell people on the truth of Jesus. We simply follow Jesus and proclaim Him and watch Him transform lives. We do not have to save anyone. God does that! Nothing is more exciting than to be part of God’s miraculous work of making dead hearts come alive! And so God’s sovereignty fuels our praying and our evangelism.

Blessing #5: Romans 9 teaches us to pursue our joy and happiness in God’s glory alone.

We need this chapter to remind us that the pursuit of our own value is empty and it is vain. This chapter teaches us that sin and selfishness never reward us with true happiness. Romans 9 helps us to see that the ultimate betrayal of our own good is the pursuit of our own glory. This chapter makes clear that seeing the great worth of God and of enjoying Him and making much of Him is where life is found. That’s the fountainhead from which all happiness, all satisfaction, all purpose, all joy is found. So we are wise to thirst after Him and not after created things.

Remember, Paul begins this chapter by describing his own heart’s anguish over the lost condition of his own people. While some Jews believed in Jesus as the Messiah, most had not believed in Him. So most of God’s chosen people remained outside of God’s salvation, God’s forgiveness, outside of God’s adoption and outside of God’s blessing. That reality caused Paul to address three specific questions. The first question was addressed in verses 6-13. And that question is this:

Question #1: Did God fail to save people whom He purposed to save?

Verse 6-13 answers, “No.” God did not intend to save every individual in Israel, but only a chosen remnant.

Question #2: If God chose some to receive His blessing and did not choose others, is God unjust?

So verses 14-18, God answers, “No, God is not unjust! God is right to exercise His freedom as God to have mercy upon whomever He wills to have mercy.”

**Romans 9:18** So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills.

Well, this gives rise to question number 3.

Question #3: If God has mercy on whomever He wills and hardens whomever He wills, is God unfair? How can God hold people accountable if He is the One who softens with His mercy or who hardens as He withholds mercy?

God answers this question in verses 19-29. We want to unpack verses 19-24 this morning, at least part of them. As we look at these verses, we’re going to follow four themes. We’re only going to look at the first three primarily. These themes help us to understand how we can worship God in view of His sovereign grace and mercy.

**Theme #1: The Reason for Everything: God’s glory.**

God has a purpose for everything He does in this world. That purpose is to proclaim His greatness and His worth throughout the whole world. We trace this theme back really, all through the Bible. But verse 17 of Romans chapter 9 is wonderful in this regard.

**Romans 9:17** 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.”

Paul is quoting from Exodus 9:16. In Exodus, God confronts Pharaoh, this mighty emperor of this mighty empire, Egypt, through a series of plagues. And God’s purpose is to liberate His people so that they could worship Him. Exodus 9 teaches us that this battle between God and Pharaoh is not really a battle at all. God wants us to understand that story as not being a boxing match between two mighty persons. So, God strikes the first blow and then Pharaoh strikes back. And then God strikes at Pharaoh and back and forth it goes. No! That is not the meaning of that story. Pharaoh’s arms are too short to box with God. And the application God wants us to make is that our arms are too short to box with God as well.

Friend, if you have come to church this morning boxing with God in some way at this time of your life, God’s kind but sure word to you is to simply surrender. It is time to yield! You are on a failing mission which will lead you to utter misery. The story of Pharaoh and God’s interaction is not at all that God punches and Pharaoh counter-punches. Rather, the story is that God is mighty and Pharaoh is nothing. Mighty Pharaoh who rules over the greatest dynasty on earth is nothing but a floating dandelion seed next to the LORD God Almighty! God lightly blows and Pharaoh spins in the wind. That’s how God intends for us to understand this story.

The setting of Exodus 9 is the sixth of ten plagues. It’s the plague in which God sends boils breaking out in the skin of the Egyptians and of the Egyptians’ cattle. God explains in Exodus 9 why He is taking so long to subdue Pharaoh. Remember, it’s ten plagues over the course of a long period of time in which Pharaoh is finally subdued and finally gave in to God’s desires to let the people go. But God tells us why it’s taking so long. And this is what God says in Exodus chapter 9:

**Exodus 9:13-16** Then the Lord said to Moses, “Rise up early in the morning and present yourself before Pharaoh and say to him, ‘Thus says the Lord, the God of the Hebrews, “Let my people go, that they may serve me. For this time I will send all my plagues on you yourself, and on your servants and your people, so that you may know that there is none like me in all the earth.For by now I could have put out my hand and struck you and your people with pestilence, and you would have been cut off from the earth. 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.”

God is saying to Pharaoh, “I could have ended this whole ordeal in a split second on Day 1. But I chose to defeat you over a period of time through ten plagues, so that everyone would know that there is none like Me in all the earth and so that My name would be proclaimed in the greatest possible way.” It is as though God were saying, “If I had ended you (Pharaoh) too quickly, the story that reveals My power would have been too short.” As the Israelites from that day forward would tell the bedtime story, it would be a five second story. God sent Moses. Moses said, “Let my people go.” Pharaoh said, “No!” and God struck Pharaoh dead. End of story! Let’s go to bed.

God is saying, “I don’t want that. I want this generation and every generation afterwards to hear this story in such a way that it would be the greatest display of My power and My might over this mighty emperor, Pharaoh. And so that’s the reason why I’m doing what I’m doing here in Egypt.”

Here’s the question: What is God’s motivation in the salvation of His people? Here, He tells us it is “so that I might display My power and My glory to all peoples.” God pursues the glory of His own name. That’s God’s motivation! This motivation is not a contradiction to His love for us. In fact, this motivation of God’s pursuit of His own glory is in complete alignment with His love for us. His love for us magnifies His glory all the more since we are totally unworthy of His love. Allow me to use a human illustration to describe a great, weighty spiritual truth.

The fact that I love my wife Kimberly and that I love my sons and daughters is not a particular glory to me. When you set them next to me, I am blessed to be in relationship with them. They are beautiful, they’re talented, they’re generous, they’re giving, they’re forgiving and they’re fun people. So, my love for them is not a display of the excellence of my own heart because they rightly merit my love. It is no virtue for me to love them because they have so much in them for me to be attracted to. They make my life so much better. No one says when they see my love for my wife and my children, “Wow, Ritch! You have such a loving heart. Your wife and kids are such wretches. I don’t know how you do it. I don’t know how you could love such people. It would be nearly impossible for me, and yet you love them. You’re such a loving person.” No one ever says that. And if they ever did say it, they’d be a little crazy because it’s simply not true.

But this is not the way it is with God’s love for us. God loves us when there is nothing for Him as God, to be attracted to in us. God is so infinitely superior to us that we have nothing in ourselves that makes His existence better. Furthermore, God loves us while we were still sinners, rebels, outlaws, and enemies. Nothing in us prompted Him to love us. He does not love us because we are adorable or cute or witty or talented or smart or good. His love is His completely free choice to love a people who are completely undeserving. His love is a universe-sized poster that advertises and proclaims the excellence of His own person and of His own heart.

I love the hymn that Stuart Townsend has recently written. He writes:

How deep the Father’s love for us,

How vast beyond all measure,

That He should give His only Son

To make a wretch His treasure.

Who is the wretch there? That’s me and that’s you if you’re in Christ. How deep the Father’s love for us must be that He would take us wretches, people who had nothing good to offer Him, nothing to barter with, and yet He gave His Son. He loved us beyond all measure. It’s His love that makes us a treasure. It’s not us, the treasure causing Him to love us. It is Him and the greatness of His love that causes us to be a treasure. That’s the God-centeredness of God. His motivation for loving us is His own glory, to display the greatness of His love in this. While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:8) He died in our place.

Now, once God does set His love upon us, God equips us to bring joy to His heart through the grace He gives us. So our worship and our service to Him is not our gift to God. Our worship and our service is His gift to us. We actually now, through the work of God’s grace in our heart are in a position where we can please the infinite God. There is no purpose and there is no meaning greater than that. That’s God’s gift to us! So our obedience and our service and our ministry and our labors, that’s not us paying God back. That’s God’s giving us meaning and purpose, entering into His glory. That’s the marvelous thing!

I think that much of our natural resistance to the teaching of Romans 9 fades away when we simply rejoice in the central truth that God is a God-centered being. God loves His own glory and is jealous for it. And He is right and it’s necessary that He would love the thing which is most valuable so that we could be invited into the thing that is most valuable. That is God Himself. Often the source of man’s resistance to the clear teaching of Romans 9 is simply that we naturally resent God’s pursuit of His glory instead of our glory. The natural man reads Romans 9 and says, “I don’t like that kind of God. I wish God would be more man-centered, He’d center His thoughts more about me than about Himself. The truth of the Gospel is that God is right to do that which successfully pursues His own glory to the greatest degree. God Himself is the greatest value in all creation and so He is right to value that which is most valuable. So God loves His own Name and sovereignly purposes to advance it in every dealing with man. That’s theme number 1. The reason for everything is God’s glory.

**Theme #2: The Reversal that Sinful Man Seeks: Self-glory**

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

I like the New International Version translation of this.

**Romans 9:19 NIV** One of you will say to me: “Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?”

If He has mercy on those whom He has mercy and He hardens those whom He hardens, why would God still blame us? Why would God blame people who harden their hearts against Him if they are only doing that which He makes them to do? That’s the question.

When God begins to convict man of His sinfulness, man’s natural response is first to resist that conviction. It is to resist it and make it hard to come to us. Once it arrives into our own lives, we take that conviction, that accusation of God upon our own soul, and we rationalize it. We try to set it aside. When we can’t resist and we can’t rationalize, what we do is what happens here. We reverse it and we take the attack, the accusation that justly falls upon us, and we spin it to make it into an attack against God Himself.And that’s what is happening. They’re spinning the accusation that God has made against their soul that we are all sinners and we’ve all fallen short of His glory, and said, “Hey, God! Aren’t we simply doing what you have designed us or made us to do?”

We spin our accusations, God’s accusations back toward God because we’re seeking glory for ourselves. If we accepted God’s clear appraisal that our lives are so messed up by sin that we could do nothing about it and only God in His mercy could rescue us, our pride would be crushed. And that’s the reason why faith and repentance begins with a humble heart by which we say, “I’m undone! There’s nothing I bring to God to barter with Him for His blessing or His praise or His heaven. The only thing I have is empty, dirty, sin-stained hands and a corrupt heart. I need God to do everything for me from the beginning to the end.”

And here’s the great tragedy. In seeking glory for ourselves, we fall short of God’s glory. God, through Christ, has made a way to enter into this wonderful, beautiful, valuable thing called His glory. But until we stop pursuing our own glory, we’ll never enter into the glory of God’s eternal life, the glory of knowing God and knowing Jesus Christ, enjoying Him now and forever. And we entirely miss God’s glory. There is nothing more tragic in all the world than that. God in grace offers to connect us to the most wonderful, beautiful, valuable thing in all the world, namely Himself. And we turn God’s offer of His own glory down in order to protect and preserve something that is corrupt and that is passing away. We think that the source of our joy is in our own worth and this confusion brings about the complete destruction of our purpose, meaning and joy. Here’s what Jesus says about that.

**John 12:25** Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.

Do you catch that? If you love your own glory, then the only way for you to have any glory is to lose your own glory. Because when you lose your own glory, God provides you access through Jesus to participate in His glory. And that’s where life is all about. So if you love your life, you have to lose your life. You have to lose this pursuit of your own self-importance, of your own self-significance so that you realize there’s nothing in me that is eternally significant. There’s everything in God that is eternally significant. When I lose this, then I’m able to turn and embrace the free offer that God provides for me in Christ.

Jesus says it another way in Matthew 13. I love this description! He talks about what the kingdom of heaven is like and the people who participate in the joy of God’s kingdom.

**Matthew 13:44** The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

Now think of this! This guy is walking his field and he sees this treasure buried here. “I know what I’m going to do. I’m going to go home and I’m going to sell everything I have so I can buy that field, so I can get that treasure.” Now, everything he has had, he’s treasured up to that point. He says all this stuff, my house, my donkey, my cart, my barns, all of those things have been very, very important to him up to this point, but now they have become completely unimportant. “I’m going to sell, get rid of everything because now that I’ve found something of true value, I’m willing to discard everything that I used to think was of great value so I can grab hold of it.” He says that’s what the kingdom of heaven is like.

And we have to ask ourselves the question: Have I ever become that man? Have I ever come to recognize that everything that I thought was really important about my own life is really not important at all because I’ve discovered that the treasure, God Himself, is all important? So I’m going to get rid of all this pursuit, everything that I used to think was great and awesome and joy-inducing in order to grab hold of this thing which is the source of all life and all happiness. He goes on to say another parable.

**Matthew 13:45-46** Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it.

Now, do you notice then in his joy he goes? That’s important because oftentimes, Christians have this perspective that the Christian life is God asking us for our stuff and us saying, “Okay, God. I guess I should give it to you because you’re God and you have a right to ask me for my stuff. So I’m going to give you my stuff and I’m going to give you myself.” No! That’s not the Christian life at all. The Christian life is the discovery that what God is offering is more infinitely valuable than anything we have and that in joy we turn. It’s not reluctant, saying, “I just wish I could hold on to everything that is me.” No, the Christian life is this discovery that the Holy Spirit presents to our hearts. It’s taking the blinders off our eyes to see the glory of God in the face of Jesus. In joy we turn and say, “I need what Christ is offering me.”

So how should we respond to this charge that God is to blame for our resistance to Him? Paul could have answered this question a number of ways, but his response is very insightful as it is surprising. Paul does not answer this question the way I would have if someone would have asked me this question before reading in Romans 9. This leads us to the third theme.

**Theme #3: The Right of God: Absolute sovereignty.**

***20*** *But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, “Why have you made me like this?”*

Interesting that Paul does not respond, “Oh, wait a second guys! I didn’t mean to imply that our salvation is totally God’s sovereign doing. I didn’t mean to imply that. I didn’t mean to communicate there is nothing that we can do to prompt God to give us mercy.”No. Paul didn’t answer that way because that’s exactly what he has taught them. The detractors here understood this much of the Gospel. God is 100% sovereign in His mercy. He has mercy upon whom He wills to have mercy and He hardens those whom He wills to harden. That’s the clear teaching that Paul has given up to this point. God’s mercy does not depend upon human will or upon human exertion. God’s mercy depends on everything that is inside of God alone. God alone is the sole source of our salvation from beginning to end. Notice that Paul’s answer makes a huge contrast between God and between man.

***20*** *But who are you, O man, to answer back to God?*

Paul is juxta-positioning man and God. Man, down here, small, weak, corrupt, sinful; and God, infinite, holy, wise, righteous, sovereign. We are the ones who are molded. We’re the clay. He is the molder. He is the Creator. He is the Designer. This means everything we are and everything we can do comes from Him. And here’s the irony. The ability to ask the question of verse 19 comes to us because the molder of the clay designed our ability to ask that question inside of us. We wouldn’t even be able to ask that question were it not for God and His creative freedom.

Paul had explained earlier that man is completely responsible for his sin and that God alone is the perfect Judge to whom we all will one day give an account.

**Romans 2:3-5** Do you suppose, O man . . . that you will escape the judgment of God? Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God’s righteous judgment will be revealed.

Why is man storing up wrath for himself? The answer is because of your hard and impenitent heart. It’s not because God is hardening. It’s because of man’s responsibility of looking at the patience of God and still saying, “God, I want my glory and not your glory. I am going to remain self-centered rather than God-centered.” God is kind. He could immediately execute His judgment, but He doesn’t. His kindness is meant to lead us to repentance.

The question asked in Romans 9:19 misses the truth explained earlier in this letter that man is completely responsible for his own destruction. God’s sovereignty in His mercy does not contradict man’s responsibility in His rebellion. This question in verse 19 hopes to relieve us of the responsibility for our own miserable condition. But the argument is absurd. Let me use another human illustration.

Imagine a man who defies God and decides to live a life of a drunken reveler.One night while driving home from a party, he drives off the road and smacks into a telephone pole. He severs his spinal cord and is paralyzed. He has a drunk friend in the car with him and that drunk friend escapes with minor injuries. So now he’s living out his life having no longer, many physical capabilities. He’s sitting there and he’s stewing. He’s thinking about his own misery and he’s thinking about his friend’s escape. He shakes his fist at God and says, “God, this is not fair! How could you do this to me? Why did you rescue my friend from this miserable trouble and not me? You are so unfair!”

Now, it is true that God is sovereign over every detail of that story. God ordained for that telephone pole to be placed exactly where it was placed. He ordained for that party to go the way it did. He is not the author of the evil that is found there, but He’s not the victim of it either. And He’s using all the details even of the wicked actions and sins of sinful people to produce His purposes in human history. It is true that God did have mercy on the drunk friend that evening who escaped from that same accident with hardly a scratch. The happenings that night were not the result of some random, chaotic chance. It wasn’t faith that was acting. So Christians don’t believe in chance or fate. We believe in a God who is sovereign and purposeful. Every part of that story was ordained by God. He is in absolute control over every detail. Yet God is not the author of evil and He is not responsible for refusing to spare this man from the consequences of his own foolish actions. And yet this man, how absurd to shake his fist at God and say, “God, you somehow are unfair.” And that’s what natural man does when they consider the mercy and patience of God in His sovereign grace.

The truth is, man is in no position to accuse God of wrongdoing because God did not create the problem. God offers the solution and He invites everyone who would humble themselves to receive Jesus Christ as Savior and as Lord and to be given grace and to be given mercy. Man is not passive in his rebellion against God. Paul has already made this abundantly clear in Romans chapter 3.

**Romans 3:10-12, 18** as it is written: “None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.”…“There is no fear of God before their eyes.”

The question asked in Romans 9:19 gives evidence and proof that there is no fear of God in the person who is asking that question. We sin against God and then accuse Him of wrongdoing because of the way He distributes mercy. Beloved, God is not obligated to extend mercy to anyone. God would have been entirely just to withhold mercy from all. This is what God chose to do with the angels, by the way. Not one angel who fell ever received or experienced God’s mercy and God was just in that. Remember that God does not harden pure, innocent hearts. God only hardens hearts that are already hard and rebellious and resistant against Him. The hardness of man’s heart comes from man’s willfulness and cannot be blamed upon God. We have no excuses for it. Here's Paul’s answer again in verses 20-21.

***20*** *But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, “Why have you made me like this?”* ***21*** *Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use?*

The analogy being presented is drawn from the Old Testament. There are at least four occasions in the Old Testament where this analogy of the potter and the clay is used. And every time, it’s used to describe God’s right to be sovereign in His workings with mankind. Perhaps the most well-known of these passages or the most complete of these passages is Jeremiah 18.

In Jeremiah 18, God comes to Jeremiah the prophet and says, “I want you to get up and go down to that potter’s house.” Evidently this was a very famous potter. Jeremiah knew exactly where he was to go. And God said, “When you get to the potter’s house, I’m going to tell you some things.” So Jeremiah says, “I went down to the potter’s house and when I got there, the potter was actually working at the wheel.” Jeremiah was sitting back and watching the potter do his thing at the pottery wheel. And Jeremiah says that the vessel he was making was spoiled. There was something about it that as the potter was making and molding this clay, that wasn’t to the potter’s liking. And so, the potter crushed it again. And then he began using that same clay to spin another vessel. Jeremiah says that he reworked it into another vessel and he did it as it seemed good to him. (Jeremiah 18:1-4) That’s what potter’s do. That’s the relationship between the potter and the clay.

Friend, do you consider your relationship with God as that of the potter and the clay? You know, we exalt ourselves so that we begin to consider God as our equal, or our own lives as equal with the Lord. And that’s not the relationship. We would be nothing, literally nothing, had not God spoken and said, “Let there be…” And this is what Jeremiah says:

**Jeremiah 18:5-8** Then the word of the Lord came to me: “O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter has done? declares the Lord. Behold, like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, and if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I intended to do to it.

That’s God’s free offer! He is sovereign, and yet we’re responsible. The invitation is given to all. So all of these things, again, these truths are not in contradiction. They’re always married. They’re wed together. And he goes on:

**Jeremiah 18:11** Now, therefore, say to the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem: ‘Thus says the Lord, Behold, I am shaping disaster against you and devising a plan against you. Return, everyone from his evil way, and amend your ways and your deeds.’

Here is the response God calls upon people when they come to realize that God is this kind of God, that He’s sovereign. God holds sovereign prerogatives over all His creation. He is the Potter. He is the one who exercises His right to shape the clay into whatever He desires. And God says, “Recognize that and humble yourselves before Me.” We should not act like we created our own lives and that we have mastery over them. God created us and He’s the Sovereign Lord. He’s the One who possesses sovereign rights.

This truth must notmotivate us to a fatalistic shrug, “O well. I guess whatever God wants, that’s what God will do.” No! It’s a cause for us to humble ourselves, repent of our sin, and turn to Him because He’s shown Himself to be a merciful God. And yet, God is just in giving mercy to those whom He wills and refraining from giving mercy to those whom He does not will. God does not cede over His sovereignty to man. But the truth is that no sinner ever humbly pleads with God for mercy and is turned away! So for all of the discussion about God’s sovereignty, let that truth forever remain imbedded in our hearts. God is always consistent with His own person. He is good and righteous and wise. His decisions are never arbitrary but solely based upon His perfect character. Yet know that His love and mercy do not demand that He do anything other than condemn us. And that’s why we fall before God undone, left in ourselves.

***21*** *Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use?*

Isn’t it right for the potter to make out of one an amazing piece of pottery to put on display as an artwork in the house and out of another lump of clay to make an ashtray out of it, or a garbage can out of it? Yes. The potter has the right to do that.

***22*** *What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction,* ***23*** *in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory—*

Here’s the question: What if God, desiring to show His wrath and to make known His power has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction? Would God be wrong for doing that? If He decided to use people who are hardening their own hearts, then He refrains from giving mercy to change them so that by their own hardening, He would display His righteousness and justice. Would God be just in doing that? And the answer of course is, Yes. God is just! He’s not wrong for doing that.

What if God has been patient for so long with sinful, rebellious people simply in order to give a greater demonstration of His power on the Day of Judgment, of His righteousness on the Day of Judgment? That’s what He seems to have done. He says he did that in Pharaoh’s life. Is God wrong for doing that? No! God is not wrong for doing that. God’s wrath and power are beautiful and perfect elements of His glory. It is right for God always to display whatever is part of His glory, whatever is part of His perfection. God would not be wrong to withhold immediate judgment like He did with Pharaoh so that in the end His righteousness and justice would be fully displayed.

Yet, I want to close with another application because it’s an important application. It’s a weighty application. We have to wrestle with it. We’re going to wrestle with it more next time we’re together. I would be amiss if we didn’t observe one more application of God’s patience. One is what Paul says here in Romans 9. Another is what Paul has already said in Romans 2.

**Romans 2:3-4** Do you suppose, O man . . . that you will escape the judgment of God? Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?

God’s kindness, His patience, the reason why He’s not executing judgment right now is meant to lead you to repentance. That’s God’s soft heart. That’s His heart toward us. He says, “One of the reasons why I’m withholding, first is to show My great power. And that reason is always effective. So I’m never the victim and I never leave my purposes in the hands of sinful people.” But another purpose, “I want you to hear My heart,” God says in Romans 2. “My heart is, that My patience toward you would be such that that kindness that you experience would lead you to repentance, lead you to salvation.”

On the basis of Romans 9 alone we might wrongly conclude that God shows patience only for the ultimate condemnation of sinners. While that is one purpose, it is married to Romans chapter 2. And there is no contradiction with these two motives of God’s patience. Peter himself brings us back to this in that passage we’ve already alluded to when he said some of the things Paul writes are hard to understand. And this is what Peter says:

**2 Peter 3:8-9** But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.

He's talking about God’s judgment coming. Some were saying, “God will never bring judgment. God has been saying He’s going to bring the Day of Judgment from the beginning of time, and it’s not come yet. God is never going to bring judgment.” But time with us is not like time is with God. God is not delaying for no reason. His purpose is that you would reach repentance. And if you’ve never received His mercy, God invites you to receive His mercy. Don’t think that God is slow because He’ll never really execute judgment! No! God is slow because He is giving you opportunity to turn to Him and to connect to His glory. And then he goes on to say this:

**2 Peter 3:10** But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed.

You think of terror now. There is no terror like the terror of this day! Have you received God’s mercy? If not, the only application is to come undone before this God who is sovereign. And if you have received God’s mercy, let’s live a life where God is the center and not ourselves.