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Sermon Notes

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The Potter's Freedom

Romans 9:19-23

Introduction

I. A Deep and Confirming Objection

A. Context: What Paul Has Said Thus Far

1. Paul dealing with deep question: If God's promises cannot fail, why are so many of the Jews rejecting Christ and perishing?
 - a. Remember the amazing encouragement of the closing verses of Romans 8
 - b. All of this goes for naught if God's word has failed concerning the Jews!
 - c. If God can break His promises to the Jews, He can break them to anyone
2. Paul's incredibly deep answer:
3. Paul's even deeper elaboration: unconditional election
4. Paul's defense of God's justice: Romans 9:14-16
5. Paul's expansion: Mercy for some, hardening for others

B. Regular Pattern: Raising Objections and Answering Them

C. What Is the Objection?

1. Basically: If God is so all-powerful over human will and human hearts, why doesn't He simply save everyone?
2. Why does anyone go to hell? God can do anything He wants with human hearts!!

D. Two Underlying Assumptions of the Objection

1. Paul's Doctrine Teaches the Absolute Sovereignty of God in Salvation
2. Absolute Sovereignty Nullifies Human Responsibility

E. Note Again: Question Proves Interpretation

1. This question cannot come up in an Arminian, free-will scheme
2. This question, like previous ones, simply proves the doctrine Paul was teaching
 - a. If salvation is by works and not by grace alone, would Romans 6:1 ever get asked?
 - b. If salvation is by Law and not by grace alone, would Romans 6:15 ever get asked?
 - c. If election were conditional on human beings and not solely on God, would Romans 9:14 ever get asked?
 - d. AND if salvation were an exercise of human free will and not God's sovereignty, would 9:19 ever get asked?
3. Such a question would be ludicrous in a free-will scheme!!!

II. God's Rebuke

A. God Puts Humanity in its Place... A Regular Pattern!

Romans 9:20 But who are you, O man, to talk back to God?

1. What is the rebuke: WHO ARE YOU O MAN!!!

Romans 9:20 "Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, 'Why did you make me like this?'"

- a. Focus is on our weakness, our frailty as created beings, our mortality
- b. Human race has forgotten itself... wisdom is to know who we really are

“Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves.” John Calvin, Institutes of Christian Religion. Book I, Chapter One. Paragraph One. Sentence One

Psalms 8:3-4 When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, ⁴ what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?

Ecclesiastes 5:2 Do not be quick with your mouth, do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God. God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few.

Isaiah 40:22-25 He sits enthroned above the circle of the earth, and its people are like grasshoppers. He stretches out the heavens like a canopy, and spreads them out

like a tent to live in. ²³ *He brings princes to naught and reduces the rulers of this world to nothing.* ²⁴ *No sooner are they planted, no sooner are they sown, no sooner do they take root in the ground, than he blows on them and they wither, and a whirlwind sweeps them away like chaff.* ²⁵ *"To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal?" says the Holy One.*

- c. God's curse on the human race a constant reminder in Ash Wednesday service

Priest dips his thumb into the container of ashes, smears them on the forehead of the person in the sign of the cross, and speaks these words:

"Remember man that thou art dust and unto dust thou shalt return."

2. Arrogantly arguing with God is Satan-like
 - a. Satan arrogantly sought to seize a position in God's universe that was not his own
 - b. Satan sold that bill of goods to Eve
3. Humanity constantly displays overweening pride toward God
4. God regularly humbles His people to keep them from arrogance
 - a. Abraham: deep and terrifying darkness
 - b. Moses: burning bush
 - c. Israel: Mt. Sinai
 - d. Joshua: "Are you for us or for them?" "NO!!"
 - e. Job: "Where were you when I ...?"
 - f. Isaiah: "Woe is me"
 - g. Jesus: Sermon on the Mount, on anxiety
 - h. Peter, James, John: Mount of Transfiguration
 - i. Paul: Road to Damascus
 - j. John: vision of Christ in Revelation 1
5. Right attitude in this study is absolutely VITAL:

How quickly we forget our place and arrogantly try to seize something that is not ours!

Martyn Lloyd-Jones: “You cannot understand? You are tempted to question and to argue, and to query? The reply to you is, ‘Who are you, O man, that replies against God! Shall the thing formed say to Him that formed it, why have you made me like this?’ ‘But that,’ you may say, ‘is not a fair argument. It is rather a prohibition of argument, and the exertion of an unfair authority.’ To which I reply that we were never meant to argue with God, and that we should never have started from the assumption that it was to be a discussion between two equal disputants. God is in heaven, and we are upon the earth. God is holy and we are sinful. God knows all things, and sees the end from the beginning.... God needs no defense, for He is on the throne. He is the Judge of all the earth. His Kingdom is without end. Cease to question and to argue! Bow down before Him! Worship Him! Get into the right attitude yourself, and you will begin to understand His actions.”

B. “God on Trial”??

1. The basic issue here is as C.S. Lewis put it, “God on the dock”
2. Faulty human justice has put God on the defendant’s stand and is pacing back and forth like a back-room lawyer firing questions at God
3. History has shown an amazing human willingness to “talk back to God”

C. Talking Back to God : What Is Rebuked Is Not Questions, But Contentiousness

1. Greek: word means contention, dispute, disagreeing with God
2. America: a nation used to freedom of dissent
 - a. Bumper stickers, political cartoons, political demonstrations, free speech radio, posters, editorial columns
 - b. All based on our seemingly sacred right to “QUESTION AUTHORITY”
 - c. God, our Creator and King, is one authority we must not question
3. Honest questions are always accepted

James 1:5 If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.

4. The issue here is contentiousness based on arrogance based on ignorance (of who God is and who we are)

Romans 9:20 But who are you, O man, to talk back to God?

- a. Our contentiousness is based on our arrogance... we pridefully think much of ourselves and little of God
- b. Our arrogance is based on our ignorance... if we could behold what Isaiah saw or if we could stand at the base of Mount Sinai and experience what Israel saw of the terror of the Lord, our whole demeanor would change

D. A Rebuke that Refreshes

1. After God rebuked Job, he repented in sackcloth and ashes
2. He said his disputations with God were over forever:

Job 40:1-5 The LORD said to Job: ² "Will the one who contends with the Almighty correct him? Let him who accuses God answer him!" ³ Then Job answered the LORD: ⁴ "I am unworthy-- how can I reply to you? I put my hand over my mouth. ⁵ I spoke once, but I have no answer-- twice, but I will say no more."

E. A History of Strong Disputations

1. Mentioned John Wesley's amazing sermon: "You make God worse than the devil!" The "You" was George Whitefield, his godly friend who taught God's sovereignty in election
2. Others have seen the tendency for this issue to drag people into contention
3. A peace-loving submission to God's clearly revealed will in Scripture ends disputations

James 3:13-18 Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. ¹⁴ But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. ¹⁵ Such "wisdom" does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil. ¹⁶ For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice. ¹⁷ But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. ¹⁸ Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness

III. God's Role

A. God is the Potter, We Are the Clay

1. Rebuke also reminds us of God's role
2. The image is one of God as shaper, molder, craftsman, POTTER

Romans 9:20 "Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, 'Why did you make me like this?'"

- a. Greek: word is **plasma**... relates to something that can be molded, something soft and plastic
 - b. We are molded, shaped, fashioned...
 - c. Points essentially to our CHANGEABILITY
 - d. Everyday, we are shaped, molded, changed in some way
 - e. Things we read, conversations we have, experiences we undergo, people we observe or interact with... all these things MOLD US like plastic
 - f. Contrast: God never changes... in fact, He is the one who does the molding, the shaping, the crafting
3. God fashions us after His image by His own internal vision
- a. Many testimonies of people shaping something after their own internal vision

A rock pile ceases to be a rock pile the moment a single man contemplates it, bearing within him the image of a cathedral.

~Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *Flight to Arras*, 1942

I saw the angel in the marble and carved until I set him free.

~Michelangelo

Michelangelo was asked, while he was sculpting his David, "How do you know what to carve away"? His response was reported to be, "I simply remove everything that doesn't look like David."

In a similar way, God carves away from us everything that doesn't look like Christ

Romans 8:29 For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.

- b. God works with people... that is His medium; He is an artist whose galleries are filled with perfected people from every tribe and language and people and nation

B. The Potter and the Clay

Romans 9:20-21 "Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, 'Why did you make me like this?'" ²¹ Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use?

1. Pottery a part of human experience from earliest history
2. Potter and clay a strong image from Old Testament days
 - a. Human race originally taken from the earth
 - b. God shaped and molded human bodies from that earthy clay

NAU 1 Corinthians 15:47 The first man is from the earth, earthy

3. So, several prophets picked up on this image

Isaiah 29:15-16 Woe to those who go to great depths to hide their plans from the LORD, who do their work in darkness and think, "Who sees us? Who will know?"¹⁶ You turn things upside down, as if the potter were thought to be like the clay! Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, "He did not make me"? Can the pot say of the potter, "He knows nothing"?

Isaiah 45:9-11 "Woe to him who quarrels with his Maker, to him who is but a potsherd among the potsherds on the ground. Does the clay say to the potter, 'What are you making?' Does your work say, 'He has no hands'?¹⁰ Woe to him who says to his father, 'What have you begotten?' or to his mother, 'What have you brought to birth?'¹¹ "This is what the LORD says-- the Holy One of Israel, and its Maker: Concerning things to come, do you question me about my children, or give me orders about the work of my hands?

Isaiah 64:6-8 All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away.⁷ No one calls on your name or strives to lay hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us and made us waste away because of our sins.⁸ Yet, O LORD, you are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand.

Jeremiah 18:1-6 This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD:² "Go down to the potter's house, and there I will give you my message."³ So I went down to the potter's house, and I saw him working at the wheel.⁴ But the pot he was shaping from the clay was marred in his hands; so the potter formed it into another pot, shaping it as seemed best to him.⁵ Then the word of the LORD came to me:⁶ "O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter does?" declares the LORD. "Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel.

Summary: The image of the potter and the clay is one of the power of God to shape human beings as He sees fit for His purposes and His glory; and the humility human beings should have about how God chose to make them

C. Key Distinction: Not God as Creator But God as Molder

1. Martyn Lloyd-Jones: This section [Romans 9] is NOT speaking of God as Creator but of God as shaper and molder of what is here
2. God does not create anyone evil... rather He created Adam perfectly good, in His image and likeness, with a completely free will to choose at the tree of knowledge of good and evil
3. BUT when Adam sinned, the whole human race sinned with him... all of us became cursed and corrupted... this is the doctrine of original sin
4. As soon as each of us has the chance to understand God and His Laws, we make actual choices to reject the glory of God and rebel against Him... we move from original sin to actual sin
5. The whole human race is the massive lump of sinful clay... not shaped or made sinful by God, for God cannot make anyone evil

James 1:13 When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone;

6. Lloyd-Jones quote:

“This is essentially different from the original creation, because in the original creation it was not only creation from nothing, but still more important, God created man in His own image and likeness.’ That is the opposite of dishonor. He looked upon man, as He looked upon the whole of creation, and we are told that He saw that it was good. God never created anything unto dishonor, but here we are dealing with a potter who makes one vessel unto dishonor. And that proves we cannot be dealing with human nature as such, still less with man as he was made at the beginning. It is an account of what God does with fallen humanity.

So there is the key to the whole explanation of this statement that has mystified so many people. They get hold of the idea that God has deliberately made some people that they might go to hell. That is a lie! It is not taught anywhere in the Scripture... The lump of clay is not ‘humanity’; it is ‘fallen humanity.’”

It is as though God found this disgusting pile of rejected, stinking clay of no value...wrecked and defiled by evil... and chose to do something with some of it

He chose to take some of that lump, that defiled and evil pile of useless clay, and fashion it into the perfect image of His Son

BUT He did more than that... He chose to give the rest over to the desires of their evil hearts, to harden them and to confirm them in their rebellion

He gave them over to be what they wanted to be... He could have saved them all, He could have exerted His sovereign power in an awesome way, and transformed them, but He chose not to!

Why? We'll get to that in a moment, as far as the text allows us to answer the "Why???" question

But this is God the molder and shaper of regenerate people, and the hardener and judge of unregenerate, reprobate people

D. Key Insight: God Does Not Craft Everyone for Glory

1. Some are crafted as vessels of honor
2. Some are hardened as vessels of dishonor
3. Some are vessels of wrath, prepared for destruction
4. Some are vessels of mercy, whom HE prepared for glory

Summary: God's role = Sovereign Craftsman

IV. God's Rights

vs. 21 Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use?

A. God's Rights of Ownership

1. The Potter-Clay analogy is one of sovereign rights of ownership and craftsmanship
2. The Potter owns the clay and can make anything He wants out of it
3. Greek: "power" = right, authority (**exousia**)...
 - a. the right of a King over His domains, the right of an owner over his property
 - b. not so much "power" as in the raw energy to make something happen, like the power of an explosion
 - c. that word is used (**dunatos**) in verse 22... from which we get English words like dynamite and dynamic

Romans 9:22 What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath-- prepared for destruction?

4. No... here in verse 21, the issue is RIGHTS OF OWNERSHIP!!
5. God can do what He wants with His own things
6. Humans absolutely demand this same right on earth

- a. Communism an utter failure because it denies private ownership...
government seizes what does not belong to it
 - b. If the government came and took some of your land or your house or your car, you would feel your rights violated
 - c. If you want to give it freely, that's your decision... but the government cannot take life, liberty or property without due process of law
7. BUT when God exerts rights of ownership over the earth and its people, sinners howl with injustice!!
8. Here God is declaring His rights over the whole of the human race

B. "The Same Lump of Clay"

- 1. As we've seen, the "same lump of clay" is SINFUL HUMANITY, not merely humanity
- 2. God can do whatever He wants with the putrid pile of sinful human clay
- 3. He can reject it all... He can transform some of it into fine China, while leaving the rest vile and rejected; or He can transform ALL of it into fine China... it is totally within His right as Sovereign Owner of the Earth
- 4. "Same lump of clay" highlights the UNCONDITIONAL aspect of election
 - a. God does not look at the clay and say, now here is something I can work with
 - b. Here is something that's not quite so bad as the rest
 - c. It is the SAME LUMP OF CLAY... all of it rejected and wicked and defiled and "worthless"

Romans 3:10-12 As it is written: "There is no one righteous, not even one; ¹¹ there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. ¹² All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one."

- d. He chose to do something astounding with part of it

C. Pottery for Noble Purposes

- 1. Literally: "vessels of honor"
 - a. Greek: time
 - b. Definition

1) a valuing by which the price is fixed 1a) of the price itself 1b) of the price paid or received for a person or thing bought or sold 2) honour which belongs or is shown to one 2a) of the honour which one has by reason of rank and state of office which he holds 2b) deference, reverence

c. Commonly used of the honor given to Christ in heaven

Revelation 4:11 "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being."

d. Also used of the honor of the nations that comes streaming into the heavenly Jerusalem

Revelation 21:24-26 The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it. ²⁵ On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there. ²⁶ The glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it.

2. Basic idea: God has the right to take putrid, rejected, stinking wicked clay and transform it into a vessel in which He will put something of immense worth and value and honor

3. What is that? His own eternal glory!!!

D. Pottery for Common Use

1. He also has the right to take the same putrid, rejected, stinking wicked clay and fire it in a kiln of hardening to make it a vessel of dishonor

2. This is absolutely in keeping with the clay's own nature and bent

3. The clay yearns for it and begs for it out of sinfulness and stony ignorance

4. God has the right to do it

V. God's Reason

Romans 9:22-23 What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath-- prepared for destruction? ²³ What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory--

A. Amazing! After the Rebuke Comes the Reason!

B. God's Glory is Put on Display in Both Types of Vessels

1. One type of glory shown in the vessel of honor

- 2. One type of glory shown in the vessel of dishonor
- C. More on this next time

VI. Application

- A. Humbly Ask God for Proper Attitude
- B. Perhaps Confess Sin of Arrogance in Disputing with Him
- C. Christians: Praise God for His Incredible Skill as a Potter
- D. Christians: Be Truly Humbled You Came from the “Same Lump”
- E. Unbelievers: Humble Yourself for Salvation... God Can Shape Anyone into a Vessel of Glory