**Lesson 26: God is Sovereign and Righteous**

Text: Romans 9:14-33

**Introduction**

Is God fair? That question has troubled man since Satan tempted Eve in the Garden of Eden. Abraham posed the question when God planned to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. “Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?” (Genesis 19:25) In the previous section of Romans, we saw that God chose Isaac and not Ishmael. He also made a sovereign choice of Jacob rather than Esau. Paul used these examples to explain why so many Israelites were excluded from the blessings in Christ. God’s dealings with Israel prompted the question, “Is there unrighteousness with God?” As we wade into one of the more difficult sections of Romans, let’s keep in mind that God is always sovereign and righteous.

1. **Paul used the examples of Moses and Pharaoh to illustrate the sovereign choices of God.** 
   1. He sovereignly chooses the recipients of His mercy and compassion. (v. 15; Exodus 33:11)
   2. His choice is not based on human desire nor effort. (v. 16) He is not obligated to do man’s will.
   3. If God shows mercy according to His sovereign choice, it stands to reason that He would judge those He considers worthy of His judgment. (v. 17; Exodus 9:16)
   4. Thus, He shows mercy according to His sovereign choice and hardens those He chooses to harden. (v. 18) The question then becomes, “On whom does God show mercy and whom does He harden?” We must return to the original statement issued by Paul. There is no unrighteousness with God (v. 14). He is not the author of evil. He does not produce a sinful heart in man. He does not prompt a person to commit murder. He does not induce infidelity. He can’t! He can only encourage righteousness because that is His very essence. Consider James 1:13-15. We can say with the utmost confidence and scriptural support that neither the sin nor the effects of sin are caused by God. Man chooses to sin and must face the consequences.
   5. Does this prove to be the case with Pharaoh? The Bible records that Pharaoh hardened his own heart against God (Exodus 8:15, 32; 9:34; 1 Samuel 6:6). Exodus 9:34 in particular makes it clear that Pharaoh sinned yet more and hardened his heart. God did not cause Pharaoh to sin. To state that He did would violate other passages. Pharaoh’s heart was hard long before he met Moses. God worked according to His foreknowledge to accomplishes His purposes through Pharaoh. That is not to say that God produced the sinful resistance of Pharaoh.
   6. There are also verses that simply record that his heart was hardened (Exodus 7:22; 8:19; 9:7, 34). The context would point to Pharaoh as the agent of the hardening. When he saw that a particular plague was lifted, his heart became hard once again to the children of Israel so that he refused to let them go.
   7. What are we to make of the passages that specifically state that the LORD hardened Pharaoh’s heart? (Exodus 4:21; 7:3, 13; 9:12; 10:1, 20, 27; 11:10; 14:4, 8) We must take what we know about the character of God as well as the character of man and apply it to passages such as these. We know that God can only do right. We also know that man’s heart is sinful. We also know that God intervenes in man’s life to give him the opportunity to repent. When man refuses to repent, another layer of hardness is added to his heart. God does not produce their sinful choices, but He allows men to suffer the consequences of their choices. We become hardened through the “deceitfulness of sin” (Hebrews 3:13).
   8. Thus, God shows mercy to those who respond in faith to His offer of salvation. On the opposite side of the same coin, God can only judge those who reject His offer of salvation. He would not be righteous if He did otherwise. God has sovereignly chosen to respond to man according to man’s response. This does not undermine His sovereignty. He is so sovereign that He is able to accomplish His will without violating man’s freedom to choose! God is sovereign and righteous.
2. **Paul uses the example of the potter and the clay to illustrate God’s sovereignty. (v. 19-22)** 
   1. As the potter, God has power over the clay. (v. 21) This does not mean that God makes some people sinful and others righteous. Again, there is no unrighteousness with God. King Solomon said, “Lo, this only have I found, that God hath made man upright; but they have sought out many inventions.” (Ecclesiastes 7:29) God does not plant evil schemes in man’s mind! Man develops his own. It is man’s own choices that lead him to honor or dishonor.
   2. Man brings destruction upon himself. (v. 22) The reference “vessels of wrath” means that they are destined for wrath. The word “wrath” is consistently used throughout the New Testament to refer to God’s wrath upon unbelievers (Matthew 3:7; John 3:36; Romans 1:18; 2:5; 5:9; 1 Thessalonians 1:10; 5:9). God did not design them to be recipients of His wrath. He is “not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9). They fit themselves for destruction.
   3. Does the grammar of the phrase “fitted for destruction” point to this interpretation? The key question pertains to the agent who fits the vessels for destruction. The form of the participle “fitted” can be understood as either passive or reflexive. If it is passive, God fits (creates, designs, prepares) the vessels for destruction. If it is reflexive, the vessels fit themselves for destruction. Grammatically, it could go either way. We must allow what we know about God and man to assist in the interpretation of this phrase. Does God intentionally create people for the sole purpose of punishing them in eternal flames of torment? Absolutely not! This interpretation does not fit the message of the Bible. Jesus did not come that the world might be condemned (John 3:17). He came to seek and save the lost (Luke 19:10). They are not lost and in darkness because God made them to continue in that state. Satan has blinded their minds lest they should be saved. Don’t blame God for the devil’s work! (2 Corinthians 4:4). God finds no pleasure in the death of the wicked and calls them to repentance (Ezekiel 33:11).
   4. It is clear from Paul’s letter to the Romans that the Jews have brought God’s judgment upon themselves due to their own unbelief (Romans 9:32; 10:16; 11:20, 23, 30-31). Those who hold that God made some for destruction make unfortunate statements such as, “So many Jews have failed to embrace the gospel because God has so willed it” (Douglas Moo). It is God’s will for them to be saved (Romans 10:1; 1Timothy 2:4).
3. **God has sovereignly chosen to show mercy to those who believe. (v. 23-33)** 
   1. Believing Gentiles are the people of God, beloved and the children of God. (v. 23-26; Hosea 1:10; 2:23).
   2. Only a remnant of Israel will be saved. (v. 27-29; Isaiah 1:9; 10:22-23).
   3. It is ironic that the Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness by the law have obtained it by faith (v. 30). The Jews who so zealously pursued it have not obtained it (v. 31). The reason they failed to obtain righteousness was because they did not receive it by faith (v. 32). It was not because God planned to condemn them. It was not because He fitted them for destruction. It was because of their own unbelief!
   4. It is because they have rejected their Messiah (v. 33; Isaiah 28:16). Yet, the offer of salvation still stands. “Whosoever believeth on him shall not be ashamed.” They will not be put to shame.
4. **Central Idea: Paul demonstrated that God is righteous in His choices because He has sovereignly chosen to show mercy on those who believe and to bring wrath upon those who remain in unbelief.**

**Conclusion**

The Bible consistently presents that God sincerely desires to show mercy to sinners. It is a distortion of His character to portray Him as a vindictive God who creates sinners just so that He could destroy them. Paul wanted the recipients of his letter to know that God will save any who come to Him by faith!