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Romans 9:18, NRSV.

¹⁸So then he has mercy on whomever he chooses, and he hardens the heart of whomever he chooses.

Misinterpreting the Bible: Sovereignty, not Predestination.

We are returning today for a third look at the Book of Romans. As a reminder, Romans is particularly famous as a letter because Paul is doing something unusual: he is trying to convey important information to a church he has never visited and therefore has never had a chance to influence. He wants them to have a broad understanding of what he believes to be true about the teachings of Jesus. So, he is not writing one of his typical, brief “corrective letters” where he is dealing with focused problems that have developed within a church he founded. Rather, he is writing a long, highly organized theological treatise. But there is one “corrective” aspect of this extensive letter. The church in Rome is apparently dominated by Jewish followers of Christ who believe that some or all of Mosaic law must be followed to be justified with God. As a result, Romans is best known for its promotion of the principle of “salvation by faith alone”, which is of course something Jesus taught. The need to correct these followers of Christ who were

urging Gentile Christians to adopt Mosaic law has caused people to think that in Romans Paul over emphasizes this doctrine, at the expense of teaching us to act with kindness and forgiveness, as Jesus also taught. But we need to keep in mind that Paul does cover this in his letter to the Romans, as well. He stresses that our actions in life are indicative of the true depth of our faith.

What I would like to focus on today is another major aspect of Romans, and that is something that has also proved controversial. This has to do a terrible misinterpretation of Romans that has been promoted over the centuries by people that are broadly known as “Calvinists”, and that is the belief that in Romans Paul is teaching us that God predetermines who will be saved, that some of us are incapable of having faith. Under this doctrine we would have a rather limited form of free will. It would not be our choice to be justified by God through faith or any other means. There is something rather subtle in the proper interpretation of Paul’s teachings along these lines that illuminates a powerful theological principle of Christianity, and many, many people miss this entirely.

Before we get to this, I’d like to talk about a young man whom we will call Liam. As always, I am changing details of this story to protect his privacy. In my early days as a pastor, which wasn’t that long ago as I went to seminary as an older person after having a full academic career, I was asked by a pastor in

another state to visit the son of a congregant of his. This son, Liam, happened to live quite close to me. But this pastor, who didn't know the Boulder Denver area that well, didn't realize that the son was in a hospital deep within Denver, not near my home. Nonetheless, I drove down there to see Liam. I'm from L.A. I love freeways. When I got to Liam's ICU room, all I knew was the story of how he was injured. He had been driving along a boulevard when there was an accident ahead of him. Traffic was completely blocked. He, as well as a couple of other people pulled their vehicles off the road and got out of their cars to help clear the road and get help for the injured. But when he stepped out of his car, he was hit by an oncoming car. The person who struck him had been trying to bypass the accident by driving on the shoulder at a high rate of speed. I'll get back to Liam.

Consider Romans, Chapter 9, verses 16-21:

¹⁶ So it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God who shows mercy. ¹⁷ For the scripture says to Pharaoh, "I have raised you up for the very purpose of showing my power in you, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth." ¹⁸ So then he has mercy on whomever he chooses, and he hardens the heart of whomever he chooses. ¹⁹ You will say to me then, "Why then does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?" ²⁰ But who indeed are you, a human being, to argue with God? Will what is molded say to the one who molds it, "Why have you made me like this?" ²¹ Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one object for special use and another for ordinary use?

The context of this passage is that Paul is talking about a theological notion that we call "Divine Sovereignty", meaning that God has all authority, that we cannot

in any way surpass his control. It means that we cannot argue when God does something that perhaps we don't approve of. Not only do we not have God's omniscient vision and radically longer-term goals than we have, but God is the Creator who cannot be limited by his creations. I'll return to this topic, what Paul is trying to convey.

The problem, though, is that there is a long history of preachers, even theologians, using Bible passages either very naively or deliberately out of context in order to sell a concept that is important to them personally. Let's look at our passage, verse by verse. First, here is 16 and 17:

¹⁶ So it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God who shows mercy. ¹⁷ For the scripture says to Pharaoh, "I have raised you up for the very purpose of showing my power in you, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth."

People have interpreted verse 16 as meaning that no matter what we do, God will decide who is saved, that we have no control. Then they use the next verse, about the Pharaoh, to suggest that God created the Pharaoh, who held the Hebrews as slaves in Egypt, as an evil man, destined for damnation, and that he did this deliberately, simply to show that he, God is indeed powerful.

Here is the next verse, 18:

¹⁸ So then he has mercy on whomever he chooses, and he hardens the heart of whomever he chooses.

This seems superficially to back up the argument that God “hardened the heart” of the Pharaoh, thereby creating him as an evil person, giving him no ability to act in a moral fashion. But if we look at these verses carefully, we can see that this is not what Paul is saying. First, Paul is saying that God found a Pharaoh who had decided on his own to be evil. By “hardening his heart”, Paul means that God at that moment stepped in, accepted Pharaoh in the state he was in – and then used the Pharaoh for his own purposes. The Pharaoh ends up setting into motion the series of events that send the Israelites to the Promised Land. In other words, in verse 17 where God says, *“I have raised you up for the very purpose of showing my power in you, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth,”* God is saying that God has a purpose for all people – and the purpose is always good. People may choose to do evil things, but God will often use these bad acts for a greater good. Thus, the first verse, the one that says, *“¹⁶ So it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God who shows mercy,”* does not mean that God decides who in advance will be allowed to be saved. Paul means that God can choose to have mercy on anyone, and that we cannot force God to do anything. So, verses 16 to 18 mean that God is sovereign and can be merciful to anyone he wants, and when God encounters a person who is acting evil, God is sovereign enough to do what he wants with those evil acts.

Here are the last three verses, 19-21:

19 You will say to me then, “Why then does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?” 20 But who indeed are you, a human being, to argue with God? Will what is molded say to the one who molds it, “Why have you made me like this?” 21 Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one object for special use and another for ordinary use?

The last verse, 21, *“Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one object for special use and another for ordinary use?”* is often used to argue that God will mold some people from the beginning of their existence to be saved and others to be damned forever. But in context, we see that these three verses mean that we cannot overrule God, and we are all made from the same “lump” of clay, that some of us will serve in greater ways than others, but God controls that. All in all, this passage, verses 16 to 21 means that we can’t perform any acts that will save us and that God is fully in control of what he chooses to do with us on Earth. But it has nothing to do with predestination, with the argument that some of us are created with the predetermined decision to never let us be justified, to be made right with God. In sum, this passage is about God’s total power, his amazing ability to make good out of evil, and that it is futile, even morally wrong to try to somehow control what God does.

Let’s look closer at the last line, *“Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one object for special use and another for ordinary*

use?” This uses a metaphor that appears elsewhere in the Bible, and in fact, in the Hebrew Scriptures. Remember that Paul is largely addressing Jews who have accepted Jesus as their Messiah, and so he knows they will relate to Old Testament concepts. Isaiah 45:9 says this:

⁹ *Woe to you who strive with your Maker,
earthen vessels with the potter!
Does the clay say to the one who fashions it, “What are you making”?*

Paul is reminding his Jewish readers that this is a long-standing belief among Jews, that God decides what to do with us, that he is almighty. Jeremiah 18:1-6 reads:

18 *The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: ² “Come, go down to the potter’s house, and there I will let you hear my words.” ³ So I went down to the potter’s house, and there he was working at his wheel. ⁴ The vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter’s hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him.*

⁵ *Then the word of the LORD came to me: ⁶ Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done? says the LORD. Just like the clay in the potter’s hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel.*

Paul’s readers are also familiar with this passage, which says that the people of Israel repeatedly strayed from the path laid down by God, and that each time God has chosen to remold his people back into godly people. God is indeed all powerful.

But why was Paul concerned with this issue in the first place? Why was Paul going to such lengths to convince a largely Jewish audience that God, as they had always been taught, was all powerful and could use us as he sees fit? The problem

was that only a small fraction of Jewish people had accepted Jesus as the Messiah, and there was a rapidly growing tendency for followers of Christ to be Gentiles, non-Jews. But Jewish people had been raised to believe that they were “chosen”, that God had created them with a special purpose – as was God’s right to do so. He took some of his clay and made these people who would be given the Mosaic Covenant, the promise of land, progeny, and his blessing. They would be the holders of the teachings of God. God introduced himself to the world through the Jewish people. Paul is trying to tell the Jewish believers in Rome the same thing that Jesus meant when he said:

¹⁷ “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. ¹⁸ For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished.”

In other words, Paul is assuring these Jewish believers, while following Mosaic law is not required of Gentile followers of Christ, that God is still faithful to the Jewish people. Yes, God made a powerful covenant with the Jewish people. Most of them were apparently not following Jesus. Jesus was becoming the Messiah of the Gentiles. But the Jewish believers in Rome, despite the fact Gentiles did not have to follow Mosaic law to believe in what Jesus taught, were not going to be abandoned by God. God is still sovereign. God has not lost his integrity. God has

always had the opportunity to be merciful to whomever he wants. The fact that God is now becoming the God of the Gentiles does not mean that God has changed. What we see is that Paul's focus on God's ability to do what he wants with his potter's clay is part of the same focus he has in other parts of his letter: he is trying to unify the believers in Rome, so that Jews and Gentiles do not compete, do not feel that one has the upper hand over the other, and that both groups come to understand that the God of the Old Covenant is the God of the New Covenant. So, rather than this passage seemingly out of nowhere to be promoting predestination is in truth reaffirming one of the central purposes of the letter.

Let's get to the subtlety of our main passage today that I mentioned earlier and get back to Liam. Liam's young wife came into the room when I was there. I knew that Liam was a Christian because he had asked me to pray with him. He was in the middle of a series of very serious orthopedic surgeries. He had suffered a severe concussion, but had no brain bleed, no skull fracture. He didn't need any skin grafts for his road rash. Essentially it would come down to having to have both legs, some ribs, a collarbone, and several vertebrae worked on, then having to go through an extensive period of rehab, then having to adjust to life with a body that would never be perfect again. We prayed together for Liam to be free of anxiety, to look forward with hope, and to find a path in life where every single day had joy in it.

What I didn't know was that his wife was not Christian, and that she had been quite uninterested in attending his church. She wasn't raised with any faith and was not comfortable with the notion. I naively said to her that it was beautiful that Liam believed that he should walk in the footsteps of Jesus - and thus help those in need. I told her that I knew she was on a long journey with Liam and that it would not be easy for her. I said that I hoped she could find some happiness in knowing that she had married a man who lived his faith, who was not a hypocrite. I wasn't inventing this. Liam had just told me that this was his motivation for taking a risk after the traffic accident he had witnessed and getting out of his car. She didn't respond to what I said. She thanked me for spending time with Liam. Then I left. It wasn't until a few months later when this pastor sent me email thanking me for seeing Liam that I asked about Liam, how he was doing. This pastor responded that his congregant, Liam's mother, reported that Liam's wife was now attending church. He said it was a direct result of Liam being hurt while refusing to do what hundreds of other drivers were doing, and that was just zoom on by.

In our passage, Paul reminds the believers in Rome, largely Jewish people, that God used the Pharaoh to do his work. Indeed, Paul is loosely quoting Exodus 9:16 where God says this to the Pharaoh:

¹⁶ But this is why I have let you live: to show you my power, and to make my name resound through all the earth.

We should all remember that God put each of us on Earth for a reason. Those reasons, our individual purposes, vary. And often, God will use bad people, bad things done by otherwise good people, or tragic events to accomplish what he wants done in this world. Each of us should be determined to not be a Pharaoh, to not be a person who must be manipulated into serving God. We want to volunteer to represent the grace-filled Kingdom of God where people live with kindness and forgiveness. Each of us should offer up ourselves as clay for God to mold and ask God to use whatever happens to us in life so that all people learn about the teachings of Christ. And we should live with joy and security in our hearts, knowing that God has given us each free will to take the path we choose, and that God will never turn his back on us.