

Evergreen Presbyterian Church

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Sermon Title: The Potter's Freedom (Pharaoh and Reprobation)

Sermon Text: Romans 9:16-29

Rom. 9:16 So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy.

Rom. 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."

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

Rom. 9:19 ¶ You will say to me then, "Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?"

Rom. 9:20 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?"

Rom. 9:21 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?

Rom. 9:22 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,

Rom. 9:23 in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory—

Rom. 9:24 even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles?

Rom. 9:25 As indeed he says in Hosea,

“Those who were not my people I will call ‘my people,’
and her who was not beloved I will call ‘beloved.’”

Rom. 9:26 “And in the very place where it was said to them, ‘You are not my people,’
there they will be called ‘sons of the living God.’”

Rom. 9:27 ¶ And Isaiah cries out concerning Israel: “Though the number of the sons of Israel be as the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will be saved,

Rom. 9:28 for the Lord will carry out his sentence upon the earth fully and without delay.”

Rom. 9:29 And as Isaiah predicted,

“If the Lord of hosts had not left us offspring,
we would have been like Sodom
and become like Gomorrah.”

Main Point: God possesses the absolute, sovereign right to display His justice through the wicked and His mercy through the redeemed, leaving humanity with no ground for boasting and every reason for praise.

Outline:

1. God’s Purpose for Pharaoh
2. God’s Hardening of the Heart
3. God’s Rights as the Potter
4. God’s Gift of Mercy

Introduction

I think if we are honest with ourselves, much of what we have been reading here in Romans chapter 9 goes against the grain of our instincts about ourselves. We think about people and their decisions, and we tend to think of everyone as sort of a self-contained entity who is very individualistic and who can’t be acted upon by others.

And then we come to a passage like this one today, and it just rocks us. Because here Paul begins with these words, “So then it depends not on human will or exertion.” Already, that bothers us. Who does it depend on? We like to think that everything we do came from us. We like to think that when we do something or believe something or accomplish something that it wasn’t someone else that had a hand in it. And here Paul is and he’s saying, God had compassion on Jacob simply because he wanted to, for His own purposes. And he *didn’t* have saving compassion on Esau, because that’s *also* what he wanted to do.

Man, does that drive us crazy. We want something here for ourselves.

Now, in the last few weeks I was at pains to show from the text that God’s grace works. It raises up the dead Lazarus and conquers a rebellious man like Paul. But all of that left this unavoidable question: if God is actually *able* by his Holy Spirit to melt the hardest hearts, then why are there still hard hearts out there? Why does God save someone like Paul, but then the text says that he hardens someone like Pharaoh? Why harden anyone at all? Why not just soften all of the hearts?

Now, Paul understands what he’s saying, and because he gets why we would be offended, he perfectly predicts this objection. As I said last week, if all of this offends you, it means you’re following Paul accurately. So how does he answer it? Well he answers it by saying, “God is not some kind of passive spectator. Instead, he is a sovereign craftsman.”

Let’s follow Paul’s argument here. I think we can break down what Paul says about God’s work in Pharaoh along four lines. Here we go: first, The Purpose for Pharaoh. Second, God’s hardening of the heart. Third, God’s Rights as the Potter. Then fourth, God’s gift of mercy.

What Paul lays out is this truth that He alone has the absolute, sovereign right to glorify himself by displaying His justice through the wicked, and displaying His mercy through the redeemed. And what this means is that all of us are left with no grounds to boast before God and every reason to praise Him.

1. God’s Purpose for Pharaoh

First, let’s consider what Paul says that God’s purpose is in Pharaoh.

Think about this: God says why he does what he does in Exodus with Pharaoh. And it is often the case in the Bible that we see what God does but often don't always know why he does what he does. After all, God doesn't have to tell us his purposes. He doesn't have to reveal himself and his motivations to us.

But here in verse 17 he gives us a big look behind the curtain. Look at what Paul quotes here from Exodus 9:16. This is God speaking 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.”

So just think of this: this Pharaoh was brought to power. And if he has ears to hear, God tells him why he made him Pharaoh in the first place: “that I might show my power.” How did God show his power in Pharaoh? Pharaoh resists God's command, doesn't let Israel go, and so God through these circumstances creates the situation in which God exerts his pressure campaign which Pharaoh keeps resisting.

So God showed his power in the Exodus by bringing the plagues upon Egypt, by terrorizing Egypt until they were finally willing to send the Israelites away, and then by Pharaoh changing his mind, chasing the Israelites into the sea, and then God utterly flattened Pharaoh under infinite cubic tons of sea water.

God says, that is why this man was born. To glorify God as an object of his wrath. It's why he was who he was. It's why he dealt with Moses the way that he did: because God had a plan: I will save a people for myself, and I will destroy my enemy for all to see, and in such a public way that thousands of years from now, Hollywood will never be able to make a movie that looks more cool or amazing than what I am actually going to do. You will *have to have been there!*

But all of this means something important: Pharaoh was born so that God could make his hard heart and his life of resistance the tapestry upon which He would paint this masterpiece. God did not just react to Pharaoh as a villain of history. He talks here as someone who is way more involved with Pharaoh's ascent to power: he sovereignly positioned Pharaoh at this exact moment in time.

Pharaoh is not here by accident. God placed him there for a reason.

If we go further into the text, in verse 22, Paul gets really direct:

“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, in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy?”

We’re used to saying that God is glorified by holiness and goodness. And that is true. But Pharaoh is proof that God is also glorified when people receive judgment. He can glorify himself in Paul. So when people look at Paul they go, “Wow. God can save anyone with even the hardest heart!”

And God also glorifies himself in someone like Pharaoh when people look at him and tremble: “This is what it looks like when God gives someone what their sins deserve.” Both of their lives are displaying an aspect of God’s manifold attributes. One of them displays his justice, and the other one displays his mercy. They are both showing us God.

And God says this is why he raised Pharaoh up: to display his justice. Here’s what it looks like when a sinner gets what he deserves.

2. God’s Hardening of the Heart

Second, we have to talk about the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart.

In verse 18, Paul keeps going. He says,

“So then [God] has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills.”

So here, God is saying, “Pharaoh’s heart was hardened by me.”

But wait! *The Bible does also say that Pharaoh hardened his own heart.*

Exodus 8:15: “[Pharaoh] hardened his heart and would not listen.”

Exodus 8:32: “Pharaoh hardened his heart this time also, and did not let the people go.”

Exodus 9:34: “[Pharaoh] sinned yet again and hardened his heart.”

Well you think, “That settles it. It’s not God, it’s Pharaoh who hardens his heart.” Ah, but wait! In the same passages that say Pharaoh hardened his heart we’re also told either that “his heart was hardened,” or we’re directly told that God did it.

Exodus 9:12: “But the LORD hardened the heart of Pharaoh, and he did not listen to them.”

Exodus 10:1: “The LORD said to Moses, ‘Go into Pharaoh, for I have hardened his heart and the heart of his servants, that I may show these signs of mine among them.’” (Notice there how God says why he’s hardening Pharaoh’s heart? Because it provides the occasion for him to show these signs. He wants to be seen by these people and by the Israelites.)

Exodus 10:20: “But the Lord hardened Pharaoh’s heart, and he did not let the people of Israel go.”

Exodus 10:27: “But the LORD hardened Pharaoh’s heart, and he would not let them go.”

Exodus 11:10: “The LORD hardened Pharaoh’s heart, and he did not let the people of Israel go out of his land.”

And then Pharaoh’s last act, in Exodus 14:8: “The LORD hardened the heart of Pharaoh king of Egypt, and he pursued the people of Israel while the people of Israel were going out defiantly.”

And you might be really confused by this point. “Wait! Did *Pharaoh* harden his heart, or did *God* harden Pharaoh’s heart?” And the answer is yes. According to the Bible, they *both* did. And this is not a contradiction.

I want to introduce to you a word that you don’t find in the Bible, but one that I think is helpful as a tool that philosophy gives to us, and that term is “compatibilism.” “Compatibilism” is the view that God’s sovereignty and man’s decisions are compatible with each other. They are not either/or. They are not at odds with each other.

Exodus certainly doesn’t present these things as an either/or proposition. When we make choices, we do so because we want to, but God is doing something else

even in our choices: he is at work even when we are at work, and he is doing something different than what we are doing.

One of the places in Scripture where we see this happen is in Genesis 50:20 when Joseph says to his brothers who sold him into slavery,

“As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good.”

See, Joseph is saying, “You did this. You wanted to do this, and you did it. BUT... God meant something in it.”

In other words, “you were doing what you intended, *and* God was doing what he intended. His work was compatible with your work. When you did what you did, it was you. And when you did what you did it was God.”

How does this work? Well a lot of this is just mysterious. We shouldn’t make up answers. But the Bible sets up some guardrails that we can give answers within their bounds. For one thing, here’s a guardrail: God does not sin, he cannot sin, and he does not cause people to sin. He does not and cannot (to be even clearer) work in the human heart such that he introduces sin where there was not already sin. That’s a guardrail that Scripture gives us. And so we should go beyond those bounds that Scripture sets as we think about these things.

But we can draw some answers from within these guardrails. God has no need to make Pharaoh sin, or to create fresh sin that wasn’t already there. Pharaoh is rotten enough as he is. In fact, every time he was ever kind to the people of Israel it was actually God showing him grace and keeping him from being as bad as he was capable of being. Pharaoh was not always as bad as he could be. You know, maybe he loved his mother. Maybe he kissed babies or showed kindness to people occasionally. Right? Because of God’s grace, he wasn’t as bad as he could have been at all times throughout his life.

So when God hardens Pharaoh’s heart, he doesn’t have to do anything new in him. He doesn’t have to make Pharaoh bad. All he has to do is lift the restraints that He has been putting on Pharaoh. He just stops holding Pharaoh back from being the corrupt, jealous, petty, angry, sinful leader that he always was deep down. God doesn’t have to do anything new to Pharaoh’s heart. He simply takes the brakes off that had been there all his life by God’s grace. He stops stopping him.

Remember: God owes no grace to Pharaoh. And so if he removes his grace Pharaoh cannot get to the judgment throne of heaven and complain, “Hey. You were supposed to keep me from sinning.” God would say, “No. I can show mercy on whom I show mercy.”

God hardens Pharaoh by withholding the softening restraining influence of his grace, leaving Pharaoh to himself and his own natural desires. And here’s that this means: in one sense, God hardened Pharaoh’s heart by removing his grace. In another sense, Pharaoh eagerly, willfully, and sinfully chose to harden his own heart against God. God sovereignly directed, channeled, and used Pharaoh's *already-corrupt* natural desires to accomplish His purposes: this man will hunt my people down, and I will show everyone what happens to my enemies when he does that.

God’s sovereignty and Pharaoh’s will are not in a tug-of-war; Pharaoh did exactly what he wanted to do, and God ordained it for His glory.

What I want you to see is that this doesn’t fully explain the mystery of God’s sovereignty over human sin, but it does help us to at least begin to understand how the Bible can speak the way it does: Pharaoh hardens, and God hardens.

3. God’s Rights as the Potter

This takes us to the third truth Paul presents us with, which is God’s rights as the potter.

Everything Paul has said so far has probably got us a bit upset, and he knows it. So look at what Paul says about that in verses 19:

"You will say to me then, 'Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?'"

Paul says, “Okay you want to argue with this, I get it.”

If you’re upset with what Paul has said by this point in Romans 9, then you’re following everything so far just fine. How does Paul defend what God has admitted to doing in the book of Exodus (and elsewhere), then? He defends God by reminding us that he is God and has rights over creatures that we can barely relate

to. The closest he gets to comparing it to something is a potter at his wheel forming clay into something that the potter wants to make.

Look at verse 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?'"

This is about the freedom of God and the rights that God has. And it goes all the way back to the story I told last week where we were reminded: There was a time when none of us existed, and when there was no such thing even as creation. God freely made us from nothing. He has all of the rights. We can't complain about fairness, because God is free. We as creatures have no legal standing to sue the Creator. He made us from nothing. He didn't even have to make us. He didn't have to give us breath. He doesn't owe us grace. We are breathing because he has freely decided to give us breath.

We have to stop taking his grace for granted and thinking that, "well of course he has to be kind to me." Get rid of that sense of entitlement. We're fallen creatures. We're entitled to nothing. Not breath, not water, not food, nothing in the whole world... and when we get those things it is grace, grace, grace freely given because he is the molder and we're the clay.

That's what he calls us in verse 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?"

Think about it: the "lump" the Potter is working with is not an innocent lump of unfallen humanity; it is a lump of *already fallen, guilty* clay. And here it is: God has rights. Paul is just not really interested in our rights here. This is all about God. God has rights. We're all lumps. And one us he can take and say,

"You are fallen, you have disobeyed. You have rejected me, and rather than give you mercy, I will pass you over and leave you in your sin, and give you what that sin deserves. You will receive no injustice. There is nothing unfair here. I will leave you to yourself."

He does not always say that to us (thank God), but he absolutely has that right, because he is God.

This is what he does with Pharaoh and numerous other people as well. And in this, God's justice is displayed so that all of us can look and say, "What a holy God! With eyes too pure to even look upon evil!"

But another person he can look at and he has the same right to say something totally different to them: "Now you are going to glorify me by being an object of mercy."

4. God's Gift of Mercy

And this takes us to our fourth point this morning, which is God's gift of mercy.

Let's keep our noses in the text. Notice I'm not taking us to the Reformers or Augustine or the philosophers. We're staying here with Paul. We're reading Bible. What does Paul then say in verse 22? He makes us face a hard "what if"?

"What if God, desiring to show his wrath and make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction,"

We've heard that before, but he's asking a what if... he's making us face our own prejudices against God's freedom when he asks this. "What makes you think that your preference should define what God is allowed to do?" Do you have the nerve to tell God no?

Why would he prepare these vessels of wrath in the first place? What is the usefulness of a vessel of wrath? He's about to tell us. Keep following along...

"...vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy..."

The picture is coming together now. There are people in the world. People like Pharaoh. People with hard hearts turned against God. People who never come to Jesus Christ. People like Judas, whom Jesus said it would have been better for him that he had never been born. Paul calls these kinds of people "vessel of wrath, prepared for destruction." What purpose do these vessels for wrath actually serve? Why do they exist at all?

Paul says, they exist so that vessels of mercy... people who know the grace of God and who have fled to Christ for refuge are able to know the riches of his glory. You see, God desires to be known in all his manifold ways. He is not a two-dimensional God.

He is vast, immense, mysterious, great, just, wrathful, gracious, merciful, stern, kind, and glorious.

And all of these truths exist harmoniously within the divine nature without any contradiction. He is grand and glorious and full, and he desires to be known in this divine fullness.

That is why vessels of wrath AND vessels of mercy live and move and have their being in this world: because in us, God displays the fullness of who He is.

There are movements in some circles of Christians to downplay the wrath of God. To only talk about the love of God, and to downplay harder theological truths about God (like we're talking about here today). But Paul is saying, even in the wrath of God there is glory that God wants us to see and know. When we look away, we are obscuring and ignoring something important about God's glory.

If you are a Christian, then you have experienced God's grace. But we are meant to see his wrath, to see his punishment of sin, and we're meant to be in awe of it. This is how holy God is: that he never leaves sin unpunished. Either sinners bear the price of their own sin for the eternity of hell, or else their sin is born in the sin-bearer, Jesus Christ, who loved us and gave himself for us.

And even today, you can trust in this Savior and experience his saving grace. You need only come to him in faith, confessing your sin, confessing your need and trusting in Christ alone.

And Paul has been at pains to say, if you know Jesus, you are one of these vessels of mercy, prepared beforehand. This goes back to the whole thing of this chapter so far: God's election. He decided these things for Jacob and Esau before they were born. And he decided these things for all the rest of mankind before we were born or had done anything good or evil as well.

Conclusion

Now, it's hard for me to know how you are responding in your heart to what you're hearing. Personally, my reaction is to feel very small. We are meant to feel so small before such a God.

And I think this is Paul's goal. Because think of what he's done. He stripped you and me and all of us of anything that says, "I deserve this." Why? Because insofar as we are vessels for mercy, we didn't prepare ourselves, God did. If we receive mercy, God gives us nowhere to plant our flag and say, "Here. This is the part that I did." Even when we have faith, we don't get to say, "This is *my* faith." Because even that was given to us by him. Ephesians 2:8:

"For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast."

Here is my encouragement, based on what Paul has said today: be content with being a creature, and with letting God be God. Don't covet God, and wish that *you* could be the free one, and wish that *you* could be the one who decides these things for yourself. Accept that all of us are creatures living in God's world. Let's delight in this truth: That He is the Potter, and we are the clay.

Let's pray.