

The Potter and the Clay

Romans 9:19-24

Introduction

Ilan Ramon was a fighter pilot in the Israeli air force – and became the first Israeli ever asked to take part in a NASA space mission – flying on the Space Shuttle Columbia.

This was a hugely significant event not only for Ramon but also for his nation Israel.

To mark the significance of the event – he chose to bring a few Jewish items with him into space. One item was a Hebrew Bible – which he admitted he did not bring because he believed what was in it - - - but because he recognized the tremendous significance it has played in Jewish culture and history.

i.e. – the Bible to Him was an ornament [an important one] / a symbol of Jewish history - - - but not a word from God speaking to us Divine truth

Ramon and 6 other crew members nearly completed a 16-day mission which included scientific experiments in space. But – the mission was brought to an abrupt end when the Shuttle broke apart upon re-entering the earth's atmosphere [Feb. 1, 2003] - - - making it the 2nd Shuttle mission to suffer the loss of an entire crew on board.

Ramon recognized the Bible has played a huge role in the lives of the Jewish people – but sadly he did not take the next step to believe what was in it – or in the Savior who it pointed to

The Apostle Paul began this chapter lamenting the unbelief of his brothers – his kinsmen according to the flesh

But – he reminds us that God always has His remnant of those which He has chosen

In the days of Elijah – we found the prophet lamenting the apostasy of the nation and God reminded him

Romans 11:4 - 'But what is the divine response to him? "I have kept for Myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal."

Adam Hamilton shares a story of a woman who faced a crisis of faith in her life

Adam Hamilton: 'a woman in my congregation, after years of fertility treatments, finally conceived. She and her husband were filled with joy. But early in the pregnancy she became extremely ill. By her fifth month doctors informed her that if she continued to carry the child to term she would not survive. While she was willing to take that risk, the family was not. The child was unable to survive outside the womb. The baby died and the mother lived.'

Adam Hamilton: 'She wrote to tell me of the experience. "I had never wrestled with the will of God. Now my life and faith depended upon it. I had always thought God could and would do

anything if enough people prayed – but people had and God didn’t. Who was God? What good is God?” The experience led this young woman to turn away from her faith and to stop believing in God. It may surprise you to learn that at the time all of this happened she was the pastor of a small church.’

She was teetering between unbelief and faith

Eventually this woman returned to her faith in God and – she and her husband adopted three Russian little girls who needed a home. They are filled with gratitude to God for His great blessings. [I assume no longer a pastor?]

We all wrestle with questions of faith at times

And Paul is going to address a big one in this next section that has to do with God’s sovereignty and human responsibility

He just finished his discussion of Pharaoh and how God made use of his sin - - - to display His own power to deliver the Israelites from his hand [9:17-18]

Romans 9:19 – 'You will say to me then, "Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?"'

In this passage – Paul will take us into the thorny debates over free-will and divine sovereignty and how we should view such things

I. Reproving the Questioner - vv. 19-21

Paul has just told us that God has mercy upon whom He chooses and He hardens or leaves others in their sin – he now asks - - how can people be blamed for their sin?

Who resists His will?

Are we just characters in a play – and fulfilling the part assigned?

Do we make meaningful choices at all?

We should be aware that there are intellectuals who argue for the absence of free-will amongst human beings – who come at this from an atheistic worldview

Sam Harris – is a popular neuroscientist / philosopher – who has written a book titled – ‘Free Will’ – in which he argues that free will is an illusion created by the inner workings of the brain

We are just bio-chemical puppets – whose actions are determined by the many causes and influences that have come together in our lives – and over which we have no control

Criminals and sociopaths can't really help themselves – and should be locked up – but we need not blame them for their moral choices

We can imagine Paul speaking to the modern day anti-free will crowd

Paul's first response is we had better check our attitude in asking that question

Paul reproves the questioner – 'Who are you O man?'

The questioner is presented as coming with insolence or disrespect – saying – 'wait – this is all wrong – who resists His will? The thing is unjust.'

First – Paul wants us to make sure we approach the question with the right attitude

We are stepping onto ground that involves some of the thorniest issues of human behavior and of reality

He says – 'Watch it!'

If we think we can take ourselves off the hook by blaming God for our behavior - - - we are setting ourselves against the truth

Scripture teaches moral culpability / blame worthiness

The Great White Throne judgment

Revelation 20:12 - 'and I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and the books were opened; and another book was opened, which is the book of life; and the dead were judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds.'

God will look on sinners and judge them for their deeds / actions / words

God has given us a moral code – in the Ten Commandments – also written on the conscience – so that every man is without excuse

Rom. 2:14-15 - 'When Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a Law to themselves, in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness, and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them.'

i.e, - Paul says – people know what is right and wrong

We know we ought to do certain things – and ought not do certain other things

Because of that – we hold people morally responsible in our criminal justice system [at least for now]

If a guy goes out and kills 15 people – and the police finally arrest him and he gives excuses – ‘well – I am genetically predisposed to want to kill people. – or I got picked on in school – or God made me this way / I fell out of a car once . . . I grew up in Gaza and was educated by Hamas!’ / etc. et al.

We don’t really care – we slice thru all that - - - you are still responsible for your actions

That is how God treats humanity as morally accountable agents who make real moral choices

Interesting picture in Jesus’ letter to the church at Thyatira – he refers to the woman Jezebel – who – in biblical history – Jezebel was the worst female character in the Bible

She married king Ahab - led Israel into idolatry – and put to death prophets

In the church at Thyatira – Jesus refers to a woman named Jezebel [which is probably a symbolic name] – because of her actions

Revelation 2:20-22 - 'But I have this against you, that you tolerate the woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, and she teaches and leads My bond-servants astray, so that they commit acts of immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols. And I gave her time to repent; and she does not want to repent of her immorality. Behold I will cast her upon a bed of sickness, and those who commit adultery with her into great tribulation, unless they repent of her deeds.'

False prophetess – leading people astray

She does not want to repent

With humanity – God gives people opportunity to repent / to see the error of their ways – to bring their sins before God and seek His forgiveness - - - but they don’t want to

Paul uses the image of the potter and the clay

This is an image used in the OT

Jeremiah [we are told] went down to a potter’s house and saw that the vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in his hands – and so he refashioned it into another vessel that pleased the potter

Jeremiah 18:5-10 - 'Then the word of the Lord came to me saying, "Can I not O house of Israel, deal with you as this potter does?" declares the Lord. Behold,

like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in My hand, O house of Israel. At one moment I might speak concerning a nation or concerning a kingdom to uproot, to pull down, or to destroy it; if that nation against which I have spoken turns from its evil, I will relent concerning the calamity I planned to bring on it. Or at another moment I might speak concerning a nation or concerning a kingdom to build up or to plant it; if it does evil in My sight by not obeying My voice, then I will think better of the good with which I had promised to bless it.'

However one slices it – moral culpability or guilt always rests with man - - - He is responsible for his actions before God

Robert Morgan: 'The balance between God's sovereignty and human free-will represents not a contradiction but a mystery. On the one hand, The Bible teaches that God is sovereign and supreme and His decrees are infinite and absolute. On the other hand, it tells us to choose this day whom we will serve [Joshua 24:15] and that whoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved. [Rom. 10:13]'

J.I. Packer: "C. H. Spurgeon was once asked if he could reconcile these two truths to each other. "I wouldn't try," he replied; "I never reconcile friends." Friends?—yes, friends. This is the point that we have to grasp. In the Bible, divine sovereignty and human responsibility are not enemies. They are not uneasy neighbors; they are not in an endless state of cold war with each other. They are friends, and they work together."

When Paul talks about a lump of clay – He is talking about humanity already created / and fallen into sin

God is like a potter – and now He must decide what to do with this lump of clay

He will show mercy to some – and harden others – or essentially leave them to their sinful choices

Paul is not talking about creation – we are already here

What should God do with fallen humanity?

He will prepare some vessels for mercy and others He will leave to themselves – preparing themselves for destruction

God in creation – created man upright and holy

When Adam and Eve – or even Lucifer came forth from the hand of God – they were holy – but capable of falling into sin

Eccl. 7:29 - 'God made men upright but they have sought out many devices.'

It is part of our doctrine – that man as He came from the hand of God – was unfallen in an unconfirmed state of righteousness – but capable of falling from that state – which he did

When Satan rebelled – when Adam and Eve fell – God permitted the rebellion because He would make use of both for His purposes – *just as* He made use of pharaoh – in the story of the Exodus

Once the Fall of Adam and Eve occurred - - - God now deals with us as fallen sinners – who do not deserve mercy – but to whom He is free to show mercy as He chooses

When God permits something He does so for a reason

Why did God allow the Fall of man into sin?

The answer has to do with exalting Christ as Redeemer – displaying God's mercy to the redeemed / showing His patience towards sinners / and His holy justice towards the wicked / His victory over evil

II. Vessels of Mercy - vv. 22-24

Why does God tolerate / put up with sinners as long as He does?

God is patient – allowing sinners opportunity to repent - - - but they do not want to

Acts 17:30-31 - 'God is now declaring to men that all everywhere should repent, because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead.'

Paul uses very careful language here – this text has been at the heart of a number of theological debates in history

There are vessels of wrath *prepared* for destruction

v.22

Καταρτιζω – fitted / prepared

The word for prepared in reference to the wicked is middle / passive voice – [i.e. Paul did not attribute this directly to God] - it is the wicked who essentially prepare themselves for judgment by their sinfulness and rejection of the Savior

When Paul deals with the vessels of mercy – He uses very different language

v. 23 –

προετοιμαζω – prepared beforehand –the active voice points to the fact that it is God's active doing

*** God prepares men for glory – but sinners prepare themselves for judgment

Spurgeon: 'Vessels of wrath fit themselves for destruction, but grace alone can prepare a soul for glory.' [MTP 6, p. 327]

Spurgeon: 'Are there not some of you here who are being fitted for destruction? God is not fitting you, you are fitting yourselves, by daily developing and indulging the depravity of your heart . . . this is not to be laid to the charge of God, but at your own door the guilt must lie. If you perish any one of you, on your own head shall be your blood.' [MTP 6, p. 325]

Notice what Spurgeon says

The sinner prepares himself for judgment thru his sinful choices / stubborn, unrepentant heart

God in His nature – abhors sin and is inclined to punish it – but instead - He holds back

He exercises patience with every sinner who breathes His air and walks on this earth

If God does not strike the sinner dead when he sins - - - it is not because God condones the sin

It is because he is giving the sinner time to repent

That is what happened with the apostle Paul

He was self-righteous Pharisee / church persecuting sinner

I Timothy 1:13-14 - 'I was formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor. And yet I was shown mercy, because I acted ignorantly in unbelief; and the grace of our Lord was more than abundant, with the faith and love which are found in Christ Jesus.'

I Timothy 1:16 - '... for this reason I found mercy, in order that in me as the foremost, Jesus Christ might demonstrate His perfect patience, as an example for those who would believe in Him for eternal life.'

Paul was not a good person – He hated Christians / persecuted them - - - but God . . .

We were dead in our trespasses and sins – but God . . .

Ephesians 2:4 - 'But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us.'

Christ died for us

God could judge sinners the moment they sin – end of story – but He bears with us patiently allowing us opportunity to repent – drawing us unto the Redeemer

Stephen Charnock: 'Had God punished men for their sins as soon as they had been committed, none would have lived to have been better, none could have continued in the world to honor him by their virtues.'

We find that God takes no delight in judging sinners

Ezekiel 33:11 - 'Say to them, "as I live!" declares the Lord God, "I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that the wicked turn from his way and live. Turn back, turn back from your evil ways! Why then will you die O house of Israel?"'

Scripture never says God delights in showing forth His wrath

What does He delight in?

Showing mercy

MLJ: 'Where is the injustice of God showing His power and His wrath upon those who so richly deserve it - 'fitted for destruction'? What is wrong about God showing, if He chooses, mercy to certain people, when none of them at all deserve it?'

This was also shown in the parable of the wheat and the tares where the two grow side by side

Matthew 13:24-27 - 'He presented another parable to them, saying, "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field. "But while men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed tares also among the wheat, and went away. "But when the wheat sprang up and bore grain, then the

tares became evident also. "And the slaves of the landowner came and said to him, 'Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have tares?'

Matthew 13:28-30 - "And he said to them, 'An enemy has done this!' And the slaves said to him, 'Do you want us, then, to go and gather them up?' "But he said, 'No; lest while you are gathering up the tares, you may root up the wheat with them. 'Allow both to grow together until the harvest; and in the time of the harvest I will say to the reapers, "First gather up the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them up; but gather the wheat into my barn."'"

The wheat and the tares grow together unto the time of final harvest

A.W. Pink: 'How wondrous is God's patience with the world today. On every side people are sinning with a high hand. The Divine law is trampled under foot and God Himself openly despised. It is truly amazing that He does not instantly strike dead those who so brazenly defy Him. Why does He not suddenly cut off the haughty infidel and blatant blasphemer, as He did Ananias and Saphira?'

'Why does He not cause the earth to open its mouth and devour the persecutors of his people, so that, like Dathan and Abiram, they shall go down alive into the pit? And what of apostate Christendom, where every possible form of sin is now tolerated and practiced under cover of the holy name of Christ? Why does not the righteous wrath of heaven make an end of such abominations? Only one answer is possible: because God bears with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction.' [The Attributes, p. 64]

Conclusion

The Apostle Paul said:

I Timothy 1:15 - 'It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all.'

Paul says, 'God was patient with me' – I was like smoke in His eyes – a stench to His nostrils – I offended Him – blasphemed – but He was patient

He is patient with each one of us here today

We have opportunity to call upon God for mercy – ask Him to save us in Jesus' name