



## LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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### Is there injustice on God's part?

**Romans 9:14-24**

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I've learned over the years that I'm not much of an artist, but that didn't stop art class from being one of my favourite things in elementary school. And my favourite times in art class were the times we got to work with clay. There's something about being given a lump of clay and then giving shape to it. I always had grand designs that were completely beyond my ability. It was still fun. I remember plopping my blob of clay onto a board and having my friend turn the board while I tried to shape the clay, as if it were a potter's wheel. It wasn't. And it didn't work. But it was fun anyway.

In junior high, however, we got to try our hands at an actual potter's wheel. I waited for days in anticipation. I knew just what I wanted to do with my lump of clay. I was picturing how I was going to shape it on the wheel. I watched as the other kids threw their lumps of clay onto the wheel. (You have to throw it onto the wheel or it won't stick right.) I watched their pieces take shape...and should have noticed that it wasn't as easy as I thought it would be. And then it was my turn. I threw the clay down and it landed near the edge of the wheel, nowhere near the centre. I pulled it off and tried again. This time it went off in the other direction. I think I tried seven or eight times and never got it anywhere near the centre. (This is why I don't like sports with flying balls. If you can't throw a blob of clay two feet onto the centre of a wheel, well...) Our teacher finally intervened and got my clay situated. But when it came to giving it shape, I didn't have any more success. If I didn't know better, I would have thought the clay

had a mind of its own and was fighting back. I wanted it in one shape and it insisted on another. Over and over I mashed it back down and started over. In the end I had to give up on my grand images and settle on a simple, thick-walled little pot.

Paul has a similar sort of image in mind in our lesson this morning. We'll be looking at Romans 9:14-24. He writes about God as a potter who has full rights over his clay. If the clay resists his will, he has every right to mash it back into a lump and shape it again. Of course, that's the difference between me and God. My clay had no will, but God works with sinful human beings who struggle against his will. Of course, the other difference is that where I was incompetent, God is the omnipotent master of all he does. He *will* accomplish his purposes. And Paul's been highlighting this from the start of Romans: the good news about Jesus reveals the righteousness—the covenant faithfulness of God. What he promises he will do. What he starts he will finish. And since so much of Romans has to do with the problems of a church that began Jewish, but was rapidly becoming Gentile, someone was bound to ask Paul: What about the Jews? What about Israel? God made promises to Israel, the Messiah has come in answer to them, but most of Israel has rejected him and is marching on to judgement. How can God be righteous, how can God be faithful if Israel has gone so badly wrong?

Last week we looked at the first part of Paul's argument. He went back to the beginning of Israel's story and said that not all Israel is really Israel. God made promises to Abraham that he would work through his family to bring redemption to the world, but right from the get-go, God also winnowed that family down. He chose to work through Isaac, not Ishmael. He chose to work through Jacob, rather than Esau. And Paul also pointed out that this had nothing to do with parentage or with

worthiness. Jacob and Esau were twins and Jacob, despite being chosen, was hardly an admirable or upright character.

And now, in light of that, Paul anticipates a question. It's a question that, I think, confronts all of us in light of God's election. Look at verse 14:

### What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part?

Is God unjust in the way he chooses to work? Paul practically shouts, "**By no means!**" And to explain why God is not unjust in the way he operates, Paul goes back, once again to Israel's story. Look at verses 15-16:

**For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy.**

At first glance, this may sound as if God's will or his showing of mercy is arbitrary. This is another one of those places where context is everything. Paul's not just making a statement about God's sovereignty. He's quoting from Exodus 33. He's carrying on with Israel's story, from Isaac and Jacob, now he fast-forwards several hundred years to the Exodus and to the story of the golden calf. The Lord had just rescued the Israelites from their slavery in Egypt, he'd taken them miraculously through the Red Sea, and now at Mount Sinai, Moses has gone up the mountain to meet the Lord. The Lord has carved the *torah*, the law for his covenant people, onto stone tablets. We can only imagine how awed and excited Moses was as he carried the law down to the Israelites. But coming down the mountain he finds that they've made a golden calf—an idol—and that their dancing around it like a bunch of pagans. God is entering into a covenant relationship with his people—I will be your God and you will be my people—and they're

prostituting themselves to an idol. Imagine a groom waiting at the front of the church for his bride to walk down the aisle. He watches the limo pull up outside the open church doors. He waits and waits. Finally walks down the aisle, out the doors, and finds her cheating on him in the back of the limo. That gives you a sense of what happened at Mount Sinai with the golden calf incident. And so Moses pleaded with the Lord for mercy on his people. And the Lord did have mercy. But he was clear: his judgement fell on the people, but some would be spared. The Lord would have mercy on whom he would have mercy. And, of course, pushing Paul's argument along: God would continue to work out his purpose through the remnant. Though all Israel be guilty, *God's word will not fail*. This is the very point Paul made back in 3:4, "By no means! Let God be true though every one were a liar."

You see, Brothers and Sisters, when we hear about God choosing some and not others, here's our problem: We're forgetting that *everyone* is guilty. Our entire race has rejected God, chosen idolatry, and fallen into sin. Our entire race deserves judgement. All of Israel was guilty of worshipping the golden calf. And so, Paul is saying, the surprise is not that God's judgement fell on some, leaving them on the wayside to the promised land. No, just the opposite in fact: The surprise is that a remnant was allowed, despite their sin, to continue as part of God's covenant people to carry out his purposes. Because we forget that we are sinners, we're prone to thinking in terms of privilege. We think we *deserve* God's grace. We think we *deserve* God's blessing. What we *really* deserve is judgement. Paul reminds us from Israel's own story, that the fact that God calls and works through anyone at all is a revelation of his amazing mercy.

And, Paul stresses, Israel's status as the people of promise has nothing to

do and does not depend on their willingness or intention to follow God or be obedient to him. What moves God's plan forward—even if every human being should fail to be faithful—what moves God's plan on to its completion is his own mercy.

Now Paul goes on in verses 18 and 19, making the same point again, but from a slightly different perspective. He draws from the same story of the Exodus, though.

**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." So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills.**

Paul points us back to Exodus 9. In the middle of the plagues that the Lord had sent when Pharaoh refused to release the Israelites from their slavery, the Lord sent Moses to Pharaoh with a message. The Lord called on Pharaoh, once again, to let the Israelites go. And he explained to Pharaoh: I could have wiped out both you and your people at any time for your disobedience, but I have chosen to let you live. And this is why. The Lord explained: Your stubborn rebellion allows me to show my power and to make my name resound through the earth. Again, what God did with Pharaoh wasn't capricious or arbitrary. Paul's point isn't that God has the right to have mercy or to harden a sinful heart at his whim. And his point isn't simply that God has the right to do this to people who get in the way of his purposes. Paul's point is that Pharaoh was being swept up into God's purposes, not only to deliver Israel from her slavery, but—and this is the most important part of it—to make God's name known through all the earth. The nations would be talking forever—and taking note—of the God of Israel who triumphed not only over Pharaoh, but

over Pharaoh's gods. And, of course, this is God's purpose. Humanity sinned, we cut ourselves off from God and from the life we were intended to have in his presence. We've made a mess of ourselves and of his creation. But he is good and faithful. Our rebellion cannot thwart his good plans, and so he began working out this long plan of redemption. And that plan began by reintroducing himself to a race of people who, in our idolatry, had forgotten he even existed. He called Abraham and his family and through them he would make himself known. His word has gone out and it will not return void. Neither a rebellious Israel nor a rebellious Pharaoh will stop God's purposes. Through his blessings or through his judgement, the world will know him. Remember that. To understand Paul we have to slow our pace, and when we do that we're prone to losing sight of the big picture. But here it is. He's talking about election and divine justice, but the over-arching topic here is the righteousness or the faithfulness of God.

With that in mind, we can continue on to verses 19-24. Paul has shown that God is not unjust. There's nothing arbitrary about his election or his choices. But someone still might then ask another question:

**You will say to me then, "Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?"** (Romans 9:19)

Paul seems to be painting himself into a corner, but he's really not. He's leading the argument in this direction so that he can answer just these sorts of questions. It's the age-old question: If God is sovereign, doesn't that make us a bunch of puppets? And if we're a bunch of puppets in his control, how can he hold us responsible for our actions?

To answer that question, Paul carries the story of Israel forward again, this time to the Exile. He could have

chosen one of several other examples, but the Exile is perfect. All of these examples, from Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, the Exodus and Pharaoh, and now the Exile were completely uncontroversial examples for Paul to use. The Jews already understood them to make the point that God chooses the people through whom he works. In their own telling of the Exile story, the Jews understood it to be an act of judgement. Not only that, but they also knew that through this act of judgement, God had pruned his people down to a small remnant.

The Exile is important here, because it's a reminder that God's judgement was deserved. Israel had rejected God. Her kings had setup idols to pagan gods in the Lord's temple. The people worshipped those pagan gods. The priests take advantage of their position and the rich trampled on widows and orphans. And for centuries, the Lord pleaded with his people through the prophets: Return to me that the nations might know me through your example and my blessings on you. Israel refused. And God judged. And it wasn't judgement for judgement's sake. It was judgement so that God's purposes of redemption would move forward, not this time through blessing, but through cursing. And not just through judgement, but as the people were winnowed down to a faithful remnant.

Now, Paul doesn't just come out and tell the story of the Exile. This is why we have to pay attention to the contexts of the passages Paul quotes from the Old Testament. To point us to the Exile, he quotes from Jeremiah 18:6. He almost certainly was also thinking of Isaiah 29:16, which echoes with the same image of the potter and the clay. Here's what Paul writes:

**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?" 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? 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, which he has prepared beforehand for glory...**  
(Romans 9:19-23)

The Lord one day sent Jeremiah to watch a potter. As Jeremiah watched, the vessel the potter was making on his wheel somehow went wrong. Jeremiah watched as the potter squashed the clay back into a lump and started over. The Lord told him: Israel refuses me. The people insist on following their own plans and are stubbornly sticking to their evil will. Israel is like the clay in the potter's hands. The vessel isn't turning out, so I'm going to squash the clay back into a lump and start again. The Lord God has the right to act on Israel the way the potter has the right to reshape his lump of clay. The vessel *will* be made. No amount of resistance will stop that from happening. God's word does not return void. God is faithful and does what he says he will do.

That was Jeremiah 18, but as I said, Paul also has Isaiah 29 in mind. There the Lord condemns Israel for having ignored him. He points out how, in her religion, she merely goes through the motions. She names the Lord, but doesn't truly follow him or love him. And so, through Isaiah, the Lord warns of the coming judgement and the coming exile. Israel will be judged. But Isaiah also gives hope: It's not just that a remnant will survive and come through the other side of judgement to fulfil God's purposes. Isaiah writes that on the other side of judgement, the Lord will establish a new covenant. Israel had rebelled, she will be judged, but this isn't the end. Through this new people, this new Israel, God will see his purposes and his promises fulfilled.

Paul reminds us again, in verse 23, that God's ultimate goal is to make known the riches of his glory. He does this—and he always has done it—through “vessels of mercy”. God works through sinners reformed by his merciful and gracious hands. And then he goes on in verse 24 to describe these vessels of mercy:

**...even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles?**

There's the kicker. He has called and formed a new people. As he said at the beginning of the argument: There's Israel and then there's *Israel*. This new people, the ones called and chosen, the ones through whom God is making himself known and bringing redemption and renewal—now through Jesus, Israel's Messiah—this new Israel includes some people from the old Israel—the biological children of Abraham—but *also* includes Gentiles too. This was part of the plan. God chose to work through Abraham's family, but to do so he winnowed it down. Ishmael and then Esau were winnowed out. Later on the ten northern tribes were winnowed out and only little Judah was left. And then through exile, Judah herself was winnowed down to a faithful remnant that returned from exile. And, finally, that remnant was winnowed down to one man, Jesus the Messiah—the only truly faithful Israelite. He was Israel concentrated in one man so that he could die for his people and fulfil the Lord's promises to them. But the amazing thing was that, Israel having been winnowed down to Jesus, meant that the new people that followed, was created not by birth or biology or genes, but by faith. From Jesus, the family began to widen out, accomplishing God's ultimate purpose and making his name known throughout the nations. Jesus himself, particularly as Israel's representative and through his death and resurrection has shown that God is faithful and, if

there are any doubts, the inclusion of so many Gentiles—like the people to whom Paul was writing in Rome and we ourselves sitting here two thousand years later—that we can speak of Gentiles who are part of God’s Israel, is further proof that God is righteous. The purpose for which Abraham was called—to make the glory of the Lord known to the nations—has happened in and through Jesus.

And yet, Brothers and Sisters, the plan isn’t complete. God could not accomplish his work with the old Israel until his people had been winnowed down to just one man—to Jesus—but this side of the cross, his work will not be complete until his people has broadened out to encompass the nations—until every last enemy, every last bastion of idolatry and wilful rebellion has bowed the knee and submitted to Jesus the King. God’s purpose is still the same: to make himself known to the entire human race and to bring redemption and renewal to the world—to make that which he created good, to be good once again.

Let us always remember. You and I are sinners. But we have been called by God, not because we deserve his blessings, but because his purposes for redemption and renewal *will* be accomplished. Like the potter, lovingly reshaping lumps of spoiled clay, he has poured out grace and mercy on to reshape us, to make us new, and to make us fit for his holy purpose. But let us never forget the cost. To make us new cost God his own Son. On the one hand, the cost of the life of God himself and the love shown in his sacrifice, ought to move us to loving and faithful submission as we give ourselves over to the work of the potter’s hands. But let that great cost also be a reminder to us of the faithfulness of God when we are wilful and when we try to impose our plans and our purposes on him. As he has always done with his people, he will shape us into vessels for a holy

purpose. It can be painful if we’re fighting back. Paul reminds us today, however, that God will do what he must and we can and will ultimately rejoice in that. Jesus is the proof. What God has begun through his Son he will surely finish, doing whatever it takes. As we acclaim in the Lord’s Supper: Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.

Remember where we went wrong in the first place. We failed to trust in the Potter’s goodness and faithfulness. We thought we knew better and fought back against his good and wise hands...and we made a mess of everything. Of ourselves. Of our relationships. Of his world. Jesus came to begin the process of setting it right. He’s given to his people—to us, in fulfilment of Isaiah’s prophecies—he’s given his Holy Spirit to turn our rebellious hearts back to God in faith, in trust, and in love. But we still struggle. Brothers and Sisters, this is why he taught us to pray: Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Dear Friends, think on those words as you pray them. Let the Potter have his way, that his glory, his goodness, his mercy, and his love will be manifest in us—in you—and made known through us to the world.

Let us pray again today’s Collect, which I think is fitting to our lesson: O Lord, hear with favour the prayers of your people; that we who deserve to be punished for our offences, may mercifully be delivered by your goodness, for the glory of your name; through Jesus Christ our Saviour, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*