

What Gives Him The Right?

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Unshakeable: Romans / Romans 9:14–29

We are a society that celebrates our rights and rightfully so. We believe every person has the right to live free from oppression; we believe in the freedom of speech, freedom of religion, the right to vote.

As Canadians, we celebrate these rights, we have fought to protect them, and we lift our voices when they are infringed upon. These kinds of rights are intrinsic to what it means to be human.

Here's the question I want us to wrestle with this morning. What kind of rights does God have? What kind of rights does the creator, sustainer and absolute ruler of all the universe have?

See the thing about our rights is they are given to us, granted by a government or constitution. And those rights can be taken away. But God has rights as the absolute ruler of all creation, and He doesn't have to fight for them, ask for them, they are not granted to Him.

They are rights that are inherently his because of who He is.

Now that's important because we've been wrestling with some pretty tough topics as we've worked our way through some of chapter 8 and now chapter 9. We wrestled deeply last time with the reality that God sovereignly chooses those who belong to Him in eternity past. And He chooses not based upon our birth, He chooses not based upon anything that we have done good or bad, but He chooses based upon His eternal purposes of election.

And that raises lots of questions, but at the base of those questions we're really asking, what gives Him the right? It's like asking who does God think He is?

In our passage this morning Paul gives the image of God as the potter and you and I as the clay and he asks the questions does not the potter have the right to mold the clay in whichever way he chooses?

It's a humbling truth to wrestle with, but here's what we find...

God, as Creator of the universe, has rights we don't — the right to show mercy, to withhold it, and to call whomever He wills.

Look with me at our passage this morning.

Let's be honest, we've been wrestling with some uncomfortable teaching of Paul in chapter 9. I get it. In fact, in some ways, it's hard to understand.

It's one of the reasons that we work through whole books of the bible; it forces us to deal with topics that challenge us.

In chapter 9, Paul has been dealing with Israel's place in God's salvation plan. Because as he unfolds the teaching of the gospel in Romans, some questions would naturally rise.

It would be the question of God's promises to Israel. Like if all have sinned and fallen short, if all people, the Jew and the Greek are in danger of judgment and need the gospel, need forgiveness, if Jew and Gentile need to be saved.

Then what about all those Old Testament promises to Israel? Has God turned His back on Israel then? And Paul, if Israel is God's people and this gospel you preach is filled with God's power then why has Israel mostly rejected the gospel?

And Paul gives us that answer in verse 6, look there.

Romans 9:6 **ESV**

⁶ But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel,

What does that mean Paul? And what unfolds in the following verses is that there are two kinds of Israel. There is physical Israel, Israel who are physical,

fleshly descendants of Abraham and there is Spiritual Israel or Israel of the promise.

And in God's promise salvation, promises are not for all Israel, but Israel of the promise.

And that's a hard truth to accept, but Paul traces it all the way back to the beginning and he shows us that from the beginning God has been separating Himself a people even out of Israel, not all of Israel are Israel of the promise.

He shows us with Abraham, and Isaac and even though Abraham had Ishmael and other sons and even grandchildren by the time he died, the promise didn't belong to all of Abraham's children, but only Isaac. God chose that the promise would be with Isaac alone.

Romans 9:7–8 ESV

⁷ and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but “Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.” ⁸ This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring.

And he goes on to show us that God didn't stop there in choosing for Himself a people out of Israel, he moves onto Isaac's family and gives the example of Jacob and Esau and he shows us, rather he reminds us that while Esau was the oldest and had the rights to the inheritance, God chose Jacob for Himself.

Romans 9:10–12 ESV

¹⁰ And not only so, but also when Rebekah had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac, ¹¹ though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad—in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of him who calls— ¹² she was told, “The older will serve the younger.”

The point that Paul wants us to see is that God has been choosing all along, we could go on to those who were judged in the wilderness and those who survived,

those who made it through the wilderness and those who didn't, those who were destroyed later in history by the Babylonians in judgment and the remnant that remained.

Paul is saying that the promise doesn't belong to all of Israel, but from the beginning God has been choosing for himself a people, a people of promise, a people of salvation.

And his choosing is not based upon anything that these people deserved but just what verse 11 says that though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad, but in order that God purpose of election might continue....

But here's what I think we need to realize, is this nothing different than what Paul has already been teaching... That our faith, our justification in Christ is a gift that we didn't earn, we just didn't realize how far that gift went, that even my faith in Christ is a gift.

But we also have to see just how wide this teaching is throughout the bible. You have to wrestle with what predestination means or election means or God's choosing because it is everywhere.

We just think of Jesus' teaching when He says to His disciples – you didn't choose me, but I chose you.

Or Jesus' teaching in [John 6](#) when He says that no one can come to me unless the Father draws him and that all that the Father gives me will come to me.

We've seen [Ephesians 1:4](#).

Ephesians 1:4 ESV

⁴ even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love

2 Thessalonians 2:13 ESV

¹³ But we ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the first fruits to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth.

Even as you get to Revelation and it says that those who will enter into eternity with Christ are those whose names were written down in the lambs book of life before the world began.

I mean, you can't get around it, it's here.

And I'm not saying it's easy, I'm not saying it's not hard. I'm saying the bible teaches it and we have to deal with it.

But it does raise some questions, doesn't it?

It raises questions in my own heart over the years.

And Paul here raises those questions, but what we need to notice is he doesn't answer them directly. He doesn't try to reason or logic with us as we ask these questions, but rather he points us back to who God is... That if God is who He is, He has the right to do what He wants to do.

Part of the reason Paul doesn't answer us directly, is because there is a depth to this that we just have to accept. We can't understand. Our limited brain and understanding cannot compute or reconcile the depth of God's wisdom or working and at some point, we need to just humbly accept that.

Like, listen if God is who He is... He has rights that we don't.

He has the right to show mercy to whomever He chooses.

THE RIGHT TO SHOW MERCY

God has the right to show mercy.

We look back at verse 14-16.

Romans 9:14–16 ESV

¹⁴ What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means! ¹⁵ For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." ¹⁶ So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy.

We won't spend too much time here because we looked at these verses last time, but the question that comes up - is that fair?

Is that fair that God chooses some but not others? Paul words it another way here, is that just? Is there injustice on God's part? And his answer, Paul says, "By no means.. or absolutely not."

But notice as I said, he doesn't try to give us a reason or an explanation. But what he does is he appeals to the rights of God. He is saying it's not about justice, it's about mercy.

When God chooses anyone for His own, it is completely an act of mercy, and He has the right to show mercy to whom He wills.

He has that right, because like it or not, He owes us absolutely nothing.

I can have mercy on whom I have mercy; I can show compassion to whomever I want to show compassion.

His choosing is not about justice, it's mercy.

Because if it was about justice, everyone would be damned. All have fallen short.

Do you remember [Romans 3](#)? All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

Romans 3:10–12 ESV

¹⁰ as it is written:

"None is righteous, no, not one;

¹¹ no one understands; no one seeks for God.

¹² All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.

Do you remember that? Do you remember [Romans 1](#)?

That humanity has freely chosen not to honour God or recognize God, that we have instead made gods of our own making to worship, that we have rebelled against God.

And so if justice is what we're looking for, then justice demands that we face judgment for our rebellion against God.

But God has made the choice to show mercy and compassion on some, even though He owes us nothing.

Let me put it to you this way... Imagine for a moment you were a lender and you had 12 people that owed you millions of dollars in debt. But one day you decided to forgive 4 out of those 12?

Are you wrong for not forgiving everyone? No, because those who are left owing, really owe you that debt, it's yours. Is it unfair, unjust?

The other 8 are still left owing what they owed, they can't show up and say that's not fair. It's not about fairness, it's about mercy.

You, as a lender, decided to show some mercy and your reasons for doing that are your own, but no one can say you were unfair, you have absolutely no obligation forgive any debts, and yet you chose to forgive some.

That's the picture, God has the right, the absolute right to show mercy to whomever He wants to show mercy. He owes mercy to no one. if He did it wouldn't be mercy.

But here's where Paul goes next, he shows us that the opposite is also true. Not only does God have the right to show mercy to whomever He wants. He has the right to withhold mercy as well.

THE RIGHT TO WITHHOLD MERCY

Romans 9:17–18 **ESV**

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.” 18 So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills.

If God has the right to show mercy to whomever He will, He also has the right to withhold mercy.

That’s the difficult one isn’t it. Again, Paul is continuing to give us biblical examples to show us this isn’t a concept he’s making up; he tells us to consider Pharaoh. Do you remember Pharaoh from the book of Exodus?

Remember Moses goes down to Pharaoh and he asks Pharaoh to let God’s people go and Pharaoh continues to reject God’s command, and it takes 10 plagues and even after the 10th plague Pharaoh’s heart is hardened and it takes a miraculous deliverance and display of God’s power to bring Israel out of bondage from Egypt.

And it’s interesting because it says in the book of Exodus that God hardened Pharaoh’s heart. That is God withholding mercy from Pharaoh.

He could have turned Pharaoh’s heart, He could have softened it, but He chooses not to.

And we wrestle with that again, so is Paul saying that God predestines some to salvation and some to condemnation, no, that’s what’s called double predestination, that’s not what we see.

See, I think the assumption we make is that humanity is neutral to God. Many assume that we are born neutral. That we have neither love nor hatred towards God and if we just give someone a good enough reason, they’ll choose to follow the Lord.

But that's not what the bible teaches is it? The bible teaches us that heart of mankind is desperately wicked, that we are born into sin and iniquity; that our hearts are not neutral to God, but that we are in opposition and rebellion to God. That we are in darkness, Jesus says. We love the darkness, we're not trying to get out of it.

Our hearts are far from neutral our hearts are set on sin.

Think about Pharaoh again, it is true that God hardened Pharaoh's heart? Yes, but it also says on numerous occasions that Pharaoh hardened his heart. In fact, before God hardens Pharaoh's heart, Pharaoh hardened his own heart first.

Again and again through these plagues, we see Pharaoh hardening his own heart — and only later in the sequence do we see it said that God hardened it.

God didn't give Pharaoh something he didn't want, He gave him what his heart already desired. Pharaoh's heart wasn't neutral, it was hardened towards God and His purpose and what God does is not turn his heart against him, but rather God gives Pharaoh over to what his heart already desires.

I mean I get it, we have to pause and think about this for a moment, but if God chooses not to show mercy, if God chooses not to change someone's heart, it's not as though they desire God and He isn't willing, it's that they want nothing to do with God and He is giving them exactly what they want.

The fact is that anyone who wants to come to Jesus, He will not turn away.

It's not as though there are people who are longing to come to Jesus and Jesus is saying no, no, not you, that's not it. The human heart is not willing to come unless the Lord changes it.

Let me ask you, what's the difference between you and you're unbelieving family members or friends? Let me ask you, because I've wrestled with this, why can two siblings grow up in the same household, have similar upbringing, same parents, same experiences, but one believes in the Lord Jesus and the other doesn't?

Why can I sit in the same service and hear the same gospel preached and believe in the Lord Jesus and the other completely rejects it? Why did I choose to believe?

Was it because I'm smarter? Wiser? Am I better than the person who doesn't believe? I still can't tell you why H chooses one or the other, but what I can tell you is that in order for anyone to come to saving faith, God has to move on that heart.

Our hearts are born hardened towards God, everyone one of us. And the only way that hardened heart changes from rejecting to believing, is if God change the heart.

And it is a merciful act of a benevolent God to soften anyone's heart, but it is completely God's right to choose not to soften someone's heart.

Maybe that's the work you sense the Lord doing in you this morning? Like, maybe as you hear the truth of His Word you sense the Lord softening your heart, calling you towards Him, embrace Him in faith this morning.

That brings questions, doesn't it? More around free will. What about my free will?

And Paul deals with that question, and I think it's important to see these aren't new questions, but Paul simply words them another way.

Look at verse 19.

Romans 9:19 ESV

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

Seems to make sense doesn't it? That's the question. If it is a matter of God choosing to change some hearts, but hardening others, then how can He judge any of us, how can I be held responsible for my actions?

Doesn't that just make us look like puppets in God's play? How can he reconcile free will with God's sovereignty?

And our hope is that Paul would answer that, but he doesn't.

Look at what he says.

Romans 9:20–21 ESV

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?" ²¹ Has the potter no right over the clay...

See, it's kind of like we're asking who does God think He is? And Paul says wait a minute check yourself, who do you think you are to challenge God in such a way? The question isn't what gives God the right, the question is what gives you the right to question Him.

I must have my right to choose God, but doesn't God have a right to choose who belong to Him? Isn't it prideful of us to claim ours over His?

Listen, there are genuine questions, but I think at the end of the day, we have to humble ourselves under God and just accept that there are things about His way and His will that we can't fully comprehend.

It is a bit prideful, isn't it? To elevate ourselves over God, to elevate our thinking over God's and say, because it doesn't make sense to me, it must not be right.

There is a mystery to this. In order for God to be God there has to be some mystery to how He works and His ways. If we could reconcile and understand everything about God, He wouldn't be much different than you or I.

Let's be clear, the bible teaches both, and so we have to believe both. The bible teaches us that whosoever will believe shall be saved and so we preach that message and we believe that message, that all who call on the name of the Lord shall be saved, that God so loved that world that He gave His only begotten Son and whoever, whoever believe in Him will not perish but have everlasting life.

We believe that; we preach that.... God is not willing that any should perish.

But it also teaches that behind my choice, is God choosing me. And while I cannot reconcile how those two go together, hand in hand, God can.

For my ways are not your ways, says the Lord, and neither are my thoughts your thoughts, as high is the heavens above the earth so are my ways and thoughts above yours.

Paul says, it's kind of like the clay looking up at the potter who is making it and asking why are you molding me this way.

I get it. The free will question. But let me pose to you that maybe it's about how you understand our free will.

Like, I think most of us understand free will like I have the freedom to choose and have whatever I want. But listen, all freedom has it's limits, doesn't it?

With all our free will, my choices are limited aren't they? I can choose all I want to fly, but I can't fly. I can choose that I'm never going to get sick anymore, but I'm probably going to get sick. All freedom has it's limits.

And the freedom of our choices is limited isn't it? It's limited to culture and upbringing; it's limited to exposure and circumstances.

But ultimately our choices are limited and impacted by one great thing. Sin.

See it all goes back to my desires of my heart doesn't it? Like, I make choices based on what I desire, I choose things because I desire a certain outcome or a certain fulfillment. What we desire impacts our choices.

Let me give you an example. I was away at a conference this week with some other pastors, and they gave us options for dinner. Would you like the fish or the steak?

Now listen I hate fish, but I love steak you give me the choice between a steak and a fish, I'm going to choose steak every time.

I'm free to choose either one, I can have either one, but because I love one and hate the other I'm going to choose steak every time.

See, when it comes to choosing God, mankind has the choice – choose God or choose sin, but with Jesus. I love my sin, I love my darkness, I love the world and so I'm going to choose sin, darkness and the world every time.

I'm free to choose either one, but unless I love one more than the other I will choose the one every time.

It goes back to God has to do a work on our heart. He doesn't force us to choose Him against our will; His Holy Spirit changes the desires of our heart that we turn from sin and choose Him every time.

It's God's right, it's His world, His universe, His creation.

And even though it may not make sense to us, even though it leaves us with questions. We have to trust that He has a purpose for every person He calls and every person He chooses not to.

That's where Paul ends this section.

Romans 9:21–23 ESV

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

Paul gives us a hypothetical here... I think he's being a bit cheeky, but he says hey let's just pretend that God has a purpose in those He withholds mercy from. Like, let's just pretend that God is righteous and just and perfect and loving in all that He does and He knows more than we do, and if He chooses to withhold mercy there's a purpose.

That some how some way it is to make the riches of His glory and His grace and His power be displayed.

That's what He did with Pharaoh, isn't it? We're still talking about how God worked powerfully to deliver the Israelites all these centuries later.

Think about it, God could have blinked and removed Pharaoh from existence, He could have just chosen not to even create Pharaoh or struck him dead on the spot, but no... He endured Him with patience... why?

Because we are still talking about the plagues and the power of God behind the plagues, and we're still talking about how God separated the Red Sea and allowed Israel to walk through on dry ground and the sea to cave in on Pharaoh's army, we're still taking about how God preserved Israel in the wilderness of 40 years and their clothing did not even wear out.

We're still talking about the greatness of our God and how He works, and none of that would have been on display if it was not for Pharaoh.

God has the absolute right to show mercy to whomever He chooses, and to withhold mercy from whomever He chooses, but Paul isn't done there just yet.

He ends with this, that God has the right to call whomever He wills.

THE RIGHT TO CALL WHOMEVER HE WILLS

Remember the questions we started with? What about Israel? Paul has been showing us that God has been choosing for Himself a people out of Israel, an Israel within Israel.

Well then, what about the Gentiles? Is this choosing that God is doing just within Israel? Look at what Paul says there in verse 24.

Romans 9:24 ESV

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

What? Make the connection, that what God was doing through Israel of the promise back in the Old Testament, all the promises, all the covenants, all the salvation, is not just for those He is calling to Himself out of Israel, but out of the Gentiles as well.

This is scandalous to the Jews. That it's not all Israel that are God's people of the promise, but you're saying Paul, that God is creating for Himself a people made up of Jews and Gentiles and they both have access to the promises?

That's why Paul quotes so many Old Testament passages, he's saying, isn't this what God said in the Old Testament?

Through the prophet Hosea, that He would call a people who are not His people, and call those who are not beloved, His beloved and those who are not called His people will be called sons of the living God.

And from the prophet Isaiah, he shows that God has saved and called a remnant out of Israel, He has not called all of Israel but a remnant, verse 27 though the number of the sons of Israel be as the sand of the seas only a remnant of them will be saved.

Do you see what he's saying... God is forming for Himself one people made up of individuals chosen from Israel and the Gentiles.

This is God's right, to create and choose for Himself a people, not just made up of those He's chosen from Israel, but those He's chosen out of the Gentiles and He tears down the wall that divided us and He makes that which was two, one.

In fact, Paul says exactly this in Ephesians 2:13-15.

Ephesians 2:13-15 ESV

¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴ For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility... that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two.

Do you see what he is saying the work that God is doing? He is creating for Himself one new man, or one new people in place of the two. Gentiles that were once far off from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenant of promise have now been brought near by the blood of Christ.

This isn't just about election, this isn't just about Israel, it's about how God is sovereign over the progress of His gospel. That out of Israel He was calling to Himself, choosing for Himself a people and now God is calling for Himself a people out of the Gentiles. Calling them out of every nation, every tribe, every tongue.

So often we get hung up on our rights before God, but wrestle with this. What rights does God have as the absolute sovereign ruler of all creation and all existence?

Surely God has rights that you and I don't.

He has the absolute right to show mercy to whomever He wants, the absolute right to withhold mercy from whomever He wants and the absolute right to call to Himself whomever He wills.

Here's where I would end, because it's what some people may be thinking. Then why preach the gospel? If God has simply chosen those who belong to Him, why preach and call people to believe in the gospel?

And the first reason is well because we're commanded to.

But more importantly, it's because God has determined that it is through the preaching of the gospel that His people will come to salvation.

I don't know, I don't assume. But I simply end this way, saying that the one who has every right to turn us away, is genuinely calling on you to come to Him this morning. He is not willing that any should perish, but rather He sent His Son Jesus Christ here and He laid His life down so that all who would call on the name of the Lord shall be saved.

Is that you this morning? My prayer is that God would shine the light of His gospel in your heart and turn it towards Him this morning.

Let us pray.