

Is God fair?

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Preacher: Nick Louw

[0 : 0 0] Good morning again, everyone. Let me tell you about some ministry that I did in the past. In Polesmoor Prison, I had the great privilege of working in Polesmoor Prison, doing ministry there for a while when I was at Takai. And I met some very interesting people amongst them.

I met a murderer who became a Christian. He was in prison doing his time, and he heard the gospel of Jesus, and God opened his eyes. God spoke to him. God called him to himself, and he became a new person. He put his faith in Christ. He changed his life. He changed his priorities. Of course, he still had to serve his time. He still had to spend a large part of his life in prison for what he did. But he had the sure hope through Christ that he was going to be one of God's people in the new creation, one of God's glorious children, even though he was a prisoner in Orange in Polesmoor when I knew him. Elsewhere, when I was doing ministry at another time, I met a sweet old lady.

She had never committed a crime. She was really the type of person who wouldn't hurt her to fly. And, you know, she was always sweet, and she always tried to do the right thing to try to help people.

But one of the things about it is that she had never submitted her life to Jesus. She had never trusted in Jesus and declared that Jesus is her king, and she's following him. Really, she didn't see the need to. Her life was okay. She did what she tried to do well. And so, kind and sweet as she is, she is separated from God. And the Bible says, unless anything changes, she is going to face God's judgment when she dies. Now, do you think that is fair? That a convicted murderer who's lived a life of sin is given eternal life, while a sweet old lady who's tried to do her best is going to face wrath and judgment? Do you think that's fair? It doesn't seem fair, does it? And yet, that's what the gospel message clearly teaches in Scripture. That it's what we've been discovering in Romans over the past year, that the people who God saves are saved by grace alone. And if we really believe that, what grace alone means is that it's irrespective of what they've done or haven't done in their lives.

Salvation is purely through grace and not through what they've done. And that, I admit, is a difficult idea to get our heads around, because in cases like I've mentioned, it just doesn't seem fair, does it?

[2 : 32] And maybe you struggle with that idea. Or maybe you know someone who struggles with that idea. Well, it may come as a comfort to you, as we open Romans 9, which I hope you have in front of you, that the Apostle Paul also struggled with this idea, even though he firmly believed it. You know, just because you believe something doesn't mean you won't struggle with it. In fact, that probably shows that you believe it, and you're not just believing it because you want to. When you believe truth, often you don't want to believe it. You struggle with it, and yet you know it's true. And Paul knew it was true, but he struggled with this truth, especially when it came to his fellow countrymen, the Jews, who were good people in many respects. They were good. I mean, they tried so hard to live rightly, to do what God wanted them to do. I'm sure many of them were very nice people, but they had not accepted Christ. While the Gentiles, on the other hand, who had been pagans their whole lives, were being saved in droves when Paul wrote Romans. And so Paul, understandably, he struggles with this. But it's here in Romans 9 that he works through it with us. And he says, you know, if you struggle with this idea, I struggle with it too. Let's think through it. Let's work through this idea.

And in what he writes, he actually proves to us how God is still not being unfair in his workings. And so let's see what he says. From the first verse, he basically begins by saying how heartbroken he is at the Jewish people, his people's refusal to follow Christ. Because he explains in verse 4 and 5, in a way, they were so close to God already. I mean, you can imagine how he felt. You know, the Jewish people, they'd experienced so much of God in history. He'd revealed so much of himself to them. Israel itself, as a nation, played such an important role in God's work in the world. They were so close, but yet so far. Because they had ignored Jesus. They had ignored God's ultimate revelation. The culmination of all God's work in the world. They ignored the one thing that mattered.

You know, they had been through everything with God, but they just didn't get the main thing. They were so close, but yet so far. And that's why Paul is grieving for his people.

But isn't that like so many people today that you probably know? They're decent. They're upstanding people. They're really nice to get along with. And they want to do the right thing.

They recycle. They give to the poor. Maybe they even read their Bible on a regular basis, and yet they still ignore the one thing that matters. Like that sweet old lady, they've not submitted their life to Jesus. And you see, at the end of the day, that's the only thing that matters.

[5 : 29] Not whether you've taken communion or gone to church or lived a decent life or helped the poor or recycled, which are all good things. But they mean nothing without the one thing that really matters, which is whether you've truly trusted and submitted your life to Jesus or not. That's what it comes down to.

And you see, the Jews hadn't. They'd come so close, and yet they were so far. Despite all that happened in history in the Old Testament in the Jewish nation, they'd missed Jesus. And Paul is so grieved by this. But even more so, we go on to see Paul's grieved because God had made specific promises to Israel. You see, it's not just a, man, they missed out. It's, wait a minute, God, you promised them stuff.

What happened to your promises? And so not only does it seem that God is unfair in not choosing these good people and choosing godless pagans, but it seems that God has actually gone back on his word, which is the real problem that Paul's addressing in this passage.

And so Paul really has to go on and explain not just why God is not unfair, but why it's not the case that he's gone back on his word. And he does that by emphasizing the first truth, the first kind of take home today that we need to get into our minds and our hearts, which is this, that salvation is God's work and not ours. We need to understand that. Salvation is God's work, not ours. In other words, salvation is not dependent on our goodness or who we happen to be, but it's completely 100% dependent on God's will alone. Not your will, not my will, but God's will. And that is what we're failing to understand here, Paul says. But actually, it's always been the case. That's always been true of how God saves people. And he makes the point by going back to the Old Testament, in fact, the passage that we read earlier. So let's have a look at what he says, Romans 9 from verse 6.

I'm going to read that. He says, It is not as though God's word had failed, for not all who are descended from Israel are Israel, nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham's children. On the contrary, it is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned. In other words, it is not the children by physical descent who are God's children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring.

[7 : 56] Let's just end there for now. You see, what Paul's saying here is that, yes, God promised to save the nation of Israel. He promised that they would be his people and have hope of eternity and new land, the new creation to come. But the thing is, God wasn't talking about physical Israel. And we've got to remember that when we look at modern Israel today, which we'll talk about in the next few weeks as we look at Romans 10 and 11. But God's promises weren't to just physical Israel. And Paul proves this by going back to Abraham's family, because it's right there, right at the beginning. Abraham was Israel's forefather, the forefather of the nation of Israel. And he had a number of children, right?

But not all of them became part of God's people. In fact, only one who God chose, which was Isaac. And in the same way, Paul explains, not all Jews, not all people born physically from Abraham's family are in fact God's people. And so salvation, the point is salvation is not dependent on our identity, who we see when we look at ourselves or where we've come from or what we've done. But it depends purely on God's choice of who to save. That's what it comes down to. And we saw this last week, didn't we? When we look at the end of Romans chapter 8 and the whole idea of predestination that God chooses before they're even born, who he's going to save. Well, that's what we see happening in Abraham's family. And if you're not yet convinced of this, Paul goes on to prove it again, to hammer it home with another example from verse 10. Read along with me.

Not only that, but Rebecca's children were conceived at the same time by our father Isaac. Yet before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad in order that God's purpose in election might stand, not by works, but by him who calls, she was told, the older will serve the younger, just as it is written, Jacob I loved and Esau I hated. Okay, so here we have the very next generation.

These were Abraham's grandchildren. Two children whose circumstances couldn't have been more alike. They were twins. Not only did they have the same father and mother, but they shared the same womb and the same birthday. And yet they were completely different because before they were born, God had chosen one to be part of his people and not the other. Which is a point made very starkly and disturbingly in the phrase, Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated. Which we must understand in biblical terms just means that God chose to accept Jacob and not Esau. It's referring to an action. You know, when we talk about hate, we refer to an emotion that we have towards someone else. I hope not, but that's what we, how we refer to the word. But in the Bible, it refers to an action. God's action to set his acceptance on one person and to reject another. But of course, that doesn't water down the starkness of the point that's being made here. I mean, I think Paul quotes this because it's so stark and so disturbing. God accepted one and not the other and it wasn't based on anything they did.

It was God's choice alone. And that is how God has always saved people and brought people into his kingdom. And it's how he still does it. Not based on what we've done in our lives. And not based on who we are, what culture or religion we align ourselves to. And so salvation's really got nothing to do with us, but everything to do with God's choice. Now, of course, there is a sense in which we must accept that. But even us accepting God's salvation is because he's chosen us before. And that is what we learned last week. And you see, when a person does that, when a person hears God's call in the gospel and sees the truth of it and believes it, which is something they don't choose, you don't choose to believe something. It is something that God works inside you. And when a person comes to faith in Jesus and submits to him as Lord, that is not a bid for God to choose them. Look, God, I'm following Jesus. Please choose me. No, it is rather an indicator that he already has chosen that person.

[12:14] God's choice. Because salvation is his work and not ours. Now, I can see by the expressions on your faces, this is a difficult teaching to get our heads around, isn't it? Not least of all, because it seems arbitrary and unfair that God would choose to save one person and choose to reject someone else, not based on anything that they've done. We think it's undeserved. And so this leads to the big question, is God unfair? Is God unfair? And that's exactly the question that Paul responds to in verse 14.

What shall we say then? Is God unfair or is God unjust? Not at all. Now, let's just stop there before he even goes on to explain why he says that. He knows that the human reaction to this teaching will immediately be to accuse God of being unfair, won't it? That's our immediate reaction when we hear this.

As if we set the rules as to what's fair or not, and God has to follow them. And God kind of sits under our judgment, which is crazy, of course, and yet that's exactly what we do, isn't it? We judge God. We say, no, no, no, God, you're not fitting into my rules of how you should do things. It's kind of like a child playing a game on the school playground. All right, have you ever watched and seen how quickly one of the louder children will change the rules of a game to suit themselves? Have you seen that? They're playing a game and then when some kid does something they don't like, they say, no, no, that's against the rules. And then they tell them what these new made-up rules are, even though they actually don't have the first clue as to what the game's rules really are. Well, you see, that's what we do with God, isn't it? We accuse him of being unfair or unjust when we don't have the first clue as to what real justice and fairness is. And besides, any idea that we do have of justice has only come from God himself. And so who are we? We're in no position to call God unfair, no position at all.

And Paul could have stopped there. He could have just stopped at verse 14 and said, what shall we say? Is God unjust? No, not at all. Deal with it. He could have, but he didn't. Because he wants you to understand why God is still being just in only choosing some and not others so that you will worship him rightly. And so he goes on to give two important reasons that I want us to see this morning. Why God is still fair and just in all this. And the first of those is because nobody actually deserves God's mercy in the first place. Look at verse 14 onwards, what he says. What shall we say then? Is God unjust? No, not at all. For he says to Moses, I will have mercy on whom I have mercy and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion. It does not therefore depend on human desire or effort, but on God's mercy. For scripture says to Pharaoh, I raised you up for this very purpose that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth. Therefore, God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy and he hardens whom he wants to harden. Okay, let's stop there.

Now, Paul, we need to understand the context of what Paul is saying. He cites two Old Testament accounts. First of all, when he's talking about Moses and the Israelites, the Israelites are in the desert under Moses' leadership. And this happens, God says this to Moses, right after they had committed national idolatry and disobeyed God and turned against him and started worshipping idols.

[15 : 50] And the second one is Pharaoh in Egypt, when he refused to release God's people from slavery, despite God showing him who he was, Pharaoh pitted himself against the rule of God. Now, if we understand the examples, we start to get what Paul's saying here, because the thing about both of these examples, let me ask you, I don't often ask questions in the pulpit, but I will. In both of these cases, what would the just and fair thing have been for God to do? You tell me. In the case of the Israelites turning against him and worshiping idols, in the case of Pharaoh resisting him, what would the just thing have been to do? To reject them, to punish them. Thank you. Well done for having the bravery to speak up in a sermon. All right? But we've got to get that. The just, the fair thing to do would have been for God to punish both Pharaoh and the Israelites for their rebellion in each case and destroy them. That would have been the just thing to do, to destroy them immediately.

But God chose to have mercy on some, the Israelites, and he chose to delay the judgment of Pharaoh until he had carried out his work. But the point is that when God had mercy on the Israelites, it was the opposite of what justice demanded. You get that? They, he shouldn't have had mercy.

Justice demanded their punishment for resisting God and worshiping things that he had made instead of him. Justice demanded that he punish them, but he didn't. So he had mercy and mercy is the opposite of what justice demands. To illustrate, let's say you're a victim of a crime, okay? Which is a very apt and realistic illustration in South Africa. Let's say you were mugged, okay? And they came and they took your wallet, your phone, and then you go to the police station and you report the crime. And when you get there, a few hours later, the police say, actually, we've caught a suspect. We saw him looking quite suspect near the place where you said it happened. And we're going to bring him out.

And you can identify him for us. And they bring the suspect to you, but you see immediately it wasn't the guy. This guy was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. I actually had that situation not too long ago. There was a guy in our back garden and he stole one of Alex's toys.

And I chased after him in the road. I didn't know what I was going to do when I caught him. It was kind of like when those dogs chase after birds and they finally catch them and they don't know what to do with them. But fortunately, I didn't catch him. And then we phoned, I phoned Barry, who's part of the neighborhood watch. And we phoned the armed response. And a few hours later, they said they caught a guy. And so we drove over and it was just a poor guy who was in the wrong place at the wrong time. It wasn't the guy at all. And he had been manhandled by the security. And so we let him go.

[18 : 37] But for me to let him go, that wasn't mercy, was it? He wasn't the guy. He didn't do it. And it's the same if you were mugged and you saw a suspect, but he wasn't the guy. For you to say, no, no, he wasn't the guy. Let him go. Isn't mercy. You're not being merciful because justice gives you no right to punish that person. He didn't do it. Mercy is instead, if they brought you the guy and you see immediately that it is the same guy who mugged you, but then you decide not to press charges.

And then he's released. Same outcome, but it's a totally different situation because that is mercy. You see? That's mercy because it does the opposite of what justice entitles you to.

Do you understand now what mercy means? We need to get that. Mercy is doing the opposite of what justice entitles you to do. And now let's say, let's continue the example. Let's say you decide not to press charges. And then a week later, you're mugged again by someone else. You're not having a very good week. Okay. But let's say the police catch him and they bring him to you. You identify that he's the suspect. And this time you decide to press charges. Now, would that be unfair?

You know, you didn't press charges on the other guy. Is it unfair for you to press charges on this guy? No, it's well within your rights to press charges because the guy's guilty. You're perfectly entitled to press charges on one person who deserves it and have mercy on another who also deserves punishment. And in the same way, God is perfectly entitled to have mercy on some and not on others because no one actually deserves that mercy in the first place. That's the point Paul's trying to make here. And in fact, Paul goes further and says that he can even harden people against him if he wants, like he did for Pharaoh, because it's no more than they deserve. Now, at this point, some may object, right? And say, well, wait a minute, wait a minute. How can God blame people if he actively hardens them against him? How is it their fault at all? And that's exactly what Paul anticipates and goes on to answer. Look at verse 19. One of you will say to me, then why does God still blame us?

For who is able to resist his will? But who are you, a human being, to talk back to God? Shall what is formed say to the one who formed it? Why did you make me like this? Now, that's a good point, isn't it? If God is our creator, he can do what he wants with the people he creates because he created us just like an artisan or a potter, as Paul goes on to say, can do what he wants with the pots in his workshop. He's not under their authority. He can do what he wants with the pots.

[21 : 26] He made them. But you see now, this is what we often, we often read this and go, yeah, yeah, so we shouldn't talk back to God and we're pots and he's a potter. But we often miss something here. The point is, and I think this is what Paul wants us to realize, is that we're not like pots.

We're different to pots. Because we argue with God. Pots don't argue with the potter. We still resist God. Pots don't resist the potter. And that's the thing about us which actually makes us guilty.

Is that we can't help resisting God's ways and God's decisions. And we've been doing it right from the beginning, right from Adam and Eve, even though they were made in a perfect world, what did they do? Well, it didn't take long, did it? Before they were second guessing God and questioning the way that he ordered things. You know, why did God make a tree that, you know, why didn't he just leave the tree out? You know, maybe it's because he doesn't want us to know something that we want to know. And so they ate the fruit. And we don't understand why, but that's the way God ordered things. And our human instinct is always to resist that. Always to reject God's way of doing things and try to do it our own way. And we do the same in every single day of our lives. We read the Bible and go, that's God's way, but I'm going to do things my own way. You see, it's in us. It's human sin. And we do the same, of course, when we argue intellectually with how God chooses to do things in his world. Ah, predestination, election, that's so unfair. God, you're unjust. You see, it's just our sin coming out, resisting God's way of doing things and wanting him to do things our way. But God is totally entitled to do that. He is the potter and we are the pots, but not like pots because we resist God. And you see, God's not the one in the dock. We are in the dock and us arguing with God is making us complicit in our guilt. That is the evidence against the fact that we are guilty for the fact that we are guilty. And that's what each of us needs to understand this morning. That not only do we have no right to hold God to account, but also he is well within his rights to not have mercy on any of us because all of us have set our will against God's rightful rule in our lives. All of us deserve his punishment. And if it wasn't for

God going against the demands of justice to have mercy and going against so much so that he sent his son to die for us so that he doesn't have to have the just demands laid on us. If it wasn't for God going against the demands of justice, we would all be facing judgment and hell because of our resistance and our rebellion. And it's when we understand that, that we stop asking, why does God only have mercy on some? And we start asking instead, why does he have mercy on any? Because no one deserves it. And that's the first reason. The second reason Paul gives to explain the fairness of God in only choosing some for salvation is this, and that is that God has made the world for him, not for us. And this is the second truth we need to get into our heads this morning.

It's vital that we get this if we're ever going to live properly. Look at what Paul says from verse 21. Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for special purposes and some for common use? What if God, although choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath prepared for destruction? What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory, even us, whom he also called not only from the Jews, but also from the Gentiles? Now, now this is really the center and the climax of Paul's argument in Romans 9, and that is that the potter doesn't make the pots for the sake of the pots. He makes them for his own sake, for his own use.

[25 : 30] God makes us not for us, but for him and for his purposes and for his glory. Of course, us being caught up in his glory is the ultimate joy for a human being and the ultimate bliss. But God didn't set it all up for us. We're not the top of the food chain, right? God set up and created this universe for him.

And therefore, if it serves his purposes to choose some and not to choose others, indeed, even to harden some to sin, that's what he will do. And he is perfectly entitled to do that, which is just like what he did with Pharaoh. Now, look at what God says to Pharaoh in verse 17.

Let's go back a few verses. I raised you, Pharaoh, up for this very purpose that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth. So you see what that's saying?

That Pharaoh resisted God, sinned against God. God hardened Pharaoh's heart against him. Why? So that God would be made known to his people. God hardened Pharaoh's heart to necessitate the fact that he would have to miraculously release his people. His people, Israel, would have never known God's glory and power if Pharaoh just said, yeah, okay, you can go. No, he had to resist God for God's glory to be fully displayed to his people. And that's the way God works. You see, he has mercy on some and he uses the hardness of others still to achieve his purposes. Verse 18, therefore, God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy and he hardens whom he wants to harden. And so rather than accusing him of being unfair to do that, you should be absolutely amazed that if you're in Christ, you are one of the people that he has chosen to save for his glory rather than to harden and face his justice, which he has every right to do. And when you get that, when you get that God has every right to condemn me to eternal judgment, then that changes how you live. It changes how you relate to God. It makes you want to give everything to God. It humbles you when you think of how undeserving any of us are to not only be spared from a judgment we deserve, but to be given God's love and eternal blessings that we don't deserve, all for his glory. And when we get that, it should make us want to give every fiber of our being to glorifying God, because that's the reason we exist. That's the reason he predestined us. That's the reason he saved us for him. So I end with asking you, are you one of those people? Are you in Christ or are you a Christian by name only? Well, that's not enough.

That's not going to save you. You know, you might be so close and yet so far. You need to submit yourself to Christ, because if you are hearing God's call to you this morning, that may well be because you are one of those he has chosen to save. And so don't leave this place without doing something about it. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you for giving us truth. We thank you for opening our eyes to believe it, even though it is not easy to understand often and it is not easy to accept. But help us, Lord, to be submissive to our Creator. Help us not to rebel and constantly question the way you do things, but help us to be amazed that you have done what we don't deserve, that you have sent your Son, as we celebrated this morning in communion, to give himself in our place, to take on your wrath so that we don't have to, to die for our sins, to take away from us the punishment that we deserve so that we can enjoy you for eternal life. Lord, help us to realize the amazingness of this and this week to live it out in devoting ourselves to glorifying you in everything we do, because that is why you made us. Help us with this by your Spirit. Amen.