

# The Freedom and Justice of God in Sovereign Election

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By John Piper January 12, 2003

## Romans 9:14-18

**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. 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.**

The doctrine of God's unconditional election is so different from what most of you grew up with that you not only have a hard time believing it is in the Bible, but also a hard time feeling that it is good news. So I am swimming against a doubly difficult current in these messages from **Romans 9**. On the one hand, I believe that is exactly the doctrine that **Romans 9** teaches, and on the other hand, I believe that doctrine is very good news. So I must do my best both to show you that it is there in the text, and that it is good news. That's my job in these days. It is humanly impossible, but with God all things are possible. So, Lord, please help me.

The main point of the message this morning is that God is just or righteous in unconditional election.

The structure of the message goes like this:

- ✓ **First**, we will ask where this objection in verse 14 comes from. Why did anyone raise the question about the justice or righteousness of God?
- ✓ **Second**, I will give three reasons why the doctrine of unconditional election is good news.
- ✓ **Third**, we will see how Paul reasserts the doctrine in verse 16: "It depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy."
- ✓ **Fourth**, we will try to understand Paul's argument in verse 15 for the righteousness of God in unconditional election.

## Where This Objection in Verse 14 Comes From

First, Paul asks in verse 14, "**What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part?**" And he answers, "**By no means!**" Where did the objection in **Romans 9:14** come from? Paul knew the kind of objections that were typically raised against his teachings. He had preached and taught publicly for years in synagogues and churches and market places. He knew what he had to deal with. So he raises the questions that people typically raise and dealt with them.

What had he said to raise this objection that God is unjust or unrighteous? The main thing he had said was that God chose Isaac not Ishmael, and Jacob not Esau before they had born or had done anything good or evil. That was the point of verses 7-13. Recall verses 11-13, "**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 [conditionally] because of works but [unconditionally] because of him who calls – 12 [Rebecca] was told, 'The older will serve the younger.'** 13 As it is written, 'Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.'" The point is that God's favor in election is not based on what we do or what we think or what we feel or what we choose, but on God alone – the one who calls.

And we need to stress – because it is so often denied – that the issue Paul is dealing with in this chapter is election for our personal, eternal destinies – individual Jews and Gentiles, not just the Jewish people as a whole and the Gentile peoples, and eternal destinies, not just historical roles. The problem he is wrestling with is stated in verse 3: many of his Jewish kinsmen are accursed and cut off from Christ. That is what creates the crisis – not the historical role of a nation, but the eternal destiny of individual Jewish people who rejected the gospel as he preached from synagogue to synagogue.

So the answer to our first question is that the objection in verse 14 rose from Paul's teaching of unconditional election – that God chooses whom he will graciously save before we are born or have done anything good or evil. Our election to eternal life is not based on what we choose or what we do. It is based on God alone. Which person chooses to trust Christ and be saved, and which one chooses to reject Christ and be lost, is finally God's choice.

And so some of Paul's listeners objected and said, "God is unjust – he is unrighteous – to base his election on nothing in us. It is unrighteous in God to choose who will believe and be saved or who will rebel and be lost. So goes the objection that Paul raises in verse 14. "**Is there injustice on God's part? Is there unrighteousness with God?"** Paul answers, "**By no means.**" There is no unrighteousness with God when he unconditionally elects whom he will.

### **Three Reasons Why the Doctrine of Unconditional Election Is Good News**

Now before we look at Paul's reassertion of the doctrine in verse 16 and his argument for it in verse 15 I want to give you three reasons that this doctrine of unconditional election is good news.

**A. It is good news** because it means no unbeliever is so bad that they can say in response to our gospel pleading, "I can't be elect; I am too evil. I have sinned too long and too deeply." God's election is not based on how much we do or don't sin. It is not based on anything we do or think or feel or choose. Therefore, the proper response to that kind of despair is to say, "Who do you think you are to exalt your sin to the level of God? Who do you think you are to wallow in your despair and make your sinful will the sovereign of the universe, as if you could decide who is elect and who is not by the quantity of your sinning?" No! You have no right and no

power to declare yourself beyond God's election. He and he alone decides who is elect. And he decides NOT on the basis of your sin or your righteousness, but on the basis of his inscrutable will alone. You may not play God with your sin. None of it proves you are not elect. Repent, therefore, and call on the name of the Lord through Jesus Christ who has died for sinners. For he has said, "Everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved." To the despairing soul who feels he has sinned himself out of the possibility of election, unconditional election is good news.

**B. The doctrine of unconditional election is good news** because it preserves the praise of God's glorious grace at every point in our salvation. There was not, and is not, nor ever will be, a point where we become the decisive cause of our salvation. God has chosen us freely so that we may not boast in ourselves but in God. This is good news because we were made to find greatest joy in praising, not being praised. Probably the deepest corruption that we have all inherited from the Fall – and it is especially and blatantly prevalent in the last 50 years – is that we believe and feel that happiness and health come from being praised, rather than from praising God.

We think that psychological health comes from being made much of, rather than from being freed from that need to enjoy making much of God forever. That is why we were made, and that is where the greatest and deepest and longest joys are found – not in being made much of, but in forgetting ourselves in the joy of making much of God's glory, which consists very much in his free and sovereign grace. Unconditional election is designed for that great and happy end. Therefore it is good news.

**C. The doctrine of unconditional election is good news** because when, by grace through faith, you know yourself loved by God, forgiven, justified, accepted, this doctrine of election assures you that the roots of your salvation – the roots of God's almighty commitment to save you – are not shallow, but go down deep into the counsels of eternity. It is good news to know that the root of your salvation goes down forever and ever into eternal grace and never gets to a point where it is contingent and fragile and dependent on your foreseen faith or your foreseen good works.

There are other reasons for feeling that the doctrine of unconditional election is good news, but that is what we have time for this morning.

### **How Paul Reasserts the Doctrine of Unconditional Election in Verse 16**

Third, notice how Paul reasserts the doctrine in verse 16: "**So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy.**" What is the "it"? "**It depends not on human will or exertion.**" It's the issue he is dealing with from verses 1-13. Perhaps the shortest answer straight from the text would be from verse 11: "**God's purpose according to election.**" God's electing purpose does not depend on human will or exertion.

Literally the words are: **"It is not of him who wills or of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy."** The point is to underline the unconditionality of God's election. And the completeness of the unconditionality is stressed by using a "willing" word and a "doing" word: **"one who wills"** and **"one who runs."**

This is important because it touches the very thing that some people find so controversial: the human will. Paul states as clearly as we should wish, I think, that the human will is not the final and decisive condition of election. God is. It is God and God alone. God chooses his own people before we have willed anything like faith, or done anything like love. That's the point of verse 16, reasserting what Paul already taught in verses 11-14.

### **Paul's Argument in Verse 15 for the Righteousness of God in Unconditional Election**

Now finally, what is Paul's argument in verse 15 for the righteousness of God in unconditional election? Paul has said, No, there is no unrighteousness with God. That's the point of verse 14. Then verse 15 starts with that key word **"for"** to show that he is giving a reason or a basis or a ground for what he just said, "For he [God] says to Moses, **"I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion."**

Now that is a very puzzling argument for the righteousness of God in unconditional election. He says, **"No, God is not unrighteous in having mercy on people without respect to their will or work, because God said to Moses, 'I will have mercy on whom I have mercy and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.'"** It sounds like a restatement of the unconditional election, rather than an argument that unconditionality is righteous.

At this point in the chapter I resolved in early 1979 to take a sabbatical from teaching Bible at Bethel College and devote nine months to figuring out Paul's argument. So I spent from May – January working on it. I've told you the upshot before: I wrote a book called *The Justification of God* (which for me, is one of the most foundational things I have ever written), and I left teaching to come to Bethlehem. That was the effect of one word, you might say, the word **"for"** at the beginning of verse 15. There is no unrighteousness with God, **"FOR, God says to Moses, I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion."**

There are two keys to understanding this argument. I will give you a bare introduction to them today and then come back to them in three weeks when we take up the rest of this paragraph. First is the context of this Old Testament quotation in **Exodus 33:19**; and the second is Paul's understanding of the righteousness of God. Let's take these one at a time to see if we can follow Paul's argument and how verse 15 is a defense of God's righteousness in unconditional election.

## The Context of the Quote from Exodus 33:19

Consider this quote in **Exodus 33:19**. Moses is talking to God and seeking God's promise to go up to the promised land with the people. Then he asks to see God's glory in verse 18, and that sets up the statement which Paul quotes in **Romans 9:15**. In **Exodus 33:18**, "Moses said, 'Please show me your glory.' 19 And he [God] said, 'I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name 'The Lord.' And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy.'"

Moses asks to see God's glory. God obliges by saying: Here's my goodness, my name. And to his name he attaches this sentence: "**I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy.**" In other words, I think God is saying to Moses, and to us, my glory is expressed in my name, Yahweh (Lord), and my name is expressed in my freedom to have mercy on whom I have mercy. This is who I am. This is my name. This is my glory. My essence as God consists essentially in being free from any constraint originating outside my own will. This is the essence of what it means to be God. This is his name, my glory. One confirmation of this is that back in chapter 3 of **Exodus** Moses asks God what his name is so that he can tell the Israelites who sent him. God answers in verse 14: "**God said to Moses, 'I AM WHO I AM.'** And he said, 'Say this to the people of Israel, **'I AM has sent me to you.'**" In other words, God explained his name here as "**I am who I am.**" And in **Exodus 33:19** he explains his name as "**I will have mercy on whom I have mercy.**" The structure is the same, and the meaning is simply expanded. God's name, the essence of his glory, is that he IS absolutely and without cause or constraint from outside himself. He is who he is. And, expanding on that in chapter 33, he says his name, his essence, is, "**I have mercy on whom I have mercy**" – that is, I am absolutely self-existent and absolutely self-determining. I exist freely, without cause or control from any other. And I have mercy freely. At the deepest decision of my mercy there is no cause or control or constraint by anything outside my own will. That is what it means to be God, Yahweh. That is my name and the essence of my glory.

## The Meaning of God's Righteousness

That is the first key to understanding the argument of **Romans 9:15** – the context of the quote from **Exodus 33:19**. Now the second key is the meaning of God's righteousness. What does Paul mean by righteousness, when he says, "**There is no unrighteousness with God**"? If I had time I would love to develop a long argument from the Old Testament, and from Paul's use of the "**righteousness of God,**" to show you where I get the answer to that question. But all I have time for is to give you my conclusion and say that I will come back in three weeks with support for it.

God's righteousness is essentially his unswerving allegiance to his own name and his own glory. God is righteous to the degree that he upholds and displays the honor of his name. He is righteous when he values most what is most valuable, and what is most valuable is his own glory. Therefore God's justice, his righteousness,

consists most fundamentally in doing what is consistent with the esteem and demonstration of his name, his glory. God would be unrighteous if he did not uphold and display his glory as infinitely valuable.

Now the two keys are in place for understanding the argument of **Romans 9:15**. Paul is arguing that there is no unrighteousness with God when he elects unconditionally. Why? Using our two keys, the answer is: because God's name, the essence of his glory, consists in his absolute freedom to have mercy on whom he will have mercy. That is who he is. And his righteousness is his unswerving allegiance always to uphold and display this glory. Therefore, he must uphold and display his freedom, if he is to be righteous.

Let me say it one more time: If God's righteousness consists in his unswerving commitment to uphold his name and his glory, and if his name and his glory consist in his absolute freedom in showing mercy, then to be righteous he must choose the beneficiaries of his electing mercy before they are born or have anything good or evil.

Therefore the doctrine of unconditional election stands and God is righteous in it.

And I close with the reminder of how good this news is:

No amount of sin that you have ever done can keep you from being God's elect. God was, is, and always will be free. And your past record of sin was and is no hindrance to your being elect. Call on the name of the Lord Jesus and you will be saved.

And let all the praise for your salvation go to him and not yourself. You were made for this. Find your joy in making much of God and his grace, not making much of yourself. And when you find your rest in Christ through faith, glory in this: the roots of your security go down forever in the eternal grace of God. Amen.

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