

Sermon for Sunday, June 13, 2010
Dr. Dan Doriani

GOD'S SOVEREIGN MERCY
Romans 9:1-16

For the second time recently, I'm addressing a controversial topic - predestination. It's not that I like controversy. I don't. But we're studying Romans and God's election is a major topic in chapters 8-9, so I need to address it. Paul described a pastor's call and duty this way: Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage — with great patience and careful instruction... Endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry.

We are "servants of Christ" and have been "entrusted with the secret things of God. Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful" (1 Corinthians 4:1-2). That is, church leaders must re-declare what God declares in the Bible, even if it leads to challenges.

The Bible is a sprawling book that doesn't always "tell it straight." Sometimes it will "tell it slant." Jesus spoke in parables, dark sayings, riddles. When he teaches, he rarely offers up "Point 1, 2, 3." He sends us swimming in metaphors. Books like Samuel can roll along for several chapters and never say "the point is." This is wise. It makes us think. A burst of light can blind eyes that are used to darkness. The Lord sends daylight gradually. He reveals his truth gradually, too. Good! But we do struggle to comprehend it sometimes.

Peter admits that the apostle Paul is hard to understand at times: "His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort" (2 Peter 3:16). And some things are clear but we don't want to listen:

The time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. (2 Timothy 4:3)

Put all this together, add 2,000 years of tradition in every language and 100 lands and it's no surprise that Christians disagree on certain things. Here are five examples:

Baptism: shall infants of believers be baptized or not?

How shall the church be governed? Through a hierarchy of cardinals and bishops down to novices? Or does the congregation get a vote on everything? Or will the congregation elect its leaders in a representative government?

Shall worship be formal or informal? How long a service? Are set prayers and readings and confessions good or not?

Is it an accident that all priests, monarchs and apostles are male or is it a sign that God ordains men to lead the church and the family?

Our topic: how does **election** work? Does God give the same offer to all so that we essentially elect ourselves? Or is God finally sovereign in election?

These questions are old. Believers have been studying them, for hundreds, even thousands of years. Churches tend to take a position on them. They may change a little. Generally pastors study long and hard, make a decision, stick to it. That's true at Central. We believe it's right to baptize the children of believers.

In church government, we don't have a hierarchy and we're not a pure democracy either. Presbyterians elect leaders who serve as our representatives. We believe that the Lord wants men to lead the home and the church. We are Reformed or Calvinistic in our belief that God is sovereign in election.

Our church is 166 years old (1844); our convictions have been steady in these areas for a long time, usually through the life of the church. We affirm our confession of faith. We have always been Presbyterians, always baptized infants, always called men as elders and pastors, always had a view of God's sovereignty. The great majority of you agree on these matters. That's one reason why you are here - although there are other reasons.

Yet we know it's impossible to agree on *everything*. I don't even agree with *everything* that we do. What then? First, we think. We think because the Bible tells us to. One case: The early church had debates about food: should disciples be vegetarians? In cities, the poor often ate meat that had been offered to idols earlier in the day. Could disciples do that? They asked Paul what to do.

In Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8, he said two things that are brilliant even though some might call them contradictory. First, study the matter. Think it through. Don't tell yourself, "This question is too hard. Experts disagree. Who am I to think I can find the truth?" No, study, talk. "Let everyone be fully convinced in his own mind" (Romans 14:6). Paul says, "Have convictions! Practice them. If you decide it's OK to eat meat, go ahead! I bless you. If you don't think it's OK, then don't." Paul thinks it's OK to eat meat, but don't do it if you think it's a sin (Romans 14:6-8).

On the other hand, Paul says don't pass judgment on our brothers. Don't despise people who come to different conclusions. God is judge. We will give an account to *him*. It's not our place to judge each other (Romans 14:10-12).

If we want to live together well when we disagree, we can't judge. But there is another principle. Disagreement is inevitable. Even the closest, most loving husband and wife will disagree about things, even sharply. The same holds for friends and people in churches. We live together well by remembering that we do agree on the great matters. Paul says:

Live a life worthy of your calling. Be humble and gentle, patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit... You were called to one hope... one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all.

We belong to Christ. True Christians agree on the great matters. Jesus is Lord. He died for our sins. He was raised for our life. God the Father is sovereign. The Spirit testifies to Christ and works in our lives.

On rare occasions, a secondary matter becomes very important to a person. Then the position and practice of the church feels like torment - intolerable. What then? Find a good church that shares your view, a church where you can serve. But no church will agree with you on everything. And don't expect to find the perfect church. If you do find it, don't join - you'll mess it up!

Meanwhile, the gospel, our love for each other, our history of serving together, caring for each other hold us together. We have a commitment to God's word. These are the great issues. If we stay humble and gentle, we usually can disagree - even sharply - and stay together. So, then to a topic where we disagree.

1. Lamentation for the lost of Israel (9:1-5)

In Romans 9, Paul addresses a problem that grieves his heart - the rebellion of Israel. The rebellion of Israel, his own people, whom he loves, makes Paul heartsick. That leads him to explore how it happened - and God's sovereign plans in election. He explains, in 9:18, "God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden."

First, hear his heart emotions. The rebellion of Israel causes Paul "great sorrow." Three times he testifies to it: "I speak the truth... I am not lying, my conscience confirms it in the Holy Spirit". Paul has "unceasing anguish" over the fate of God's people, Israel. He grieves that so many did not yet recognize that Jesus is indeed their long awaited Savior and King (9:1-2).

His anguish is so great that he would taste God's wrath in their place if it were possible: "I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race" (9:3).

This is amazing. Paul suffered so much from these people. They jailed him for years on false charges. Five times they lashed him thirty-nine times. They disagreed sharply, so that's no great surprise. It is a surprise that he still loves them so much that he would suffer eternal death for them if that were possible.

Do you feel that way about those who hurt you, or do you just get angry? Do you feel anguish for them? Do you especially feel grief for your friends when they stray from the Lord? Do you grieve over your enemies? Your family?

Christians belong to God's family, yet our natural allegiance to our nation, city, and family remains. We still love them! Jesus is King of the world, the Savior for all. But Paul wants his people to believe. It grieves him when they don't.

He wishes that he could suffer God's curse for his people if it would save them. Of course, it isn't possible. Paul can't atone for someone else's sins. That is the work of Christ. Paul knows that. He said "Nothing can separate me from the love of Christ" (8:35-38). He belongs to the Lord forever. But if he could, like Christ, give his life as a substitute, he would.

Years ago, a young woman was dying. She went to a huge church but she went to the pastor and asked him to lead the funeral. She said, "If you bury me, my father will come to my funeral and hear you preach the gospel. Speak it clearly. I've prayed for him a long time. I know God will save him." She did die and her father was converted. This was her passion for her father. She did not lament death if it meant that her father would trust in Jesus.

Paul laments over his people, for it should have been different. Israel rejected the Lord although he granted them great privileges. Paul mentions eight:

First, God **adopted** them "as sons." He said, "Israel is my firstborn son."

Second, "theirs the **divine glory**." The cloud of glory led them out of Egypt. It entered the tabernacle and the temple. This glory showed itself supremely in Christ.

Third, theirs are "the **covenants**." God made covenants with Abraham, affirmed with Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, enhanced them with Moses and the promises to David. He said, "I will bless you... and all peoples... will be blessed through you" (Genesis 12:1-3).

Fourth, fifth and sixth, Israel received three things: The **law** – given by Moses, applied by the prophets, deepened by Jesus. The **worship of God** with all the songs and sacrifices. God's **promises** "They will be my people and I will be their God."

Seventh and eighth, "Theirs are the **patriarchs**," Abraham and all heroes of the faith. "From them is traced the human **ancestry** of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised!"

All those privileges, yet no faith! Let us take heed. We can belong to a church, own a Bible, take communion, have Christian parents, friends, and education. But you must be born anew, born from above. When God calls, you must say, "Here I am. I repent of my sin and believe in you."

It's tragic when people have great privileges and squander them. It reminds me of another kind of funeral for someone who wasted his life. He had talent, energy, wit and charm, but something went

terribly wrong. He became cruel, angry, suspicious, addicted, dishonest. We weep for what that person could have been. So Paul weeps. Yet, "It's not as though the word of God has failed" (9:6a). How so?

2. Not all Israel are Israel (9:6-9)

Scripture already said "Not all Israel are Israel." Sadly, the principle is all too clear. Abraham, the father of Israel, had two sons, Isaac and Ishmael. Ishmael, born to Hagar, was not the child. Isaac, born to Sarah, age 90, was. God counted Isaac as the heir of the covenant. (Romans 9:7). "Through Isaac your offspring shall be named." Paternity is not what counts, God's election is: "The children of the promise are regarded as Abraham's offspring." (9:7-8).

In Romans 2, Paul said there are two Israels. One is outward, in the flesh; the other is inward, in the Spirit. Absalom was David's son, talented, handsome, ambitious. But he was no true son of David; he tried to kill his father.

Fifty years later, Solomon died. Late in his career, Solomon obsessed over money and building projects. Taxes rocketed up and Solomon's son Rehoboam promised more of same. A man named Jeroboam led a popular rebellion. To keep them loyal he said, "Don't bother traveling to Jerusalem! I'll build convenient worship centers for you. They'll be fabulous! A huge stone altar with a golden calf on top. Come there and worship." I have seen the ruins – impressive. And most of Israel followed, for "not all Israel belongs to Israel." But Paul himself offers the strongest illustration – God chose and elected Jacob over Esau.

3. God chose Jacob (9:10-13)

The choice of Jacob over Esau is a striking case of divine election because the boys were twins. One father, one mother, one womb. Yet, Romans 9:11 says: "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' (9:12). This reverses the ordinary rule of primogeniture – rule by the first son. Why does God overturn the normal order?

Let's rule one thing out. There is no hint that Jacob was a better man. Both Jacob and Esau rebelled against God, sinned against each other, and their parents. Jacob was closer to his mother and cared more about his father's blessing, but that's not a sign of spiritual life. Since he was close to his mother, they connived to deceive father Isaac who was old and blind. They duped him so he gave Jacob his blessing. Jacob essentially stole the birthright from Esau and later stole the blessing (Genesis 25, 27). Now he would get two-thirds of the inheritance and lead the family.

Esau was no better. He was an outdoorsman, a man with strong appetites for food and pagan women (Genesis 27:46). He had a violent side and no interest in spiritual things. Once he came from a long day hunting. Tired and hungry, he traded his birthright for a bowl of stew. "Thus Esau despised his birthright" (Genesis 25:29-34).

Jacob stole from his brother, connived with his mother, deceived his father, tried to defraud his uncle, and showed no true interest in God's covenant. The famous "stairway to heaven" episode proves the point. After he defrauded Esau, Esau swore to kill him and Jacob fled (Genesis 27:41). God spoke to him in a dream. He promised him land and descendants saying, "I am with you and I will keep you wherever you go" (Genesis 28:15). Jacob said, "OK, if you do all that, then I'll follow you: "If God will be with me and will watch over me... so that I return safely to my father's house, then the LORD will be my God and I will give you a tenth." (Genesis 28:20-22). So he promises to be loyal to God if he produces.

Jacob never changed until God wrestled with him, over fourteen years later. Then he saw God face to face. As he grappled, he held onto the Lord and said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." He knew

if he kept wrestling he might die, but suddenly he preferred to die than to live without God's blessing (Genesis 32:22-30).

This sovereign choice is so strong that God even says, "Jacob I loved but Esau I hated"(9:13). That is, God chose Jacob and rejected Esau.

In cases of choice, "hate" is an idiom meaning "not chosen". Here is the proof: Jesus consistently says we must love him more than our family. In Luke 14:26, Jesus says we can't be his disciples unless we "hate" our family; in Matthew 10:37, he says we can't be disciples unless we love him more than family. It's the same idea. As we love God more, so God loved Jacob more.

4. God has mercy as he wills (9:14-16)

Still God chose one over the other. He chose one and bypassed the other. Paul anticipates the question: "What then shall we say? Is God unjust? Not at all! [As] he says to Moses, 'I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion'" (Romans 9:14-15). Mercy is God's gift.

We tend to say, "That's not fair." It seems unfair for God to do something for one but not another. But the complaint touches only one aspect of fairness.

God always gives everyone what they deserve before the law. He pays every debt, never punishes the innocent. He is perfect in his retributive justice. In that sense, God is always fair. But he does not treat everyone exactly the same way or give everyone the same gifts. He does not distribute the same favors to all. Some are born in Angola, others in America. No two people have the same body or mind, the same home or friends. But the Lord never gives less than we deserve.

Suppose a teacher gives a fair but difficult math test. The average score is 68. The teacher could give everyone what they deserve – lots of Cs, Ds, Fs. Harsh, but just. Or he could add twelve points to every score and most would do well. Or he could give some students a 100 and let the others keep whatever they earned. Is that unjust? No. Everyone gets what they earned, and some get more.

In election, God does something like option three. In fact, humanity stands before God with a zero. "No one is righteous, not even one; no one understands, no one seeks for God" (Romans 3:10-11). Everyone is failing. But among some of these people, God sends his Spirit to regenerate them. This is a supernatural act. They begin to think about God, moral goodness, Jesus and eternal life. They surprise themselves by reading the Bible, going to church, desiring to know God.

Our confession summarizes lots of Scriptures and says: By God's eternal purpose and good pleasure, out of His free grace, God predestines some to life. He does this because of grace alone, not because He foresees our faith or good works. Others, God passes by. Is this biblical?

Yes. Romans 9 describes two men, Jacob and Esau, both prominent sinners. Neither man deserves anything from God and neither seeks God. God let Esau go (cf. Romans 1:24-28), but He pursued Jacob, made promises, brought him low, to the end of his abilities, and then He appeared to Him, and changed him.

Is that unjust? I must leave that question for another day. But I can say this: God is never unjust. If we want justice, all are lost. Our hope is mercy. But more on that another week.

Now I ask you to join me in looking at election or predestination as God does: God has mercy on whom He wants to show mercy. We are in no position to demand more. We can and should give thanks that He has already placed us in His path. The very fact that you are listening suggests that He is working in your life to draw you to Him for the first time or to take you deeper.

People object to the doctrine in several ways.¹

1. Predestination fosters arrogance as the elect boast of their status. No, it excludes boasting, for it says God's favor is unconditional and undeserved.

2. Predestination fosters uncertainty: Am I predestined or not? No, it excludes worry, for God finishes what He starts. The very question suggests spiritual life.

3. Predestination fosters apathy. No, it means everything we do matters to God.

4. Predestination fosters complacency, for some have God's favor, regardless. No, it calls for moral passion, for God predestines us to be conformed to Christ.

5. Predestination fosters narrow-mindedness, self-absorption with the favor of God. No, for God chooses His people that they might bless the nations.

Where then do we stand? If you have called on the Lord truly, sincerely, then He has called you according to His purpose. You are predestined to be conformed to Christ. And those he predestined, He also called; those He called, He also justified; those He justified, He also glorified. Nothing can separate you – come!

If not, then try talking to the Lord even now...

¹ Stott, *Romans*, pages 249-251