

# The Gospel According To Paul: Romans

*Maurice W. Lusk, III*

## **The Potter and the Clay (9:19-21)**

Paul insists that God is not unjust or unrighteous in the exercise of his will. His decisions, his determinations, and his choices are beyond reproach or question. Deut 32:4 says, "He is the Rock, his works are perfect, and all his ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he." And in Psalms 111:17, "The works of his hands are faithful and just; all his precepts are trustworthy." Isaiah 55 says,

*For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD .<sup>9</sup> "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.<sup>10</sup> As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater,<sup>11</sup> so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it (Isaiah 55:8-11).*

God has not gone back on his word to bless all nations through the seed of Abraham, and he has not broken his word in his rejection of the Jews who call themselves "Israel." God acts on the basis of his omniscience, whether knowledge of the past, present, or future; knowing what he knows, his decisions are all the more just or righteous. But his omniscience cannot be interpreted as a causative force underlying the events that take place within the lives of men (whether in the past, present, or the future).

*One of you will say to me: "Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?" **But who are you, O man, to talk back to God?** <sup>20</sup>"Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, 'Why did you make me like this?' Does not the potter have authority over the clay, to make out of the same lump of clay a vessel for honor and another for dishonor?" (Rom 9:19-20)*

The assumption of Paul's "rhetorical Jewish questioner" that God was at fault because he allowed man to be subject to the inclination to do evil was common within the Judaism of this period. Joseph Shulam, in his *Commentary on the Jewish Roots of Romans* (p. 332), gives an interesting insight as to where Paul came by his hypothetical argument, "Then why does God still blame us?" especially as relates to the potter and clay vessel imagery. "This theme," says Shulam, "which clearly expresses the right of the Creator over what He creates, was frequently discussed in various midrashic treatments of this theme."

What is the meaning of *We are the Clay, and Thou our potter?* Israel said: 'Lord of the Universe! Thou has caused it to be written for us: *Behold, as the clay in the potter's hand, so are ye in My hand, O house of Israel* (Jer. 18:6); for this reason, do not depart from us through we sin and provoke Thee, for we are but the clay and Thou art our potter.' See now, If the potter makes a jar and leaves therein a pebble, the when it comes out of the furnace it will leak from the hole left by the pebble and lose any liquid poured into it. Now what caused the jar to leak and thus to lose any liquid placed therein? The potter who left the pebble therein. This was how Israel pleaded before God: Lord of the Universe! Thou has created in us an Evil Inclination from our youth, for it says, *For the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth* (Gen. 8:21), and it is that which has caused us now to sin, for Thou has not removed from us the instigator to sin. (*Exodus Rabbah* .46.4; [a midrashic commentary on Exodus - mwl ].)

The thinking present in this rabbi's mind was that God must bear the responsibility for man's defective nature in that he instilled within him "the evil inclination," therefore man had little or no choice in the matter of his unacceptable behavior.

But responsibility for sin is not the only issue of debate in verses 19-

21. Some see Paul here teaching a doctrine of individual election and predestination; i.e., God has determined the events in the lives of those elected for a special dispensation of grace. In fact, here is supposedly found a doctrine of “double predestination,” i.e., God has created some men to be vessels of mercy, who will be set on the stage of human history to follow the script God has instilled within them in carrying out his predetermined plans. Others he has created to be vessels of wrath, who have been created for dishonor, and who are predestined to do evil while in this world, and will be condemned to eternal hell at the end of this earthly drama.

The reasoning supporting this interpretation of these verses is drawn from Paul’s references to certain individuals who were chosen by God to act out a role in his promise to Abraham (Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau). There were also certain individuals who were created by God to behave in such a way as to facilitate God’s deliverance of Israel from the Egyptians. God hardened Pharaoh’s heart so that he could manifest himself as Israel’s savior and show them his power through the 10 plagues. Then, in Paul’s time, the argument goes, God has predestined Israel to turn away from him in order that he might displace them as his chosen people and replace them with the Gentiles, who he desires to give a “most favored nation” status.

It is the case that some persons were selected over others in God’s fulfillment of the seed promise, and some will receive mercy and others will receive wrath as a consequence of their choices and consequent behaviors, but nowhere in this text or anywhere else in Scripture, is it taught that God created anyone to be a vessel of wrath, predestined to behave in such a way as to bring dishonor to themselves, and bring upon themselves eternal damnation. God has chosen certain individuals he knows will best serve his purposes in his dealings with the race of man; e.g., Abraham, Moses, David, the various prophets, and Saul of Tarsus. But to choose certain individuals for specific tasks does not mean that he created them to do evil and thus make themselves vessels of wrath, fit for nothing but destruction and condemnation to Hell.

The most critical issue of this discussion has to do with the question of “responsibility.” Who was responsible for the choice of Abraham to have a son of a woman other than his wife? Who was responsible for Esau’s decision to value a bowl of soup over his birthright as the firstborn? Who was responsible for Pharaoh’s decision to say “no” to God when commanded by God to let the Israelites go?

When anyone hardens his heart and defies the will of God, who is responsible for that decision? Paul has said earlier in Romans 2 and 3 that God will judge every hardened heart. But if it is God who determines whose heart will be hardened and whose will not, how can he hold anyone responsible for something over which they had no control? Or, as Paul's hypothetical inquirer puts it, "Then why does God still blame us, since our behavior is determined by him? For who resists his will?" (9:19).

If it is God who determines (or predetermines) to either soften my heart in repentance or harden it in defiance, how can he, by any standard of justice, judge *me* for a situation *he* controls? And if God judges me for what he predetermined that I would do, then how can he hold me accountable for what I've done; or better, what he's done through me? This whole concept is nothing less than an attempt to evade personal moral responsibility for one's actions, and shift that responsibility to God.

### **They Are Without Excuse**

But Paul said earlier (Rom 1:18-3:20), that those who had become vessels of dishonor were without excuse for their condition.

*The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, <sup>19</sup>since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. <sup>20</sup>For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities--his eternal power and divine nature--have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse. <sup>21</sup>For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. <sup>22</sup>Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools <sup>23</sup>and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles, (Rom 1:18-23).*

What is he saying here, if he is not saying that the Gentiles are without excuse for their alienation from God? They had obviously made themselves vessels of dishonor and vessels of wrath. This is clearly what Paul is saying. Then, concerning the Jews, he says:

*You, (the Jews-mwl) therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge the other, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things. <sup>2</sup>Now we know that God's judgment against those who do such things is based on truth. <sup>3</sup>So when you, a mere man, pass judgment on them and yet do the same things, do you think you will escape God's judgment? <sup>4</sup>Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness leads you toward repentance? <sup>5</sup>But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed. <sup>6</sup>God "will give to each person according to what he has done." <sup>7</sup>To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life. <sup>8</sup>But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger. <sup>9</sup>There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile; <sup>10</sup>but glory, honor and peace for everyone who does good: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. <sup>11</sup>For God does not show favoritism, (Rom 2:1-11).*

How is the average person reading these words supposed to understand them, if he can't understand them as saying what they are clearly saying? How did the people of this text become vessels of dishonor? Did God create them to be vessels of dishonor? If so, how could he "manifest his wrath" upon them for their behavior, if he had created them to behave the way they had behaved? Is this what some would have us believe that Paul was saying in Romans 9:18-21?

The fact is, God created all vessels to be vessels of honor, both Jews and Gentiles (cf. Gen 1-3). Those who were now vessels of dishonor and wrath, were without excuse for their condition, according to Romans 1:18-3:20. This is the whole point of Paul's argument there. How were they without excuse if they were what they were because they were predestined to be that way? Seem that they had the most defensible excuse one could imagine, if they were the way they were because God created them to be that way. They had no choice in the matter, they were predestined to be vessels of dishonor; that is, if that is what Romans 9:18-21 is saying. You can't have it both ways; either these people are who and what they are because God made them to be that way, or they are the way they are of their own

choice. They chose to be what Paul accuses them of being in Romans 1:18-3:20, or God made that choice for them. Then he visits his wrath on them for being that way. There is clearly something wrong with this picture.

### **The Sources of Paul's Potter-Clay Imagery**

Paul pulls the imagery he uses here from the Old Testament poetic metaphors of the potter and his clay vessels (cf., Isaiah 29:16; 45:9; 64:8; and Jeremiah 18-19). But this "potter and vessel" imagery will not allow for the interpretation placed on it by those who see in it an underlying doctrine of special election and predestination. In every text, we see the potter holding the vessel accountable for its state of dishonor and tells the vessel that it is to be destroyed as a vessel of wrath because of its own individual determination to defy the will of God and go a whoring after other gods. Isaiah says to Jerusalem,

*The Lord says: "These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is made up only of rules taught by men."<sup>14</sup> Therefore once more I will astound these people with wonder upon wonder; the wisdom of the wise will perish, the intelligence of the intelligent will vanish."<sup>15</sup> Woe to those who go to great depths to hide their plans from the LORD, who do their work in darkness and think, "Who sees us? Who will know?"<sup>16</sup> You turn things upside down, as if the potter were thought to be like the clay! Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, "He did not make me"? Can the pot say of the potter, "He knows nothing"? (Isaiah 29:13-16)*

Whose behavior is under consideration here? Why is God addressing these people with rebuke for what they are doing? Why is he telling them that what is coming upon them is due to their unfaithfulness, if they are not accountable for their behavior? Isaiah says that they don't think that God sees what they are doing? Why does that matter if he is the one who determines what they do anyway? Why would they need to hide what they are doing if God predetermined what they would do? Isaiah says, "Shall what is formed say to him who formed it." Is this not what Paul is portraying in Romans 9:20? In Isaiah 45:9-11, we see a this same imagery,

*"Woe to him who quarrels with his Maker, to him who is but a potsherd among the potsherds on the ground. Does the clay say to the*

*potter, 'What are you making?' Does your work say, 'He has no hands'? <sup>10</sup> Woe to him who says to his father, 'What have you begotten?' or to his mother, 'What have you brought to birth?' <sup>11</sup> "This is what the LORD says- the Holy One of Israel, and its Maker: Concerning things to come, do you question me about my children, or give me orders about the work of my hands? (Isaiah 45:9-11).*

God is telling the inhabitants of Jerusalem that he will bring them back from their captivity, and they are not to forget what it was that cost them their freedom and their homeland. He will make this happen, they only need to take hope in his promise of deliverance. Then in chapter 64, Isaiah cries out as the penitent voice of Israel,

*Since ancient times no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who acts on behalf of those who wait for him. <sup>5</sup> You come to the help of those who gladly do right, who remember your ways. But when we continued to sin against them, you were angry. How then can we be saved? <sup>6</sup> All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away. <sup>7</sup> No one calls on your name or strives to lay hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us and made us waste away because of our sins. <sup>8</sup> Yet, O LORD, you are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand. <sup>9</sup> Do not be angry beyond measure, O LORD; do not remember our sins forever. Oh, look upon us, we pray, for we are all your people, (Isaiah 64:4-9).*

Isaiah is speaking on behalf of his fellow Jews? What is he saying? “We know what we did, and we repent of it; please come and deliver us, don’t forget us, don’t hide your face from us, for we are the clay and you are the potter, we are the work of your hands.” What is this all about? These people and their fathers were in captivity because they had refused to do the will of God, to serve him faithfully, and Isaiah has them calling out to God reminding him that they are the work of his hands, they are all his children; he can take them as vessels of dishonor and make them into vessels of honor, he can return to them and turn them from vessels of wrath into vessels of his glory. What they are all asking for is to become vessels of mercy to God. They see themselves, through the eyes of the prophet, as all vessels of mercy.

Then there is Jeremiah, another of the prophets who foretold of the coming wrath of God upon Judah. Throughout chapters 18 and 19, we see the imagery Paul has used in Romans 9:19-24. In Jeremiah 18:1ff, the prophet is told to go to the potter's house and God will give him a message.

*This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: <sup>2</sup>"Go down to the potter's house, and there I will give you my message." <sup>3</sup>So I went down to the potter's house, and I saw him working at the wheel. <sup>4</sup>But the pot he was shaping from the clay was marred in his hands; so the potter formed it into another pot, shaping it as seemed best to him. <sup>5</sup>Then the word of the LORD came to me: <sup>6</sup>"O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter does?" declares the LORD. "Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. (Jeremiah 18:1-6)*

If this is the imagery in the mind of Paul, what message does he intend to communicate? In this passage, the potter is creating a vessel of clay, it appears to be developing in a defective way but the potter simply recreates it into a new vessel, a new creation. What a remarkable piece of imagery, especially for Paul and his belief in the new creation which occurs to the broken clay vessels of the human race as a result of the redemptive work of the God, the Master Potter.

In the following chapter, Jeremiah's imagery returns to that of the dramatic parable of God's punishment of Judah for their sordid and grievous sins. Isaiah is instructed to buy a clay vessel from a potter, take the elders of Judah to the Valley of Ben Hinnom (*Gehenna*, the valley of Topheth outside Jerusalem) where Judah had made sacrifices to Baal, and there he was to break the clay jar before them saying,

*'This is what the LORD Almighty says: I will smash this nation and this city just as this potter's jar is smashed and cannot be repaired. They will bury the dead in Topheth until there is no more room. <sup>12</sup> This is what I will do to this place and to those who live here, declares the LORD. I will make this city like Topheth. (Jeremiah 19:11-12)*

Why was this vessel to be destroyed? Was it because God created it to be destroyed? The clay vessel here was the nation of Judah and the breaking of the vessel was a visual demonstration of what God was to bring

upon Judah for its idolatry. **“Their”** idolatry, not the idolatry of God. If God predestined some of them to be vessels of wrath, then what is this message of Jeremiah all about? Why this visual from God? What was God saying to the these elders of Judah with this message, if it is the case that they only did what they did because God had created them to do so? They were created to be vessels of wrath and that was that, they had no choice in the matter? No, I don’t think so!

### ***The Point of Paul’s Potter-Vessel Illustration***

*Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, ‘Why did you make me like this?’ Does not the potter have authority over the clay, to make out of the same lump of clay a vessel for honor and another for dishonor?” (Rom 9:20b-21)*

It would seem far more consistent with this Old Testament imagery and Paul’s earlier argument for the accountability of both Gentile and Jew for their sins, that Paul is saying, “Cannot a potter make a vessel that can be adequate to its purpose and a vessel that proves not to be adequate to its purpose?” If the vessel has a will to hold the water or wine poured into it, then the vessel fulfills its purpose. If, however, the vessel determines not to hold the water or wine poured into it, it does not fulfill its purpose?

If the creator has made his “creations” (or “vessels”) capable of determining whether they will or will not fulfill the purpose for which they were created, then the decision as to whether they will or will not fulfill their purposes lies with them. Just as the wooden puppet Pinocchio was created to be a thing on a string that moved to the will of the puppeteer. Pinocchio became something very different when he was given life, and with it, the freedom of will to choose his course of action or behaviors.

The role of God’s mercy is critical to an understanding of what Paul is saying here. The “vessels of wrath” to whom he refers are not human beings with a fixed fate, born to be damned. Rather, God’s longsuffering with the human race is for the primary purpose of allowing all vessels of wrath to become, through repentance, vessels of mercy. Here also Joseph Shulam’s references to the Jewish background of Paul’s terms and concepts are helpful.

“Vessels of wrath,” says Shulam, “are therefore vessels which are

deserving of punishment. If they do not repent, all attempts to escape judgment prove futile, but God will have mercy on them if they repent.” Here he pulls from an insightful quote from a rabbinic homily from the *Pesikta* collection of the *midrashim*,

Rabbi Alexandri said: If an ordinary person makes use of a broke vessel, it is a reflection upon him. But the Holy One is unconcerned about the use of broken vessels – indeed His entire use is broken vessels: *The Lord is nigh to them that are of a broken heart* (Ps.34.18); *Who healeth the broken heart* (Ps.147.3); *a broken and contrite heart, O God, Thou wilt not despise* (Ps.51.17). Hence, admonishing Israel, Hosea says to them: *Return, O Israel* (Hos.14.1) . . . . When the Holy One is asked, “The sinner – what is to be his punishment?” the Holy One replies: In penitence let him mend his ways, and his sins shall be forgiven him (*Pesikta de-Rab Kahana* 24.5, 7).

### **Conclusion**

God’s refusal to show mercy to the penitent is inconceivable, and man without the ability to repent is just as inconceivable; just as inconceivable as trying to imagine meaningful human existence without freedom of choice.

Life without freedom of choice can never be life that knows the pleasure of making the right choice, especially the choice to do the will of God and thus fulfill its purpose as a being created in the image of God. Human life without freedom of choice can never be life with responsibility, can never be held accountable for its actions, can never commit itself to anything or anyone emotionally or intellectually, can never repent of wrong choices, because it cannot make wrong choices, it has no choices. Life without the freedom of choice can never decide to believe in God, can never, of its own free will, confess belief in Jesus, can never, of itself, accept Jesus and its Lord and Savior.

But life that is created in the image of God can do all these things, and when it does, it fulfills the purpose for which it was created. It becomes a vessel of honor; and those vessels that will not do these things, make themselves vessels of dishonor. To be sure, God created them both, but he created them to be like him – beings of intelligence, of emotional capacity,

of moral character, and of volitional or decision making capacity or responsibility. We are not Pinocchio's, created by Geppetto, the puppet maker; rather, we are human beings, created by God, made in his image, after his likeness.

He can create out of the same lump of clay, a vessel that reflects its design as a being created in the image of God and one that does not reflect his image; and the reason for the difference is that God created all vessels with the capacity and the responsibility to make themselves either vessels of honor or vessels of dishonor.

Responsibility for those vessels who become dishonorable rather than honorable cannot be laid at the Creator's feet. That responsibility rests in the vessel itself, if God created it with the ability to make of itself what it "wills" or "so chooses." And that is precisely what the Scriptures say he did do, "in the beginning," when he created man in his own image, after his likeness (Gen 1:26; 2:4-9, 18-25; 3:1-24).

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