

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of systematic theology today by continuing to examine biblical anthropology. Dr. Spencer, last time we discussed the doctrine of total depravity, which says that every aspect of our being is affected by sin. And, as a result, man is not able to repent and believe in Christ until and unless God regenerates him, that is, causes him to be born again. At the end of the session, I asked the question that many people have raised; namely, "If man is utterly incapable of obeying God's command to repent and believe, how then can it be fair for God to condemn an unbeliever for not doing so?" How would you answer that question?

Dr. Spencer: Well, let me begin by giving God's answer to the question, and then we can discuss it further. Paul deals with this question in Chapter 9 of the book of Romans. He begins by citing Old Testament passages that present the doctrine of election; in other words, that God sovereignly and unconditionally chooses whom to save.

Marc Roby: Now, by calling this election unconditional, you mean that it is not based on anything man does.

Dr. Spencer: That's right. This doctrine is represented by the letter 'U' in the acrostic TULIP. But, getting back to our passage, in Romans 9:18 Paul draws a conclusion from these Old Testament verses and writes, "Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden."¹

And then, in Verse 19, he anticipates essentially the same question you asked in response to this conclusion, he says, "One of you will say to me: 'Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?'" And finally, in Verse 20 we read his answer, which is really God's answer since Paul wrote as he was carried along by the Holy Spirit. And we read, "who are you, O man, to talk back to God? 'Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, 'Why did you make me like this?'"

Marc Roby: I must say that God's answer would seem to argue in favor of *not* discussing this further. He asserts his sovereignty and basically says we are not in a position to ask the question.

Dr. Spencer: I agree. In fact, John Murray describes this answer as being an "appeal to the reverential silence which the majesty of God demands of us."² We don't want to probe beyond our proper limits. There is mystery in the doctrine of election that goes beyond what we are able to understand, and we need to be careful or we can get into territory that man should avoid all together, or risk being impudent.

Marc Roby: Yes, we certainly want to avoid that. We should have proper respect and reverence for God at all times and keep the Creator/creature distinction in mind.

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² John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997, Vol. II, pg. 31

Dr. Spencer: Absolutely. And yet, there is more that we can properly and biblically say about this question. And it is a question that is deeply troubling to many, which is why the apostle Paul anticipates it, and then he himself goes on to say a little more. But we must pay careful attention to the fact that God is putting us in our place first. He is reminding us that we have no business questioning his goodness.

Marc Roby: And that reminds me of Job.

Dr. Spencer: Oh, it certainly does. In his excellent commentary on the book of Romans, P.G. Mathew noted that “Job had many questions for God. But when God questioned him. Job closed his mouth.”³ And in Job 42:3-6 we read that Job replied to God, “You asked, ‘Who is this that obscures my counsel without knowledge?’ Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know. You said, ‘Listen now, and I will speak; I will question you, and you shall answer me.’ My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.”

Marc Roby: That is the only response possible if we truly see God and ourselves.

Dr. Spencer: And we must not miss the point of Paul’s rhetorical question in Romans 9:20, “who are you, O man, to talk back to God?” We have no right to question God about how he governs his creation. If he chooses to give us an explanation, that is entirely by grace. He doesn’t owe us an answer. But God did graciously give us some more information about his purposes in election. Just as God dealt with Job’s questions by questioning him, so Paul responds to this question about God’s fairness by asking questions in return. We just dealt with the first of them, “who are you, O man?”, which points out that we have no right to talk back to God. And the second was also in Verse 20, “Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, ‘Why did you make me like this?’”

Marc Roby: And the answer is, again, “No! The creature shall *not* say to the Creator, “Why did you make me like this?” In context, that question clearly has an accusatory tone. It is saying, in essence, that God should have made me some other way.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, that’s right. Paul is pointing out how inappropriate it is for us to question God and he means to humble and silence us. And he goes on, in Verse 21, to ask, “Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use?”

Marc Roby: The same metaphor about a potter and the clay is used in the Old Testament as well. In Isaiah 45:9 we read, “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?’”

Dr. Spencer: That is exactly the same idea. These three questions were meant to put us in our place. Let me quote from P.G. Mathew’s commentary again. He wrote, “Mind your place! You are down here; God is up there. God is all-transcendent. God is our Creator; we are his creatures,

³ P.G. Mathew, *Romans: The Gospel Life* (Volume 2), Grace and Glory Ministries, pg. 62

and we must never forget the Creator/creature distinction. We exist and consist in him. So think correctly. Pride goes before a fall. God is not our equal. No man has a right to bring God to trial. But God has every right to bring us to trial and cast us into hell.”⁴

Marc Roby: Nothing could be more obvious than the fact that God is not our equal. So, it is only reasonable that we keep that fact in mind at all times.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, that fact causes us to face reality. We have no business questioning the fairness of God. But, in a very real sense, anyone who goes to hell *chooses* to go to hell.

Marc Roby: Now how can you say that?

Dr. Spencer: Well, we noted in Session 104 that eternal death, or hell, includes eternal separation from the blessings, or presence, of God. But let me quote from P.G. Mathew again. He says, “Listen to the arguments of the great theologian Jonathan Edwards: ‘I. That if God should for ever cast you off, it would be agreeable to your treatment of *him*. ... II. If you should forever be cast off by God, it would be agreeable to your treatment of *Jesus Christ*. ... III. If God should for ever cast you off and destroy you, it would be agreeable to your treatment of *others*. ... IV. If God should eternally cast you off, it would be agreeable to your own behavior towards *yourself*.”⁵ And Mathew adds a fifth point, “If God should eternally cast you off, it would be agreeable to your treatment of the Holy Spirit.”

Marc Roby: That is very good. If people reject the Father, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, they should not be surprised when God rejects them.

Dr. Spencer: Well, in fact, that is what their actions show they really want. And we never treat others the way we should either, which shows our contempt for God since they are also made in his image. And when he speaks about our treatment of ourselves, he is reminding us that we don’t have the right to abuse our own bodies by using drugs, or over eating, or sexual immorality or any of a number of ways in which people do so. We don’t belong to ourselves. We belong to God; he made us.

Marc Roby: That’s an excellent point.

Dr. Spencer: And the bottom line is that we are all sinful, rebellious creatures. God does not treat anyone unjustly; he treats every individual with either perfect justice or mercy.

Marc Roby: And we should not want to be treated with justice if we have any inkling at all of the many ways in which we have violated God’s just laws and offended his holy character.

Dr. Spencer: No, any rational person will desire mercy. But now, with all of that in mind, let’s take a look at the final question Paul asks in Romans 9. In Verses 22-24 he wrote, “What if God, 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

⁴ Ibid, pg. 65

⁵ Ibid, pp 66-67

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?”

Marc Roby: That is a very difficult passage. Not difficult to understand, but difficult for people to accept.

Dr. Spencer: I think you're right about that. Paul tells us that God has prepared some people for destruction for the purpose of manifesting his power and wrath and also to make the riches of his glory manifest to the objects of his mercy, in other words, to those whom he chose to save.

We have said a number of times that the Bible clearly teaches that God's purpose in creation is the manifestation of his own glory. And that includes showing his holiness and justice as well as his mercy and love. People may not like that, but it is the truth.

Marc Roby: But, of course, an unbeliever is not going to accept that answer.

Dr. Spencer: No, I'm quite sure they won't. I know I didn't. This question of God's fairness was very disturbing to me before God graciously granted me a new heart. And, as we discussed last time, that is what new birth is. It is God granting an individual a new heart. Or you could say a new spirit. 1 Corinthians 2:14 tells us that “The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.”

But whatever terminology you use, the point is that God changes our fundamental nature, which affects every aspect of our being. He regenerates us. He gives us a new mind, a new will, a new set of affections. We are not made perfect, but we are changed in the very core of our being. And that change is just as pervasive as the depravity it begins to destroy.

Marc Roby: Why do you say that it “begins” to destroy our depravity?

Dr. Spencer: Well, in his infinite wisdom, God has chosen to conform his people to the image of Christ through a process. The process begins with new birth, which issues forth in repentance and faith, which then result in justification.

But repentance and faith are not the only fruit that come from new birth. It also manifests itself in every aspect of our behavior. As Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 5:17, “if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!” And yet, the change is not complete, we are not yet perfect.

Marc Roby: Yes, that fact is abundantly obvious when we look at ourselves and others.

Dr. Spencer: It certainly is obvious, yes. If we have been born again and have trusted in Jesus Christ alone for our salvation, then we are justified in God's sight, and yet we are still sinners as well. Theologians have a Latin phrase they use for this condition.

Marc Roby: Well of course they do, they're almost as bad as medical doctors in liking Latin.

Dr. Spencer: I suppose that's true. In any event, Martin Luther stated that believers are *simul justus et peccator*, which means simultaneously just and sinner.⁶ We are justified in God's sight by our union with Christ as we discussed last session. And yet, we are still sinners. When God regenerates a person, he changes every aspect of the person's being. The effects of regeneration are just as pervasive as the sinful nature. But, just as our sinful nature did not make us as bad as we could possibly be, so regeneration does not make us as good as we can possibly be, it does not perfect us. It does not remove sin completely. It simply begins the process. We are simultaneously just and sinner.

Marc Roby: Which expresses the idea that a Christian is a mixture. We have a desire and an ability to obey God, but we still have sin residing in us as well. And there is a war going on between our old and new natures.

Dr. Spencer: And that is exactly what the Bible teaches us. Let's take a brief look at one passage that deals with this fact. In Colossians 3:5-10 Paul commands us, "Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator."

Marc Roby: That passage has an interesting mix of statements in the past tense, like "you have taken off your old self", and commands in the present tense, like "Put to death ... whatever belongs to your earthly nature".

Dr. Spencer: And that is why it is a great illustration of the inner conflict that exists in every true believer. If we have been born again, there is a very real and pervasive change that has occurred. John Murray calls this change, which is produced in our nature by regeneration, definitive sanctification.⁷

Marc Roby: Which is what the Bible is referring to when it speaks in the past tense about believers having been sanctified. For example, in 1 Corinthians 6:11 Paul told the believers in Corinth, "you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God."

Dr. Spencer: Exactly, it is also what is being referred to in the passage we are looking at in Colossians when it says that we "used to walk in these ways" and that we "have taken off [our] old self". But, in addition to this definitive sanctification, there is also progressive sanctification, which is indicated, for example, by the command to "Put to death ... whatever belongs to your earthly nature". We still have work to do.

⁶ R.C. Sproul, *Faith Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine of Justification*, Baker Books, 1995, pg. 102

⁷ John Murray, *Collected Works*, Vol. II, Banner of Truth Trust, 1977, Chap. 21

When we are born again there is a dramatic and pervasive change in our nature, but it isn't complete. God has ordained that we struggle against sin, walking in faith, until he calls us home. At that time he will perfect our spirits as we are told in Hebrews 12:23.

Marc Roby: Now that is something to look forward to!

Dr. Spencer: It certainly is. But let's get back to the point you made that an unbeliever is not going to accept the answer given in Romans 9. I have a couple of things to say about that. First, whether or not an unbeliever will accept the truth has no bearing on whether it *is* the truth. Remember, an unbeliever also won't accept the most basic truth that God exists and has revealed himself in his Word.

Marc Roby: What is the second thing you wanted to say about it?

Dr. Spencer: That there is no reason to really get into this question with an unbeliever unless he or she brings it up. While it is true that an unbeliever is totally depraved, dead in trespasses and sins, and cannot repent and believe unless God first regenerates him. It is equally true, as Paul wrote in Romans 10:9, "That if you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." This is what we should be saying to unbelievers. Share the gospel. Answer their questions to the best of your ability. Pray for their salvation. But don't worry about how to reconcile God's sovereign election with their personal liberty. That question doesn't affect what they must do to be saved. Never once in the New Testament do we see someone asking "What must I do to be saved?" and then being told to be born again. They are told to repent and believe.

Marc Roby: I think that is good advice for evangelism. And I personally find God's sovereign election to be a very comforting doctrine. I must do my job to evangelize, but no one is going to perish because I didn't do my job well enough. If God has chosen someone for salvation, then they are going to be saved.

Dr. Spencer: I agree, that is a great encouragement. It is our business to live for God's glory and to share his glorious gospel. It is God's business to save sinners.

Marc Roby: And with that I think we are out of time for today, so let me remind our listeners that they can email their questions and comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org, we'll answer as best we can.