

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

# The Potter and the Clay

Romans 9:19-24

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This is an incredible passage of Scripture that we are looking at in Romans chapter 9, and so I need to begin in a word of prayer.

*Father, as we look now into Your Word, I pray that You would instruct us and teach us regarding who You are and how You deal with humanity. Lord, we see that You are sovereign and we gladly acknowledge that, that You are supreme in Your authority over all the earth and You have appointed the eternal destiny of every man. And so, Father, enlarge our understanding today, and more than that, enlarge our heart for You and deepen our humility before You. Use this even to mature us and to develop us further into men of God. We pray this in Christ's name. Amen.*

Alright, we are in Romans chapter 9, and today I want us to look at verses 19 and I think through verse 24. We will see how far we can progress, but these are weighty, heavy verses that should produce some sobriety in our hearts.

## ROMANS 9:19 — THE RESISTANCE

So, beginning in verse 19, Paul writes, "You will say to me then, 'Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?' On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, 'Why did you make me like this,'

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will it? Or does not the potter have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for common use? What if God, although willing to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction? And He did so to make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory, even us whom He also called, not from among Jews only, but also from among Gentiles.”

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As we wade yet deeper out into this vast ocean of Romans 9 that teaches the sovereignty of God, we have come to yet greater depths in our understanding of who God is. And in this passage, God is represented as the potter and all of humanity is represented as a common lump of clay, and out of this common lump of clay God sovereignly chooses to make some to be vessels of honor and others for vessels of dishonor. This analogy rightly represents God as the potter, the maker, that He can do with the clay whatever He wants to do with it. And He is not accountable to the clay for how He chooses to fashion and make some to be certain vessels and others to be other vessels.

It is very appropriate that all of mankind is pictured as clay, one lump of clay, because clay is dirty, clay is filthy, clay is marred, it is filled with many flaws. And that is what humanity is in its total depravity. Because of the fall of Adam, the entire human race has been plunged into sin, and so the analogy of clay is very appropriate. And then for God to make two different kinds of vessels, one is honorable, the other is dishonorable. And as we shall see, the honorable would be like today a fine piece of china, a beautiful vase, and the dishonorable, as we will see, will be like a toilet, will be like a privy, will be like a trash can to hold refuse and to take out of the house and to dump behind the house.

The contrast is very stark and is very vivid. Yet, this is what the Bible teaches and this is what the text teaches. So, I want us to walk through this passage, and the intent of this passage is to put God in His rightful place, to acknowledge God in His rightful place as sovereign over the eternal destinies of the creation that He himself has made.

So, as we walk through these verses beginning in verse 19, I want you to see first the resistance in verse 19 because Paul anticipates the pushback from what he has just said in verse 18 that He has mercy on whom He desires and He hardens whom He desires. And as soon as Paul says that, Paul anticipates the objections that are going to be raised, that if God is this sovereign, how can He hold anyone responsible for the choices that they make if ultimately God is the one who is making the choices. And so, Paul anticipates this imaginary objectioner. And so, in verse 19, he actually records what they would be saying and it is a question that no doubt would be in our minds as well. But it's not just the question, it is the way the question is asked that Paul will react to in verse 20 very strongly. But we are in verse 19. "You will say to me then." And the "you" represents this imaginary objectioner, "You will say to me then." He now quotes what he believes

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to be on their mind. "Why does He still find fault? Question mark. For who resists His will?" Question mark.

And so, Paul is getting it out in the open. Paul puts it out on the table. Paul does not just pass on, speed quickly onto the next subject. No, Paul pulls over and parks and actually raises this question that I know that many of you are thinking. And so, the question restated is if God shows mercy to some and He hardens whomever He wills regardless of their merit or of their effort or their choice, then how can God possibly assign blame to people for their choices? I mean, that is the question that's on the table and any thinking person is going to think this question. The rebellion is not to think the question; what we will see is there will be arrogance behind the question that Paul will sharply respond to in the next verse.

## ROMANS 9:20—THE REBUKE

And so, I want to proceed now to the next verse. After the resistance, now comes the rebuke. And in verse 20, Paul rebukes this hypothetical imaginary questioner who would call God into account to give an answer for how and why God does what He does. And so, in verse 20, "On the contrary, who are you, O man?" And that is a stinging rebuke that Paul fires back at the person who is thinking this and asking it in a prideful, arrogant way, in which he is demanding of God this answer and calling God into account and calling God into the courtroom of a person's thinking and putting God on the witness stand and demanding of God the answer for this.

And Paul begins this by saying, "Who in the world do you think you are O puny little man, you little fleck of dust, you presumptuous, prideful man to require of God an answer for why God has done what God has done?" And he goes on to say, "Who are you, O man, who answers back to God?"

So, this is more than just honestly with humility asking God. There is a stubbornness in this imaginary questioner, just like there was stubbornness once in my heart when I rejected and resisted the truth of the sovereign election of God. I didn't realize what pride there was in my heart, what arrogance there was in my heart. I mean, I thought I had done God a big favor just to believe in His Son and I thought I had done God a favor to leave the bank and to go to seminary and to give my life to ministry as if God had received now some lottery pick for His team. There was so much pride, stinking pride in my heart, and it was this truth that exposed it.

And there are so many times as I teach this truth, even recently, where after I teach, there will be a dialogue with someone who will come up and ask me questions. There is nothing wrong in asking the questions, but I can tell by the tone of the voice that they

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don't like this truth and they want me to give an account for God. And as I said to them, "You go read Romans 9 three or four times. You come back and you tell me what you think this chapter says, because you need to humble yourself beneath the mighty hand of God and your push back is a reflection of the arrogance that is inside your heart and soul."

That is the arrogance that we see here, and Paul calls it out, "Who are you, O man, who answers back to God?" This is more than just asking God. And the objection is irreverent, it is foolish, it is blasphemous. And what Paul will say in essence is, "Young man, you just crossed the line with God. You have gone way too far in your challenging God, 'Is this just? Is this fair? Is this right? And how in the world can you still hold us accountable when You are the one who is making all the choices?'" And it comes from a heart that is above God and looking down upon God for God to give an account.

And so, what is being represented here is, when he says, 'who answers back to God,' that really means who snaps back at God, who pushes back, who calls God into account, who demands answers from God, who questions God and even passes judgment on God. And so, verse 20 goes on to say, "The thing molded will not say to the molder, 'Why did you make me like this,' will it?" And so, here is this analogy of the potter and the clay, and what Paul is saying is the clay has no right to call the potter into account for what the potter does with the clay. The question goes way too far. The question is out of bounds. God is unaccountable to any of His fallen creatures for the choices that He makes. No man may call God into account and demand an explanation or even an apology for what God has done. And as Paul uses this analogy of the potter and the clay, the molder and the thing molded, it is drawn from the Old Testament. And in Isaiah 29:16, we see this, in Isaiah 45:9 through 11 we see this, in Isaiah 64 verse 8 we see this, and in Jeremiah 18:1 through 6 we see this. So, this is not a new teaching that has come into play.

In fact, why don't we just turn back and look at a couple of these? Isaiah 45 verses 9 and following, we read, "Woe to the one who quarrels with His Maker—an earthenware vessel among the vessels of earth! Will the clay say to the potter, 'What are you doing?' Or the thing you are making say, 'He has no hands'? The clay may not call into account the potter and say, "What are you doing? What have you done with my life? And what are you doing with everyone else? I need answers. I need an explanation." No, it goes way too far. And as long as we are in Isaiah, Isaiah 64 verse 8, Isaiah 64 verse 8, "But now, O Lord, You are our Father, we are the clay, and You are our potter; and all of us are the work of Your hand." And only because the next book is Jeremiah, just turn over to Jeremiah 18:1 through 6, as long as we are this close to Jeremiah.

And in Jeremiah 18, beginning in verse 1, "The word which came to Jeremiah from the Lord saying, 'Arise and go down to the potter's house, and there I will announce My

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words to you.” Verse 3, “Then I went down to the potter’s house, and there he was, making something on the wheel. But the vessel that he was making of clay was spoiled in the hand of the potter; so, he remade it into another vessel, as it pleased the potter to make. Then the word of the Lord came to me saying, ‘Can I not, O house of Israel, deal with you as this potter does?’ declares the Lord. ‘Behold, like the clay in the potter’s hand, so are you in My hand, O house of Israel.’”

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So, what Paul is saying here in Romans 9 is he’s just drawing upon this very Old Testament imagery that represents the sovereign will of God over the destinies of mankind and represents the supreme authority of almighty God over all humanity to make of them as He would so choose. So, such an accusation against God is intolerable, to demand of God an account for His sovereign election. God will not be subpoenaed and brought into the courtroom of any of our puny little minds with our inferior thinking, and God will not be put on the witness stand and be cross-examined by any man so that we can render our verdict on God whether He is found acquitted or guilty by us of injustice. God is not the one on trial; we are the one on trial. And God owes us no further explanation than what He chooses to give to us. And in this Romans 9, Paul does not attempt to resolve the tension between divine sovereignty and human responsibility. He offers no explanation to unravel this mystery. We must be content simply to accept what God has given to us that He is the potter, and we are the clay.

## ROMANS 9:21 – THE RIGHT

Now, this leads to verse 21, the right. And in verse 21, we see that God has the right to do with His creation as He pleases. And so, in verse 21, we read, “Or does not the potter have a right?” Now, let me just stop right there. This word “right” is a Greek word *exousia* that means “supreme authority over others.” It means the power of choice. It means liberty to do as one pleases. That’s what this word “right” means. In fact, it is translated in Matthew 28:18, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and earth.” And so, it is synonymous with supreme authority or the familiar word, “sovereignty.” That is what this word “right” means. “Or does not the potter,” that is God, “have a right over the clay,” that is all mankind, “to make from the same lump,” this one batch of clay, “one vessel for honorable use and another vessel for common use?”

And it is the same thought that we saw earlier in verse 11 that from the same womb God can make one twin to be the object of His love and God can make the other twin to be the object of His hatred, all from the same womb. And here the idea is the same; from the same lump of clay, God can sort it out and separate it with different purposes for the different objects that He makes. And so, God is like a potter who possesses and exercises uncontested authority over one lump of clay, which is humanity. And as I said in the



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introduction, mankind is like clay, dirty, flawed, filthy, marred, and each individual is like a vessel. Some are made for very fashionable use, and others are made for very dishonorable use. So, let us think about this.

Look at verse 21 again, "To make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use." Let us just talk about this. A vessel here, it is a broad term, but it can be used of an object that is made by a potter, and when it is an honorable vessel, that would be like a piece of pottery. It would be like a beautiful piece of pottery. It would be like a vase, a very intricate beautifully painted vase. And this honorable vessel would be used to put out in the house to enhance the beauty of the house. It would be put on the table and food would be put into this honorable vase, like a bowl, and you would serve food to your family with it. And it would also represent, let's say a cup, that you would pour something to drink in and you would drink from it, and it would be also like a dish that you would put food on and you would eat from it, and it would be your very best pottery.

If you were to come over to my house and for dinner and if it was a special occasion and if I wanted to honor you, we would pull out our finest china that has come from my wife's grandmother and mother and has been passed down. And we only bring it out for very special occasions, like someone's birthday, and that is the imagery here.

This word "honorable" is a Greek word that means "valuable," "highly esteemed," because of the inherent beauty of it. And so, this represents those whom God has chosen to save. This represents those whom God has chosen to set His distinguishing love and affection upon them from before the foundation of the world. Those whom He chose in Christ, He has chosen to put on display the attribute of His mercy and His grace and His love and set them into the house which would represent the church and even for the world to see the beauty of God's grace at work in their life. And it would be a reason that honor would be given to the potter that this Potter is so skilled and is so excellent in His ability that He could take from a piece of raw clay, this filthy, dirty clay that is so marred, that this Potter is so good and He is so proficient that He can shape it and mold it and bring it into a state that is spectacular, that radiates with its beauty, and it is a source of bringing praise to the Potter that He could fashion such a piece of pottery.

So, that is one vessel for honorable use. But then he goes on to say in verse 21, "And another for common use." Now, this word "common" is the very same word in the Greek that was used for "honorable" earlier in the sentence. It just has the prefix "A" or "a-" in front of it that makes it a negative. For example, in the English language, a museum is a place you go in to muse, you go in to think. You ponder things in a museum. You look at beautiful works of art and you muse in a museum. When you put the "A" in front of it, "a-musement," it is an activity where you unplug your brain and you do not think. That is really what the word "amusement" means. It is the lowest level of an activity that

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requires no profundity of thought whatsoever; you are just entertained. Well, this word for “common” in the New American Standard and in the ESV, it actually is rendered “dishonorable.” It is just the negative prefix in front of the very same word. And what this word means, “common” or “dishonorable,” it means unattractive and unpolished, and it means even vile and disgraceful and shameful.

And so, when the potter takes this clay and he begins to fashion it, he just leaves it in its natural earthy state. And he will fashion it also into a bowl-like object, but it will not resemble a spectacularly beautiful piece of pottery. No, this bowl will just be left unpolished. It is unattractive and what it will be used for in the house is to be a garbage can to put trash into it. And it is actually hidden in some corner of the church because it is so repulsive-looking that you do not want your guests when they come over and when they are eating from the china, you don't want them to see this dishonorable vessel, much less smell it because there is a foul odor to it because of the trash that's in it. Worse than that, before there was indoor plumbing, in these early biblical days, it was used to hold human excrement and human dung, and people would relieve themselves into this earthen bowl and then it would be carted outside and the contents would be dumped away from the house so that the foul odor would not drift back into the house.

So, that is the idea here in God's working. So, those that are a common vessel or dishonorable vessel are those whom God has chosen to pass over from setting His grace and mercy upon them, and He leaves them in their sinful, filthy, dirty state, but He has a purpose for them as well. And Proverbs 16 verse 4 says, “God has made everything for its own purpose, even the wicked for the day of evil.” And God uses them but for different purposes, in a different way. Oh, they are still useful, but it is a dishonoring use that God has.

## ROMANS 9:22 — THE REPROBATE

So, as we continue to walk through this, look at verse 22 now, and I want you to note the reprobate in verse 22, because Paul now deals with those whom God chooses not to save, those whom God chooses to harden their hearts. And in verse 22 he tells us it is not for no reason that God has passed them over. No, God actually has an intention for them as well. And so, in verse 22, “What if God, although willing to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction?”

Here is the purpose that God has for the one whom He passes over, that He chooses for them to be simply left in their natural dirty state. God will put certain attributes on display in them that will reflect His glory. God is glorified in them as well. And the attributes, there are three attributes that are mentioned here in verse 22 that reflect the

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glory of God, that reflect the character of God. The first is wrath. The second is power, and the third is patience. You see that right in your text. And God has chosen to magnify His own name by causing His wrath to be shown in these vessels of dishonor. This wrath is His fierce, righteous, holy indignation and anger that is unleashed rightfully so upon them. This word “wrath,” just to remind you, is a Greek word *orge* from which we derive the English word “orgy” that means “heated passion.” It refers to God’s violent emotions towards the reprobate. God is not stoic. God is not impassive. God is passionate in His wrath towards the ungodly.

And then the word “power” refers to His power to damn them, the power to take, if you will, a piece of clay, a clay bowl left in its natural state and to smash it into a thousand pieces, just like Psalm 2 verse 9 and 10, God commands the Son to take the rod of His anger and to crush those who are outside of Him.

And then, the attribute of patience, that God for so long endures the rebellion and the unbelief and the sinfulness and the blasphemy and the cursing and the swearing, that the patience of God is seen that God would allow this to go on as long as it does. So, God is glorified even in the reprobate as these character qualities of God are very vividly put on display. And we would add, and rightly so, there is no apology for the wrath of God. There is no apology for His power to damn that which deservedly is under His anger, and there is no apology for His patience to endure such sinful creatures.

## ROMANS 9:23—THE RESCUE

So, that leads now to verse 23, the rescue. And in verse 23, we see another purpose for the reprobate. And in verse 23, the New American Standard reads, “And He did so.” The ESV says, “In order to make known.” This is introducing what we call “a purpose clause.” And so, the purpose that is stated in verse 23 is flowing out of verse 22. It is yet another purpose for why God has passed over certain vessels and chosen to deal more graciously with other vessels. In verse 23, “And He did so.” So here is the reason why He did so: “to make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory.”

Now, here is what is going on in the brilliance of Paul’s mind as he is being led by the Holy Spirit to reveal the mind of Christ and the mind of God in this text. What Paul is making known to us is that the saving grace and the saving mercy that is bestowed upon vessels of honor shines all the more brightly and is magnified and is seen to be all the more glorious when it is compared to this trash can, when it is compared to this toilet bowl. If there was no toilet bowl and if there was no trash can, the beautiful china, the beautifully painted vase would not seem to be as pretty until it is compared to the ugliness and the foulness of the vessel of dishonor.



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And I have used this illustration with you before. I promise I won't use it again. Just bear with it one more time. But when I bought my wife's engagement ring, I went to downtown Dallas, went up several floors to some building there, went into a kind of a private jewelry store. The salesman brought out a diamond, put it on the counter. I was basically unimpressed with the diamond. I said, "Do you have any others?" And he brought out some others, and I just thought, "It's okay." He then brought out a black velvet pad and put it down on the counter and then with those tweezers picked up the diamond and placed it on the black velvet pad. And that diamond exploded with color as all the lights overhead in the ceiling were, as it were, just sucked through the diamond and the diamond began to sparkle and there were different colors that would be seen in the diamond. It just radiated light and became instantly beautiful. And it was the black pad that made the diamond sparkle. That is the idea of what Paul is saying as we transition from verse 22 to verse 23, that the purpose of the black pad in verse 22 is to cause the diamond in verse 23 to sparkle all the more brightly.

So, the genius of God, the brilliance of the eternal purpose and plan of God is so far above us that we barely can even just glimpse some of the reasons for which God is doing what God is doing. And God is so infinite in His wisdom that even if God was to explain it to us, we are too finite in our fallen state right now, redeemed that we are, though, to even be able to grasp how all these wires have been connected in the mind of God what God has chosen to do from eternity past. And so here in Romans 9, Paul has only just pulled back the veil just ever so slightly, just for a slight ray of truth to come shining forth from the throne of God to us here to let us know why God has done what God has done.

So, He did so to make known, or in other words, He did so in order to make known the riches of His glory, not just of His glory, the fabulous multiplicity, abundance of His glory. And the glory here refers to all of the attributes of God, the sum and the substance of all who God is and for it to be the riches of His glory. This is unfathomable because God possesses incomprehensible glory. He has chosen to make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy which He prepared beforehand for glory.

The second use of "glory" here refers to glory as a synonym for heaven and glory as also a synonym for our being glorified when we step into glory in heaven above. And so, the end of verse 23 is really teaching the sovereign election of God, God's sovereign choice of those whom He prepared beforehand for glory that we would be vessels of mercy. And mercy is the theme that is running through Romans 9. Just to draw this to your attention, in verse 15, "He says to Moses, 'I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy.'" In verse 16, it depends on God who has mercy. Verse 18, "So then He has mercy on whom He desires." And now again in verse 23, "To make known the riches of His glory upon

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vessels of mercy," mercy here representing really the totality of His saving grace, His electing love that He has set upon us.

## ROMANS 9:24—THE REDEMPTION

And lest we think that this is a limited grace, he adds in verse 24. We will end with verse 24, "Even us." And when he says "us," he is opening it up to the whole world, "whom He also called, not from among Jews only, but also from among Gentiles." And we will get into that next time we meet.

But what I want you to see in verse 23, if you are a Christian, if you are born again, if you are a genuine authentic disciple of Jesus Christ, if you are a true bonafide believer who has repented of your sins and put your trust in the saving arms of Jesus Christ, it is because God prepared you to be a vessel of honor like a beautiful piece of china from which His glory, His attributes which shine brightly that the attention would be brought to the Potter that He could take a piece of clay so dirty and so marred and so filthy, and in His hands He can reshape it and remake it and put it there on the table and it is so spectacularly beautiful that there is a sense of awe at the ability of the Potter to transform it into such a beautiful object that reflects His perfections and His own excellencies.

And were you to walk into the next room and to relieve yourself into just a clay pot that is left in its marred, dirty, filthy state that God has hardened so that it will contain the refuse that is put in it, and when you see that object and in your mind then compare it with the beautiful object that is on the table, it would cause you all the more for your jaw to drop and for your eyes to pop and for your mind to be expanded. How great must this Potter be that He could take a piece of clay and fashion me to be an object of mercy and to be a vessel for common use!

We all deserve to be toilet bowls. We all deserve to be trash cans. We all deserve to be hardened, a hardened piece of dirt to be used to showcase God's wrath and His power and His patience, but for reasons known only to God, for us to pull back the veil just ever so slightly and to have some brief glimpse of what is going on in the mind of God, for us to see that God has chosen to use me in a way I do not deserve should drop us to our knees and we never get up, that we have been prepared for glory, something that we do not deserve and something that others have not received. This should cause our hearts to be grateful. It should cause our hearts to be thankful. It should put a certain sobriety in us because as we stand at this verse, we have climbed to the top of the mountain in Romans 9. And the profundity of these verses is just absolutely astounding and astonishing.

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And so, no wonder later when we get to it, Paul will say in Romans 11:33, “Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been His counselor? Or who has first given to Him that it might be paid back to Him again? For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To God be the glory forever and ever. Amen.”

So, men, this is a very tall truth that we have looked at today, and I can see in your faces and in your countenance that you feel the weightiness of this. And that is good for us to feel the weightiness of it, because ultimately your eternal destiny is in the hands of the sovereign God who has made choices in eternity past and has chosen for those of us who are in Christ to have mercy upon us.



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