

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, October 2, 2016**

SOVEREIGN IN SALVATION

Romans 9:14-33

Before we read today's Scripture passage, I want to give you an invitation to attend a weekend gathering in just a few weeks that could have a major impact on the health, vitality, and effectiveness of our ministry as a church for years to come.

The weekend of October 21-23 – just three weekends from now – Dr. Ken Priddy, an EPC minister who heads up a ministry organization called “The GO Center”, will be with us to lead us through a training seminar to help us evaluate the health or “un-health” of our church and to identify steps needed to improve the health and vitality of our church in order to better carry out our mission – our *great commission* – from God. It is called the “GO Seminar”, based on the Great Commission Jesus gave His disciples to “go and make disciples of every nation ...” in Matthew 28:19-20.

The weekend will begin on Friday evening, October 21, with a session from 6:30-9:00 PM for church ministry leaders *and* all interested church members. You don't have to have a title like elder or deacon or director, or be a ministry leader to attend. We want all of you who are interested and able to take part in it.

The same is true for the Saturday seminar, which will go from 9:00 AM – 4:00 PM. Dr. Priddy will lead us through a process designed to help us jump-start our church toward significant growth in vitality. If you are interested and want to be invested in helping us take some steps forward as we seek to fulfill God's purposes for our church, please come and join us. Set aside Friday evening and Saturday morning and afternoon to devote to these matters.

Dr. Priddy will also be with us on Sunday morning, October 23. He will make a presentation during the 9:00 AM Sunday school hour to which all adults are invited, and he will preach at our Worship service that morning as well.

You don't have to sign up or register for Sunday morning, but we do need to have you sign up for the Friday evening and Saturday sessions, so that we can have adequate workshop materials for everyone who attends. There is no charge for the seminar or the materials. A member of our church family has generously offered to pay for all the materials.

There is a simple sign-up sheet for the GO Seminar out in the lobby. We'll get more information out about the weekend in the next two weeks. Bill Snyder, who is at the church retreat this weekend, will give a ministry minute about the GO Seminar next Sunday. In the meantime, I urge you to block out the weekend of October 21-23 and make every effort to attend.

I love this church. I hope you know that! There are many things I love about this church. I consider myself wonderfully blessed to have been the pastor of Faith for the last 19 years

plus. The years have just flown by! But as much as I love this church, I know that God has more for us as a church family than we have yet discovered or experienced. More in the way of blessings. More of His grace. More in the way of opportunities to serve and to share the love of Jesus. More in the way of impacting our community with the gospel. More in the way of being salt and light in a dark and needy world.

I think this seminar with Ken Priddy may be one tool God is giving us to enable us to move forward as we seek to serve God's purposes for God's glory here at Faith.

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Now, let's look together at God's Word as it comes to us in Romans 9:14-33. Let us give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God's holy Word.

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You may recall that previously, as we have progressively waded into the deeper water of the doctrine of election (or predestination, or the sovereignty of God in salvation) here in Romans 9, we have seen biblical examples of God's sovereignty in choosing one person and not another – specifically, in choosing Isaac and not Ishmael, and then Jacob and not Esau his twin brother, as the ones through whom the blessings and promises of God's covenant with Abraham would find their fulfillment. Though Ishmael was Abraham's first-born son, God chose Isaac to receive the covenant promises. Though Esau was born before Jacob, God chose to bestow the blessings of His covenant upon Jacob and his descendants. It was not because Isaac was more deserving than Ishmael, or Jacob than Esau. It was, instead, for the fulfillment of God's sovereign purpose.

God's ways, as we are reminded in Isaiah 55:9, are higher than our ways, and His thoughts are not the same as ours. Or, as Paul says in Romans 11:33, God's judgments are unsearchable, and His ways are beyond our ability to comprehend. To say it another way, "It's way over our heads. We'll never figure it out" (11:33, *MSG*). The ways of God, as an expression of His sovereign wisdom and power and love and holiness, will always remain a mystery to us. Because He is God and we are not.

We have seen how Paul, in verses 6-13, dealt with the objection that God's saving purpose had somehow failed, since so many of the Jews rejected Jesus, the Savior sent from heaven. But no, says Paul. God's promise did not fail. God's plan of salvation did not fail. God's purpose in sending Jesus His Son did not fail. That so many of the Jews refused to accept Jesus as Messiah and Savior and Lord does not mean God's word has failed in any way (9:6). What it means, as we have seen, is that election to salvation is not based on race, it is based on grace. Contrary to what many of the Jews assumed, being Jewish was – and is – no guarantee of election to salvation. Whether you're Jewish or not, your ancestry won't save you. Just because your parents or grandparents or siblings or wife or husband happen to be Christian doesn't make you one. Election to salvation is based on grace, not race. It is all about God and His sovereign grace. It may be hard (or impossible) to wrap your mind around this, but it is true.

We also see that salvation is based entirely on God's provision, not our performance. It is based on God's mercy, not our merit. This is obvious in God's choice of Jacob. What did Jacob do to merit the blessing of God in his life? Absolutely nothing. God chose Jacob before he was born – before either he or his brother Esau had done anything good or bad, so it would be obvious that it was “not by works but by Him who calls” (9:11-12).

As we wade further into the deep water in verses 14 and beyond, Paul makes it plain that mercy and grace are not entitlements to which anyone can lay claim. They are, by definition, undeserved. God owes mercy and grace to no one. He bestows them generously, freely, sovereignly, on whomever He chooses. But He owes them to no one. The most “deserving” person in the world does not deserve mercy or grace. Neither do you. Neither do I.

To take it a step further: Just because God chooses to show mercy to some does not mean He is obligated to show mercy to all. Using God's dealings with Pharaoh during Israel's enslavement in Egypt as an example, Paul pointedly illustrated that God is not obligated to show mercy to Pharaoh because He showed mercy to Moses. God actually did show mercy to Pharaoh. He sent ten plagues upon Egypt, and each one was an opportunity for Pharaoh to repent and relent. Each one was an invitation from God to Pharaoh to change his mind and heart, and to let the people of Israel go. But Pharaoh refused. Instead of opening his heart to God, Pharaoh hardened his heart against God. Pharaoh refused to humble himself before God. And God, in effect, gave Pharaoh over to the hardening of his heart.

Is God unfair? Is God unjust because He chooses to show mercy to this one and not to that one? This is a hard one for a lot of people, because it just doesn't seem fair that God should be merciful and gracious to some but not to others. It goes against our sense of what is fair and right.

Paul, though, defends God against the charge that God is unjust by appealing to His mercy. Our salvation is not due to the justice (or justness) of God, though God is at all times and in all things perfectly just – even in the salvation of undeserving sinners. His perfect justice has been perfectly satisfied by the perfect substitution of the perfect Savior on our behalf, who perfectly fulfilled all the righteous requirements of God's law, so that we are justified and accepted by God on the basis of His atoning work on the cross. That God sovereignly chooses to save you, or me, or anyone, though, is not an expression of His justice. It is an expression of His mercy and grace. Look at verse 16: “It (Salvation) does not ... depend on man's desire or effort (or achievement or anything else we think we can offer), but on God's mercy.”

That God does not treat everybody the same does not mean He is unjust. Nobody deserves to be saved. Since nobody deserves to be saved, since everybody justly deserves God's judgment because of our sin, God cannot be unjust in giving us – or anyone – what we deserve. That God chooses to show mercy and grace to some is just that: It is mercy and grace. One hundred percent undeserved.

Paul tackles yet another anticipated objection to this doctrine in verses 19 and following. Here is how he frames it in verse 19: “One of you will say to me: ‘Why then does God still

blame us? For who resists His will?” If God sovereignly decides who receives mercy and who doesn’t, who is saved and who isn’t, then why does He hold us accountable? Sounds like a fairly reasonable objection, doesn’t it?

How does Paul respond? Look at verse 20: “Who are you, O man, to talk back to God?” In other words, who in the world do you think you are to accuse God? What gives you (or me, or us, or anyone) the right to criticize God or stand in judgment of Him? In *The Message* it says: “Do you for one moment suppose any of us knows enough to call God into question?”

In verses 20 and 21, Paul uses the example of a potter and the clay used by the potter to create different kinds of pottery. The analogy of the potter and clay has Old Testament roots, going back to the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah. In Jeremiah 18, the Lord instructs Jeremiah to go to the potter’s house, where the Lord will give him a message. So Jeremiah goes and watches the potter working at his wheel. Then the Lord gives this message to Jeremiah for the rebellious people of Israel: “O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter does? Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel” (Jeremiah 18:1-6). God is the potter, and we are the clay.

In Isaiah 29, the Lord speaks a word of judgment against the people of Judah. In verse 16 He says:

You turn things upside down,
as if the potter were thought to be like the clay!
Shall what is formed say to the one who formed it,
“He did not make me”?
Can the pot say of the potter,
“He knows nothing?”

Again, in Isaiah 45:9, the Lord says:

Does the clay say to the potter,
“What are you making?”

And again, in Isaiah 64:8 (this time it is Isaiah himself speaking):

O Lord, You are our Father.
We are the clay, You are the potter.
We are all the work of Your hand.

It is with this background that Paul appeals to the imagery of the potter and the clay to describe our relationship to God. There is a limit to the analogy, of course. Human beings, unlike pieces of pottery, are not inanimate lumps of clay. Works of pottery, unlike human beings, are not created in the image of God. Point well taken. Paul’s point, though, is that, just as a potter has the right and freedom to shape the clay into objects or vessels for different purposes – “some for noble purposes and some for common use”, as he observes in verse 21, shaping “one lump of clay into a vase for holding flowers and another into a pot for cooking

beans” (9:21, *MSG*) – so God has the sovereign right and freedom to deal with us, each of us and all of us who make up our fallen race, according to His justice or His mercy, as it pleases Him and His eternal purposes.

You and I may not like all the implications of this, and we certainly don’t understand it fully, but this is what the Bible declares. And this doctrine – the doctrine of election (or God’s sovereignty in salvation) – is above all a doctrine of grace and mercy. For, were it not for God’s sovereign grace and mercy shown to undeserving sinners, no one would ever be saved. *No one.*

There is more in this passage that I had hoped to get to today. But it will have to wait. I particularly wanted to get to verse 29, where Paul quotes again from Isaiah, this time from Isaiah 1:9, comparing the people of Judah to the notoriously wicked people of the twin cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, which were totally destroyed by God during the time of Abraham (see Genesis 18-19), with only Abraham’s nephew Lot and Lot’s two daughters escaping with their lives.

Think of it this way: If the Lord were not merciful to us – if the Lord were not gracious to us – we would all end up like the people of those two cities. Totally destroyed. For we deserve God’s just judgment no less than they.

But, do you see? God *is* merciful. God *is* gracious. And He has made known the riches of His glory to us, the objects of His mercy and grace (9:23). Which is why the doctrine of God’s sovereignty in salvation should be such a great comfort to us.

But this doctrine is not only for our comfort. It also gives us a mission we must not neglect. In his book *The Mission of God’s People*, Christopher Wright points out that election is not just for our individual benefit and salvation. Election means that the elect become agents of blessing to others. Wright writes: “It is as if a group of trapped cave explorers choose one of their number to squeeze through a narrow flooded passage to get to the surface and call for help. The point of the choice is not that only one gets saved, but that he or she is able to bring help and equipment to ensure the rest get rescued. “Election” in such a case is an instrumental choice of one for the sake of many” (Wright, 72).

We who are saved by God’s sovereign mercy and grace are commissioned by God to take the message of His mercy and grace to others, so that they too may believe. We are the instruments God uses to bring others to Himself in saving faith.

Trusting in God who is sovereign, will you let Him use you this week to share the message of the gospel with someone who needs to be rescued from their sin and guilt?

Lord, let it be so in us, to the glory of Your name.