



When in Romans Do as the Righteous Do

"Clay Nation"

Romans 9:19-24

When I was a kid it was my dream to make a stop-motion claymation movie starring Gumby and Pokey.

Our text introduces us to a **clay-nation**, as it were. God is the Potter and Israel, in His sovereign hands, is like clay.

Let's keep in mind the context of Romans nine, ten and eleven. Jewish believers were trying to reconcile God's Old Testament prophecies and promises to Israel with their current circumstances in which Israel had been set aside while the Gospel was going out to the Gentiles.

Paul presented a series of Old Testament examples to show that God *was* and *is* consistent in His dealings with Israel:

- The nation had rejected the supernatural birth offered to them and was therefore more like Ishmael than Isaac.
- The nation had despised their birthright and was therefore more like Esau than Jacob.
- The Jews had hardened their hearts and were more like Pharaoh than Moses.

These examples, especially that of Pharaoh and the hardening of the heart, gave rise to an objection.

Romans 9:19 You will say to me then, "Why does He still find fault? For who has resisted His will?"

The Contemporary English Version captures the sense of the objection when it says, "How can God blame us, if He makes us behave in the way He wants us to?"

The question reveals a profound understanding of what Paul had been teaching. The Jews were realizing that God knew Jesus Christ would come to His own but that they would not receive Him. God knew that the offer of the kingdom would be rejected and that the Jewish leaders would hand the Lord over to be crucified.

If this was indeed the "will" of God all along, was it really fair to hold the nation of Israel accountable and responsible?

Here is the answer:

Romans 9:20 But indeed, O man, who are you to reply against God? Will the thing formed say to him who formed it, "Why have you made me like this?"

Romans 9:21 Does not the potter have power over the clay, from the same lump to make one vessel for honor and another for dishonor?

Wow. It sounds like God, because He is God, can harden whomever He chooses, whenever He chooses, for His own purposes, and that we aren't even allowed to question Him.

One such proponent of that interpretation put it like this:

Admittedly dreadful, God has chosen, designed, and prepared certain people for destruction. Their only purpose is to serve as objects of God's wrath, so the elect can better appreciate God's mercy toward them and His power. Likewise, the elect were chosen, designed, and prepared to serve - but, they were fashioned to serve as objects of His mercy and therefore glorify Him.

Not so fast. You have to know *where* Paul got this idea about the "clay nation." It's from Jeremiah chapters eighteen and nineteen.

In the Jeremiah passage, Israel was the clay and God was the Potter. The clay is said to be marred. As a result the Potter could not mold it as He desired. Instead He made it into another vessel, one more consistent with the material in His hands.

Then God Himself provides this commentary:

Jeremiah 18:6 "O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter?" says the LORD.

"Look, as the clay is in the potter's hand, so are you in My hand, O house of Israel!

Jeremiah 18:7 "The instant I speak concerning a nation and concerning a kingdom, to pluck up, to pull down, and to destroy it,

Jeremiah 18:8 "if that nation against whom I have spoken turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I thought to bring upon it.

Jeremiah 18:9 "And the instant I speak concerning a nation and concerning a kingdom, to build and to plant it,

Jeremiah 18:10 "if it does evil in My sight so that it does not obey My voice, then I will relent concerning the good with which I said I would benefit it.

Jeremiah 18:11 "Now therefore, speak to the men of Judah and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, saying, 'Thus says the LORD: "Behold, I am fashioning a disaster and devising a plan against you. Return now every one from his evil way, and make your ways and your doings good."'" "

Did you hear the two "if's"?

- "if that nation against whom I have spoken turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I thought to bring upon it..."
- "if it does evil in My sight so that it does not obey My voice, then I will relent concerning the good with which I said I would benefit it..."

God's own application is, "Return now every one from his evil way, and make your ways and your doings good."

Does that sound at all like God arbitrarily forms clay according to His will without taking into account the will of the clay? No, it doesn't.

God's own commentary on the Potter and the clay is better than any man's comments! He said that His dealings with Israel, and other nations, depends upon their obedience to Him. He holds them responsible and then judges them accordingly.

The hardening came from the clay, not from the Potter. Finding the clay hardened, God would shape it according to its nature. Yet He looked for repentance.

In Jeremiah nineteen the vessel on the potter's wheel was finished. Jeremiah took it out to the field and broke it in pieces. It remained marred in the potter's hands, and was only fit for destruction. It was a picture of the destruction that would come upon Israel **if** their hearts remained hardened against God.

Officially, by the decision of the leadership, the nation of Israel was hardened against Jesus. God treated them accordingly. He has been treating Israel, as a nation, accordingly for the last two thousand years of human history.

Verses twenty-two through twenty-four describe those two thousand years. For us, it's a history. The Gospel has been going out directly to the Gentiles.

Romans 9:22 What if God, wanting to show His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction,

There is some disagreement as to who is being described. I think it's the nonbelieving Jewish nation, so guilty before God, yet long endured. Though provoked to visit discipline on the Jewish nation for its sin in rejecting Christ, and thus to demonstrate his power, yet thus far God has endured with His longsuffering their rejection of Jesus.

Romans 9:23 and that He might make known the riches of His glory on the vessels of mercy, which He had prepared beforehand for glory,

"The vessels of mercy" are both Gentile and Jewish believers in the Church Age. While God is being long-suffering with the nonbelieving Jews, He is showering His mercy on whosoever will believe in Jesus.

"Prepared beforehand" is *not* a reference to electing individuals in eternity past for eternal life. Paul was referring to the preparation made in the Scripture that anticipated the nation of Israel rejecting Jesus and the Gospel going out to the Gentiles for the "glory" of God.

For example. We don't have time to go into it in depth right now, but in the great prophecy given to Daniel regarding the flow of history, we see a period of 69 weeks of seven-years leading up to the Savior being cut-off by His people. Then there is a break in the timing until eventually the final week of seven years is fulfilled.

We live during that 'break.' The final seven years is yet future; it's the Great Tribulation.

So you can see how that God "prepared beforehand" for the rejection of Jesus by Israel and His "glory" being revealed in the salvation of whosoever will believe.

Romans 9:24 even us whom He called, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles?

Thus God is "calling" to all who will believe, both Jew and Gentile.

The picture of God as a potter making (creating) some people as vessels only fit for eternal destruction is not a biblical teaching. It assumes this illustration of the potter and the clay has no context or commentary to explain it.

God is sovereign. Mankind is free and responsible. With that as your basic understanding you can see how a sovereign God is nevertheless justified in holding the nation of Israel responsible for their free choice to reject Jesus as His Son and their Savior.

You might still struggle with the concept that both these things can be simultaneously true. I do - until I remember that I only know about God and man and our relationship by what He has revealed in the Word. I therefore see them both and trust that there is no contradiction or inconsistency.

You and I are free and responsible. God is sovereign and in control. Israel rejected Jesus. God pushed 'stop' on the prophetic clock. He is calling out a people, the Church, comprised of Jews and Gentiles. God's longsuffering is still in effect and it will remain in effect until "the times of the Gentiles" are fulfilled. When the last person in this age is saved, the Lord

will return in the clouds to resurrect the dead in Christ and to rapture the believers who remain alive until His coming.

Then He will push 'start' and all Israel will be saved through the Great Tribulation to recognize their Savior at His Second Coming.