

*Exposition of the Ninth Chapter
of the
Epistle to the Romans*

by
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Appendix

"Practical Excursus on the Potter and the Clay"

*"Hath not the potter power over the clay,
of the same lump to make one vessel to honour, and another to dishonour?"*

Hath he not? Yes, he has. That is the answer which the apostle expects. It is the answer which he himself, looking at the subject from his own peculiar standpoint, was fully prepared to give. He was right. The potter *has* power over his clay, when it is really his own, to make of the same lump one vessel to honour and another to dishonour. And God, the almighty Potter, has unchallengeable power over His clay, to make of the same human lump, subjected in all its parts to the same process of careful preparatory kneading, one vessel to honour, and another to ignominious uses or dishonour.

Let it be noticed, in the *first* place, that when the apostle speaks of the potter's power, he does not refer to his physical force. It is not ability to do of which he speaks. He does not mean that the almighty Potter is, in virtue of His almightiness, able to make, out of the same human lump, one vessel to honour and another to dishonour. He has no reference at all to any such ability. God indeed is possessed of the irresistible and almighty force that is essential to creating; but it is not to this that the apostle refers.

The word translated *power* (ἐξουσία) is quite a different word from that which means *power* (δύναμις) in the sense of force or *ability to do*. Calvin's word in his French commentary is *puissance*. But the apostle's word brings out the idea of *authority, prerogative, right*. The apostle means that God possesses the *right* to fashion, out of the same human lump, one vessel to honour, and another to dishonour. In virtue of His high position as the Monarch of the universe, God has--in the estimation of the apostle--authority thus to act. He has a right to do with His own as He pleases. He is self-authorized. It is within the range of His rights to make, if He chooses, a distinction in human destinies. If the apostle's view may be accepted, God is not under obligation to confer equal honour, or equal dishonour, upon all the children of men, without distinction or exception. He will be doing no wrong although He make a difference, and fashion on

His wheel one human being with high aptitudes and aims, and another with lowlier qualifications fitting for some humbler sphere.

But now we note, in the *second* place, that we are not to look upon God's prerogative or right to fashion either to honour or to dishonour as utterly unconditional. True indeed the prerogative of the literal potter over his literal clay may, so far as his relations to his fellow men are concerned, be absolute. He may do with it what he pleases, even although the thing which he pleases may be ridiculous, absurd, injurious to himself, and ultimately ruinous to the success of his affairs. He may, if he chooses, by adding capriciously foreign admixtures and inappropriate ingredients, spoil his clay for all but ignoble vessels; or he may stupidly attempt to make fine vessels out of coarse clay. He may misshape his vessels, if he chooses, and as he chooses. He may mar them all while they are in his hands, if he pleases; or, if he prefer it, he may wait till the whole batch are fashioned, and dried, and hardened in the kiln, and then he may take an iron rod, if he pleases, and dash them into shivers. If the clay be his own, and the wheel be his own, and the time be his own, and the rod be his own, he may act as absurdly as he pleases with his vessels. He has an absolute prerogative over his clay,--a right to do with it as he pleases, provided he do no injury, by his freaks, to men round about him.

But then in the *third* place, this absolute right of the human potter is not fitted to shield him from the free, unsparing criticism of his fellow men. They may not indeed interfere between him and his clay, and say, "*No; this won't be permitted. You are ill-using your clay. We won't allow it.*" They may not feel at liberty, or be at liberty, to act thus. But certainly they would be at perfect liberty to say of the man, what Jonathan Edwards said of the devil, "that he is one of the greatest fools and blockheads in the world." ("Miscellaneous Observations." *Works*, edit. 1839, vol. ii, p. 612.)

It should be noted in the *fourth* place, that while, in some important respects, men in their relation to God are like the clay on the potter's wheel, they are not like clay in all respects; and in particular, they are unlike it in this very special respect, that *they are possessed of rights*. All men indeed are little, feeble, and dependent. But still *they have rights*; and he who denies that they have is a slanderer, witting or unwitting, at once of men's real nature and of God's real character.

Man has a right, for instance, to be treated with justice. He is wronged if he be treated unjustly. He has a right to be furnished with ability to do his duty, if he is to be held responsible for not doing it. He would be wronged if this ability were withheld from him. Man has a right to have the gate of heaven opened wide before him, or at least held ajar for him, *if* he is to be blamed for not entering in. Both God and men have rights because they are moral beings, possessed at once of intelligence and of freedom of will. Man must have some power of formative self-control "unto honour," if he is to be blamed for being fashioned into a vessel "unto dishonour."

All this being the case, it is obvious that God's prerogative over the human clay is not

utterly unconditional. His right to do with it as He pleases is, by His own benevolent arrangement, modified and limited by the rights which He has conferred on His human creatures. He has not reserved to Himself the right to do wrong. The idea of such a reservation is infinitely absurd and blasphemous.

It cannot be the case then, that God has reserved to Himself the right to deal maliciously, or cruelly, or tyrannically, with His poor feeble human creatures. If human creatures are to be held by Him as responsible for the shape which their character assumes, then something or other is due to them as the basis of their accountability. That is, they are, as contradistinguished from mere clay, in possession of rights; and thus, by the very existence of *their rights*, God's own rights are not utterly unconditioned. He has Himself conditioned them by conferring rights on His human creatures.

All this being the case, we now note, in the *fifth* place, that it would be a mistake to quote this statement of the apostle in support of the doctrine of unconditional reprobation. We cannot indeed entirely object to the idea of reprobation. There are beings that need to be reprobated. There are human beings who deserve universal reprobation, and who therefore deserve Divine reprobation. Neither can we object to the idea of future retribution, and of such future retribution as cannot be thought of but with the most tremulous solemnity and awe. But we ask liberty to object to the idea of absolutely unconditional reprobation, or such reprobation as is absolutely unprovoked and undeserved.

It is right indeed to magnify the sovereignty of God. But it should not be forgotten that there is more in the circle of divinity than sovereignty. There is justice too; there is righteousness; there is holiness; there is graciousness, goodness, wisdom, mercy, love. It would be a strange inversion of theology to hold in abeyance these, the moral contents of the character of God, for the purpose of making infinite room for the one relationship of sovereignty. Such inversion of theology would be akin, in philosophic monstrosity, to the wild political aphorism of a former age, that *monarchs reigned by Divine right, and could do no wrong*.

But what then, in the *sixth* place, was the apostle's aim in proposing his query, "*Hath not the potter power over the clay, to make, out of the same lump, one vessel to honour and another to dishonour?*" Why should he be solicitous to show that God has the right to turn some of the human race into a condition of dishonour, even as He has the right to turn others on His wheel into a state of glory, honour, and bliss?

The reason is this: he is discussing in the ninth, tenth, and eleventh chapters of this epistle the relation of his countrymen to the gospel and to Jesus. Alas! the great mass of them were unbelieving. They rejected the true Messiah, the Prince of life, the only Mediator between God and sinful men, whose name is the only name given under heaven among men, whereby they may be saved. What then? If they should persist in their rejection and rebellion, what was to become of them? Would they, notwithstanding, be all

turned on the Divine wheel into vessels of honour and glory?

The Jews themselves contended that they should and would. They were, they contended, the darlings of God. They were the chosen, the elected nation, the kingdom of God, the kingdom of heaven. It was the idolatrous Gentiles, and they only, who were to be fashioned into vessels unto dishonour; not the Jews, if they remained true Jews. Not they. God would be unfaithful, they contended, were He thus to deal with them. They were the children of Abraham, and therefore they were the children and the heirs of God. It was glory only to which they were destined.

Thus they reasoned; thus they dreamed. But "No," says the apostle. "You are wrong, my countrymen. It is with the intensest sorrow of spirit that I say it. You are entirely wrong. It is the penitent only and the believing, whether Jews or Gentiles, who shall be saved. And God, the almighty Potter, who has us all on His wheel, has power and prerogative and right, out of the same lump both of Jews and Gentiles, to turn one man, even though he be a Gentile, provided he be penitent and believing, into a vessel to glory, and to turn another, even though he be a Jew, provided he be unbelieving and impenitent, into a vessel to dishonour."

The apostle had evidently in his eye the representation that occurs in the eighteenth chapter of Jeremiah. If a vessel becomes marred in the hands of the potter, then, instead of proceeding with it according to the original desire and design, he may crush the clay together, and fashion it into another kind of vessel altogether, as seems good to him. The Jewish people, for instance, were put upon the almighty Potter's wheel; and He desired to fashion them, as a people, into a glorious vessel. He began His operation accordingly, and was carefully and most skilfully proceeding with it, doing it all manner of justice, when, lo! it became marred in His hand, and He had to make it into another vessel, a vessel unto dishonour. Why? Why did He not rather, after it was marred, fashion it once more into what He originally desired, a noble vessel destined to noble uses, a vessel to honour?

The reason was this: the vessel was marred, not because of any imperfection in the manipulation of the Potter, for the almighty Potter is not liable to imperfection of manipulation, or to mistakes or blunders. It was spoiled clay that was in the Potter's hands. Some bad and coarse ingredients had been by some enemy flung in, so that only a coarser vessel than what was desired by the Potter could be made of it. Hence He fashioned it into a vessel that was fit to be used only for comparatively ignominious purposes, a vessel to dishonour. He had no alternative.

Instead of the nation of the Jews--as contemplated by Jeremiah--the Apostle Paul was considering the condition and prospects of the individuals of the nation. The salvation which he proclaimed, was a salvation not for people as peoples, but for persons as persons. What then was to be said of the persons of the Jews? Alas! the great majority of them were persistently unbelieving and perseveringly disobedient. What would the almighty Potter do with them? Lo! as He operates on His wheel, vessel after vessel, and vessel

after vessel, are marred in His hand. They do not turn out as He desired. Hence it is that, while He joyfully fashions some men into vessels to honour, He feels mournfully constrained to turn others into vessels to dishonour.

The Lord is not willing that any should perish. That is, He does not wish, out of this particular lump, to have any vessels fashioned and shaped for a destiny of dishonour. He would have all to be beautiful, and honourably serviceable; that is, He would have all the vessels He is fashioning, the whole set of them, to be vessels unto honour. He would have all men everywhere to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

Speaking in the person and through the lips of Jesus, He says to the wilfully impenitent, "*I would: but ye would not.*" And just because they would not, they spoiled the good clay that was in the almighty Potter's hand, so that there was no alternative. The vessels which He had graciously desired to fashion after His own sublime ideal being marred and spoiled by human folly, He must needs--if He would utilize the precious clay at all--put it on His wheel and fashion it bit after bit into vessels to dishonour. It is the great moral alternative, all-glorious to God.

Pages 192-201 from the Appendix section in *Exposition of the Ninth Chapter of the Epistle to the Romans* by James Morison (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1888). **Note:** The text has not been modified, except that long paragraphs have been divided.