**Understanding and responding to reprobation**

Text: Romans 9:22

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**Scriptures:** Exodus 7:1-5; Romans 9:1-24

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 94, 436, 440, 439, 180

**Series:** Canons of Dort (#4 Articles 1:15-18)

**Theme:** The doctrine of divine reprobation.

**Proposition:** Reverently adore the doctrines of divine election and reprobation

**Introduction**

The doctrine of election and the corresponding doctrine of reprobation are difficult. For many people their difficulty is not in understanding these Biblical teachings, but in accepting them. Over the history of the church, there has been disagreement amongst Christians about divine election and even more so divine reprobation. The authors of the Canons of Dort in the seventh century wrote of ‘*those who complain about this grace of underserved election and the severity of righteous reprobation*’ (Art 1:18).

The ‘First head of doctrine: divine election and reprobation’ (the ‘U’ of TULIP) speaks of not protesting against this Biblical truth but instead having ‘*reverent adoration of these mysteries*’ (Art 1:18). In this sermon, which covers the content of the last 4 articles of the first head of doctrine in the Canons of Dort, we’ll define reprobation, consider what is called ‘double predestination’ and then focus on six different responses to reprobation. As we look at our text in Romans 9:22-23, we’ll do this under two points:

1. God’s decree of reprobation
2. Responding to reprobation
3. **God’s decree of reprobation**

We have been subject to a number of new laws since the Covid-19 pandemic began. Our New Zealand civil government has ordered us to remain at home under some alert level settings with some exceptions. The word ‘decree’ isn’t used very often in modern communication. It means ‘*an official order that has the force of law*’.

Henry of Huntingdon, a 12th century English historian tells the story of King Canute who set his throne by the sea shore and commanded the incoming tide to halt and not to wet his feet and robes. He recounted that yet "continuing to rise as usual [the tide] dashed over his feet and legs without respect to his royal person. Then the king leapt backwards, saying: 'Let all men know how empty and worthless is the power of kings, for there is none worthy of the name, but He whom heaven, earth, and sea obey by eternal laws.'" If this account is true, then King Canute understood that the decrees of God always bring about Our Creator’s desired outcomes. Only the Living God can command the natural forces of nature and the lives of His creatures in such a way that He purposes and plans always come to pass.

The writers of the Canons of Dort used the phrase ‘the decree of reprobation’ (Art 1:15). This is God’s official order that ‘*not all men are elect but that some have not been elected, or have been passed by in the eternal election of God*’ (Art 1:15). Reprobation is God’s eternal decree whereby he foreordained that certain persons would be excluded from the number of those saved by grace, and that those same persons would instead experience his just wrath.

In our text from Romans 9, the Apostle Paul writes “*What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction*” (v22). The phrase ‘vessels of wrath prepared for destruction’ reveals the doctrine of reprobation as part of God’s predetermined will. Paul writes about the difference between the children of promise, like Isaac, and those who were merely the physical descendants of Abraham: “*Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated*” (Rom 9:13). The Scripture here reveals that God’s saving grace is not universally extended to all.

Paul quotes the words of God from Exodus 33:19 “*I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion*” (Rom 9:15). Paul then gives the example of Pharaoh as someone whom God raised up in order to show His divine power (Rom 9:17). The book of Exodus does not depict divine hardening of Pharaoh’s heart to be a response to this king’s self-hardening of his own heart. Nowhere in the Exodus narrative is it stated that God was motivated to harden Pharaoh’s heart because of the latter’s prior actions, choices, or attitudes. On the contrary, Moses repeatedly states that God hardened Pharaoh’s heart as a means to demonstrate His own glory and power ([Ex 7:1–5, 9:16, 10:1–2, 11:9, 14:4, 14:7–18](https://www.esv.org/Exod%207%3A1%E2%80%935%2C%209%3A16%2C%2010%3A1%E2%80%932%2C%2011%3A9%2C%2014%3A4%2C%2014%3A7%E2%80%9318/)). In response to the objection that God has no right to condemn anyone which, Paul identifies in Rom 9:19, God affirms the divine right to harden whomever He will for His glory. “*Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honourable use and another for dishonourable use?*” (Rom 9.21).

Theologians sometimes speak of ‘double-predestination’ by which they mean that God decrees both election and reprobation. This is what the Canons of Dort affirm. We need to be careful here because God does not work in the same manner with respect to election and reprobation. In election, God actively intervene in the lives of some people to bring them to salvation. In reprobation, God withholds His work of saving grace, passing people by and leaving them to the just consequences of their own sins. Even when God hardens the hearts of some, He is not the Author of the evil which they chose to do (e.g. James 1:13, 17; 1 John 1:5).

It has been helpfully said that ‘double-predestination’ is not symmetrical – God is active in election for some, but passes by others in reprobation. This ‘passing by’ in which people are (in the words of CofD Art 1:15) left ‘*in the common misery into which they have by their own fault plunged themselves*’ is referred to by the word ‘preterition’. This infrequently used word literally means ‘passing over’.

Those who complain about the doctrines of election and reprobation often base their opinion on emotional grounds, rather than on what the Bible teaches. Sometimes they have heard false teaching about election and reprobation and thereby have been misled. Our call here, brothers and sisters, is to be equipped to teach and admonish others about these truths with the aim that that they respond in faith and praise of the glorious grace of God which brings us to our second point.

1. **Responding to reprobation**

The Canons of Dort affirm that the doctrines of election and reprobation are mysterious. We do not know why God choses some people but not others to be saved, other than that this is ‘*according to the counsel of His will*’ (Eph 1:11). We do know that God’s choice is not based on any human decision or behaviour: “*so then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy*” (Rom 9:16).

There is a pastoral focus in the last few articles of the first head of doctrine in the Canons of Dort which outline different responses to the doctrines of election and reprobation. These responses cover people in these categories:

* Those who lack assurance of their salvation (Art 1:16).
* Those who are discouraged by a lack of godliness and/or faith in themselves (Art 1:16).
* Those who have turned away from God to worldliness (Art 1:16).
* God-fearing parents who have children who die in infancy (Art 1:17).
* Those who complain that God is too severe in His judgements on the His judgment against those who turn away from Him (Art 1:18).
* Those who reverently praise God for the mysteries of His grace

Perhaps one or more of these conditions describes you or someone you know. Let’s look at each one in turn.

**Firstly**, those who lack assurance in their salvation. Here is the description of their state from Article 1:16 “*Some do not yet clearly discern in themselves a living faith in Christ, an assured confidence of heart, peace of conscience, a zeal for childlike obedience, and a glorying in God through Christ*”. This might be described as feeling ‘spiritually dry’, ‘distant from God’, or just sad-of-heart. The encouragement is to use God’s means of grace. These include: personally reading, hearing, and studying the Word of Christ; regularly attending congregational worship, hearing the Word preached, experiencing the sacraments being administered, and praying with others. Being diligent in spiritual disciplines with a desire and an expectation for God’s grace is what the Canons, following the Scriptures, prescribe.

**Secondly**, those who do not see sufficient fruits of faith in their lives. They are described this way in Article 1:16 “*Others seriously desire to be converted to God, to please him only, and to be delivered from the body of death. Yet they cannot reach that point on the way of godliness and faith which they would like*”. Which one of us, brothers and sisters, would say that we are satisfied with our own progress in sanctification? Only those who have some degree of spiritual blindness or who have ignored or misunderstood the perfect standard of God’s law, would say that he or she is sufficiently fruitful in the Christian life (cf. 1 John 1:8). The Canons of Dort offer this wise spiritual counsel “*They should be even less terrified by the doctrine of reprobation, since a merciful God has promised not to snuff out the shouldering wick nor to break the bruised reed*”.

**Thirdly**, those who have no regard for God the Father and Jesus the Saviour. They are described in Scriptural terms as having ‘*completely given themselves over to the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth*’. Terrified fear is the right response for anyone in this state. For them the doctrine of reprobation shows how seriously God views sin and that there is no escape from His righteous judgement for those who are not elect. The right response is not wrestling to understand the mysteries of God’s secret will in election, but rather it is turning to God in repentance and believing in Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord. As the Word of God reveals “*Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him*” (John 3:36). Be assured - if you have responded to the gospel in saving faith, then you are elect!

**Fourthly**, God-fearing parents who have children die in infancy. Overall infant mortality was higher in the seventeenth century than it is now in this age of advanced medical treatments, however young children still die today. There is great grief when a loved one dies, especially when that person is young. For Christian parents mourning the death of their young child, their grief often comes together with questions about the state of salvation of their child.

We know that salvation does not come directly through parents, no matter how godly and believing they are. Ultimately salvation is by faith alone, by grace alone in Christ alone. However, God has made covenant promises in His Word and said to Abraham: “*And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you*” (Gen 17:7). He has said through the Apostle Peter: “*For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.*" (Acts2:39). He identifies the children of believers as being ‘holy’ (1 Cor 7:14) in the same way as the unbelieving husband or wife of a believing spouse is holy by association (1 Cor 7:14). Holiness here does not mean necessary saved, but being blessed to live in close proximity to the godly influence of a believer.

So whilst there is not absolute guarantee given in the Scriptures that the children of believers who die in infancy are saved, there is every reason to hope that they are; based upon God’s covenant mercy. The Canons of Dort express this hopeful expectation in these words: “*God-fearing parents ought not to doubt the election and salvation of their children whom God calls out of this life in their infancy*”. At times, parents have taken these words further as the ground for presuming that their children are most definitely saved. Whilst this desire for certainty is understandable given the grief of losing a child in this life, it is not the message of the Bible.

**Fifthly**, those who complain that the doctrines of unconditional, undeserved election and reprobation are too severe. This category covers many Christians in non-reformed churches. The ‘Remonstrants’, following the teaching of Jacobus Arminius likely thought that divine election and reprobation was not consistent with their view of God as kind, loving and just. The ways of the Lord our not our ways (Isa 55:9). He is above us in all things good. His person and ways are perfect.

The Apostle Paul asks in Romans 9:20 “*But who are you, O man, to answer back to God*”. The answer is that as fallen creatures who are not all-knowing, we have no right to respond in criticism to the Lord for His ways. Job leant this truth after much suffering and confusion, saying finally “*I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know*” (Job 42:3). The doctrine of reprobation is not in contradiction to God’s love, mercy, kindness and compassion, but affirms His sovereign power, authority and justice.

**Sixthly** and finally, the right response to the mysterious doctrines of election and reprobation is that of Paul at the end of Romans chapter 11: *“Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! "For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counsellor?" "Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?" For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen”.*