

Romans: Vessels of Mercy Displaying God's Righteousness

Kenwood Baptist Church Spring Sermon Series

Pastor David Palmer

Easter Sunday

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TEXT: Romans 8:31-39



Three days can make a big difference. When our children were little, they sometimes prepared skits to perform for their parents. I remember one unforgettable drama they had created, written, and presented, and we were so touched. We were moved. Then they looked at us after the presentation and said, "We're ready for questions and comments." Asking questions is a way of honoring the message. It's also a way of exploring the implications of the message. When you are in conversation with someone and do not know what to say, you can always ask a question.

In the New Testament, Jesus promises that on that day—the final day—you will have no more questions. But until that day, the Lord welcomes questions, and Easter Sunday generates a lot of questions. Our passage this morning is filled with questions, and these questions make this passage a participatory passage. There are seven questions, and they are rhetorical. A rhetorical question is not a hypothetical question. It's a question that a speaker uses to draw you in and to invite you to ultimately adopt his point of view. There are ancient handbooks of rhetoric that teach people how to do this. I want to teach you just three variations on rhetorical questions:

A question asked to affirm or deny (*erótēma*)

A question asked and then answered by the speaker (*hypóphora*)

A question posed to gain agreement from the audience (*anakoínosis*)

There is a basic question that is asked to affirm or deny a point. In Greek this is called an *erótēma*, which just means a question—you are asking something, or you are trying to clarify or make a point. There is another rhetorical question where you ask a question and then you immediately answer your own question. That has a certain power to it. In Greek that's called *hypóphora*, which is to raise a question and quickly answer it. There are two of those in our passage and they are really important. The third rhetorical question is my favorite this morning. It's a rhetorical question that is posed in order that the listener would give agreement or assent to it. In Greek this kind of question is called the *anakoínosis*, which means that we are coming together or sharing this in common.

When we get to the end of the passage, we will see that the questions asked here are not hypothetical. They are not theoretical. They are questions that are asked of you and me to draw forward the implications of the events of Holy Week. We have been listening to Romans this spring, and Romans 8, in its final paragraph, is interpreting for us the events of Holy Week.

If you are new to the Bible, let me briefly introduce you to the speaker. Paul of Tarsus is a Roman citizen. He is using the conventions of rhetoric to communicate effectively to a society that understands this way of communication. At the same time, he is a devout Jew, trained in Scripture. In this paragraph we will hear that the most fundamental ideas of this passage are emerging from the Bible. Most importantly of all, this man has become a committed Christian. He became a committed Christian precisely because he saw Jesus alive after He had been crucified, and he believes Jesus is Israel's promised Messiah, the Savior of the world. He died on a Roman cross, was buried in a freshly hewn tomb that belonged to Joseph of Arimathea, and was resurrected on the third day. These events—the events of Holy Week—changed Paul, and the implications are still felt today.

I love numbers. Numbers are like a language. I love the number two billion because two billion people in the world are gathering this morning in light of these events. That's not a small number. You may be here for the first time, and I love that you are here. I spent the first big part of my life on the outside of Easter. You may be here celebrating your fiftieth or sixtieth Easter as a believer, and you know the secret that the longer you walk with Christ the more you love Him and the sweeter it gets.

This set of questions in our passage and the reason for asking these questions is to move us and invite us to adopt the speaker's point of view. This is not my point of view. It has become my point of view. This is the point of view of the scriptural text. I am going to tell you up front, so you know the destination, that Romans 8 is inviting us to consider through these questions that **Easter reveals the love of God in Christ for us and provides strong assurance that nothing can**

ever separate us from His love. That is what is on display here. It provides strong assurance. That is a powerful word: assurance. “I am certain.” “I am sure of this.” It is strong assurance that nothing is powerful enough to separate us from this love. That means God’s love is different from any other love we can know.

We start with the first question, in Romans 8:31a:

“What then shall we say to these things?”

What do we make of this? It invites us right out of the gate to consider that maybe there is more to this story than we than we knew. There are more implications to be drawn. It invites us into an open dialogue with the text.

The second question, in Romans 8:31b, is a little more directive, and it asks:

“If God is for us, who can be against us?”

That is a surprisingly important question because, deep within us, we wonder this: Is God for me or is He distant from me and condemning me from a remote place in heaven? Is God working for my good? Does God love me? The language that God is for us is, for Paul, is language that comes flowing out of the Scriptures. Psalm 23 is the most famous of the Psalms and begins with the declaration that *“The Lord is my shepherd,”* I am not going to be in need of anything. In Psalm 23:4, we read:

“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.”

There it is. The love of God revealed on Easter Sunday is a love that we cannot be separated from. It's different. It's life-changing.

Isaiah 41:10 is a verse that held me together when I lost my father suddenly:

“Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with My righteous right hand.”

That is the God who is revealed in the Bible. *“I am with you.”* “I am going to help you.” “I am for you and not against you.” Tucked inside that question is an invitation to consider if God—the God who is revealed in the Bible, and who is almighty, all-knowing, all-powerful, all-righteous, and all-good—is for us, then who could possibly be against us?

When I was in third grade, we had a spelling bee competition. I was an average speller, but I am competitive. As the teams were formed, I noticed that Holly was on our team, and I thought, “We got this because she's the smartest person in this class.” I felt really good. When I lived in

China, my teaching partner Simon was two meters tall, and he played NCAA Division 1 Basketball. Simon was amazing. He could have played in the NBA. We played pickup games, and every time we walked on the court I thought, "We have Simon. No matter who else comes, we have Simon." We could throw the ball anywhere near the hoop, and Simon would rise above everyone else and slam it in. I loved it. Now if that's true for a third grade spelling competition and that's true for a pickup basketball game, Brothers and Sisters, how much more is that true of God? If God, the Almighty, all-knowing, all-powerful, is telling us this morning on Easter Sunday, "I am for you," does that move us? It should move us.

The third question takes us right to the center of Holy Week. In Romans 8:32, Paul asks:

"He who did not spare His own Son but gave Him up for us all, how will He not also with Him graciously give us all things?"

If you have been around Kenwood for any length of time you are probably recognizing right away that this is a *qal va-homer*, the light and the heavy. God, who says, "I am for you," gives to us His very best. He does not hold back His Beloved Son; He gives us His very best. If God does that and His character is unchanging, then is it not the case that He will remain consistently faithful to us and then, with Christ, give us all that we need?

Those more familiar with the Bible might recognize the allusion in this statement to Genesis 22. God had called Abraham to offer his only son on one of the mountains that God would show him. That mountain turned out to be Mount Moriah, the place where David would later build the temple. And that place would later be the location where God would not spare His Son. God was claiming the spot 2000 years in advance. When Abraham was willing to offer his son, God said to him, *"I know that you fear God, seeing that you have not spared your son."* God swears an oath in Genesis 22. I love this. People say, "I swear to God," or add the short oath formula, "to be honest," which is a troubling one, and we wonder what was happening before. But God cannot say, "swear to God." He says, *"I swear by Myself."* In Genesis 22:16-18, God says:

"By Myself I have sworn, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice."

So it is that God, the God who is all-powerful and all-good, does not spare; He does not withhold. When someone tells you they love you and then they hold back their best, the nature of the love that is offered is uncertain. But when someone says, "I love you," and then gives you their absolute very best, you experience the love.

The fourth question is one of the *hypóphora* questions where the speaker asks a question and then answers it right away, lest there be any doubt. In Romans 8:33, we read:

“Who shall bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies.”

The “elect” means God's people. Abraham is the first one to be called chosen. It's God saying, “I chose you in love.” And the question now stands: Who will accuse you? Who will bring an accusation? The scene is not just a human court. The scene is a heavenly court. The accuser, or the prosecuting attorney, in the Bible is called Satan in Hebrew, devil in Greek. It means the one who accuses us. We sense this. We sense it if we are looking at it closely. When we compare ourselves with Almighty God, who is all-knowing and all-good, you and I become aware of the gap. The closer we know God, the more we are aware of the gap.

I will tell you a secret of the Christian life. The more you know God and His greatness, and the deeper you know your non-greatness, the greater is your appreciation of the love of God that bridges that gap. Here God says there will be no successful charge, no accusation. Who will bring a charge? The reason the answer to this question is immediately brought forward is that it is God who justifies. It is God who declares us to be in the right. It is God who says that we are acquitted. It is God who says to us, “You are not guilty.” We wonder how that is possible. At the heart of the gospel that we encountered in Romans 3, remember that the righteousness of God is revealed through faith in Jesus Christ. Everyone has sinned. Everyone lacks the glory of God. But now we are justified. We are declared righteous by His grace as a gift. It is undeserved. It is unmerited. It is solely the consequence of the action of God.

This flows right into the fifth question. In Romans 8:34, we read:

“Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.”

Condemnation is a terrible thing, terrible to live under—to feel the displeasure of a boss who cannot be satisfied or of a spouse who communicates that you have never done enough or to feel the condemnation that can erupt from within us when we are aware of our guilt and shame. Even though Christ's death on the cross provides us the basis for God's justification, sometimes condemnation can still leap forward. So Paul answers this question right away. Who is there to condemn you? The answer to this question is that Jesus Christ died, He was raised, He is now (present tense) at the right hand of God, interceding for us. The blood of Christ shed, according to the New Testament, is a once for all time offering. Jesus' death and resurrection lead to His ascension into glory, seated at the right hand, echoing the language of Psalm 110. This leads us to a place of deep assurance that Jesus Christ, who is for us, who came forth from the Father's love into the world, carried your sin and mine, was vindicated by His resurrection, and returned to the Father in glory, even as we are gathering here on earth, is alive and standing

at the right hand of God, interceding to block you and me from any voice of condemnation. Romans 8 started here: *"There is no condemnation for those in Christ."*

The sixth question, in Romans 8:35a, asks:

"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?"

This is the rhetorical question *anakoínosis*, a building of common agreement leading to this great conclusion. Who will separate you? Consider that. What circumstance is strong enough to separate you from the love of God in Christ? What space, what power, is sufficient? Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Separation suggests the imagery of a breakup.

It's always a tender pastoral moment with a teenager who has just gone through the first breakup and thinks life is over. "This is it. I will never experience joy and happiness again in my life." You provide calm assurance: "God is for you." I have wiped away the tears of a few folks in the parking lot at Kenwood Baptist Church, and one of my go-to questions is this: "If you could see the spouse that the Lord has prepared for you and imagine the life He has, would that help?" And they say, "Probably." A teenage breakup is a sympathetic one. The language of separation is actually covenant language, and covenant-making is more like marriage. Divorce is one of the hardest things people can experience because the couple exchange vows of committed love and then something happens, and that pain is deep and scarring. Some of you have walked through that.

Easter reveals to us the love of God in Christ for us and provides strong assurance that nothing can ever separate us from this love, that the covenant-like marriage relationship that God is initiating with us in the events of Holy Week will never end. You will never find a time when God appears to be an unfaithful spouse. You will never find a time when God says to you, "I no longer find pleasure in you, and I'm looking for someone else." God's love for us is everlasting, committed.

Question seven comes with seven items, the immense difficulties or the challenges that we face in this world. In Romans 8:35b, we read:

"Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?"

We are invited to consider if these things are powerful enough to drive a wedge between us and God, to detach us from the love of God which is on display in Holy Week. Shall tribulation, societal opposition, cultural hostility, distress, or anxiety about the future be strong enough? What about overt persecution where someone is moving against you because of your commitment to Christ? What about not having enough to eat or clothes to wear? Is that strong

enough to cut you off? What about danger or the sword, a threat on your life? Are those things strong enough?

Paul records his own experience of this in 2 Corinthians 11. He describes for the church that he loves the difficulties he has experienced in following Jesus. For the vast majority of us, these difficulties are greatly beyond what we have experienced. He lists them. In 2 Corinthians 11:24-28, he says:

"Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches."

"Are they going to keep growing in Christ? Are they going to stay close to the Lord who birthed them and purchased them?" He even goes on to say that he had a thorn in his flesh, and he asked God three times, "Would You take this away from me?" Maybe some of you know something like that. There is a burden or a struggle, something that you have carried for years, and you say, "God, I'm ready to be done with that." In 2 Corinthians 12:9, God's response to Paul was:

"My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in your weakness."

In 2 Corinthians 12:9-10, Paul then says:

"Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong."

This is another of the secrets of the Christian life. Nothing is strong enough to separate you from the love of God in Christ. You are going to go through hard things. Some of you are going through hard things right now. The Scriptures tell us this Easter Sunday that none of them are strong enough to separate you from the love of God. More than that, there is a fellowship with Jesus Christ that is available only in the midst of that.

I think I have the best job in the world. I just love what I get to do, day after day, to be with people and see Christ meet them. Good Friday was so moving, and it was a beautiful service. But the best part for me was afterward when a young man pulled me aside and said, "Pastor

David, I accepted Jesus into my heart tonight." That is so awesome. It's wonderful to be with people as they are going through hard things, to lovingly place the hand of someone who is dying into the hand of Jesus, or to stand with brothers and sisters who are going through immense difficulties that would crush us were it not for the love of God.

Those who know me well know that I have a lot of dead heroes, and I appreciate them, and I am



looking forward to meeting them. But I also have a number of living heroes. One of my living heroes is a Lebanese pastor Hikmat Kashu. He wrote a great book called *Following Jesus in Turbulent Times*. I love this book, and I reread it every couple of years. He is pastoring right now in a city that is having a million people displaced in it. Their Holy Week services happened with bombs falling into the city, that they could hear going off around the church.

I was sent a photo of the banner they hung on the outside of the church this week: "War is loud. Resurrection is louder." I was so moved by that. That's not a light thing to say. I saw a picture of the church just packed out. Brothers and Sisters, nothing can separate you from the love of God in Jesus Christ, no matter what you face.



Paul answers this seventh question in Romans 8:37:

"No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us."

It's the case, not that we aren't crushed by these things, but it's just the opposite: we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. The ESV says "*more than conquerors*" because Paul makes up a word here. The word "victory" in Greek is "*nikaō*," *to be victorious*. That's where we get the brand "Nike" with the swoosh. It can be a reminder for us that Christ is victorious. Paul does not say just that we are victorious. He does something that no one had done before by attaching a preposition *hyper* to the word, resulting in the meaning that we are hyper-victorious. That is why the ESV translators say we are "*more than conquerors*." It's their attempt to bring out this meaning of this glorious, freshly coined, compound word.

Some of you know that my wife is a native Greek speaker, which is awesome. We were talking about this passage at the dining room table, and I asked her, "As a native speaker, what do you hear in that—that in the midst of all these things we are hyper victorious?" She said, "I hear not that it's a different kind of victory but that the victory is absolutely certain." No matter what you face or what you are currently facing through Him who loved you, Jesus Christ, you will be victorious and nothing will separate you. This is true, Beloved, because Jesus Himself

experienced all these things. Jesus experienced tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger, and a sword pierced His side, but the unbroken fellowship between Him and the Father remained.

It's not through our efforts. Let me caution you against this. We are not victorious because we try harder. We are not more than conquerors because of our own determination. We are victorious through Him who loved us. Charles Cranfield said:

“It is not through any courage, endurance or determination of our own, but through Christ, and not even by our hold on Him but by His hold on us, that we are more than conquerors.”

That's the difference.

As a young seminarian when I lost my father suddenly and felt like the world was falling apart around me, an older pastor from the deep south said something to me that I have never forgotten. He looked at me and said, "David, you can lose your grip on God, but God will never lose His grip on you." I met him only one time, and he gave me a line of faithful, mature Christianity and etched it on my soul.

Paul concludes this glorious passage with confident assurance. It's assurance that there is no place where we can go, no circumstance we can be in, that can separate us. He rattles off ten items. In Romans 8:38-39, we read:

“For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Death cannot separate us. Life and all its temptations cannot separate us either. Angels cannot get in the way. Neither can rulers, and the word here might be better understood as demonic powers. The things that are presently happening around us cannot do it. They are not strong enough. The things that we are worried about in the future are not strong enough either. In fact, there is no power at all that is sufficiently powerful to pull us away from the love of God in Christ. You cannot go too high and burst through the theological stratosphere and find yourself in a space vacuum where there is no love of God. You cannot go there. You cannot put on a scuba suit and say, "I'm going down to the deeps. I'm going down into the oceanic trench." Do you know that there are some places in the ocean that are so deep you could drop Mount Everest into it? Paul says, "Even if you go there, you are not going to be away from it." There is nothing in all creation sufficiently powerful to separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ. And that's the message that bursts out into the open on Easter Sunday.

Easter reveals to us, Beloved, the love of God in Christ, that God is for us, and provides strong assurance that nothing can ever separate us from His love. I want to invite you, if you have never received that love, to receive it now. God is for you on Easter, not against you. He justifies. Christ intercedes. If you have received His love, I want to assure you this morning that you will certainly be victorious through Him who loves you. No matter what you are facing or what you are fearing, God will never lose His grip on you.

N.T. Wright wrote a whole book just on Romans 8. At the end he says, "Nothing can or will separate us from that love." We, for whom human love routinely involves separation for travel, work, and in death, may find it hard to imagine a love that gives assurance of eternal unbreakability. But that's exactly what the gospel provides to us. And that's why Christians gather to celebrate and remember. I want to invite you this morning to consider Christ as the revelation of God's love not just for the world but for you.

Let's pray.

Lord Jesus, we stand before You, and we ask that You would fill our hearts with Your love. Lord, we thank You that love is an emotion. It can be felt. We thank You that Your love is an action that can be seen and talked about. We thank You this morning that Your love is a gift, and we receive it now. We thank You, Lord Jesus, on Easter Sunday that Your love is the result of a victory, a victory which we share through faith in You, who died and rose again.

Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Amen.