

God's Wrath Against Self-Righteousness

Romans 2:1–29 (ESV)

INTRODUCTION: Last week, in **Romans 1:18–32**, we watched Paul take up the role of a prosecuting attorney indicting the openly pagan world. We saw the wrath of God revealed against the ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth. Paul painted with bold colors and dark hues — idolatry, sexual perversion, the catalog of sins in verses 29–31, and finally the chilling “*defiant discipleship*” of those who not only practice such things but cheer on others who practice these things as well, justly incurring the wrath of God upon themselves.

If we were sitting in that congregation in Rome the day this letter was first read aloud, we might have nodded along. “*Yes, Paul — those people out there in the gutters of the Empire are wicked. Thank God, we are not like them. Preach on, brother.*”

But Paul is not finished. He has only swung the spotlight onto half the room. Now, with the word therefore in **2:1**, he turns the prosecutor’s lamp directly into the eyes of the moral, the upright, the religious, the respectable — the people who quietly congratulated themselves through chapter one. Last week, he was preaching to the *gutter*. This week, he is preaching to the *gated community*.

CONTEXT: Remember that we have said that the church in Rome was made up of both Jews and Greeks. This is very important to remember throughout the entirety of the letter. Apparently, there was some measure of conflict between these two groups within the church.

- **JERUSALEM** - This had been the case at the church in Jerusalem, you will remember, in the book of Acts. The *Hellenists* complained that their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food in favor of these *Hebrew Widows*. The first band of Deacons was selected from the body to bring peace between these warring factions.
- **CORINTH** - In fact, practically every one of these early churches had to address this sort of thing. Remember, Paul is writing from Corinth - the church in Corinth had its own issues between Jews and Gentiles - the Gentiles flaunted their freedom in Christ and would bring pork to the church potluck, which the Jews found to be highly offensive.

It should come as no surprise that there were issues of unity between Jews and Gentiles within the church at Rome as well.

- **HISTORICAL:** There were historical issues at play; the Jews had been in a relationship with God since the time of Abraham. These Gentiles were new to all of this. No doubt there was an air of superiority on the part of the Jews and a sense of

imposter syndrome among the Gentiles.

- **THEOLOGICAL:** There were theological issues; God made promises to the Jews that were not yet fulfilled - a land, a kingdom. What are we to make of those promises? There were also commands and laws given to the Jews. Shouldn't the Gentiles have to honor those rites of passage, like circumcision and passover?
- **CULTURAL:** There were distinct cultural preferences that made it remarkably difficult for these groups to fellowship with one another. You see, for the Jew, previously, he would not so much as eat with a Gentile. Frequently, referring to him as a dog (a racial/ethnic slur) outside the Commonwealth of Israel. Now, within the dispensation of the Church, you would have certain scenarios where a Gentile brother was installed as a Pastor over the Jewish congregants. To us, this seems silly and somewhat racist. To them, these were matters of great importance.
- **MORAL:** Beyond all of those things, the backgrounds of the two groups were incredibly different morally. The gods that the Gentiles worshipped prior to coming to Jesus could not be more different from the God of the Jews. As Paul penned this letter in the city of Corinth, high above the city stood the Acro-Corinth, home to a temple to Diana. At night, the cult prostitutes, both male and female, would come down from the mountain and walk the streets of the city, plying their trade. One would worship the goddess by consorting with these prostitutes. If there was a famine in the land or if a battle was lost, it was always linked back to a failure to worship the goddess properly.

Compare that to the Jewish culture - they could not imagine such things. People often wonder why Jesus didn't address issues like homosexuality in the Gospels. You have to remember, this sort of thing could not be comprehended in the covenant community of Israel. The Jews would not even speak of such things.

ILLUSTRATION: I don't come in here and preach against *horse thieves*. Why? I'm not aware of any in this congregation. But if I were a Pastor in Texas in the 1800's, I'm sure the subject would come up. For the same reason, Jesus didn't preach against sodomy, but Paul, taking the Gospel to the Gentiles, did so frequently.

Well, considering these sharp differences between the two groups, how were they to worship as one? How are they to serve one another? How are they to cooperate for the sake of evangelism? This is the key point of the letter: to show how the Gospel tears down the dividing line, making something new of the two groups.

Throughout this letter, Paul will turn his attention from one group to the other.

Last week, Paul dealt primarily with the sin issues that were common in the **Gentile community** before conversion. Idolatry, Sexual perversion. He describes these people as being ²⁹ ...filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, ³⁰ slanderers,

haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, ³¹ foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. (Romans 1:29–31 (ESV))

To all of these things, the Jews would have given a hearty, “AMEN”! But now, he turns his attention toward his brethren, the Jews. One must be careful about Amenning a preacher prematurely.

NOW - before I go further, you might be thinking, “***What on earth does this have to do with us? We don’t think of ourselves in categories of Jew and Gentile.***” I’m glad you asked. It may be helpful for us to understand Paul’s admonition as aimed at those who grew up in a **distinctly Christian context**, who came to Christ early in life, who never walked in the darkest of places nor struggled with the darkest of sins. And those who came to Christ after spending **much time in the world**. Those who had developed habits, hangups, distorted affections, and the like. Sin had time to incubate and mature.

- Think of last week’s sermon as an attempt to remind those who came from a **worldly background** that the wrath of God was revealed against them in their unconverted state.
- This week, the text addresses those of us raised in a moral, perhaps religious context. Paul is saying that those of us who never dreamed of the things mentioned in chapter 1 are no less guilty. In fact, we are more accountable than they are and, as such, we incur greater judgment.

TEXT: Romans 2:1–29 (ESV)

¹ Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things.

Notice that little phrase — “***O man.***” Paul has shifted from preaching at them to speaking to them. The message has gone from large swaths of unknown people to the particular individual. This man, who wholeheartedly agrees with all Paul has said to the moral degenerates in chapter one, but who might argue and say, “But I’m not like that.” In Paul’s context, this man would be among the **Jewish** community.

These may have prayed something like the **Pharisee** in Jesus parable in **Luke 18:10–14 (ESV)** ¹⁰ “Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’ ¹³ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ ¹⁴ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other.

Perhaps there are some of us who would say, “Yes, perhaps I need forgiveness to some degree, but it wasn’t like these other people. After all, I’m not that bad.”

First, Paul points out...

1. The Contradiction of Self-Righteousness (vv. 1-3)

² We know that the judgment of God rightly falls on those who practice such things. ³ Do you suppose, O man—you who judge those who practice such things and yet do them yourself—that you will escape the judgment of God?

Paul says, “*There is a tendency for us to condemn those things in others publicly which we hate most in ourselves privately*”.

Remember, our Lord has taught that, salvifically, the sin of Anger is tantamount, it is coequal to murder:

Matthew 5:21–22 (ESV)

²¹ “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’ ²² But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire.

Yes, practically, actual murder causes the greater damage to society and the individual, but salvifically, both sins place one in danger of the Judgment.

Again, Jesus says in,

Matthew 5:27–28 (ESV)

²⁷ “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ ²⁸ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

So yes, it is easier to look at the one caught in the act of Adultery and condemn them, but in the economy of God, the offense of lust is an offense against the same God as the sin of Adultery.

The gravity of the offense depends on the dignity of the person who is injured by the offense.

ILLUSTRATION: If we see a small child pulling a worm to pieces, we would say “*don’t do that... It’s cruel*”. But we wouldn’t be appalled by it... We would not say, “You evil, wicked little boy”... we wouldn’t lose sleep over such a thing. Yet, if the child was torturing a cat, would that not be worse? Yes, on our scale of understanding, a cat is a nobler animal. What if he were torturing a sibling?

You see, it is the dignity of the offended that determines the level of the crime.

THUS, the issue is not WHAT sin you committed, but WHO you sinned against.

- If I lie to my dog, he gets frustrated.
- If I lie to my wife, I may be sleeping in the dog house.
- If I lie to a policeman, I may get a ticket

- If I lie to a judge, I may go to jail
- If I lie to a Supreme Court Justice under oath, the penalty could be very, very severe.

Why? It's not about WHAT sin you commit, it's about WHO you sin against. Thus, those who point to others and say, "I am not guilty of such things", Paul says, "think again".

This is what is meant by James, who writes - James 2:10–11 (ESV)

¹⁰ For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it. ¹¹ For he who said, "Do not commit adultery," also said, "Do not murder." If you do not commit adultery but do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law.

Not only the contradiction of the self-righteous, but also notice...

2. The Confusion of Self-Righteousness (vv. 4-5)

⁴ Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? ⁵ But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed.

Here, Paul is addressing our tendency to observe the consequences suffered by others and to presume that since we haven't suffered such consequences, God must, therefore, approve of our behavior.

The Psalmist reminds us of this danger again and again...

Asaph writes in Psalm 50:20–22 (ESV)

²⁰ You sit and speak against your brother; you slander your own mother's son. ²¹ These things you have done, and I have been silent; you thought that I was one like yourself. But now I rebuke you and lay the charge before you. ²² "Mark this, then, you who forget God, lest I tear you apart, and there be none to deliver!"

Don't you see? This is the man critically judging his neighbor and assuming that God was on his side because things seem to be going so well... Thus, he presumes, "*God sees things the way I do; this is why he has not judged me*". God says, "Oh, you are mistaken, don't let the fact that my judgment hasn't yet fallen cause you to assume that God concurs with you... Perhaps He is simply taking notes on the behavior of your heart as He prepares for your judgment.

Again it is written in Psalm 7:11–13 (ESV)

¹¹ God is a righteous judge, and a God who feels indignation every day. ¹² If a man does not repent, God will whet his sword; he has bent and readied his bow; ¹³ he has prepared for him his deadly weapons, making his arrows fiery shafts.

Friend, don't be confused, the bow of God is most certainly bent against all unrighteousness, whether outward in the case of chapter 1 or inward in the case of chapter 2.

The Contradiction of Self-Righteousness, the Confusion of Self-Righteousness...

3. The Conclusion of Self-Righteousness (vv. 6-11)

⁶ He will render to each one according to his works: ⁷ to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; ⁸ but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury. ⁹ There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, ¹⁰ but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. ¹¹ For God shows no partiality.

Don't you see - every person present at the reading of this letter is in desperate need of a radical salvation from sin...

- Whether they be **Jews** who were raised in the shadow of the temple, under the law of Moses, who deem the perversion depicted in chapter 1 as sick and twisted.
- Or whether they be the **Gentiles** raised in the shadow of some pagan idol, who had been guilty of the very things Paul listed in chapter 1.

Paul is marching ruthlessly toward his conclusion in **Romans 3:23 (ESV)**

²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,

He continues in verse 12...

¹² For all who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law. ¹³ For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified. ¹⁴ For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. ¹⁵ They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them ¹⁶ on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus.

- The **Gentile** knows the righteous demands of the law intrinsically by the fact that his conscience testifies against him when he sins, thus he is completely and totally guilty.
- The **Jews** have a conscience as well, but beyond that, he has had his mind trained by the truth of God's Law; thus, he is not free from guilt, but rather, he incurs the greater guilt apart from the Gospel.

This was the point of James who wrote...**James 3:1 (ESV)**

¹ Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.

Romans 2:17–29 (ESV)

17 But if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast in God 18 and know his will and approve what is excellent, because you are instructed from the law; 19 and if you are sure that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, 20 an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of children, having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth— 21 you then who teach others, do you not teach yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal? 22 You who say that one must not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? 23 You who boast in the law dishonor God by breaking the law. 24 For, as it is written, "The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you."

Yes, the Gentile is without excuse because his conscience bears witness against him. The Jew is without excuse, because both conscience and law bear witness against him.

Every single person under the sound of my voice is without excuse - perhaps even more so that these mentioned.

No Jew boasted of a complete collection of the Holy Scriptures - at best, he might access them at a synagogue. Yet, we sit here today - many of us with multiple copies of God's Word, Old Testament and New. Beyond that, God has given us teachers to lend meaning and understanding to what is written. What hope to we have of inheriting eternal life, we who are guilty of the same sins Paul has mentioned?

CONCLUSION/INVITATION:

At the turn of the last century, there was a chess player who was also an artist. That young man painted a scene of Satan playing chess with him for his soul. The young man is manipulating the white pieces, Satan the dark pieces. They're sitting there at the table, and the stakes are very high. They're playing for the young man's soul.



And in this painting, the pieces are arranged on the board so that Satan, with an evil look on his face, has just moved his queen and announced that, in four moves, checkmate. The young man is there. There's a look of despair and fear on his face. His trembling hand is hovering over his Rook, but he knows he's been beaten. He knows he's played the devil at his game, and he has lost. That painting hung in the gallery, and many would come and see it. Chess players from around the world came to see it.

There was a man named Paul Morphey. He lived in Louisiana. He was the world's master chess player. He'd retired from chess as the champion.

But they said to Paul Morphey, " You must see this painting. So he went to the great art

gallery, and he looked at it. And like any chess player, he tried to figure out if there was a move the young man could make.

Morphey looked at that painting, and in his mind, he would move this piece, then that one, and think. Five minutes, 10 minutes, 20 minutes, 30 minutes, and an hour. Morphey stood there and looked, and then he broke the silence of that museum with a shout. ***He said, " Young man, make that move"***. There was a move that the artist who painted the painting had not seen. The Move that Morphey saw; the master saw; the only move that could be made.

Whether you are among those caught up in sin or those caught up in self-righteousness, there is but one move you can make. That is to confess that you too are a sinner in need of a Savior, and through yourself by faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ.