

The Bad Thing About Good People

Romans 2:1-11

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One of the frustrations that come from preaching is the reality that often people listen to a sermon to gain information and when it is over they talk about what a good message this would have been for certain people to hear. In other words, a sermon on Romans 1 will inevitably leave many people feeling like it is an important message, but it is relevant for someone else.

This is one of the things that causes conflict in churches. We are good at seeing how a message applies to others, but we need help to recognize what the text is meant to say to us. So, we clobber each other with Scripture passages to try to get people to walk more closely with Jesus without realizing we need the same message spoken to us.

In Romans chapter 1, Paul announced God's judgment (both active and passive) on those who should have known God but ignored Him. As a result, we are told, God gave them over to their passions, perversions, and hardness of heart. Paul anticipated there would be Jews and "good people" standing on the sidelines nodding their heads. They agreed that these pagans should be told about the judgment of God that they deserved.

In Romans chapter 2, Paul addresses his comments to "the crowd standing on the sidelines." Perhaps we also need to see how the talk about judgment and such stubborn hearts applies to us.

Addressing the "Good People"

If we are honest, many of us would say, "Bad people should be judged. But frankly, I don't see myself as a bad person. I've tried to live a good life, and at least in my mind, I am one of the nicer people around!"

It is to such people that Paul speaks now,

You may think you can condemn such people (those addressed in chapter 1), but you are just as bad, and you have no excuse! When you say they are wicked and should be punished, you are condemning yourself, for you who judge others do these very same things. ² And we know that God, in his justice, will punish anyone who does such things.

The "good people," says Paul, are not as good as they/we think they are. In fact, he says, since they know that sins (listed in chapter 1) deserve judgment, this shows they too are guilty. Why? Because these people are guilty of doing the same things!

I can almost hear the screams! "Hey, I am not that kind of a person. I don't do anything as bad as that. Go back to the beginning of that section in Romans 1:18-32. The real sin of the people was their refusal to acknowledge the Lord in their living. They did not want to do it His way but

instead even created their own gods to worship to give them a spurious sense of meaning and purpose. Paul wants us to see that we do that same thing. The most important things are swallowed by all that we value above the Lord. That, my friends, is idolatry! What's more, our practice of a particular sin may be different but we are still guilty of the sin.

One Commentator wrote,

If we practice or habitually commit the same sins that we condemn in others, we will not evade God's judgment. We hate gossip but tell tales. We become angry when others break their promises, but then we promise more than we can deliver. Or we condemn great evils, but practice lighter versions of them. So we condemn cursing, but then use harsh language. We condemn murder, but shout at others. And we condemn theft, but succumb to envy. [Daniel Doriani, Romans (Reformed Expository Commentary) (p. 94)].

Paul reminds us that God does not compromise with sin. Any sin must be addressed and atoned for! God is just.

When we don't see God act in judgment immediately, some seem to assume that God will not judge at all. They believe their sin must not have been too bad. But Paul says,

“Don't you see how wonderfully kind, tolerant, and patient God is with you? Does this mean nothing to you? Can't you see that his kindness is intended to turn you from your sin?”

God has not abandoned judgment; He is not approving of some sins and not others. He has merely delayed that judgment. Do not conclude that your actions have given you a “pass.” Do not presume on the grace of God! This will only cause our hearts to harden and continue the spiral in the wrong direction.

We talked about repentance a little last week. It is somewhat of a lost concept today. We tell people they need Jesus, but often, we don't tell them WHY they need Christ. Or what it means to put our trust in Him.

When you want to apologize or ask for forgiveness from someone to restore your strained or broken relationship, it is essential that you show that you understand what you did and the hurt that you caused. You must accept responsibility for your actions and their consequences. A mere “sorry!” really doesn't cut it. You must admit what you did and then show that you understand how that impacted your relationship with the other person. We must ask them to forgive us. This is what repentance does.

When it comes to the Lord, repentance involves first, thinking differently about God. We stop seeing Him as the kind grandpa who lets you do things your parents don't let you do. Instead, we must see that God is holy and good and the only one who deserves our worship. We must see that God does not compromise with evil in any way. We must see Him as the righteous judge. God will not stand idly by while we destroy our lives. He is against us wasting life in sinful pursuits. We need to see Him as the Judge who wants to show us mercy.

Jesus told a parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector. The Pharisee came into the temple, looked up to Heaven and told God he was happy he was not like the tax-collector. Then he told God how lucky God was to have him on His team. Some translations say he “prayed to himself!”

The tax collector wouldn’t even look up. He humbled himself before the Lord and said, “Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner!” Jesus commented that the tax collector went home in right standing with God while the Pharisee did not!

Second, we must see ourselves differently. We need to see ourselves as sinful people who deserve the wrath of God. We are NOT victims! We are not “good people” but sin-stained people who need God’s grace.

We are guilty of measuring ourselves by others (carefully selected to make ourselves look good) rather than measuring ourselves by God’s holy standard. As a result, we have convinced ourselves that we are not as lost as others. We are like a person who is diseased but refuses to accept that fact.

Repentance faces that head-on. The person who repents stops making excuses for their rebellion against the Lord.

Third, we will look at the world differently. We need to see that the world does not exist so that we can have a good time. The world was made to draw attention to the glory of God. We are not the center of the universe! We are here to glorify and give thanks to Him in everything we do. The person who repents wants to honor the Lord. They understand that God deserves to be honored above all.

Practically, it means we begin to relate to people differently; they no longer exist to serve us but we serve them; our money is not for us to indulge ourselves but to honor Him. Our time is not for us to do whatever makes us happiest at the moment, but we are to use it to bring honor to the One who saved us from sin and from ourselves. True repentance leads to a radical transformation of values and those new values lead to a whole new approach to living.

If You Still Feel It Doesn’t Apply to You

But even after saying all this, some still smugly feel they are not included in any of these categories. Paul continues his indictment of those who see no need to repent because, in their mind, they have not done anything wrong.

⁵ But because you are stubborn and refuse to turn from your sin, you are storing up terrible punishment for yourself. For a day of anger is coming, when God’s righteous judgment will be revealed. ⁶ He will judge everyone according to what they have done.

⁷ He will give eternal life to those who keep on doing good, seeking after the glory and honor and immortality that God offers. ⁸ But he will pour out his anger and wrath on those who live for themselves, who refuse to obey the truth and instead live lives of

wickedness. ⁹ There will be trouble and calamity for everyone who keeps on doing what is evil—for the Jew first and also for the Gentile. ¹⁰ But there will be glory and honor and peace from God for all who do good—for the Jew first and also for the Gentile. ¹¹ For God does not show favoritism.

Paul does not pull any punches here. He says if we refuse to repent and turn from our sin, we are “storing up wrath.” We are running up a tab that we will eventually have to pay. This is where we conclude there must be degrees of Hell and degrees of Heavenly reward.

Most people believe the afterlife is a pass/fail deal. You either pass or you fail. Everyone derives the same benefits or curses equally. Some schools are going to the purely pass/fail system to avoid “stigmatizing people who don’t get good grades.” However, the result is that incentives are taken away for those who could excel, and everyone now works to just “pass.” Some people see Heaven and Hell that way. They are content to coast into Heaven because they have “passed” by turning to Christ for salvation.

The idea of punishment and rewards in Heaven and Hell makes sense based on God’s justice. Is it just for someone who lived faithfully in discipleship and endured the abuse of the world to be treated the same as one who did the bare minimum? Likewise with Hell. Why would the most abusive sinner (like Adolf Hitler) be treated the same as the one who was a fairly decent person who refused God’s salvation? If we do not see ourselves clearly and the situation truthfully, we are making things worse for ourselves.

Grace or Works?

Someone is bound to ask (I hope they ask): I thought we were saved by grace and not by works. What happened to the idea of “No Condemnation?” I believed we were going to get to skip judgment. I don’t think we will necessarily skip judgment; we will be spared condemnation for our sin, because Christ pays the debt.

This passage does not tell us we can be saved by what we do. Just the opposite. Paul shows us that “all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.” That is where this is going. He is trying to show that no one can be saved because of their supposed “goodness.” Those who have turned from their sin and turned to Christ will give evidence of this by moving in a different direction in their life. We will not be perfect, but we will start to live for a different purpose. Those who have lived only for themselves will be judged by their works . . . in other words; God will reveal that these folks deserve eternal condemnation. He will show them they are not the good people they thought they were. No one in Hell is going to say they are there by mistake. Someone has said, “Everyone in Hell will wish they had committed even one less sin to make Hell more tolerable.”

So whether we are here in this body or away from this body, our goal is to please him. ¹⁰ For we must all stand before Christ to be judged. We will each receive whatever we deserve for the good or evil we have done in this earthly body. (2 Corinthians 5:9-10)

Likewise, those who are welcomed into God's Kingdom through their surrender to Christ will be judged for how they lived as followers of Christ.

The Lord did not save us so we could have one endless recess. He called us to follow Him. On the last day the faith of believers will be evaluated, if you will, by our works. God will give a greater reward to those who have been most faithful. It seems to me, if you feel you have lots of rewards coming . . . you have severely missed the point! I have no idea what these "rewards" will be. In my mind, the greatest reward would come from knowing that we honored the Lord in some way.

The truth that Paul wants to make here is that God treats people impartially. In a world where it sometimes seems that justice is about Who you know or what you can afford, God looks at us objectively. He sees the hurts, the heart, and the hidden things both good and bad. No one has an advantage or disadvantage. His judgment will be fair.

Judgment is Based on What we Know, Not What we Do not Know

People often ask: "what about those who have never heard about Jesus?" Listen to Paul as he continues his argument in verses 12-16,

¹² When the Gentiles sin, they will be destroyed, even though they never had God's written law. And the Jews, who do have God's law, will be judged by that law when they fail to obey it. ¹³ For merely listening to the law doesn't make us right with God. It is obeying the law that makes us right in his sight. ¹⁴ Even Gentiles, who do not have God's written law, show that they know his law when they instinctively obey it, even without having heard it. ¹⁵ They demonstrate that God's law is written in their hearts, for their own conscience and thoughts either accuse them or tell them they are doing right. ¹⁶ And this is the message I proclaim—that the day is coming when God, through Christ Jesus, will judge everyone's secret life.

As we saw at the beginning of Romans 1, everyone knows something about God. We know it from the intricacy of His creation and from the moral sense that resides in us. Those who have not heard of Christ will not be condemned because they did not believe in Him. They will be condemned because they turned away from the truth that could be seen. Those with more information will be judged more harshly if they ignore the truth.

It is similar to the way we treat children. Our teenagers have higher standards and expectations than we have for our toddlers. We know our toddler is going to, at times, say embarrassing and inappropriate things. We expect better behavior from our teens. With more excellent knowledge comes greater expectations. Likewise, the more we know about the Christian faith, the greater our responsibility.

We can't point to non-believers and excuse ourselves saying, "I am just doing what everyone else is doing." The Lord says, "That may be true, but you should know better."

There is coming a day when the Lord will judge each of us. We will be held responsible for what we knew and what we did with what we knew. It will not be enough to show your church membership or baptismal certificate. It won't be enough to say, "I went forward at a meeting" or "I said the sinner's prayer." What God will look at is the sincerity of our heart, the genuineness of our repentance, and whether our professed trust in Christ resulted in us following and obeying Him.

There really is no condemnation for those who confess their sin and entrust themselves to the work of Christ. However, our deeds will be weighed, and rewards will be given.

Conclusions

So, what are we to do with this information? **First, if you feel a little superior to others, take a moment to examine your own life.** Sometimes, the weaknesses we notice in others are the things we struggle with most in our lives but cannot see. This is an excellent time to stop and ask, "Am I doing some of these same things I condemn in others? Do I need to repent of something before the Lord?" Have I forgotten that I have received a grace I did not deserve?

Second, we must remind ourselves daily that one day, we will all face judgment and see that our choices have eternal consequences. One of the biggest problems in our world right now is everyone is "living for the moment." (To some degree, this is a good thing. We do need to remember that the only time we truly must honor the Lord and serve each other is this particular moment, and we should make it the best moment possible). On the other hand, we also need to live with the reality that we are living now to live again. We must remember that being a follower of Christ means we follow Him!

Finally, We need to see that there is a ripple effect to every decision we make. Our decisions

1. Impact the direction of our lives. They will bring us closer to Him or move us farther away. They will move us toward greater reward or keep us from greater reward.
2. They impact the condition of our hearts. When we make ungodly decisions, our hearts become calloused and can eventually become hardened. The more hardened we are, the more sin we can justify. The flipside is also true: the more we follow Him, the softer and more responsive our hearts become, not only to the Lord, but to each other.
3. Our decisions impact the people around us. People are watching what you and I do. Our children watch to see if we obey the same rules they are expected to obey. People all around us consciously or subconsciously compare our profession of faith to how we live out that faith. They make decisions about God based on what they see in our lives. But it's not only our children; our friends, family, co-workers, neighbors, and fellow believers are all watching to see if we do believe.

The idea that our sinful behavior is not hurting anyone else is a lie from the pit of Hell. The wicked and the good people seem to have the same problem: we are sinful people in desperate need of grace, mercy, and a new direction. Fortunately, our great God specializes in all of those things.