

Romans 2:4-24 - Life or Fury

ROMANS SERMON #6

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Paul has only just begun to unpack the Gospel, the good news of Jesus, the power of God to save. This good news that he has received, a message that has rocked his world, is so good that he is willing to rearrange his life to deliver it. Though to some it may look like empty words, Paul is not at all ashamed of it. Because this gospel is the power of God for salvation, the power to save.

When we say it's good news that we can be saved through the Gospel, we should be asking, "saved from what?" So throughout chapter 1, Paul laid out the fact that our biggest problem is that, apart from Christ, we are under the wrath of God.

He described the creeping wrath of God that is already being brought to bear on lives. God punishes sins by giving people over to their desires and letting them reap what they have sown. And Paul laid out in chapter 1 many of the ways we violate God's perfect law and how each of them is a way we receive in ourselves the due penalty for our sins. And we read his list and we are all leveled and all recognize we need Jesus as much as anybody else does.

But the long list of sins in chapter 1 would have been a list that most of his religious audience would have associated with the irreligious gentiles.

Which means that one group in this church, the Gentiles, would have felt pretty beaten up by chapter 1 while the religious Jews nodded smugly. And Paul is working to pull down walls between the races, put everybody in the same boat. So it wouldn't have done the trick if the gentiles were leveled and the Jews were nodding saying, "That's right", feeling smug and self-righteous.

So in chapter 2, Paul turns to his religious audience and says, "Now your turn."

Romans 2:1-5 "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. 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? 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.

So to the religious people he says, "You're not better. You are doing the same things - an idea which he'll defend more later in the passage.

But here he says, "You're facing God's wrath, too."

In chapter 1 verse 18, Paul said "the wrath of God is revealed from heaven" before he described how God gives us over to sin and lets us have what we want. But here he says there is also wrath being stored up for judgment day.

When we don't know Jesus, not only are we being judged as we reap the consequences of actions now, but we will one day stand before God as a judge. I like to quote Lewis a lot about the doctrine of God's wrath because he does a good job explaining how it is a chosen reality: We tell God we don't want Him, and He says, "Thy will be done"¹ and lets us reap the fruit of doing what we want, on into eternity. Which is good and true, but incomplete.

Because God's wrath is not only our reaping what we sow. But one day we will stand before Him, face to face, and He will judge, and there is a reality of hell to face.

¹ C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*.

You really can't read the Gospels and say that Jesus didn't believe in hell. Jesus in about a dozen passages calls hell a reality. One of many examples is:

Mark 9:47-48 "47 And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, 48 'where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.'"

But isn't that just symbolic language?

Doesn't he mean something else?

Maybe it's symbolic. Maybe he's speaking in metaphors. But if his words here are just a metaphor, then they are used to describe some reality that is so bad that it is indescribable.

Symbols represent something bigger than the symbol:

Your wedding ring represents something bigger: your marriage. Our flag represents something bigger than a flag, our nation. And if Jesus is using symbolic words here to describe hell, he is describing something bigger - something worse - than his words.

Nobody in hell would say that Jesus exaggerated and it's not all that bad. Nobody is there saying, "Jesus described it as fire, but it's nowhere near that bad - it's actually kind of like the mall - It's tolerable, but you don't really want to be there, and kinda wish you hadn't ended up there - but 'fire' is overboard."

So whether his words are symbolic or not makes very little difference. He is describing a horrible reality.

When we sin against an infinitely holy God, we can expect to be judged face to face, to pay a fair price, an infinite one.

And I know we are hesitant to talk judgment and fire and brimstone because there are pretty strange Christians obsessed with hell and judgment,

standing on street corners, shouting people down. And we can assume the idea that God will come and judge is limited to those groups and not part of the historic Christian faith.

But the apostles creed, written as a summary of the high points of what all Christians believe, says,

"He ascended into Heaven and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence he shall come to judge the living and the dead."

All Christians believe in a future day (we don't know when) that Jesus who came meekly in the manger will come in judgment.

Now as scary as this sounds and as much as we think Christianity would be better if we just phased out this idea, this is an important part of our faith, and there are some important comforts in it.

For one, knowing that God will come to sort things out can free us from feeling like we have to. Particularly when we are living out our calling to comfort victims, to seek justice, it can be a frustrating process. When we are working against human evil, we will feel how bad and persistent and seemingly triumphant evil is that we long for Jesus to come back to make things right. Justice so often seems to miscarry, and we feel we are making so little progress. So much injustice goes on with little consequence.

Take the example of the shooter in Vegas. He kills all those people, inflicting unspeakable loss on all of those victims' families, they'll be carrying pain for the rest of their lives, and before anything can happen to him he commits suicide and takes himself out in a second. That's not very good justice. That was too little for him. He should have to pay.

Or if we stand with victims of abuse and the courts get involved, we know that even a guilty verdict for an abuser is very imperfect justice. The victims get nightmares for years and he gets a year in jail. They experience injustice and loss and he gets a slap on the wrist, or even no punishment at all. We want better justice.

The courts work better for you if you're rich, the whistleblowers are demonized, people are punished far too little. Or the innocent are punished, or punishment is excessive.

Some of the damage that is done by injustices is that those who are mistreated, abused, cheated, or are wrongly accused, or those who stand with those on the receiving end of injustice can become incredibly bitter because justice just doesn't get done. The bitterness that comes from that sense of injustice being carried out on you or someone you love can fester and wreck you.

But knowing that God will judge can be a comfort. It is comforting to know that human justice isn't the final word, that God will come and give exact retribution, and that nobody gets away with anything in the end.

We need this hope when we're wronged and if we're going to help the weak and help victims, but not be consumed by the injustices ourselves. It's a battle to have joy in this life, and joy gets leached away when we are consumed with the unfairness and injustice of the world.

Piper writes "*God's promise says, 'Yes, an outrage has been committed against you. Yes, it deserves to be severely punished. Yes, the person has not yet experienced that punishment. But, No, you may not be the one to punish, and you may not go on relishing personal retribution. Why? Because God will see to it that justice is done. God will repay. You cannot improve on his justice. He sees every angle of the evil done against you—far better than you can see it. His justice will be far more thorough than any justice you could administer.' If you hold a grudge, you doubt the Judge."*²

Trusting that God is the judge, that God will carry out perfect justice is incredibly freeing. We don't want to dismiss this attribute of God because it isn't cool anymore, we need this God. Let's not live like his future justice isn't a rock solid reality. Because it is.

It's also important to leave room for the wrath of God in our picture of God and our view of history, because anytime we push God out of the picture, we treat that as a job opening.

If we believe He isn't in control, for example, we will try to be (and we'll fail

² John Piper, *Future Grace, Revised Edition*. (Colorado Springs, Multnomah, 2012), 266.

and be anxious).

If we believe He isn't all knowing, we will step into that role and become arrogant.

If we believe God isn't righteous, we treat ourselves as the standard of righteousness and judge everybody by ourselves. If God isn't God, then we try to fill that opening.

And if we believe God is not a God who punishes, we try to fill that role.

And we then execute vengeance through gossip and slander, through theft (they deserved it), through our politics, through passive aggressive behavior, through making the lives of others miserable. And in its pathological form, even mass shootings like Vegas show how we step into the place of God when we push Him out. Here is this evil gunman, with no God in his mind, and he created a judgment day where he could decide who lived and died.

If we don't believe God is a God who rights wrongs and punishes sin, we will be tempted to step into that role.

But believing it frees us.

Paul applies the future judgment of God to our lives in Romans 12 this way:

Romans 12:18-21 “If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. 19 Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” 20 To the contrary, “if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.” 21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

Knowing there is wrath of God coming allows us to “leave it” to Him.

We can seek justice here, work to right wrongs, but along the way carry ourselves with grace, love even our worst enemies, provide pathways for even the worst of the worst to be forgiven when they repent, and we leave

the final justice up to God. That's how we overcome evil.

Those are some of the comforts we can take from the coming judgment of God. They won't get away with anything because the Lord will come back in judgment.

So be free from bitterness, free from joyless frustration. Be up close with victims, be in a frustrating situation, but rejoice that there is a perfect judge.

But the main point he's making here is not first that we should take comfort in the fact that God will judge others.

But that we should come to the realization that God will judge me. That I won't get away with anything either. And moral, religious, church-going people are no exception to that.

I like to believe that God's judgment is only good news for me and bad news for my enemies. But one day, I will stand before the God who made me, and give an account. And all of the ways I feel OK because I compare myself to others will mean nothing when I'm answering for myself.

And Paul is levelling everybody, saying the judgment day that is coming for our enemies is also coming for us. Because we are just like them.

We will all one day look into the face of God who has come as our judge.

So what will that day be like? On what basis will God judge us? What's the standard going to be?

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.

What makes the difference on that judgment day according to verses 6-8 is whether in our lives we were patiently doing well and seeking God's glory, or whether we were self-seeking.

Now if you've been around the Bible for awhile, a passage like this is startling. Because it seems to contradict the very heart of the Christian faith. We believe the message that we can't be saved by our works, that we can't earn eternal life.

Paul has already said:

Romans 1:16 "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek."

So salvation comes to those who believe. It isn't through the works of the law, or works of obedience that we are saved.

And soon we'll get to

Romans 3:19-20 "Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. 20 For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin."

So all over the place, the Bible makes clear that no human being - nobody - will be justified by doing good works and obeying God's law. Everybody is a law-breaker. So nobody has any hope that their obedience will be good enough to fare well at the judgment.

But it seems like in verses 6-7, Paul is saying, "If you're good you'll go to heaven and if you're bad you'll go to hell."

And verses 9-11 seems to say the same thing:

2: 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.

So again he says the judgment is based on what you do.

So how does this fit?

The law of God is any command of God, old testament or new testament, where God tells us what he requires of us and tells us what will happen if we fail to obey.

And if we perfectly kept that law, we could stand before God on judgment day with no guilt and receive our reward.

There's "glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good" (verse 10) and "to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life" (verse 7).

And that offer stands.

But we all fail to keep it.

Psalm 14:2-3, which Paul will quote in the next chapter says:

Psalm 14:2-3 "The LORD looks down from heaven on the children of man,to see if there are any who understand,who seek after God.3 They have all turned aside; together they have become corrupt; there is none who does good, not even one."

So yes, there is the reward of eternal life for all who do good. But there is none who does good, not even one. It's like an unclaimed inheritance, sitting in a vault, and nobody can open it.

So all the law will do for us is pronounce us guilty on judgment day. It crushes our hopes of ever getting out from under the wrath of God through what we do. It only pronounces us guilty.

So it is absolutely true that the judgment of God is based on works. It's true that all who do good will be fine on judgment day. But also true that none of us could stand up under God's scrutiny of our works, so we'll only be pronounced guilty on our own. We all break the law.

And even those who don't know the law of God do have some law they know and that they haven't kept:

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.

So everybody will be judged by the law they have. The gentiles, who don't have the ten commandments, will be judged by all the ways they fail to keep their own standards - the law written on their hearts, the fact that they've all violated their conscience. God knows their secrets, and nobody keeps the standard they have.

Now some of the religious jews in Paul's audience thought their place in the favored nation of Israel would give them a leg up on judgment day.

There was actually popular belief among the jews that God would treat sins of jews differently.³

A few years ago, I got pulled over for rolling through a stop sign by my house. (I was trying to be a good steward and preserve brake pads, but the officer wasn't impressed.)

And when he came up to the window and we got to talking, I asked him if I knew this one family member of mine who works with the police. He did, and as a result, he let me go. I dropped a name, and knowing that name got me out of a ticket.

And there was a sense among the jews, similar to a sense among religious people today, that just being called the sons of Abraham, just having the

³ Doug Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 126.

name as part of the chosen nation of God, would get them out of trouble on judgment day.

Just dropping the name jew, and having the Torah, the law of God, would be a power that would get them out of trouble.

And they would say, "To the jew first, and also to the greek." God's blessings went first to the jews and then secondly to the Greeks. So the jews are the vip flyers on judgment day and are able to make it past security far more easily than the unfavored gentiles.

But Paul puts a twist on their saying here. He is saying, "To the jew first, but also to the Greek" not just to apply to their blessings, but to their judgment. Judgment goes to the jew first and then to the greeks."

They would have said, "But we have God's law! He gave us his word! The gentiles don't have that. Aren't we favored, aren't we special? Doesn't that give us power in that judgment day?"

**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."**

Knowing the Bible, knowing about Christianity, knowing the commands, knowing the way, having a track record of going to church doesn't make you right with God. In fact, it can make you more guilty!

The Bible doesn't have magical power to shield us from judgment. Knowing it exposes us to more judgment because we knew better. So if we think we

are the righteous ones and they are the sinful ones, we are missing the message that we are all leveled. If we think knowing will get us off the hook, it could make things worse for us.

And as much as you might think you are God's answer to humanity's problems because you're religious, you actually make things worse in the world too. The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.

And how much is this true today? Religious hypocrites who police others don't police themselves and end up in the news, and God's name is mocked among unbelievers.

We are the lights, the instructors, but we don't instruct ourselves.

We make demands of others, but won't carry the same burdens ourselves.

We use our faith to police everybody else.

Religion is so quickly toxic. When we come together and impose laws on others. That person didn't forgive me enough, didn't care for me enough, didn't value me enough. That's a consumer mentality. We are called to carry the burdens of others, not demand that others carry ours.

But because we misuse the commands we become just as bad.

So these are not encouraging chapters.

The gentiles don't keep their own standards, the religious people don't keep theirs.

We all do the same things.

We might fool ourselves into thinking we can be right with God by keeping the law, because that type of thinking comes so naturally to us. We think "do something to earn a reward" and we can expect to be rewarded for our doing. But it is clear that we could all be judged by the law, but never saved by it.

So Paul had to obliterate those hopes so he could do something astonishing, something counter-intuitive, something that we need to have announced to us again and again because it is so contrary to nature.

He announces a righteousness that doesn't come from our perfect doing. He announces a righteousness apart from the law that is received by faith, that's for jews and gentiles, and where we can know we'll be able to hold up in the judgment:

Romans 3:21 But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— 22 the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: 23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24 and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, 25 whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. 26 It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

There's a different righteousness that is revealed. One that is by faith.

On judgment day it will be clear that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. And that we can't alleviate our bad condition with obedience.

But Jesus was put forward as a propitiation, a sacrifice that pays the price. And when we receive Him by faith, we are justified. We are made just.

The record of sin that the law holds against us gets cancelled by the perfect lawkeeper. Because God is just and wouldn't punish for our sins twice, He can look at how it was punished in Christ and call it enough.

So what about works?

If we expect them to save us, we will only fall short. Works can't save. But, in those who are saved, there are sufficient good works done by Christ in us to be a public witness to the fact that we were truly Christians when we stand for judgment.

So our debts are paid by Christ, His righteousness is transferred to us, and on that day when we are judged, there will be evidence in works.

"The presence or absence of saving faith in our hearts will be disclosed by the presence or absence of good works of love in our lives" (Stott 84)⁴

"We would follow those who maintain that the justification by faith granted to the believer in this life is the sufficient cause of those works that God takes into account at the time of the judgment. The initial declaration of the believers' acquittal before the bar of heaven at the time of one's justification is infallibly confirmed by the judgment according to works at the last assize."⁵

"Now, in none of these texts does it say that eternal life is earned by or merited by or based on good deeds. They simply say, in effect, that the final verdict of eternal life will accord with good deeds. They go together. And the reason they go together is not that works has replaced faith or that merit has replaced grace, but because the gospel of justification by faith is the power of God unto salvation. It is not a weak thing. The gospel does not come into a life and leave it under the dominion of sin. It comes in the power of the Holy Spirit. And where it is believed, trusted and cherished, it produces what Paul calls "the obedience of faith"⁶

⁴ John Stott, *The Message of Romans* (Downer's Grove: Intervarsity, 1994). 84.

⁵ Doug Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 143..

⁶ Piper, John. "The Final Divide: Eternal Wrath or Eternal Life, Part II" desiringgod.org (accessed 10/4/2017). <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/the-final-divide-eternal-life-or-eternal-wrath-part-2>