

ROMANS

GOD'S RIGHTEOUSNESS REVEALED

THE MORALIST CONDEMNED

Text: Romans 2:1-8

Main preaching point: Paul warns hypocrites that their double life will one day be revealed and judged.

INTRODUCTION:

An archaeologist named Howard Carter discovered the tomb of the Egyptian King Tut back in the early 1920s. When he finally broke into the tomb, he found the large, beautiful casket you can now see in the Egyptian museum.

When he opened the outer casket, he discovered another casket inside and then a third casket inside the second. Each of these was covered with a gold leaf, as ornate as could be imagined. When the fourth casket was opened, Carter discovered the mummy of Tut, buried with the beautiful solid gold mask seen in many pictures over the years. Despite all this outward beauty, when Carter removed the solid gold death mask from the head of King Tut, inside was nothing but a dry, dusty, lifeless corpse.

What was true for the great Egyptian king is also true for all humanity—outward beauty can conceal but cannot change inner death. When people look at you, are they seeing the real thing? Are we seeing a mask or the real person? Often, we don't know. But one person does—and that Person is God.

In this lesson, we will look at Paul's words in Romans about hypocrites or moralists—those who go through life with a mask, concealing their true selves underneath. Unfortunately, hypocrites think they are also hiding their true selves from God, but they are not. God will one day reveal the truth about every sinner, especially those who think they have been fooling God all their life. And that's Paul's message. In chapter 2:1-16, Paul will explain five things about the judgment of God.

1. God's judgment will be *according to truth*. (vv.1-4)
2. God's judgment will be *according to works*. (vv.5-10)
3. God's judgment will be *tempered by the light of revelation*. (vv.11-12)
4. God's judgment will be *according to revelation and conscience*. (vv.13-15)
5. God's judgment will be *administered by Jesus Christ*. (v.16)

Let's set our text in its context.

CONTEXT:

Paul opened this letter in chapter one speaking about his eagerness to preach this Gospel to those in Rome (1:7, 11, 14). He is on his way to Spain (15:24). We read of the reason for his excitement to preach the Gospel.

In chapter one, verse 16, he says, "I'm not ashamed of this Gospel. I'm really excited to preach this Gospel because it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek." Then in verse 17, he says, "for in it, for in this Gospel, the righteousness of God is revealed."

Then from verse 18 of chapter one to the end of the chapter, it seems like there's been nothing but bad news. Paul starts this letter by saying: I have some good news that I am eager to preach. And then he has unfolded truth after truth after truth that has convicted us, and it is compelling. It has reduced us to ashes. It has chopped us down at the knees. It has shut our mouths by the end of chapter one.

If you're like me, you're saying: "Can I get a word of relief here? Is there a break soon? Can I have some good news? It's like getting a root canal, you know? But Paul isn't done with us yet. He's just broken off the crown. He's now going for the tooth nerve. Relief is on the way, but he's not there yet.

We feel like the congregation where Jonathan Edwards preached long ago. As he was preaching one of his soul-stirring messages about the judgment of God and the threat of eternal damnation, one of the members of his church cried out, "But Mr. Edwards, is there no mercy with God?" Jonathan Edwards said, "You have to wait until chapter three to hear about that." As we wait for the sunshine of good news to burst upon our spirit and soul, let us not miss the thunder meant to strike our conscience in this text.

Paul shows us **three excuses** that the man in church or the moral man makes. They are excuses they use to try and wiggle their way out of the judgment of God. Paul points out the fact that he, too, is under condemnation and fails to meet the righteous standard demanded by God. It's as if Paul asks, "Does being a good, moral person or avoiding gross vices like vulgar idolatry or immorality give you an advantage that exempts you from the judgment of God?"

Let's unpack each excuse and then underline the main truth Paul wants us to know about the judgment of God.

EXPOSITION:

A. THE ADDRESSEE (vv.1-2)

¹Therefore you have no excuse, everyone of you who passes judgment, for in that which you judge another, you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things. ²And we know that the judgment of God rightly falls upon those who practice such things.

Let's step into this section by identifying...

Who is Paul speaking to? The word "**therefore**" links the people addressed in Chapter 1 with those addressed in Chapter 2. From the **practical atheist** in Chapter 1, Paul shifts his argument in Chapter 2 to deal with the **critical moralizer**. Who is this person? This is *the virtuous heathen in his day*. This is *the sanctimonious Jew*. This is both *the Jew and Gentile who considers themselves above others*. This is *the moral man in the church or the community*.

Paul exposes **the first excuse the moral man makes, which is the excuse of DISAPPROVAL**.

- ¹Therefore you have no excuse, everyone of you who passes judgment, for in that which you judge another, you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things.

“Everyone of you who passes judgment” throws a blanket over the human race and tells us there are no exceptions. To **“pass judgment”** or to **“judge another”** means the same thing. The moral man or woman would say, “Paul, I disapprove of those things you spoke of in Chapter 1. I don’t agree with any of those practices. I’m not a homosexual or lesbian. I’m not a murderer. I don’t hate God. I am not untrustworthy. In fact, Paul, I think the judgment they receive from God is right! I am not like that, Paul. I love my family. I am hard-working. I am a good citizen. I help people. This shoe does not fit me. I disapprove of that cesspool of sin—so certainly that puts me in a different category.” Paul says, not so fast. You may *disapprove* of those things, but you are guilty of **“practicing the same things”** you judge in others. How so?

Let’s be clear: judging itself is not condemned. Jesus said in John 7:24, *“Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment.”* Jesus did not call us to suspend critical thinking or to renounce all criticism and rebuke of others, for even Jesus did this.

No, the moral man is condemned because he is *hypocritical* and uses *a double standard*. If you compare the first group in Chapter 1:18-32 with the people in Chapter 2, you will see some similarities and some differences.

The similarities are that both groups have *a certain knowledge of God as Creator and Judge (1:32; 2:2)*, but both contradict their knowledge by their behavior. But here is the difference between them, the immoral person given over by God *does the things they know to be wrong and approves those who do them (1:32)*, whereas the moral man *does what he knows to be wrong and condemns others who do them*, which is hypocritical. In doing so, the moral man sets himself up as a judge, only to find that he is being judged for doing the same things—**“and we know that the judgment of God rightly falls on those who practice such things” (2:2)**.

Don’t miss this—God’s judgment here differs from man’s judgment in verse 1. Paul is saying that you’ve been holding court on other people, but you are about to be subpoenaed to God’s court—and it will be a perfect judgment. **“We know”** this because the Word of God reveals it. And it will **“rightly”** fall on the moralist because God’s judgment will be *according to truth (John 12:48)*.

Paul uncovers a tendency in human beings that has woven its way into the character of fallen man since the Garden of Eden. Man tends to be critical of everyone else except himself. What we harshly judge in others, we leniently excuse in ourselves. Three times in the first three verses, Paul says the moral man is guilty of **“practicing”** the same things he judges in others.

What we judge *openly* and *verbally* about others, we practice *secretly* and *inwardly* ourselves. In other words, *the root of the sins that the people commit in chapter one, we commit those same sins in our lives*. They’re found in our *thoughts, desires, attitudes, and actions*. The same behavior we judge to be *so serious in them is not so serious in us*. We know sin is *“worthy of death” (Rom.1:32)*, but we don’t say the same thing about ourselves. The issue in this text is not so much about *making biblical judgments*. It is not so much about *calling sin, sin*. The issue is passing judgment but practicing the same things. Can you name just one area in your own life where you are prone to have a double standard?

APPLICATION: Practicing double standards usually leaks out of our lives in two ways:

- By taking refuge in theological arguments—we say things like, *“Well, I know the Bible says that...but doesn’t it also say this...?”* That is a blame-shifting response.

- By appealing to God’s character—we say things like, “*I know this is true...but the Lord is good!*”

When do you find yourself most likely to blame-shift? When you are *fearful? Embarrassed? Weak? Self-focused?* How would God have you respond *when the truth comes out about you?*

B. THE APPROACH (vv.3-4)

How is Paul going to approach this moral person? Paul does not back off. He amps up his argument. In verses 3-4, Paul uses a rhetorical device called a *soliloquy*—where you carry on an imaginary conversation with an opponent. He will do this later on in **Romans 9:19-21**,

- ¹⁹ You will say to me then, “Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?” ²⁰ On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, “Why did you make me like this,” will it? ²¹ Or does not the potter have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for common use?

Using this very effective form of communication, please note how verses 3-4 end with question marks. Paul addresses a representative person with *intentional sarcasm*. He answers questions before you raise them in your mind.

- ³ But do you suppose this, O man, when you pass judgment on those who practice such things and do the same *yourself*, that you will escape the judgment of God?

The question anticipates a negative response—no! Why? Because God’s judgment is *inescapable*. You practice the same sins. Maybe different in *extent*. Maybe different in *trajectory*. Maybe different in *manifestation*. But when you peel back the bark and get to the trunk and core, it is the very same root. You are breaking the same Ten Commandments; it’s just a different manifestation of the sin. And you will stand in the same courtroom as the immoral person in chapter 1—and the books will be opened (*Rev.20*). There is no “out” for the moral man just because the thin veneer on the external packaging of your life is more *respectable*. On the inside, you are spiritually dead, filthy, and just as depraved. The first excuse the moral man uses is *disapproval*.

The second excuse that the moral man often raises that he is not under the judgment of God is DENIAL.

He says—“*Well, God isn’t angry with me.*” And his reasoning goes something like this: “*Look at my life. Look at the kindness of God to me. Look at all the things that God blesses me with. How can God be angry with me if He’s blessing me like He is?*” Paul advances his argument yet further.

You suppress the same revelation.
 You practice the same sins.
 You suffer the same judgment.
 You resist the same kindness.

- ⁴ Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and tolerance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance?

The rhetorical question is raised to make a stinging statement. It is intended to be provocative. It is designed to make you answer the question yourself. The answer is you do “**think lightly of the riches of His kindness**” that has been extended to you.

The phrase **“think lightly”** in the original language means to think down on. The idea is to be dismissive. To underestimate. To devalue. To pass over or to disregard. God’s kindness begins with common grace like life, marriage, family, kids, health, education, food, shelter, friends, beauty, art, music, sports, etc., then it extends to saving grace. The rain doesn’t just fall on the elect, but the just and the unjust (*Matt.5:45*). God has been so kind to all sinners. **“The riches of His kindness”**—God floods our lives with an abundance, a treasure house of kindness. But you think so lightly of God’s goodness.

He has been so **“tolerant and patient,”** which means longsuffering and forbearing. He could have executed divine vengeance on the very first sin that entered our minds, desires, and lives, but He has exercised delay and restraint and has not consumed us in His wrath.

Paul says, wait a minute. You’re misunderstanding the kindness of God—**“not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance.”** The kindness of God is seeking to melt your heart down and direct you to repent—change your mind, change your affections, and change your will. It is a new direction with a new affection. It is a turning to God and a turning away from sin, and you cannot do one without the other.

As sinners, we are like a pregnant woman past her due date. But she doesn’t have sense enough to go to the hospital to get induced. So, God gives us kindness to *induce* repentance in our lives.

As sinners, we are like children whose library book is past due, but we still want to keep going to the library to check out more books. God’s kindness sends us *notice after notice after notice after notice*, and we twist those notices with our sinful thinking, and we think it means God is saying: other children don’t need the book, and we can go get more books.

God’s kindness is meant to remind us that we need to turn from sin and turn to Him. Paul says don’t make this soul-destroying mistake. God’s kindness and patience are meant to turn you around 180 degrees to go in the opposite direction—toward His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. But you—Mr. or Mrs. Moralist—think you’re okay.

APPLICATION: What events or things can you call to remembrance that put you in the frame of thinking to change your mind about sin and turn toward God?

C. THE ARGUMENT (vv.5-8)

Think about what Paul has said up to this point. The moral man has no excuse. He or she does not get a pass. Why?

- Because they suppress the same revelation.
- Because they practice the same sins.
- Because they resist the same kindness.

J.B. Lightfoot once said, “The blackest sin is not righteousness violated, but mercy despised.” *Disapproval* is no excuse. *Denial* is no excuse. And **GOOD MORAL DUTIES** are no excuse.

The third excuse is implied, and it runs down through verse 11. It is one of the deepest human illusions we face, and it is this excuse: “It won’t happen to me.” This excuse reasons like this...

"Well, I'm different. I'm the exception; somehow, I'm in a different category than others. I'm a special case, you know. The wicked deserve the judgment of God, but I'm not the wicked. They will be judged on judgment day, but I won't be. God will make allowances for me. I'm a good person, and I go to church. I give. I support charities. I was baptized. I'm a decent person."

Paul demolishes that excuse in verse 5,

⁵ But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God,

The higher the skyscraper, the deeper the foundation and Paul knows the self-righteous, moralist churchgoer is high in his pride, so he must drill down to the depth of his foundation and demolish it. Paul says if you fail to perceive that God's goodness is *intended* to lead you to repentance, you are piling up wrath for yourself. Why?

1. **"Because of your stubbornness...."** That means callousness, hardness of heart, or obstinacy. You won't listen. You are like a stubborn mule refusing to go the way of his master. Great preaching moves beyond the "we" and "us" and gets to the "you." This is great, Holy Spirit-inspired preaching by Paul. This is painfully personal.
2. **"...and unrepentant heart..."** is a rare occurrence in Greek literature, and it has the meaning of an irrevocable, unalterable, and lost heart. The word "heart" speaks of the whole inner life—not parts of your life, but all of it, and Paul says because you are callous and refuse to forsake sin and take God's way....

"You are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God." On this day, there will not be one drop of mercy. There will not be one ounce of grace on the last day—pure, sheer, unadulterated, unvarnished, unmitigated wrath.

Jonathan Edwards put it this way, "The dam of God's kindness and patience and tolerance is holding back the river of God's wrath from you, but the longer you remain stubborn and stiff-necked and unrepentant, it is building and building and building, and one day God will remove the dam of His settled displeasure and it is going to swallow you up into the belly of hell."

That day will be not only one of wrath but of revelation (Paul says, **"day of wrath and revelation"**). Revelation signifies *the making known to people something previously existent but not known*. God's righteous judgment was always a fact, but people have not always appreciated it, nor will they until the day of revelation. Then, it will be clear beyond all doubt.

God's righteous judgment will be based upon two inflexible principles:

The first is called **the principle of exact retribution**—which says we get back what we have done.

- **Proverbs 24:12**—If you say, "See, we did not know this,"
Does He not consider *it* who weighs the hearts?
And does He not know *it* who keeps your soul?
And will He not render to man according to his work?

- **Psalm 62:12**—And lovingkindness is Yours, O Lord,
For You recompense a man according to his work.

The second is called **the principle of public revelation**—which says what we have done will finally come out and be seen in the end for what it really is.

- **Ecclesiastes 12:14**—For God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil.
- **1 Corinthians 4:5**—Therefore do not go on passing judgment before the time, *but wait* until the Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of *men's* hearts; and then each man's praise will come to him from God.

We need to pause here for a moment, and I'd like you to make some notes in your Bible or on your note sheet because we are shown three things about God's righteous judgment that we don't need to forget. Verse 6 makes it plain.

⁶WHO WILL RENDER TO EACH PERSON ACCORDING TO HIS DEEDS:

The first thing we see is something about the certainty of judgment. Did you notice the first three words where he says, **"God will render"**? Notice that the psalmist did not say God *might* render or God *could* render. But that *God will render*. I might add. He's going to render this judgment *effectively*.

Goethe, the Swiss theologian, reminds us of what a just judgment it will be. In America, we watch court cases and see lawyers finagling and getting around the system, figuring out all kinds of clever ways to get their client off. Sometimes we know that the person is guilty in the public, but somehow this lawyer was able to get them around the system. That won't happen when we stand before *God*. There will be no wiggle room. There will be no chance of injustice. We will stand before the just Judge of the world, and He will render a perfectly just and irrevocably divine judgment.

The second thing we discover is not just the certainty of this judgment, but the universality of this judgment—"who will render to each person...." Notice it didn't say God will render this judgment to *some* people, but to *each* person. This means everyone. This means you and you and you and you and you and me. He affirms this in the context. If you notice, in verse 9, he mentions *"every soul"*—*There will be tribulation and distress for every soul of man who does evil*. He also mentions the Jew and the Greek in verse 10. In verse 12, he speaks of those *"without the law,"* meaning those who don't know the Bible, and he mentions *"those who are under the law,"* meaning those who have been exposed to the Bible. In other words, *there are no exceptions*. There are *no loopholes*. No one gets out of this one—it will be universal.

It will be *certain*; it will be *universal*.

The third thing he shows us in verse 6 is that it will be according to our deeds. In other words, he gives us *the criteria of judgment*. He tells us that judgment will be based on *what we do or don't do*. It will not be based on *what we intended to do, what we thought about doing, or what we wanted to do*. It will be based on what we actually did. It will involve *sins of commission*—*sins we did that we know we shouldn't have done*. It will be based upon *sins of omission*—*things we know we should have done but didn't*. And the criteria of judgment will be according to our deeds.

Why is judgment according to works? Is that a basic question? Why am I going to be judged based on my works? If I'm saved by grace, why will I be judged by my works? Let me answer that question for you. And it's a very important question. The answer is: *because what a person does is a clue to what they really are.* Don't miss that. *What a person does is a clue to what they really are.* A dog barks. A cat purrs. A cow moos. But how do you know what a Christian is? You know what a Christian is *by what he does.*

How do you know if your heart has been changed by God? How do you know if you've been made right with God by faith in Jesus Christ? How do you know? Verse 7 tells you how you know. Look at it with me.

⁷ to those who by perseverance in doing good deeds seek for glory and honor in immortality, eternal life;

These are the birthmarks of one who is born again. They are the signs of a Christian.

- They endure doing good.
- They live for God's glory.
- They are full of desire for God's honor.
- They are heavenly-minded people.

That's what they're seeking, for that's the bent of their life. He's seeking to strive to please the Lord. That's how you can know what a Christian is. You look at what he does. He is always seeking to honor God. He doesn't always do it, but he perseveres in doing good. He doesn't give up. He's not focused on the things of this world alone. They are looking for another city, whose builder and maker is God (*Heb.11:10*). That's how you can tell.

How do you know when a person professes faith but they're not really right with God? Verse 8 tells us.

⁸ but to those who are selfishly ambitious and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, [is going to be] wrath and indignation.

These are the birthmarks of the unregenerate.

- They are selfishly ambitious; their life is all about them.
- They will not acknowledge God's Lordship.
- They will not acknowledge God's right to rule over them.
- They have a spirit of self-will.
- They do not obey the truth.
- They are unwilling to submit their lives to the authority of God's Word.
- They lack teachability.
- They refuse to submit to the truth of Holy Scripture.
- Their convictions are their own convictions, but they're not the convictions of Scripture.

There are only two kinds of people in the world—believers and unbelievers. Those who believe in Christ and live for eternity and those who do not believe in Christ and live for themselves. Paul says all who are in that second category of living for themselves will be condemned. All of them, without distinction. Rich and poor. Black and white. Educated and uneducated. Religious and non-religious. Respectable and immoral. It makes no difference, and Paul is serious about this. Unless a person is born again, he will not see the kingdom of heaven (*John 3:3*). Paul wants us to understand it in verse 11. It's almost as if he pounds the pulpit and he says, *"For there is no partiality with God."* There is no partiality with God.

That word, **“partiality”** in verse 11, underline it in your Bible. It was a word used by kings and judges who had favorites. They honored these favorites and made exceptions for them. Paul is saying the kings of the earth may do that. The judges of the earth may do that. God is not one of them. He has no favorites. If you are not in Christ, you will be condemned.

CONCLUSION:

I want to close by telling you why a good moral man goes to hell. Jesus actually tells us in Luke 18 why a good moral man will go to hell. He says of that Pharisee in Luke 18:11: *“The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself: ‘God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.’”*

This Pharisee was not an atheist. He was not a fool. He was not an irreligious man. This Pharisee was not an unjust person; this Pharisee was a giver. This Pharisee was disciplined. He was a decent man, as far as people could see. So why did he go to hell? Verse 13 tells us, *“But the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, the sinner!’”*

The moral man will go to hell because he trusted in himself as being righteous. Because he exulted himself. Because he spurned the grace of God. But the publican, the tax collector, asked God to be merciful to him not because he was special. He asked for mercy, and he goes to heaven, not because of his poverty-stricken situation, but he goes to heaven because *he is given a special grace through the merits of Jesus Christ*.

The story is told of two people who went out duck hunting somewhere in the south. There was a kind of brush area there that they were hunting in, and they noticed some smoke out on the horizon. They quickly realized (especially the one with more experience) that they were in trouble.

The friend with him was inexperienced, but the one with the experience knew they were in trouble. They knew this brush fire was coming toward them, and they couldn't outrun it; they couldn't even get around it. So, they stood there. The inexperienced hunter started to pray, *“God forgive me, please help me, please help me.”*

But the experienced hunter did something unusual. He took a match from his pocket and started a fire around him. The fire burned all the ground right around him. Then he took the inexperienced hunter, and they stood in the middle of that burnt place, and as the fire came, the fire raced right over them and didn't even touch the spot where they stood in that burnt place, and it didn't even touch them. The reason is because of where they stood—that place had already been touched by the fire.

In the Book of Romans, *the burnt place is the place where Jesus died*. The burnt place is the place where God's wrath was poured upon His Son, and all who are clinging to Christ will have the fire of judgment sweep right over them. But you must cling to Christ because the Bible says that God's wrath was poured out on Him some two thousand years ago on the cross, and He came so that the judgment of God could pass over you if you would trust Him. He actually tells us these very words, that God sent His Son into the world not to judge the world but that the world through Him might be saved (*John 3:17*). Are you clinging to Jesus? He has already taken the fire of God's judgment in our place.

Dear friends, the brush fire of God's judgment has already started. Paul says it's being revealed, and it's going to come to a place where you are. The only way you'll not be burned to death is if you are clinging to Jesus. Would you, by faith, come to the crucified and risen Savior today? Come just as you are, not carrying your righteous deeds because they're like filthy rags (*Is. 64:6*).

Come, turning from sin and placing your entire soul in His hands. Ask Him to forgive you. Ask him to change you. Surrender your life to the Savior who died in your place. Ask Him to give you life and a changed heart. He promises all who would come He will not cast out (*John 6:37*). He will not turn you away, but you must come by faith.

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