

11.12.2023

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Romans 2:1-11

I. Introduction

Good morning! [Welcome, niceties...]

As a church, we value the practice of working through books of the bible verse by verse & passage by passage. One of the reasons we value that is because it keeps us from avoiding the parts of the bible's teachings that are difficult or uncomfortable for us. Last week Pastor Kyle introduced his sermon by warning us that this part of Romans feels bleak and weighty and our passage this week is basically a "part 2" to that teaching, so buckle up because we're in for another heavy message.

Imagine that you're in a doctor's office waiting for the doctor to come in to tell you the results of some scans you've had, and the doctor comes in and says without any preamble, "Good news! Take this pill! It's the cure!" Your next question would be, "The cure for what?" right? Similarly, Paul gives his main idea for the whole book of Romans back in 1:16: "...I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes..." and then he spends the next couple of chapters answering the next logical question: salvation from what? And in the same way that hearing about a serious diagnosis from your doctor isn't a good time, but is worth it for the sake of your health, Paul's answer for why we need salvation doesn't feel happy, but it is urgently important and totally worth it.

Last week, in Romans 1:18-32, we saw that because of our own sin, we have put ourselves in the way of God's wrath. That was part one of Paul's diagnosis: in our sin we have chosen God's wrath. But Paul isn't finished identifying the problem. He doesn't just say, "You are a sinner and you need a savior." There's something missing from that statement; but the passage today gives us the missing component: **you are a sinner and you will meet a judge**. As we move through this passage on the judgment of God we're going to see: **(1) the certainty of God's judgment, (2) the rightness of God's judgment, (3) the focus of God's judgment, and (4) the way out of God's judgment**. So turn to Romans 2 if you haven't already and as you do, I'm going to pray.

Father, we cannot truly know the joy of the cure if we don't comprehend the severity of the sickness. Help us to look at reality with our eyes wide open. Help us to not shy away from the surgeon's knife that cuts deep in order to heal. Your word, by Your Spirit, has to do the work of creating new hearts and transforming lives. So Father, you must increase and I must decrease. Glorify your name for the good of your people by the preaching of your word. We love you, Lord, and we look to you. Amen.

Alright, let's look at the book together. The first thing we're going to unpack is the certainty of God's judgment.

II. The Certainty of God's Judgment (1-5; 9-11)

Now Romans 2 starts off with Paul making a striking turn in his argument. He says in verse 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." Now this only makes sense if we look back at chapter one. What "same things" is he talking about?

In chapter 1 Paul is talking about gentiles, idol worshippers, pagans who bow down to images and practice all kinds of immorality. Now, you can imagine as this letter was being read to the church in Rome there would be a mix of gentile and Jewish Christians in the gathering. Certainly there were some who heard Paul's words in chapter 1 and saw themselves in it. But then there were others who had worked very hard to be morally upright people. If there were any Jewish Christians in the Roman church, this would have been them! They had worked hard not to bow down to idols, not to be sexually immoral, not to live like the pagans. And perhaps among those people there were some who listened and nodded along thinking, *It's about time someone called out those sinners*. Maybe some of us had a little bit of that in our hearts there last week as Pastor Kyle talked about the kind of sins that get called out less and less in our world today. Could it be that there's a part of our hearts that is a bit self-satisfied because we don't live like the pagans? Well now Paul turns to those who have worked hard to obey God's law and says, "You are also without excuse!"

Now, how can Paul say to the good, well behaved, Bible believing people, "you have no excuse" because you "practice the very same things."? Well if you look back at the end of chapter 1, Paul describes those who don't acknowledge God. He says in 1:29, "They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless." (1:29-31). Now you'll notice that list describes heart attitudes just as much as it describes actions. What Paul is doing is showing the unity of the Bible because he's using the same approach that Jesus used when he taught about the law in the Sermon on the Mount. "You've heard it said, 'do not murder' but I say to you anyone who is angry with his brother in his heart will be liable to judgment.¹ You see human beings look at the outward appearance of obedience or disobedience, but God looks at the heart. And Paul is saying your moral living will fail you just as much as your immoral living. It's like the prophet Isaiah says in the OT, "all our righteous acts are like filthy rags."² No one is righteous. Whether you're a gentile or a Jew, irreligious or religious, depraved or well behaved - every person is an idolater, every person has exchanged God for created things, and every person is without excuse. Everyone is storing up wrath for the day of God's judgment.

This is what Paul is underlining at the end of our passage when he says, "⁹ There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek...¹¹ For God shows no partiality." **God's judgment for sin is certain for all people.**

III. The Rightness of God's Judgment (2 & 5)

Not only is there a certainty to God's judgment, but there is also a *rightness* to God's judgment. For many people the idea that God judges sinners causes them to cringe. Even Christians who believe the bible and will gladly accept God as Father, friend, helper will hurry past the reality of God as

¹ Paraphrases of Matthew 5:21-22

² Is. 64:6, NIV

judge.³ Some might even believe that God will leave off his judgment because he is a God of love. But did you notice something in verse 2? Paul says, “*We know* that the judgment of God *rightly* falls on those who practice such things.” Paul is assuming agreement - “we know.” He’s assuming agreement among Christians that God will judge sinful people and that he is *right* to do so. We ought not to reject the things that the Bible assumes are true. The role of God as judge is a clear theme all over the whole Bible, not just in the Old Testament! Listen to what theologian J.I. Packer wrote in his book, *Knowing God*: “People who do not actually read the Bible confidently assure us that when we move from the Old Testament to the New, the theme of divine judgment fades into the background. But if we examine the New Testament, even in the most cursory way, we find at once that the Old Testament emphasis on God’s action as Judge, far from being reduced, is actually intensified. The entire New Testament is overshadowed by the certainty of a coming day of universal judgment...”⁴

You might recoil at the idea of God’s judgment, but the Bible assumes this is a good thing and I think that’s because we actually need and yearn for a judge to bring judgment; and God is the only suitable judge. You see, the Bible says that God is love (1 Jn 4:8), and those who reject God’s judgment will often point to his love. But love and judgment aren’t opposed to each other. One author wrote: Think how we feel when we see someone we love ravaged by unwise actions or relationships. Do we respond with benign tolerance as we might toward strangers? Far from it.... Anger isn’t the opposite of love. Hate is, and the final form of hate is indifference... God’s wrath is not a cranky explosion, but his settled opposition to the cancer... which is eating out the insides of the human race he loves with his whole being.⁵ God’s wrath, which leads to his judgment for sin proves his love.

God being judge is also necessary for him to be a good God! How could a God who didn’t judge the Hitlers of the world be good? If he was indifferent to injustice wouldn’t that be a flaw on God’s part? Our hearts ache for evil to be met with justice, don’t they? But one thing that’s clear in human history is that justice without a divine judge is severely flawed, and sometimes even bad for the world.

Tom Holland is a non-christian historian who wrote a book on the influence of Christianity throughout history. He writes about the French Revolution and how it was explicitly atheistic. They didn’t believe in a God who would judge. He writes, “It was the responsibility of all who cherished virtue to work for its triumph in the here and now... To imagine that a deity might ever perform this duty was the rankest superstition... This was why... in Paris, the guillotine seemed never to take a break from its work... its blade came to hiss ever more relentlessly, and the puddles of blood to spill ever more widely across the cobblestone. It was not individuals who stood condemned, but entire classes. Aristocrats, moderates, counter revolutionaries of every stripe: all were enemies of the people. To show them mercy was a crime.”⁶ Societies that don’t have a God who judges evil, inevitably take on the burden of doling out justice themselves. But when human beings become the arbiters of justice, we start with an imperfect source and things go very badly. Think Nazi Germany, communist Russia... Think about the increasing godlessness of our culture and how, even though many cry out for justice and fight for equity, if any transgress the party line they are mercilessly canceled. But it’s the doctrine of God’s

³ Packer, *Knowing God*, 169

⁴ Packer, *Knowing God* (171-172)

⁵ Becky Pippert quoted in “Reason for God” by Keller (73)

⁶ Holland, Tom. *Dominion: How The Christian Revolution Remade the World*. E-book, Basic Books, 2019. (Ch 16)

judgment that frees us to love our enemies and turn the other cheek when the wicked oppress us because we have a God of vengeance, a God of justice who will judge the wicked, even if justice is never met in this life. Christians have a God who is perfectly wise, who is the source of truth, who is entirely good and loving. And because of his perfect wisdom, love, goodness, and power, he is the perfect judge who can judge with perfect equity and justice. This is why Paul can say in verse 5 that God's *righteous* judgment will be revealed.

So if God's judgment is certain, and if God's judgment is right and good, then the next thing we have to ask is: how will God judge people? What is the focus of God's Judgment?

IV. The Focus of God's Judgment (6-11)

Let's refocus on the Book. Remember we've already said that God's judgment is certain for everybody. I'm going to read verse 4-6 again: 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. ⁶ He will render to each one according to his works... How will God judge every person? According to verse six, God will repay each person according to what they have done. His judgment is given on the basis of our works.

Now, is Paul talking out of both sides of his mouth? He said in Romans 1:16-17, "[the gospel] is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes... "The righteous shall live by faith." Isn't salvation dependent on faith and *not* our works? But here in 2:6 it says God judges according to our works. And then Paul seems to go on to underline that in the next verses: 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. Are we saved by works or by faith? Well Paul doesn't seem like an idiot and more importantly, the Holy Spirit who carried along the men who wrote the bible isn't a liar who contradicts himself, so we should start with the assumption that scripture doesn't contradict scripture. So what does Romans 2:6 mean? ⁶ He will render to each one according to his works...

First it's important that we understand what kind of works God is looking for. And I think Paul has already given us a clue here. Verse six is connected to what Paul said right before it. And in verse four he says that God's kindness (his delaying of his judgment) is meant to lead you to repentance (which is not just a verbal apology, but a whole-life reorientation toward holiness). And then he says: because of your hard and impenitent heart, you are storing up wrath for yourself. So unrepentance leads to wrath, but repentance is what God wants for you. Now where does repentance come from? Repentance can only come when we see our sin and turn from it. And the only way we can see our sin is if God intervenes in our lives to wake us up from the spiritual death of sin and make us alive together with Christ, by his grace! So it is grace through faith that saves you.

Paul is telling us that our works matter. They're not the basis of our salvation, but they are the fruit that indicates the root of salvation. Just like the fruit on a tree doesn't give any life to the tree, but they do prove that the tree is alive. So in the same way, "patience in well-doing" and seeking glory and honor and immortality aren't works that lead to eternal life. But someone who has been saved by grace through faith will be shaped by their life in Christ to persist in doing good so that they become more like God in his character. And conversely, a heart that is hard and impenitent toward God reveals a person who doesn't want God, but has exchanged the glory of the God for idols. And to those whose life displays the fruit of unrepentance, God will give them the ultimate thing they want in their sin: wrath, fury, tribulation, and distress.

V. The Way Out of God's Judgment

Now you remember that there were four things we were going to see out of Romans 2 today. **(1) the certainty of God's judgment, (2) the rightness of God's judgment, (3) the focus of God's judgment, and lastly (4) the way out of God's judgment.** Well, the last point here is a bit of a bait and switch, because the truth is there is no way out of God's judgment.

The bible is clear. God's judgment is certain for all people; for the law-breakers and the law-keepers. He will judge everyone according to their works. Jesus said in Matthew 25 that there will be a day when he will return and all nations - all people - will be gathered before him to judge.⁷ The question is not, "Can I escape God's judgment?" You can't. On that day nothing will be hidden. All of our idols, every word we've spoken, every wrong we've done, every impure motive, every evil thought will be exposed. Some will see all of their unrighteousness laid bare and they will receive the wages for their hatred of God and their worship of created things. And some will see all of their sinful works, but they will not crumple beneath God's wrath. They will stand and say with joy, *the judgment for my rebellion has been carried out, but someone else has taken the punishment. God's wrath for my sins has been poured out, but not on me!*

The bible says, "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor 5:21). On the cross Jesus was getting the judgment of God that we deserve because we could never stand before the judgment seat of God and live. And in Jesus, when you believe in him in faith, you receive his righteousness so that when the Holy Judge looks at you he does not hand down the verdict you deserve for all your sin, but he declares you innocent and worthy of eternal life. This is why there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus!

And the freedom of this gospel means that we can love God's law with our new hearts and be zealous to persist in good works, but when we inevitably fail, we won't be crushed by our failure. We have been freed from being the judge over our own lives, because God is the judge and Christ has borne the judgment. The gospel also frees us to love others, even though they be the worst of sinners, because we know we are no better than them and God is the judge. We're freed to love them and call them to put their faith in the one who has borne the judgment for his people. If you make Jesus - the one who bore the judgment of God - the center of your life, you can value morality, acknowledge

⁷ Paraphrased from Mt 25:31-46

injustice, know that it's important to be a good person and at the same time you can live without being judgemental, you can forgive people, you can love your enemies, you can be freed from self-condemnation when you fall short.

Only the gospel of Jesus Christ offers you all of these things together. This is the power of God for salvation to all who believe and put their faith in him. Won't you make the judge who was judged in your place the center of your life?⁸

⁸ Influenced by Keller's preaching in the sermon, "The Failure of Religion."