

ROMANS SERIES #8

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on Sunday, December 3, 1995, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

ROMANS 2:1-16

THE DANGER OF JUDGING OTHERS

We saw at the end of Romans chapter one how God declared the depraved Gentile world to be guilty and without excuse because of their sin. They were “the down and outers.” But now in chapter 2:1-16 Paul engages in an imaginary conversation with someone who might have read chapter one and thought to himself, “Well, thank God, that’s not me! Don’t pin that on me. I’m not guilty of some gross immorality. I’m a decent, respectable, law-abiding citizen!” This imaginary person may have been a good-living Jew or a good-living Gentile, an “up and outer,” because we must remember that not all Gentiles preferred darkness to light; not all Gentiles became idolaters; not all Gentiles gave themselves up to sexually and socially promiscuous behavior. There were “down and outers” and “up and outers” in the ancient world.

Dr. F. F. Bruce, the eminent New Testament scholar, has said this: “We know that there was another side to the pagan world of the first century than that which Paul has portrayed in the preceding paragraphs. What about a man like Paul’s illustrious contemporary, Seneca, the Stoic moralist, the tutor of Nero? Seneca might have listened to Paul’s indictment and said, ‘Yes, that is perfectly true of great masses of mankind, and I concur in the judgment which you pass on them — but there are others, of course, like myself, who *deplore* these tendencies as much as you do’”

Bruce continues: “Not only did Seneca exalt the great moral virtues; he exposed hypocrisy; he preached the equality of all human beings; he acknowledged the pervasive character of evil... he practiced and inculcated daily self-examination; he ridiculed vulgar idolatry; he assumed the role of a moral guide...”

And when he wrote Romans 2:1-16, Paul probably had in mind people like Seneca — morally upright folk who thought themselves so respectable, indeed, that they would presume to pass judgment on other people.

Dr. John Stott, in his commentary on Romans, says: “What is the difference between the depraved sinners of chapter one and these critical, self-righteous folk of chapter two? It is that the first group do things they know to be wrong and approve of others who do them, which is at least consistent; whereas the second group do what they know to be wrong and condemn others who do them, which is hypocritical. The first group disassociate themselves entirely from God’s righteous decree, in regard to both themselves and others; whereas the second group deliberately identify themselves with God’s decree by setting themselves up as judges, only to find that they are being judged for doing the same things.”

It is interesting and ironic that Seneca, with all his vaunted moral rectitude, too often tolerated in himself vices not so different from those which he condemned in others — the most flagrant instance being his connivance at Nero's murder of his mother, Agrippina.

So, the underlying theme of this section is the judgment of God upon self-appointed judges. We discover two things about God's judgment upon these people: His judgment is inescapable (1-4), and it is righteous because it is impartial (5-16).

1. God's judgment is inescapable (verses 1—4).

The sin that Jesus attacked more directly than any other was not adultery or doing drugs or watching too much TV, but it was the sin of self-righteousness. You can find this sin anywhere, whether you're rich or poor, educated or uneducated, whether you're a Christian or a non-Christian. They say that politicians, policemen, prostitutes and pastors are all guilty of it! And it's a sin that we always try to make excuses for. Paul is saying here that the moral, self-righteous person is just as guilty as the immoral person. In fact, nobody is innocent, and our judgment is therefore inescapable.

Now, the key to this section is in the first verse, and it is the word "judgment." "You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else... "The verb "to judge" in Greek does not mean to "evaluate," as if you were an expert "judging" horses at the State Fair. It literally means to "condemn." It means "passing sentence." Paul is saying, "You who condemn other people... "And "passing judgment" is a favorite pastime of the self-righteous!

The Apostle starts off in the first four verses by talking about four characteristics of the self-righteous person, the person who thinks, "Hey, I'm not so bad. Maybe I have a few faults, but I'm not a bad person!" Paul says four things about someone's life that:

(a) This person accuses others and excuses himself. Look at verse 1: "You therefore have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge the other, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things."

Now, isn't it typical of human nature that we are unrealistic about ourselves? Everyone else is guilty but we are innocent! The common word for this is "hypocrisy," which means that we're inconsistent. You know, the worst kind of pride is religious pride. "I've got it together, but you don't." And Paul says that these people judge others, especially those in chapter one who have really blown it in a very blatant way, but they say, "I'm not so bad."

Now, how do we excuse our sin? We do it in a couple of ways:

(i) We re-label our own sin. We don't say, "I'm not a gossip"; but "I'm just sharing a concern." Or: "I'm not critical; I'm discerning. I'm not lazy; I'm mellow and easy-going. I'm not negative; I'm realistic. I'm not unreliable; I'm flexible." And we take what we condemn in other people and we say, "For me that's not wrong; it's just the way I am." And we re-label our sins. How many "respectable" folk do you know who do that?

(ii) We conveniently forget our own sin. Somebody said, “The person who thinks he has a clear conscience just has a poor memory!” A lot of times we think, “There’s nothing wrong in my life,” and it’s just because we haven’t delved deeply into our memory book!

(b) The second characteristic of a self-righteous person is that he measures other people by the wrong standard. He compares others to himself: “I’m the standard; I’m better than so and so. My taste in clothes is much better than hers. I hang out with a ‘cooler’ crowd than he does. And I have no ‘zits’ on my face!” You contrast that with the way God judges. Look at verse 2: “Now we know that God’s judgment. . . is based on *truth*.”

The problem is that we are often blind to the truth. Every one of us has a blind spot. We all have areas of weakness that we don’t see. I don’t see my own weaknesses, and you don’t see yours. Many times, we don’t see where we’re at fault, but all we do is see where others are wrong! And what is ironic is that we tend to condemn in other people what we dislike in ourselves! If you have a problem with pride, you’re going to be very quick to judge people whom you think are proud. It’s just our nature to condemn things we dislike about ourselves. Cynics often say, “Watch out for the sins a preacher is always condemning because those are probably the ones to which he himself is most tempted. We have only to think of a Jimmy Swaggart or a Jim Bakker — who were pro-family, pro-morality, anti-pornography, upholders of God, truth, justice and the American way — and then remember the lewd sins they were caught committing. So, when you see someone who reacts violently to a certain sin, it may be (1) he has a fear of it, or (2) he is guilty of it.

(c) The third characteristic of a self-righteous person is that he thinks that judging others puts him in a better position. Look at verse 3: “So when you, a mere man, pass judgment on them and yet do the same things, do you think you will escape God’s judgment?” Paul is saying, “Do you think that condemning other people is going to win you ‘Brownie points’ with God?” Will judging others enable us to escape judgment ourselves? The reason we like to judge others is that it makes us feel that we’re not so bad. But to say, “His sin is worse than mine” certainly does not *negate* my sin. Paul says, “Don’t think that by pointing out other people’s sins that you’re off the hook.” It’s like the old saying: “When you point a finger of criticism at someone else, you have three fingers pointing back at yourself, judging your own life.”

(d) The self-righteous person misinterprets God’s blessing on his life. Look what Paul says to the self-righteous person in verse 4: “Or do you show contempt for the riches of His kindness, tolerance, and patience, not realizing that God’s *kindness* leads you toward *repentance*?” He says that a self-righteous person shows contempt by *presuming* upon God’s goodness. They take it for granted. “Hey, everything’s going great; therefore, God must think I’m great! I must really be ‘in’ with God.” And they get spiritually cocky: “I’m a chosen person.” The self-righteous person thinks he deserves God’s blessing. He doesn’t realize that God’s kindness is all of God’s *grace*. If God gave him what he deserves he wouldn’t even be here. God does bless us even though we are sinners, but He does it because He is gracious. Isn’t it amazing that God knows everything about you and me, and yet He’s patient and loving and kind toward us? How often has God had a legitimate reason to “can” you and throw the book at

you? Lots of times. Our attitude should be, “Oh Lord, I know that I didn’t get what I deserved that time!” So, we shouldn’t take God’s goodness for granted and say, “Well, God is blessing my life; therefore, He must approve of my lifestyle.”

You see, the purpose of God’s goodness is to lead us toward repentance. Why is God so good to us? Because He wants to motivate us to change. God’s goodness, not God’s judgment, is what should lead people to repent. We here at Faith believe that the way you bring people to Christ is not by putting them down and telling them what they already know they are, but by holding up before them what they can be if they will only open up their lives to Christ.

So, Paul demonstrates convincingly that God’s judgment is inescapable.

2. God’s -judgment is righteous because it is impartial (verses 5-16). Look at verse 5: “But because of your stubbornness...” That’s a very interesting word in Greek. It is “skierotes,” from which we get our word “sclerosis.” Arteriosclerosis is hardening of the arteries. These people who aren’t brought to repentance by the kindness, patience and mercy of God have spiritual hardening of the arteries that leads to death. An accumulation of sin will do to you what an accumulation of plaque will do in your arteries; it hardens your spiritual arteries. Paul goes on to say it causes you to “store up wrath against yourself for the day of God’s wrath.” In life you can store up one of two things: You can store up wrath, or you can store up treasure in heaven (Matt. 6:20). What are *you* storing up?

Why was Jesus so upset with the Pharisees? Because they were judgmental. They tried to play God. And when *I* pass judgment on someone, *I’m* playing God. All this is accumulating, and one day the dam is going to break. So, Paul says, “Watch out; you who think you are morally ‘cool’ are just as guilty as the person who has fallen into all the gross sins of chapter one.”

Then Paul goes on to talk about who *has* the right to judge. And he says that only God has the right to judge because God alone is righteous, so He alone can pass righteous judgments. In the next several verses he tells us *when* God will judge people, *how* God will judge people, and *what* we will be judged for.

- WHEN will God judge people? Verse 16 tells us that it will take place “on *the* day” — referring to the Day of Judgment. And these self-righteous folk are storing up wrath against themselves for the day of God’s wrath. That date has been set; it’s on God’s calendar. It’s an awesome thought: People will give account of every word they’ve ever said and every thought they’ve ever had and every action they’ve ever taken. And no one will be able to say, “God, You’re not being fair.” Why? Because God has been patient, kind, tolerant, and merciful; and by His goodness He has sought to lead these folk to repentance.

- HOW will God judge people? God judges people in two ways:

- (1) Verse two says that His judgment is based on “truth.” That’s one of the reasons God can judge when we can’t. God knows everything about us, so He will judge truthfully.

- (2) God will judge people impartially. Everyone can count on a fair trial before

Him. How different to the present judicial system where the rich and famous can get away with murder.

- WHAT will people be judged for? In any exam it's ideal if you know the questions ahead of time! It gives you an edge! Now, in Romans 2 Paul tells us the three things people are going to be held accountable for at the end of their lives. So, we can begin now to prepare for the final exam.

(a) People will be judged according to their CONDUCT (verses 6-10). Look at verses 6 and 7: "God will give to each person according to what he has done. To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, He will give eternal life..." Paul is saying here that God will judge people according to their conduct. This passage could easily be misunderstood to mean that you can earn your way to heaven. But these verses do not teach salvation by works. The issue here is not salvation; it is judgment. It is not that we are going to be *saved* by our good deeds but that we are going to be *judged* by deeds. In Romans 4:5 Paul makes it very plain that we are not saved by works. Listen: "Now if a man works, his wages are not counted as a gift, but as a fair reward. But, if a man, irrespective of his work, has faith in Him Who justifies the sinful, then that man's faith is counted as righteousness" (Phillips). This, indeed, is the theme of Romans, that we are not saved by good works.

So, Paul is saying that if a man goes to *heaven*, it's going to be because of the free gift of God in Christ, but if he goes to hell, he's just simply collecting his wages. The judgment is going to be according to what he has done: He has continued in sin; and the more the ungodly sin, the worse will be their ultimate punishment.

(b) People will be judged according to their CONSCIENCE (verses 12-15). Paul says, "All who sin apart from the law [i.e. the Gentiles) will also perish apart from the law, and all who sin under the law [i.e. the Jews) will be judged by the law." The Jews had the law of Moses; the Gentiles, through General Revelation, had the requirements of the law "written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness..." What is Paul saying? He's saying that the Jews had God's law in a CODE, but everybody else has God's law in their CONSCIENCE. And each person the world over will be held responsible for acting on what he *knew* about God's truth. Just because the Jews had God's revelation did not excuse the rest of the world. The ultimate issue is not: How much did you *know*? but what did you *do* with what you knew? No matter whether I know the Commandments or not, my conscience tells me what is right and wrong; and people are judged by this standard: Did you *obey* your conscience or did you not?

(c) People will be judged according to their CHARACTER (verse 16). "This will take place on the day when God will judge men's secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares." Note that word "secrets." When Paul talks about "secrets" he's really talking about people's motives. We can't judge people's motives because we don't know what those motives are, but God knows. God sees inside us, and He knows what we really are — and that's what your *character* is — what makes you do what you do. Billy Sunday the evangelist used to say, "Your reputation is what other people think about you; your character is what God and your wife know you to be!"

In 1 Corinthians 4:5 Paul says, “Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men’s hearts.”

Now, let me summarize. Remember that Paul in this passage is simply trying to show our need for God, for salvation, and for grace. And he’s doing a good job of it, isn’t he?! We’ve all “blown” it, and on the Judgment Day no one will be able to say, “My conduct is sinless; my conscience is perfectly clear; my character is spotless.”

Now, that’s pretty depressing when you realize that the final exam is approaching, and you’re not even going to pass! Do you remember at school how, if you did some extra projects, the teacher would sometimes allow you to skip the final exam? Well, good news, folks! There is a way to skip the final exam! There is a way by which you can bypass all of this final judgment.

Let me show you how to skip the final judgment.

Revelation 20:12-15 gives us an advance picture of what it’s going to be like on Judgment Day. God says that there is going to be one group of people who get to bypass the Judgment. Look at Rev. 20:12. John has this vision: “And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne...” I mean, Hitler’s going to be there, Stalin’s going to be there. President Clinton, Michael Jackson, Madonna, and O.J. — everybody’s going to be there. “...And the books were opened.” Notice the plural. Not one book, but many books were opened. Then he says, “Another book was opened which is the book of life. And the dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. The sea gave up its dead, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what he had done.” Then in verse 15: “If anyone’s name was *not* found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.”

Now, that’s how Judgment Day is going to be; *that* will be the final exam. How do you get to bypass that final exam? You make sure your name is in that book of life. The fact is, Jesus wants to *save* us from the judgment. He wants to be our Savior, not our Judge. He did not come to condemn us but to save us. But if you don’t accept Jesus Christ as your *Savior*, He will, some day, be your *Judge*.

Listen to His words in John 5:24: “I tell you the truth, whoever hears My word and believes Him Who sent Me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life.”

Have YOU passed over from death to life? I urge you to settle this issue today.

AMEN.