

God's Impartiality

Romans 2:1-16

As many of you know, I grew up in a Christian home. I was baptized as an infant and was confirmed in 8th grade and took my first communion. My family attended church and Sunday school every week. We never missed. And so God was an important part of my life from the very beginning. I don't remember it being any other way. Because of this background, I grew up trying to be a good person. In high school I was active in FCA. When I got to college I got involved in Cru and over those four years I served and led in all sorts of ways. When I graduated from college I joined the staff of Cru. My spiritual resume was solid.

And if you had known me as a young boy or in high school or in college, you would have agreed with my own self-assessment that I was a good person at least in terms of the external stuff that you could see. But inside there were some ugly things. There was spiritual pride. "I've got it together. I can do this. I'm good." And at times I had a judgmental spirit. I would look at non-Christians or even other Christians who were doing certain things and I would think that I was better spiritually because I didn't do this or that.

One of the core ways that my spiritual pride could be seen was in how I thought about what Jesus had done for me. I would have never said this, but the reality was that for many years I didn't feel like Jesus had to do that much for me. I knew he died for me. I knew I needed him. But I also thought that he didn't really have to forgive me for too much, because I'd been good.

Today as we continue our journey through Romans, Paul is going to address a group of people who shared this kind of thinking. "We're good with God. We've got the right spiritual resume. We're good." Paul's goal in these first chapters of Romans is to show, however, that outside of Christ ALL the world stands guilty before a holy God. Outside of Christ, no one is good with God.

Two weeks ago, Steve looked at the final half of Romans 1 in which Paul began his argument about the sinfulness of mankind. Paul described mankind's rejection of God and the truth that has been revealed to them. He described how mankind had not acknowledged or honored God and as a result God gave them over to sin to do all sorts of things that are not right. But now as Paul comes to this next section he turns his focus to people who have this self-righteous presumption that because of their spiritual resume that they are not included in the indictment made on mankind in chapter one. He turns his attention to Jews demonstrate that they too are guilty before God.

I. A Critique of Self-Righteous Presumption (2:1-5)

In the first five verses of chapter two, Paul uses a rhetorical approach called a diatribe in which he interacts with an imaginary student or opponent by asking and answering questions. He uses this approach several times in Romans. His opponent here is

someone who thinks he is exempt from the indictment made against mankind in Romans 1. To such a person, Paul says this:

¹ Therefore 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. ² And we know that the judgment of God rightly falls upon those who practice such things.

Paul is making a conclusion from what he has said in chapter one. And his conclusion is that for this man who agrees with his indictment against humanity in the first chapter but thinks that he himself is exempt, he himself is without *excuse*. Paul says that if you judge another *you condemn yourself* because you *practice the same things*. And we can all agree that God's judgment rightly falls on those who practice such things. Now, "*same things*" refers to the list of sins at the end of chapter one. When you look at that list clearly the Jews were guilty of pride, and arrogance, and of being unloving and unmerciful. They maybe don't do all the things that were listed, but they did the same kinds of things. And so in judging others, this man was actually condemning himself.

Verse 3:

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? 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?

Among the Jews there was a kind arrogance that thought that because of their privileged status as God's chosen people that they would *escape the judgment of God*. But Paul's point is that they would not escape if they did the same things.

The Jews looked at God's kindness, which He expressed by being tolerant and patient in delaying His judgment, and they believed that it meant that they were safe and secure from God's judgment. But Paul says that God delays His judgment in order that they would have time to repent. But it doesn't mean that judgment is never coming. And so, Paul's point is that they will not avoid God's judgment just because of their status of being Jews. But rather, he says 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,

Instead of storing up treasure in heaven, they were actually storing up wrath for the day of final judgment. Their status of being Jews would not save them from God's judgment.

Now for most of us, we are not Jewish so we don't have that heritage from which we think we have some kind of special favor with God. But there are other ways we do this.

We think, “I go to Faith eFree. I grew up in the church. I memorize Scripture. I read my Bible. I don’t do the really bad sins. Or even, I’m an American.” And we can think that simply because of such things that we have special favor with God and that just because of such things we will avoid the judgment of God. But Paul is going to go on and demonstrate that it is not these things that matter.

As we come to verse 6, this interaction with his imaginary opponent comes to an end (Paul will pick it up again in verse 17) and Paul moves on to develop why the Jew is not exempt from God’s judgment on the basis of their favored status as being part of God’s chosen people. He goes on to talk about . . .

II. The Impartiality of God’s Judgment (2:6-16)

Connecting back to what he has just said in verse 5 about day of the righteous judgment of God, Paul says:

⁶ who WILL RENDER TO EACH PERSON ACCORDING TO HIS DEEDS: ⁷ to those who by perseverance in doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, eternal life; ⁸ but to those who are selfishly ambitious and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, wrath and indignation.

On that day of final judgment, God will repay each one, regardless of one’s status, according to what he has done in this life. And there will be two outcomes. For those who persevere *in doing good*, they will receive *eternal life*. And for those *who are selfishly ambitious*, and who *do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness*, they will receive *wrath and indignation*. To everyone God will render either eternal life or wrath, based on what he has done.

Now, doesn’t the Bible teach that we are not saved based works? Yes, that’s right. In fact, in the next chapter, in 3:20 Paul says:

. . . by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight. . .

Paul’s clear argument in Romans is that faith alone saves. And so we need to interpret this passage in light of what Paul has made explicitly clear elsewhere that we are not saved by works. And so what does he mean here?

Over and over the Bible indicates that we ARE judged based on our deeds. For instance, Matthew 16:27 says:

For the Son of Man is going to come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and WILL THEN REPAY EVERY MAN ACCORDING TO HIS DEEDS.

The Bible teaches that we are judged on our deeds because our deeds are an accurate reflection of whether or not we have faith in Christ. And so one who persists in doing good, reveals the life of Christ that is within him. And the one who does not obey the

truth reveals that the life of Christ is not within him. Paul is making the point here that it is only those who are genuine believers in Jesus who are able, through union with Christ, to produce good works acceptable to God.

And so yes we are saved by faith, but Paul teaches that such faith results in a life of persistently doing good. And so in a very real way, God will render to each according to his deeds. And so, based on our deeds, verses 9 and 10, say:

⁹ There will be tribulation and distress for every soul of man who does evil, of the Jew first and also of the Greek, ¹⁰ but glory and honor and peace to everyone who does good, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

¹¹ For there is no partiality with God.

I coached a lot of my kid's parks & rec. teams over the years when they were little. I loved coaching, but one thing that was hard sometimes was when one of my kids (and I won't say which one) would think that his status as my son meant he should get to play more or be point guard more or that he didn't have to work as hard or follow the rules. But it was always important for me to be fair. I tried to be as impartial as I could be. Now they would probably say that I actually made it harder on them. Maybe I did. But the point is that their status as the coach's son didn't mean that they got special treatment.

And when it comes to God we don't get special treatment, just because we've grown up in the church or because we attend a certain kind of church or because we've never done the really bad sins. We can do all of those things, but if we are without Christ, God is completely impartial, and those things don't matter. What matters is whether you have the deeds that demonstrate that the life of Christ dwells within you.

As Paul goes on, he explains further what this impartiality mean. In the case of Jew's and Gentiles, one had the Law and the other didn't. And so it might seem that God has not been fair in the amount of revelation that each has received. But even here, Paul says that God is fair and that He will judge justly. Verse 12:

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 just before God, but the doers of the Law will be justified.

This is the first time the use of, *Law*, comes up in Romans. Here, and for the most part throughout Romans, *Law*, refers to the Mosaic Law – those instruction that God gave to the children of Israel at Mount Sinai as they came out of Egypt. It was His instructions for how they were to live as His covenant people in the Land of Promise. Jewish people lived under this Law, but the Gentiles did not unless one was specifically a convert to Judaism. Paul's point here is that God will not use the Law to judge the Gentiles. He will, however, use it to judge the Jews. And he makes the point again, that it is not the status of just having the Law that matters, what matter is doing it. It is the do-

ers of the Law who will be justified.

And so, again, he is attacking the Jewish presumption that would think that because one is a Jew, God's chosen people, to whom the Law was given, that they have the inside track with God even if they don't do what the Law says.

But Paul goes on to say that in fact, the truth of the matter is that for Gentile Christians they have another experience of God's law. It has been written in their hearts. He says:

¹⁴ For when Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves, ¹⁵ in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them, ¹⁶ on the day when, according to my gospel, God will judge the secrets of men through Christ Jesus.

This is a complicated passage. But I think that Paul's point is that for Gentile believers they are not actually without law. When he says in verse 15 that *they show the work of the Law written in their hearts*, this seems to be a reference to Jeremiah 31:33, which made the promise that in the New Covenant God would cause the Law to not just be an external thing, but an energizing power in the believer. In other words, those who are in Christ, have the indwelling Spirit that enables them to in fact do the law. And so Gentile and Jewish believers have this law within their hearts. And it is that work of God in a believer's heart that enables one to persistently do good.

Finally, in verse 16, Paul again talks about this day when God will judge. It is coming for all – both Jew and Gentile alike. It is coming for world of mankind described in chapter one and it is coming for the self-righteous described in chapter two. And on that day nothing will escape God's judgment. He will judge even the *secrets of men*. And He will judge with complete impartiality and fairness.

When you think forward to that certain day of judgment, what are you looking to for your confidence? Is it that you were born into a Christian family? Is it the fact that you belong to a certain church? Is it that you got a lot of gold stars in Sunday school growing up? Is it that you haven't missed a day of church or Bible reading for 10 years? Is that you've been able to avoid the really bad sins in your life? I'm not saying that there is anything wrong with any of those things, but you can do all of those things and still be facing God's wrath and indignation. What matters is what you've done with Christ.

Some of you here this morning so easily identify with the picture of mankind's lostness that Paul painted in chapter one. You know that was your story. And so seeing your desperate need for Christ was easy. But for others, you don't see yourself in that picture as easily. And so seeing your utter lostness apart from Christ and your need for Him to forgive you doesn't come as easily. But Paul's point is that God is completely impartial. It doesn't matter if you've had a squeaky clean, religiously oriented life or

whether you've had a life that has been a mess, full of all kinds of sin. For both, judgment is coming. And what is going to matter on that day is what you've done with Christ.

When I shared earlier about myself, I was a Christian who had that kind of self-righteous thinking. And what I'm going to say may not make sense to you if you haven't experience it, but I will tell you that it was a good news when I finally came to understand at a heart level that Romans 1 was also describing me. As good as I had been; as nice as my spiritual resume looked; before God I was just as messed up and broken and sinful as what Paul describes there. Why was this good news? Because in embracing that truth about myself, I was for the first time able to truly experience the full depth of God's grace for me in Christ. My heart for each one of you is that you would have that experience of God's grace.

Amen.