

In Judging Others, We Judge Ourselves (Romans 2)

In around A. D. 57, from the city of Corinth in Greece, the apostle Paul wrote the letter to “all who are in Rome” to both Jewish and non-Jewish Christians in the capital city of the Roman Empire. Paul knew many of the Christians in Rome, some of whom became Christians through his own ministry in other places. The church in Rome at that time was mostly Gentiles (non-Jewish), but there were also many Jews. Rome had a healthy population of non-Christian Jews, as well. Many of the non-Christian Jews throughout the Roman Empire were fiercely opposed to what Paul and the other Christians were doing and saying. But, Paul, being a Jew himself, was deeply concerned for his Jewish brothers and sisters. We will see that in chapter 2 of the book of Romans, after beginning this letter to the church in Rome and addressing the need of non-Christian Gentiles, Paul then more clearly and directly addresses non-Christian Jews. Chapters 1-5 (not to mention the whole book!) is an insightful and effective training for Christians to use when speaking with their non-Christian friends and family about all people’s natural separation from God and God’s way to reconcile all people to Himself; by His grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

But, before we get to that, it is important to see that from verse 18 to the end of chapter 1, Paul gives us an overview of the fallen nature of people after the fall of Adam and Eve in the garden. The first man and woman were created in the image of God. They were planted in the garden that God had made just for them and they were provided for by their loving Creator. God had a special relationship with Adam and Eve, nurturing them and even walking in the garden with them. God had provided all of their needs and had set just one restriction- not to eat from one specific tree in the garden. He said that if they did eat of that one tree that they would surely die. There was no toil in work, no pain and, at that time, no death. God had warned them that in all that was good on earth, this one tree would bring spiritual, and later, physical death to them if they ate of it. But they were deceived and ate of the tree anyway. God had given mankind free will, the freedom to make their own choices. Had they listened to their loving Father, they could have avoided the painful, catastrophic consequences of sin. But through their disobedience, sin entered the world. And we are told that through sin, death entered the world for Adam and Eve and all of their descendants (which includes everyone that has ever lived).

Now, there was another tree in the garden, and if the first man and first woman would have eaten from it in their newly fallen state, they would have never died. The problem with that is that their bodies were now decaying and aging, corrupted by the fruit of the tree God had warned them about. If they were to eat of the tree of life, they would have been stuck in a world of pain and sorrow, decaying and corrupted forever. So, before they could do that to themselves, God intervened and cast them out of the garden. God had another way for Adam, Eve and all of their descendants. God had a plan of redeeming mankind back to Himself so that they could have eternal life without pain and suffering. This gracious act of God was done for our own good, because of His great love and kindness toward us. This plan for the redemption of all mankind was known to Him before the creation of the world. In spite of the difficulty to come for mankind, their

banishment from the garden was one of many acts of God in making a way for people, if they so chose, to come back into a close relationship with Him.

Once out of the garden, mankind began to populate the planet very quickly. As families grew into cities and cities into countries, most people fell farther and farther away from God and the truth about God. This opened up the opportunity for people to “think up foolish ideas of what God was like” (1:21). Claiming to be wise, they became utter fools and instead worshipped idols, trading the truth about God for the lie, worshipping and serving the creation instead of the Creator.

So, at the end of chapter 1, Paul is describing the outcome of this wandering away from God. He is writing to Jewish and non-Jewish Christians in Rome, but he is speaking to non-Christians as well, poignantly describing to them what we all may observe throughout world history and on in to the present day in the world around us. He mentions many offenses that would be taken as obviously wrong by most people, but especially Christians, non-Christian Jews and Gentiles with higher moral views about society. In chapters 2 and 3 especially, he is speaking mostly to non-Christians, both Jewish and Gentile, and in it, training Christians how to present the Gospel to unbelievers.

In chapter 2, Paul begins using a literary style called a diatribe, in which questions or objections are imagined as coming from some critic, so that the objection may be answered or defeated. In verses 1-11, the main target is Gentile higher moralists, but also targeted are self-righteous Jews, who think they are “right” with God because they have the law of God from Moses and are Jewish (Abraham’s descendants). Beginning in verse 12, the self-righteous Jewish people come more into Paul’s focus. From verse 17 to the end of chapter 2, the self-righteous Jew is the direct target of his crushing rebuttal to their imagined objections (which were very real objections for Paul that he encountered on a nearly daily basis). Beginning in verse 1 Paul says,

Therefore you are inexcusable, O man, whoever you are who judge, for in whatever you judge another you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things.
(Romans 2:1, NKJV)

Here in verse 1, Paul is thinking mainly of two types of people: Gentiles who believe that they have higher morals than “degenerate” types of people in their own societies, and Jews who believe that they have a right to condemn anyone who behaves in the manner described by Paul in chapter 1:18-32 because they have God’s word in the Scriptures. But, most of the Jews sorely misinterpreted God’s word. Both of these groups fall into the category of self-righteous, self-appointed judges, judging others based on a standard they have set themselves. But, Paul says to them that when one judges someone else, that person is really just proving that they deserve judgment, as well. You condemn yourself because you do the same types of things, he says! Thus, because you are self-righteously judgmental, you are acting in such a way that proves that you believe there should be a standard of judgement. In judging others, we judge ourselves, because Paul says there is a standard, but it’s perfection! You fall short of it, just like the rest of us.

Jesus spoke on this subject and the standard of righteousness that God has set.

For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.

But you are to be perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect. (Matthew 5:20 & 48, NKJV)

The scribes and Pharisees had established their own standard for right standing with God, and thought that by following the law of Moses outwardly, they were right with Him. Paul is speaking to these same types of people, who are righteous in their own eyes. But when Jesus was confronted by them, he sees through their self-righteousness and says to the people that if anyone wants to be right with God, their righteousness needs to exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees. This must have shocked and disheartened many people who felt that these ultra religious people were much more righteous than they. But what Jesus is saying is that God's standard for righteousness is perfection, exceeding even the scribes and Pharisees and that it is a matter of the heart, not outward appearances. This standard is impossible for any human to achieve, but by the revelation of this standard, our reaction ought to be to fall on our knees and cry to God for His grace and mercy. Paul's bigger point in chapters 1-5 of Romans is that the only way one may be made "right" with God is through God's grace by faith in Christ's sacrificial death for sin, and that is what Jesus came to earth to do, and did at the cross!

Continuing in Romans 2:2, Paul reminds us that God's judgment is according to truth and is against all those that practice a lifestyle of sin and rebellion to Him. Paul says, continuing in chapter 2, who do you think you are who judge, you who do the same things? Do you think that somehow you can escape the judgement of God? Or don't you understand that God's patience and kindness is meant to lead you, as well as those other "worse" sinners, to repentance? But because of your self-righteousness, your heart has become hardened and you will be judged for your misdeeds someday unless you too turn from your sin and ask God to forgive you. (Romans 2:1-5)

Jesus said, Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. (Matthew 7:1-2, NIV)

When we judge others, we forget that we are just as guilty before God for the sin in our own life and that, as Christians, we are only forgiven and made right with God through our faith in Jesus Christ, by God's grace. When a person judges, Jesus says that really we are judging ourselves, and the measure that we use against others is the measure that will be used against us, unless our sin has been forgiven by faith in Christ. And if our sin is forgiven because of what God did for us in Jesus, than we ought to be merciful and forgiving like our Father has been merciful and forgiving to us.

And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you. (Ephesians 4:32, NKJV)

Paul continues in verses 6-11, explaining that when the day comes that God judges people of their sin, He will judge them according to what they have done. He will grant eternal life to those who have sought the immortality that God offers through faith in Jesus, but wrath and anger, justice for those who live for themselves, who refuse to obey the truth. In verse 9 he makes it clear that this standard of righteousness and judgment is not just for certain people, but it is the same standard for all people- Jew or Gentile. To the Jew first (either the blessing or the judgment) because they were God's special people, to whom came the promises, the law and the Messiah, but also for the non-Jew, for God is the God of all people and does not show favoritism. (Romans 2:6-11)

Gentiles, Paul says, will be judged for their sin based on the revelation that was available to them, namely their conscience and the creation all around them, even though they never had God's written law. He has in mind the non-Jewish population of the world that have not had God's word or the opportunity to hear of Jesus. And Jews, who do have God's written law, will be judged by that law when they fail to obey it. Merely having the law of God or listening to it does not justify and make right the hearer, but only those that obeyed the law could be made right by the law in and of itself. But, the law was not given by God for that purpose, and only Jesus fulfilled the law perfectly. Because we all fall short of the perfect standard laid out in God's law, no one can be made right with God by keeping God's law. In fact, Paul tells us later in Romans that no person will ever be made right with God by the law and that the law is not even able to make someone right with God because of the weakness of man. The law fulfills its purpose perfectly, but its purpose is to show us our sin and lead us to the grace and mercy of Christ through faith. The law tells us what and what not to do, it cannot make us good. We can only be "good" (right with God) by admitting to God that we are sinners and by giving our sinful lives over to God to receive His love and forgiveness. The grace of God is available only through faith in Christ Jesus, who was sent by God for that purpose and is one with God, being the very Creator Himself. (Romans 2:12-16)

In verse 17, Paul explicitly confronts his non-Christian Jewish brothers and sisters. Paul tells us that the Jews that had not received the grace of God through faith in Jesus, their Messiah, considered themselves right with God just because they were of the Jewish heritage and because of their possession of God's law given in the Hebrew Scriptures. He says, "you know what is right and you know what God wants because you have been taught His law. You think that you are the guide, the teacher for anyone that is not Jewish or been converted to Judaism. You think that you can instruct the ignorant and teach children the ways of God."

Here they are, Paul tells us, teaching that one must keep the whole law of God! But Paul says, do you teach yourself? You teach, "do not steal." Do you steal? If not, have you coveted? That desire in your heart shows the sinfulness inherent in you. You say it is wrong to commit adultery, but have you? Have you ever lusted? You condemn idolatry but have you ever put something ahead of God in your life? How can you teach that one must keep God's law when you cannot even keep it yourself? Jesus said that this was like the blind leading the blind into a ditch! (Matthew 15:14)

When people teach others, “you must do this or you must do that to be right with God”, they are blind and leading others to destruction. We cannot do anything to be made right with God, we can only receive from God His gracious forgiveness in our true repentance. The same goes for our sanctification by grace, our growing in our walk with the Lord. Paul says to Christians in another passage to “grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ.” Grace is not just to salvation, but to sanctification. But, that is for another study.

Back to God’s law written in our hearts.

Jesus also said, You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. (Matthew 5:21-22, NIV)

The self-righteous attempt to do good works in their own strength to fulfill the law outwardly, but do not realize that the law was meant to get at the heart. Keeping the law or doing good works does not get us closer to God or make us better people in God’s eyes. I don’t think that most people who “try to be good” to appease God have really thought it through. We may not have murdered, but we’ve been angry at someone for no reason. We may not have stolen, but we’ve all coveted someone else’s stuff. Paul says, you who brag about the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? The answer for all of us is obviously, yes!

So, you think that because you are a Jew and have God’s law, that is all that you need to be right with God, Paul asks? In verses 25-27, Paul says that being a Jew, circumcised according to the commandment, has value for right standing with God only if you keep the whole law and never fail once. If you do not obey God’s law, you are no different than anyone else, including Gentiles. If you fail at one point of the law, just one time in your life, you fail in all points and your self-righteous standard is meaningless.

For you are not a true Jew just because you were born of Jewish parents or because you have gone through the Jewish ceremony of circumcision. No, a true Jew is one whose heart is right with God. And true circumcision is not a cutting of the body but a change of heart produced by God's Spirit. Whoever has that kind of change seeks praise from God, not from people. (Romans 2:28-29, NLT)

The crucial issue is not race or ritual, but obedience to God.

God spoke this same truth through Moses.

Circumcise your hearts, therefore, and do not be stiff-necked (stubborn) any longer. (Deuteronomy 10:16, NIV)

Jesus was asked one day,

What shall we do, that we may work the works of God? Jesus answered and said to them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He sent." (John 6:28-29, NKJV)

A true worshipper of God is one whose heart is right with God, it is a changing of the heart produced by God's Spirit. We are called to walk in the Spirit, not in the flesh, which is what circumcision symbolized for the Jews- the cutting away of the fleshly life, the life lived in the old, human, sinful nature. God wanted the Jewish people to walk in the Spirit by faith, just like their father Abraham and just like us today. Circumcision was a sign that Abraham already had faith (4:11). Water baptism is similar, in that it symbolizes death to the old life and re-birth in Christ to eternal life. But water baptism is meaningless without the faith of the heart in Jesus that must come first. The repentant and humble heart will not seek praise from other people because of the outward works, but seeks praise from God by following Him by His grace and empowerment, in faith. This person has come to the realization (through the perfect law of God) that they have not and cannot live a perfect life. We have failed God, we have sinned against Him. But we know that God is just and that there has to be punishment for sin. Paul tells us that the wages of sin is death! And we see that punishment placed on all of us in this physical life, for all will physically die one day, just like Adam and Eve.

But, do we see our current spiritual death, our separation from a relationship with God and His love and mercy being freely offered to us? Spiritual death will continue on into eternity after physical death for those that do not receive the free gift of God. They've chosen to do it on their own. Every person needs to be made right with God. And this cannot be done with new promises to ourselves and resolutions to "be better". We must accept the one way God has made for us to be right with Him, by His grace through faith in Jesus Christ. Christ became sin for us, taking God's punishment of sin (which is death) upon Himself, so that all who believe in Him may have their spiritual relationship with God restored and have assurance of eternal life in Heaven. The Bible says that all who call on the name of the Lord will be saved. By receiving God's promise through Jesus, we are born again to God and He brings us into fellowship with Him. We are then on a new journey with God by grace. We become a new creation in Christ. We no longer live after the old human nature, but are for the first time in our lives, alive to God in Christ. His righteousness is given freely to all who believe. The way to salvation has been offered freely to all. Have you taken it? The way to growth in Christ is by grace through faith, as well. Are you receiving from Him based on His goodness, and not your own merits? Through faith, God's forgiveness has been given to us because He sees us in Christ now. Our relationship with Him is not based on our successes and failures, but on His great love for us. Our strength in this new life is from Him. We cannot walk by the Spirit in our own strength. We have begun in faith and we will walk the Christian life through faith, by His grace. Receiving God's grace for growing in our walk with Jesus (sanctification) is about humbly admitting our insufficiency to do God's will in our own strength, and believing in and relying on Christ's sufficiency to change and empower our lives through abiding in Christ, staying connected to Him.

... for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.
(Philippians 2:13, NKJV)

As we move on to chapter 3 next, we will see that it is a summary of Paul's argument in chapters 1 and 2, the culmination of his argument. No one is right with God in their own strength or by their own good works. We have all fallen short of God's glory, His

perfection, and so we must come to Him based on His unmerited blessings alone. No matter how bad we've been, or how good, we must turn our lives over to Christ by faith to receive God's blessing. Paul then moves on to the righteousness of God, revealed in the Gospel, beginning in chapter 3, verse 21.