

DO GOOD PEOPLE NEED THE GOSPEL?

Romans 2:1–16

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Romans 2:1–16 (NIV)

“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 we know that God’s judgment against those who do such things is based on truth. 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? Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that God’s kindness leads you toward repentance? But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God’s wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed. 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. But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger. There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile; but glory, honor and peace for everyone who does good: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For God does not show favoritism. All who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who sin under the law will be judged by the law. For it is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God’s sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous. (Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now

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accusing, now even defending them.) This will take place on the day when God will judge men's secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares.”

When we left off Romans 1 three weeks ago, we had noted in verses 18 through 32 of chapter 1 Paul's denunciation of the heathen world. The world of the Greek and the Barbarian. The world which had been marked by an abandonment of God and, therefore, an abandonment of morals. The world which stood outside of God's grace and salvation because of sin. Throughout the entire section of Romans, beginning with Romans 1:18 and continuing through 3:23, Paul is demonstrating that principle: “All have sinned and come short of the glory of God.” In chapter 1, first of all he demonstrates all the non-Jewish world comes in under the sentence. All have sinned. And in chapter 2 he demonstrates how even the Jewish world, the good world, comes in under that bondage to sin as well.

I would compare chapters 1 and 2 to running. As you run more, you find the capacity to run longer. However, if you started out to run a hundred miles and were using a track of a quarter mile in length it is doubtful that anyone here would be able to cover a hundred miles without resting somewhere along the line. If a person starts running around the track who is terribly out of shape they may get around once or twice. And if someone, like myself who is getting in shape, he may run around the track twelve times. But what is twelve times around the track to four hundred times that is needed to make one hundred miles?

Paul's demonstration in this letter is simply saying the non-Jewish world, the non-religious world of this day when it comes to achieving the goal of righteousness, doesn't get very far down the track. We who are making twenty laps around the track look down on the person who dropped out after one. We say, “We're a lot further down the road than they are.” But in fact we have not gone down the road very far at all in comparison to where God is at.

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That's what Paul is attempting to demonstrate in this passage. He is speaking here in Romans 2:1–16 to what he might call the civilized pagan and the religious Jew. Translated into our culture today, the good church member who is without a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. The good, moral person in our society. The fine and outstanding citizen. The person who, by all odds, is moral and decent and honest, who pays their taxes and votes, who goes to church and the rotary club or the garden club, who is a humanitarian, a good neighbor. It is to this person that Paul speaks. It is, therefore, to us that he speaks.

Romans, by the way, probably beginning in verse 18, reflects Paul's approach that he would have taken in preaching to a synagogue. We know from the end of Romans that he is actually dictating this sermon to a secretary by the name of Tertius, and it's not at all unlikely that this sermon in written form is what Paul had many times preached in an oral way. I was intrigued, for example, when Dr. Orr was here last Sunday and heard his lecture at 9:45 because I had, at other times, heard that lecture before. But each time I hear it, there is kind of a new meaning as it relates to a new audience. But basically the approach is the same. You find something that works in a powerful way of speaking and so it's a method that God anoints and uses.

Paul has been used to doing this in the synagogue. He must start off at ground zero. What he does is really adroit. He starts off by saying to this good audience, the people out there of which they knew, the pagans, are really bad. They have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. There are idolaters out there. There are homosexuals out there. There is civil strife and disorder of every kind. People in the audience are saying, "Yes! The world is bad! It's a terrible place! Right on, brother Paul!" All the while as he's saying this, he needs—because he's bringing an unpopular message, and it's difficult for a preacher to bring a message that is unpopular with an

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audience—he needs to use every good grace he can while speaking the truth to get a hold of the mind and the conscience of his audience.

So having demonstrated that the world out there is in need of God, he must now come down to the theme that the world in here is in need of God. In verse 1 he states his fundamental premise. In verses 2 through 16 he articulates at least three principles of judgment whereby God is going to judge even the religious person. The premise is simply stated in verse 1 as this:

I. The religious person, the good and moral person, has a sense of right and wrong.

How does one know that he has a sense of right and wrong? Because that person judges others.

“You have no excuse, O man, whoever you are, when you judge another. For in passing judgment upon him, you condemn yourself” (Romans 2:1).

By the way, if there is no one in this room who has ever judged anyone else for any action of any kind, I would like for you to leave. Because this message will not be for you at all today. We all fit within the mold. Paul is saying that by judging someone else, we establish the principle of judgment. When, for example, I call someone else a hypocrite, then when I myself commit hypocrisy I have judged myself, for I’ve already established the principle by judging another. When a judge, for example, in a court sits to judge a case in which someone is being tried for embezzlement and the judge himself has embezzled, the judge must—of necessity, if he is a moral person—judge himself, because he has entered into judgment with someone else.

So what Paul is simply saying is by judging that world out there and saying it’s wrong, one establishes the principle of judgment. And he also is saying that when we condemn others, then we must condemn ourselves.

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I find it very difficult to condemn myself. I can see Paul's audience saying it's extremely difficult to do this. There are several reasons I can think of why it's easier for me to be harder on other people than on myself.

A. For one thing, I am blind to many of my own faults. There are some that I'm terribly hard on myself in some areas. My wife and kids, for example, know my faults a lot better than I do. The principle that Jesus demonstrated was a hard one, a true one: "Why do you see the speck in your brother's eye when there's a great big plank in your own?" (Matthew 7:3). I'm often blind to many of my own faults. It's difficult for me to be honest at times with myself.

B. Another thing that makes it difficult for me to be honest with myself is I forget that what I've done in the past is wrong. Time elapses between the time I did something and the time I think of it. Now that it's under the bridge, so to speak, it doesn't seem so wrong any more. We have, for example, the illustration of the woman taken in adultery coming to Jesus. Everyone is ready to stone her. Jesus then reminds them of the sins which they have committed in the past: "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone." They had this blind point in their own life in respect to remembering in the past what had been done.

C. I think even a more crucial reason why it is difficult for me to condemn myself is I have the ability to rename things which I do. Instead of being angry, I am upset. Others gossip, but I share information, vital information. Someone else is stubborn, plain stubborn. But I stand for principle. Others are disorganized. I'm busy. Someone else is critical. They have a critical spirit. I make helpful suggestions. Another person is proud. I have a healthy self-image. Someone else is inconsistent. Me, I'm flexible.

"Therefore, you are without excuse." The principle is established. When I enter into judgment on others, I establish the principle of judgment and it comes back, then, on myself. Having

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established, then, that judgment is essential because I've already entered into judgment, Paul then—under guidance of the Spirit—articulates three ways in which God judges the world. The first way in which God judges is noted in verse 2. It's demonstrated in verses 3 through 5. "We know that the judgment of God rightly falls upon..." The literal rendering is, "We know that the judgment of God is according to truth upon those who do such things."

II. God judges according to truth.

He has all the information available, and He is not guilty of any of the short-sightedness that I would be in respect to looking at myself. Paul indicates that since God will judge truly—or according to truth, or rightly—how is it that anyone could presume to think that they could escape the judgment of God? Yet this is precisely in the first century what many in Paul's audience felt in an intertestamental book at the time, The Wisdom of Solomon. There are these phrases, "For even if we sin we are Thine, knowing Thy dominion." And "While therefore Thou doth chasten us now, scourges Thou enemies ten thousand times more." How can God judge according to truth if He lets us off the hook for a wrong and punishes someone else ten thousand times worse? Since God judges according to truth, Paul asks, "Do you think you can escape the judgment of God?" (Romans 2:3). The answer is obvious. No, it cannot be escaped.

I think in our society today, because judgment is so easy to escape, we assume that God's judgment is as easy to get around as human law. When you think of it, in our society there are four ways to escape in respect to human law. One is to commit something which is wrong and the offense never becomes known because you successfully cover it. Another way to escape human law is, when you're discovered, to make it to another jurisdiction—escape to another jurisdiction and get out of the authority of the law. If that doesn't work, there's another way of getting around human law and that is to find some fault in the legal process once you're arrested

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and to escape through legal maneuvers. Finally, there's even another way. If you're actually sentenced and incarcerated, there's a possibility that one could escape and still get away.

But Paul—as he looks at God's judgment—of course, all these things have to be ruled out.

There's no way our offenses can be kept hidden. There's no way we can escape to another jurisdiction. There is no way that any proceeding along the way can be faulty because God, the righteous Judge, is true. And there's no way, once sentence has been passed, to escape God's judgment.

Since there's no way to escape, how then must we look at the prospect of God's judgment? The people in Paul's day were looking at it from the standpoint: God is going to be kind. Therefore, we can do what we want because we have a privileged relationship with Him. Paul, therefore, asks, "Do you think to escape God's judgment because of God's kindness?" The real reason why God is kind is not to let one off the hook, but because God is leading us by that kindness to repentance. God's kindness is described as forbearance and longsuffering. God's kindness is one that is willing to put up with ingratitude and lovelessness. His kindness, as expressed in longsuffering, means that He defers rebuke and punishment as long as possible. So that the reason why God does not immediately pass sentence upon us when we have erred or sinned against Him or someone else is that God's kindness is giving us time to come to ourselves and truly change. God is often criticized for this quality of kindness. People often bring up the question: "How can a loving and a just God permit the injustice and vileness that takes place in this world? How can He allow an Idi Amin? How can He allow a tyrant like Hitler or Stalin to arise and murder millions of people? How can He allow godless regimes to come into power and crush people and put them in prison and spread sorrow and destruction across the land? Why does God allow this to go on year after year? Why doesn't God judge these persons?"

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If God is to judge rightly, then when He judges He must judge all. So the question becomes a more personal one. The question we ought rather to ask is: “Why didn’t the Lord judge me yesterday when I said that sharp, caustic word of criticism that plunged like an arrow into a loved one’s heart and hurt them? Why didn’t He shrivel my hand when I took a pencil and cheated on my income tax? Why didn’t He strike me dumb when I was gossiping on the phone, sharing a tidbit that made someone else look bad in someone else’s eyes?”

Because His patience is leading me to repentance. When God executes His justice, as the Scriptures say, His justice must be declared all at once in one blow because He will exercise justice fairly. Paul indicates to his synagogue audience—who is very comfortable and very at home that “God accepts me because of my biological relationship with an ethnic group, because of my membership in this club”—Paul is saying, “You’re ignoring the building up of the wrath of God.” It’s like living in a village where high above and beyond that small village there is a dam and the waters are backing up and becoming stronger and stronger, and eventually there comes a moment when the dam breaks and the water spills over in fury and wrath.

God judges according to truth. Therefore, can anyone escape that judgment?

Paul indicates the second criteria by which God judges, the second principle.

III. God judges according to works.

The principle is stated in verse 6 and demonstrated in verses 7 through 10: “He will render to every man according to his works.” Paul very carefully defines what he means by works. “To those who, by patience in well-doing, seek for glory and honor and immortality.” The work appears to be the work of seeking. It is demonstrated in the New Testament by Acts 10.

Cornelius—who was a man seeking glory and honor and immortality—because he was seeking it

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with his whole heart, the Lord grants him revelation of Jesus Christ. And he becomes the first Gentile to obey the gospel. The good work is the seeking.

There's also another thing that Paul is attempting to communicate in this principle of judgment.

That is simply this: God will judge everyone according to their works, but in actual fact there will be found deficiency in the works outside of Jesus Christ. Therefore, there is another need of relating to God other than the principle of how good I do.

God's judgment, Paul says, falls upon the factious. That simply means those who seek themselves, who were ambitious for self instead of ambitious for God. This judgment comes upon the Jew first—even as salvation also came upon the Jew first. Then it comes also upon the Gentile.

A third principle of judgment that is given by the apostle is that God's judgment is given according to impartiality (verses 10 through 11).

IV. God shows no partiality.

In verses 12 through 16, he goes on to articulate and demonstrate this principle. The word "partiality" literally means "to receive the face." It is, for example, a kind of idea that if you were looking at a particular group of people and you were in a capacity to judge, what you do is you look upon the face of someone you know in the group and you move them off to the side because you know them, and they get a special dispensation because they're kind of in on the situation. Paul says God is not a receiver of the face. There is no ability to bribe God. God, without any partiality, will look at all of the human race.

This phrase, "for God shows no partiality," to me, is a great freeing verse for Christians. Because it frees us from the concept that God has played Russian roulette with the human race—that from the gene bank of eternity, God has selected this person for salvation and this person for

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damnation—he's kind of just, by random choice, selected people right and left toward one or the other. While the Scriptures speak of the election of the saints, there is nothing said about the election of persons not to be saved. We find a kind of a mystery there, by the way, that I think there's a relationship of the fact that God chose me and I chose God. Like which came first: the chicken or the egg? That's resolved in the mind of God, not in the mind of man. But God shows no partiality. If He were randomly choosing people from eternity past to be saved or to be damned, then one would have to say that God had shown partiality. The principle is established. God does not show partiality with the human race. This is demonstrated by the fact that those who have the written Law will be judged by that Law, and those who do not have the written Law will be judged by the law of conscience in their heart.

In fact, Paul indicates that the people who have the written Law may be judged more severely because they have more knowledge. For example, Jesus, in Matthew, talks about it will be worse in the day of judgment for the cities of Capernaum and Bethsaida and Korazin that it will be for Sodom and Gomorrah and Tyre and Sidon. You have set against each other the principles of these two societies. Those without the written Law will be judged by what is written on their hearts, the law of conscience. This helps us really struggle with this question: What about people who've never heard the gospel? Paul specifically says those who have never heard the gospel have a law written on their hearts, and their conflicting thoughts will accuse them, or perhaps excuse them, on that day.

Notice that phrase "perhaps excuse them." Here Paul theoretically holds open the possibility that a person who's never heard the gospel of Jesus Christ could perhaps be excused on the day of judgment. Later he will go on to indicate, in fact, that all have sinned and come short of the glory of God—and therefore, in his experience, he had never seen such a person. Theoretically, he

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states it. In fact, what we see from this passage is that even within the law of conscience written on the heart, there has been a violation and a disobedience to that law.

Have any of you had the chance to read “Peace Child,” written by Don Richardson, who was a Wycliffe missionary to Dutch New Guinea? He came to a tribe that was the most unusual culture that he had ever encountered, or probably any missionary has encountered. Their societal values were the complete reverse of everything that we hold dear. The person most admired in their society was a person who could be the most consummate in betraying someone. What kind of law of conscience could be written in such a culture? The missionary tells about one of the first times he told the story of Jesus. Finally came the time he talked about the crucifixion. He writes: “They were not accustomed to projecting their minds into a culture so dissimilar than their own. Only once did my presentation of the gospel meet a ringing response. I was describing Judas Iscariot’s betrayal of the Son of God. About halfway through I saw they were all listening intently. They noted the details. For three years, Judas kept close company with Jesus, sharing the same food, traveling the same road. They were intrigued that any associate of Jesus could think of betraying such an impressive figure...If anyone had conceived the idea, one of Jesus’ inner circle of trusted disciples would have been the least likely. Yet Judas, having penetrated Jesus’ group of disciples, betrayed Him and carried out the dreadful act alone. At the climax of the story—Judas’ kiss of betrayal—one man gave a low whistle of admiration. Several others touched their fingertips to their chest in awe. Still others chuckled. At first I was confused. Then the realization broke through. They were acclaiming Judas as the hero of the story. A cold feeling gripped me. I tried to protest that Jesus was good. He was the Son of God, the Savior. It was evil to betray Him. Nothing I said could erase that gleam of savage enjoyment in their eyes. One man leaned forward and exclaimed. ‘That was a real man!’ My language informants looked

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through the window and pointed to a young pig roaming freely around the village yard. When the owner first caught that pig, he kept it in his home. He fed it by hand and protected it from the village dogs. Now that it is roaming about, he still throws down scraps of food for it every day. The pig feels secure, protected, well-fed. But one day when the pig is mature, it will be butchered and eaten. The native word means to do with a man as is done with that pig: to fatten him with friendship for unexpected slaughter.”

That, then, in a society like this, becomes the law of conscience. The missionary was perplexed and baffled. Finally the solution came as a number of tribes were living in his area trying to help him reduce the language to written form. The struggle between one another became so great that the missionary felt he must now bow out of the scene and let these people go back to the jungles so they would have some distance between them because there was going to be violence, terrible violence. He called them together and told them he was leaving. They asked him why, and he related why he was. They then went into great dialogue with one another. The upshot of it was within the next day or two one of the men in one of the tribes took his child, and with his wife running and screaming and crying after him but not catching up with him, he took the child to the other tribe and left it in this man’s home. The other man then took his child and ran to the other person in his encampment with his wife following after him and deposited his child into that family. The missionary couldn’t figure out what was going on. He asked. They related that this was their custom. This was the peace child, and there was to be no outbreak of hostility between the tribes because the peace had been guaranteed by a child, a peace child. As long as that child lived within the context of that other tribe, there was always to be peace.

The missionary thought about this for a while, some days. Then it began to click in respect to the gospel. God had sent us a peace child, and Judas had betrayed the peace child. No longer did

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they think well of Judas, for to have an act of betrayal when one had given the peace child was the worse kind of offense possible. Jesus had come as God's peace child to bring enduring peace. A living demonstration in the twentieth century. Just within our lifetime. In the ancient Word, what Paul is saying is that the Lord had written on their heart. There is an appeal to the conscience, a preparation within each culture to receiving the gospel even if it has never heard the gospel. The gospel of Jesus Christ, when it comes to a person who's never heard, may be compared to two people in the woods at night. One is a good man who is lost. The other is a thief who is seeking to get lost. A search party comes into the woods with light. The good man runs to the light because he wants to be found, and the thief runs further into the darkness because he wants to be lost.

When the gospel enters human life, it creates the same response as Jesus indicates in John 3. One runs to the light, and the other flees from the light.

So God will be impartial in His dealings. To those without the written Law, He will judge them without the written Law, but by the law of conscience, written in the heart—which is in every tribe and culture. He will judge those by the law who have the law. And those who have the law will be justified by doing the law, Paul says. In actual fact, as Romans develops he'll go on to indicate that no one can keep that law. No one has kept that law.

In these principles of judgment that Paul has given, he really is asking his audience to consider: Who can stand the judgment of God? Who, if they really look within themselves, can stand God judging us according to truth? Who can stand God judging our works? And who can stand God's judgment if He shows no partiality toward us?

As we leave verse 16, we leave with a heavy feeling. As I prepared this sermon, because we're not going through the book at one time, it really ends on a gloomy note. There is no hope. One

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can't be saved by truth because there is the defect in our life that has denied—at one point or the other—which has denied the truth and God's standard of absolute perfection. My words fail, and I don't have any special pipeline that gets me into God. Therefore, how can one be saved? How can one avoid God's judgment? Paul, for the first time at the end of verse 16, drops the hint.

Beginning with this sermon in Romans 1:18 through to this point, he has not mentioned the name of Jesus. Now for the first time—remember, again, he is preaching to a synagogue audience, preparing them to receive the gospel—now for the first time, he drops in the name Jesus and holds out the hint of something else which will come to full flower in Romans 4, 5 and 6. It is if God is to judge according to truth, according to works, and without partiality then no one can stand.

But God is also going to judge by Christ Jesus. One sees that and says: "What does this mean, and how does this relate to everything else?" We might just jump ahead for a moment and suggest so we might leave today with a word of hope. Jesus is the only One who has ever come into life and has fully passed the three tests of judgment. He passes the judgment of truth. In Him there is no sin. "Let Him accuse me, if there is anything I have done," Jesus could say. He could stand before Pilate and say, "I am the truth." He passes that test.

He passes the test of the law or of works. He says, "I have fulfilled the law." Jesus in His works was perfect before God, a Lamb without blemish.

And certainly He meets also that test that God showed Him no partiality. He was born to a poor home. He was born at a bad time. He experienced the rejection of His townspeople, the misunderstanding of His family. God showed Him no partiality in protecting Him from adversity. He experienced the most painful death possible, the most unimaginable suffering. God showed no partiality.

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He passed through the worst of human experience. On each count He came through with loyalty to God. Jesus, therefore, emerges as Someone judged, who has gone through what we go through and successfully mastered it and presents us a way whereby we might be acceptable to God and avoid God's judgment by a means other than these principles which have been articulated.

This being able to avoid the judgment of God comes through a living and trusting relationship with the Judge himself: Jesus Christ, our Lord. This passage is meant to make us realize that each of us has need of a Savior. If we are trusting in anything other than Jesus for salvation, our faith is on quicksand and can never be established. It is only when every human prop is taken away from us and we come to rely totally upon Him that we may, in the day of judgment, stand acquitted by God through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Closing Prayer

Our heavenly Father, we come today not as the synagogue audience, but as the Church. As a body of people, for the most part, whom You have redeemed because of confession of faith that has been made in You. It is possible, Lord, that as we serve You, we become so familiar with the words of our faith that we fail to remember—and remake alive the terrible, awful position that we are in apart from You. Without You, we are really in the world without hope. Seeing these principles again demonstrated to us in the Scripture which You have given makes us realize afresh the magnitude of what You have done for us, allowing us—in a day when You judge the secrets of men—to be received not on the basis of our works or on the basis of our sinlessness, but simply on the basis that You have lived life for us and become a sacrifice for us and bought us with Your own blood. I ask, Lord Jesus, for each person in this audience, that there would be an individual recognition of that need for You as Savior.

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Lord, I ask beyond that for a moment. Look at the ways that we are needing Your help in issues which effect us even when You have become our Savior. I pray that this message today will help us to look at ourselves more honestly, to really see ourselves as others see us and as You see us, to take some of the ways in which we are hurting or harming other people or ourselves and bring them afresh to You in repentance and ask You to do a new work in our hearts. As David prayed, to create in us a clean heart and a right spirit. These things, Lord, we ask in Your Name, praising You and giving You gratitude for what You have done for us. In Jesus' name. Amen.