

Romans : God's Righteous Judgment on All

Romans 2:12-16

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If you have your Bibles, I'd invite you to turn with me to Romans, chapter 2. We continue to work our way through Paul's gospel to the Romans. You remember in Romans, chapter 1, verses 18 through 32, Paul had spoken especially to those pagans who were Gentiles who had never heard the law of Moses, and he had brought to bear the searching judgment of God against their sin. He had revealed to them through their attitudes and actions, their need for the gospel of grace so as to preclude a response to his message that went something like this: "Well, Paul that's very nice, but I don't need your gospel." The whole point of Romans, chapter 1, verses 18 to the end of the chapter to those Gentiles apart from Christ was that that was precisely what they needed. They needed Christ, they needed the gospel.

Then, in Romans, chapter 2, verse 1 and going down to the point where we are today, he turns his guns in another direction. He turns his guns towards his fellow Jews. Paul himself a Jew from Tarsus who had been raised in the strict branch of his religion, a man trained as a Rabbi, as a Pharisee; now turns to his own people, the religious people of his day; the people who had received the one true revelation of God in the history of this world through the writings of the Old Testament. And especially in that core of the law of Moses, and he says to them, you need the gospel, too.

And again, in order to preclude an objection, well, Paul, we don't need the gospel, we have the law, Paul begins a series of argumentation. In the first few verses he points out their hypocrisy. That though they say we have the law and the Gentiles don't, they in fact do many of the same things that they accuse the Gentiles of doing themselves. And so he brings to bear an argument against their hypocrisy.

And then he goes on to argue that God is not partial in His judgment. They have used their own misunderstanding of the doctrine of election to think that God is going to treat them with a certain kind of favoritism, irrespective of their love for God, their love for the promises, their embracing of His promises and His covenant calls to obedience. And so again, Paul says, look, God is going to be

impartial in His judgment. He's not going to grade on a curve. His law is going to be strictly applied. So He's undercutting any other place that they can run to for hope, other than the promises of God as they are manifested in Jesus Christ. He continues that argumentation here today in Romans 2, verses 12 through 16. So let's hear God's holy word:

Romans 2:12-16

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; for not the hearers of the law are just before God, but the doers of the law will be justified. 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, 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. On the day when, according to my gospel, God will judge the secrets of men through Christ Jesus. Amen.

Father, we ask that you would open our eyes to understand Your word. These words are simple, but they are hard. They are simple because Paul's logic, his argument, is crystal clear. They are hard because they cause us to take stock of our own hearts in ways that are unpleasant. Help us because of the hardness of these words to be soft in our hearts as we receive them; to allow Your Holy Spirit to seek us out and see if there is any unclean thing in us. And then we pray that by Your grace that we would run to Christ and to His promises, and to nowhere else for relief from the judgment that we deserve. These things we ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

Now there is a rumor afoot amongst evangelical circles today that in the end, in the final judgment and the final deliverances of God's judgment on this world, that God's grace is going to triumph over His justice. That is, that some people are saying that somehow in the end, those who have not embraced Christ in this life, will be in God's mercy embraced by Him at the judgment. That is, sooner or later, most if not all, will be redeemed. They will not undergo the punishment of God's just sentence. Theologians like Clark Pinnock and his writings have popularized that view. We've all heard that view spoken at a common-place level as we've had conversation with various friends, but that particular view is even taking root amongst evangelical theologians today. That somehow God in the end is not going to punish everyone. God is not going to bring to bear punishment on those who have rejected Christ. That evangelical universalism, we might call it, is directly rejected by Paul in this passage.

But closer to home Paul is rejecting another attitude that is held by many who are professing believers, many who are church members. There are many who are part of the church who, with their lips, say that they believe in the gospel; but their lives radically contradict those claims. They feel secure because they have,

with their lips, made a profession of faith; but their lives portray a lack of gospel-transforming power. Now I'm not talking about perfectionism here. Every one of us, even the most mature Christians, especially the most mature Christians in this congregation, knows that the Christian life is not characterized by perfection. It's characterized by growth. We grow in grace. We continue to struggle with sin. There are besetting sins that are very difficult for some of us to conquer, and sometimes we are tempted with Paul to cry out a wretched man that I am. Who will deliver me from this bondage to sin? We feel that from time to time. I'm not talking about that though. I'm talking about a fundamental tension between our profession and our behavior which is characteristic of all of life. It's a schizophrenia and more and more we see this kind of schizophrenia in the church. Let me give you an example that a friend told me about only a few days ago that occurred right here in Jackson. It was at the abortion clinic on Briarwood Drive. There, an older gentleman, a grandfather, brought his young, unwed granddaughter who was pregnant, to the abortion clinic to murder her child. In they went to the clinic. The man immediately came out, sat down on a chair, opened his Bible and began to read. Someone said, "Do you believe that?" "Yes." "Are you a Christian?" "Yes." "Then, what are you doing. What's going on in there is none of my business," he said, and he went back to reading his Bible. Schizophrenia. God's word says one thing. We do another. Radical, dynamic tension going on in what we say we believe, and the way we act. That's extreme perhaps, but it struck me like a thunderbolt as to how some Christians can say one thing, and live in an entirely different way. Say that we believe one thing, and actually live as if we believe another.

Paul is speaking to people in a similar situation in His own day and age. There are people who say, "Paul, look we have the law, we have the law. We don't need your gospel." And Paul has several responses to that. One response that Paul has is well, you haven't understood the law. If you understood the law, you would understand that the law was never given to justify you. The promises are what you trust in for your salvation. The law is your standard for life. You've misunderstood the function of the law itself.

But another charge that he brings is that though they have the law, they don't do the law. You talk about having the law, he says to his people, but you don't live by the law. You make all this noise about how you alone amongst all the peoples have been given the law of Moses. That's true, but you don't live by that law. So in this passage he continues this relentless argument. Paul is responding to the objection that he hears. "Oh, we don't need the gospel, Paul. We have the law." And hear his response in three parts.

I. Even if one has never read or heard God's law, because we break the law we will be judged/condemned by the law.

If you'll look at this passage with me, first in verses 12 and 13. Here, Paul simply

stresses this. That Jews and non-Jews, Jews and Gentiles, everyone in other words, will be judged according to the standard of God's holy law. Even if one has never heard or read the law of Moses. Because we break the law, we will be judged. We will be condemned by the law. Now bear in mind that throughout this section Paul's main aim is to bring conviction of heart for those Jews who have rejected the gospel, they've rejected Christ. He's first in Romans 1 been speaking to the Gentiles. Now he changes his focus and he speaks to the Jews for a moment. Then in Romans 3, he's going to summarize and wrap everybody up in one big bundle and get us all condemned in order that we will not seek to justify ourselves before God, but will instead run to God through the Lord Jesus Christ in His mercy. And so Paul is, in this whole section, trying to bring conviction of heart to these Jews who rejected Christ, and they've said, "No, Paul, we've got the law. We don't need your gospel."

These devout Jews felt secure in their national election and in their possession of the law of Moses. And Paul wants them to be uncomfortable. He wants them to be insecure. He doesn't want them to find their security in those things. He wants them to be insecure in order that they will run to the only place of hope and refuge, and that is Jesus Christ.

And Paul wants to unsettle them by pointing out that the law is not going to justify any sinner. Now it's important to recognize throughout this passage, Paul is not teaching justification by works. Some people read this passage, and they say, "Ooh, that kind of sounds like Paul says that unless you do this, you won't be saved." Actually, Paul's point is the opposite. Those who don't do this will certainly not be saved. Those who are unrighteous will certainly not be justified before God. Those who are characterized by a life of wickedness will certainly be condemned. Why is he saying that? Because there are some people who think that simply by hearing the law, that they will be declared right before God; that they will stand acquitted before Him in the last day. And Paul wants to emphasize that no sinner will be justified by the law, whether he's a Jew or a Gentile.

His targets are hypocrisy and self-justification. Either saying, "I know the law," and not doing it. Or attempting to justify one's self by the works of the law. And his tool of diagnosis is this distinction between hearers and doers. And you remember this. Jesus uses this all the time in His teaching, in His parables. He speaks of the distinction between hearers and doers of the law. And Paul says, "Look, my Jewish friends, you have the law. You don't do it. And in the end if you expect to be justified by the law, the only way to be justified by the law is by doing it, and doing all of it and doing all of it perfectly. And so I would suggest to you that unless you want to stand before God on those grounds, that you probably ought to try another way. And the only other way is my gospel, which is the Lord Jesus Christ."

Now, His words not only have reference to the Jews of His own day, but they have reference to us my friends. For us, if we cling to a religious profession of

faith that is contradicted by the whole tenor of our lives, we are in the same precarious position of presuming on God's mercy while living in a way which shows we've never really understood or embraced the gospel. Paul underscores here the fact that what counts both now and in the day of judgment is not whether people have possessed the law or have read it, had them read to them in the synagogue or in the church, but whether they have conducted their lives in accordance with its requirements. So for those people who expect to be judged right before God on the basis of how they have lived, if you choose that way, you better be prepared to backup your choice.

And the apostle Paul is basically beginning to lay an argument that there is no one who will be justified in that way. Everyone falls short. We could find striking examples that show how people within the church fall short if they are expecting to be justified by their own lives on the last day. The same friend who was telling me the story that I opened the service with, told me another story about seeing an acquaintance of his, a lady from a Presbyterian church in another city, drive into the same abortion clinic with her daughter to take her in to have this procedure performed. Here she was, a professing Christian, and yet she was conducting herself in a way which contradicted her profession. In another case, I had a young woman come in to visit me who had grown up in a non-Christian background, and she was very confused because she had dated a young man who was a professing Christian. And yet, it was he who had introduced her to premarital sexual relations. And she was confused. He was a professing Christian. And yet he was the one who had led her in a direction which was in contradiction of God's work. She had been pure in her living before she met this young man. She was confused. We could point out example after example about Christians, professing Christians who do not live according to the standards of God's words.

And so Paul is simply saying this. Don't rest in this generic idea that God is sort of going to weigh your life out, a little bit of good and a little bit of bad, and then you'll be fine in the end. Because at the Grand Assize, because He will judge by His law, everyone whose confidence is in the law and not in Jesus Christ is going to come up short, whether Jew or Gentile. It's a sobering word that Paul brings here. But he's emphasizing that no one can stand before God as righteous, merely by hearing the law. If you intend to be justified by the law, then you must do the law as Leviticus says. And so the apostle says, "If you have not done the law, then there is only one hope for you, and that is the hope of the gospel."

II. Our conscience confirms the justice of God's judgment.

Paul continues his argument. Look at verses 14 and 15. Someone might object. "Wait a minute, Paul, this isn't fair. You say everybody's going to be judged by the law, even those who have never heard the law of Moses. That's not fair." But Paul says, "No." Everyone who is alive has the work of the law written on his

heart. Everyone who is alive has the works of the law written in their heart. Our consciences, in other words, confirm to us that God's judgment against sin is real, and it's right.

Paul is heaping up here condemnation on the Jews. The Jews have said, "Well, we have the law. And, therefore, we don't need your gospel, Paul." And he says, "Look, you're culpable by that law that your boasting in. Let me show you that even the Gentiles come short if they trust in the law."

Now this is important because we often hear a modern objection to the gospel that goes something like this. "Well, it's not fair to say that God will judge people. What about those who have never heard." And Paul's getting a similar kind of objection here. "Well, this isn't fair, Paul. Many people have never heard or read Moses' law. How can they be judged by that law?" And Paul says, "Well fine, let me explain that to you. Yes, indeed, they will be judged by that law, because everyone has the requirements of the law written on their hearts. Everyone. Let me prove it," he says. He first asserts that there is no human being that does not have the things, the requirements of the law inscribed permanently on their heart, on their soul, on their inmost being. And then he says, "Now, I know that some of you disagree." You say, "Well, Paul, you say, that's simply your philosophy, and I disagree with your philosophy." And Paul says, "Let me give you some evidence from my philosophy." He says, "First of all notice how there are Gentiles who sometimes do the works of the law." He says, "Look around at the governments of the Gentiles. All of their governments have standards. Many of those standards are good, many of those standards are in accord with the law which God has revealed through Moses. And the reason that they're in accord with those laws which are revealed through Moses is because they're based upon the principles of the law which are inscribed in the heart. So the very fact that you see governments with standards around you is an evidence that God has inscribed the works of the law on people's hearts." He goes on to say, "Furthermore, they act in accordance with those laws from time to time. They're not always all bad. They do some good things from time to time. That's evidence that the works of the law are written on their hearts.

Furthermore, their conscience confirms to them," he goes on to say in verse 15. "Their conscience confirms that they have the works of the law written on their hearts. From time to time they feel guilty about things they have done or not done. And furthermore, not only their conscience, but their reflection upon their conscience confirms that they indeed have the works of the law written on their heart, because they think about it." Sometimes the thoughts of their hearts acquit them from being guilty of something that they have been accused of by their conscience. Other times, their reflection actually convicts them of being guilty about something that their conscience has accused them of.

And so through all these means, Paul makes it clear that it is evident that God has written the works of His law, the requirements of His law on the hearts of

everyone. And therefore the old objection – but what about those who have never heard? It's scuttle. You know, sometimes, people will attempt to evade the gospel. They'll say, "But look, how can you say that people who have never heard the gospel are going to be condemned." "Because they're not condemned on the basis of the gospel," Paul says. "They're condemned on the basis of the law." And you say, "But what about those who have never heard the law?" And Paul says there is nobody who exists like that. They may not have heard it with their ears, but it's been written on their hearts. There's nobody who is not culpable for their sin. In other words, Paul is saying everyone stands under the just condemnation of God. And even our conscience confirms it.

III. The justice of God's judgment will be revealed on the day of Christ's coming.

So he goes on in verse 16 to say that in the last day, according to His gospel, God will judge the secrets of men through Jesus. Now be careful, Paul's not contradicting himself there. We just said that Paul is arguing in verses 14 and 15 that God is going to judge, not by the gospel, but by the law. And so when He says on the day when according to my gospel God will judge the secrets of men through Jesus, He's not saying that the gospel will be the standard by which He judges men on the last day. He is noting, however, that in the preaching of the gospel there is necessarily and inherently a proclamation of God's just judgment. Think about it. If you preach the gospel that though we are sinners, and though we are rightly under the condemnation of God, yet God in His mercy and His love sent His son, who lived and died in our place, so that if we trust on Him alone for our salvation as He's offered in the gospel, we will be saved, He receives the punishment for our sin, we receive the acquittal of righteousness by His deeds. By saying that you are inherently committing yourself to the belief that God will judge, and that those who are in Christ will be spared His punitive judgment, and that those who are not will not be spared His punitive judgment.

In other words, the gospel inherently entails the conveying of the doctrine of God's final judgment. That's so important for us to understand. The gospel doesn't negate judgment. The justice of God's judgment will be revealed on the day of the coming of Christ, just as the mercy of God's judgment will be revealed on that day. That's very important in our day and time, because there are many Christians who think that God's grace rules out eternal punishment; or, that God's grace rules out a final judgment. Paul begs to differ. Paul says, no, far from it. God's grace requires judgment. Grace, mercy, is optional. Justice and judgment are not. And the very proclamation of grace requires final judgment. The gospel inherently entails proclaiming the reality of the final judgment and punishment of sin.

You know, we're in the midst of a national discussion that has been growing about the death penalty. Whatever your views are on that, one often hears from

within the Christian community some flogged thinking that goes like this: "If we really understood God's grace and mercy, we would be opposed to the death penalty. Now whatever you think of that argument recognize that underlying it is the idea that grace is the opposite of justice. It's not. Injustice is the opposite of justice. Grace is not the opposite of justice. Grace and justice can co-exist happily. In fact, there could be no grace for us apart from the justice of God; because God's grace for us is based upon His enacting of His justice upon His Son. And, therefore, if grace and justice are exclusionary, then the gospel is impossible.

And so it's so important for us to recognize that when Paul says on the day when, according to my gospel, God will judge the secrets of men through Christ Jesus. Yes, yes, we preach the gospel of grace. In fact, Paul's whole point here is to make people not trust in their own lives and their own works, but to run to Christ and the gospel. But God's grace does not negate the reality of His final judgment. In fact, the reality of His final judgment impels us to embrace His grace now. Don't think that somehow in the end, one part of God is going to be pitted over against another part of God, because God's attributes and actions never contradict one another. They are always in perfect harmony. So the apostle Paul says not only now does your conscience show you that your lives will condemn you, but on the last day your conscience with crystal clarity will confirm that if you are apart from Christ, you will have no hope forever. And so the apostle Paul is taking away every argument possible that we might bring up to say to Him, Paul, thank you very much. We don't need your gospel, because Paul knows that we need the gospel more than anything else.

Until we understand our deserving of judgment, until we understand the seriousness of sin, until we believe that God's judgment is just, then we will never understand how amazing grace is. But it is precisely because of the seriousness of sin and the reality of final judgment that God's grace is so amazing. And Paul is saying look, your only hope is not to look to yourselves. Your only hope is to embrace Christ and the gospel. Trust in Him, not in yourself. Accept His life, and His death in your place. Recognize that you, in and of yourself, standing before God, you are going to be condemned. But recognize that He, in His love has accepted condemnation for you, so that for you, as you trust in Him, there can never be condemnation. That's amazing grace. Let's pray.

Our Lord and our God, we do need to embrace the gospel. Lord, if we have been in church for years, and we've never embraced the gospel, enable us to see our sin and to see the Savior and to embrace Him. If we have wandered in and out of the church over the years; and we've never dealt with our sin; and we've never seen our deserving of judgment; and we've never embraced Christ as He is offered in the gospel; enable us to embrace Him today. We pray that You would be exalted in Your people's lives, for these things we ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

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