

Romans: Contempt for God's Kindness

Romans 2:4

By [Dr. J. Ligon Duncan](#)

June 11, 2000

As you take your Bibles in hand, please turn to Romans, chapter 2, verse 4. As we have worked through Paul's letter to the Romans, especially beginning in Romans 1:18 to the end of the chapter, we have seen Paul demonstrate two things. First of all the justice of God's condemnation, the justice of God's wrath against the world in its sinful rebellion. He has demonstrated the justice of that wrath by showing the universality of sin. Sin is everywhere, and he's illustrated the pervasiveness of sin, the universality of sin by showing the gross immorality in the society to which he was writing. And, in fact, the same kinds of immoralities that you would have seen in Greco-Roman society you see in society in America today. And so Paul began by pointing, for instance, to a particular type of sexual deviancy. But then by the time he gets to Romans 1:28 to the end of the chapter, he gives a list of twenty-one sins to make sure that no one in pagan society thinks that simply because they haven't committed a particular sexual sin, or a particular sexual deviancy that they are therefore without sin. And so somewhere, everyone is touched by the sins that he lists at the very end of the chapter.

But to this point, he's writing primarily to what we would call immoral pagans. Pagans who are not in any way worshipers of the true God, or part of the religious and worshiping community. And so as he would have been speaking this word, the religious, moral Jews, church-going Jews of his day would have been shaking their heads: Yes, Paul, that's right. Those people are immoral. Yes, they are under God's condemnation. But he gets to Romans, chapter 2, verses 1 through 3, and he says, by the way, I have something I'd like to say to those of you who are regular synagogue-attending moral Jews, but who have rejected Christ. And here's what it is. You know right from wrong. And you condemn those who do the wrong. But you know what? You do the wrong yourselves, and therefore, you are self-condemned. Even though you don't participate in the openly, grossly, blatantly immoral activities which I've just described, you yourselves are sinners and you're in need of grace. And if you rejected the Lord Jesus Christ, you've rejected the only way that you are going to be able to find the grace of God. And so he brings a charge of hypocrisy against the church-going people, if we can put it that way, of his day. So, he speaks first to the bad

pagan, that is the pagan who is openly immoral, and now he's speaking to the good pagan. That is, a person who is religious, but who really in his or her heart of hearts has never come to grips with his own sin and his own need of grace. And he certainly never found it in Jesus Christ.

Now he continues that argument today. So here's God's holy word in Romans 2, verse 4:

"Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance." Amen.

And thus ends this reading of God's holy and inspired word. May He write its eternal truth upon our hearts. Let's pray.

Our Lord and our God, this day as we come to Your word, help us to see ourselves in light of what Paul says. Rather than thinking about how these words apply to someone else, help us to sit under the judgment of Your word. Search our hearts to see if there is any unclean thing in us. And then by Your grace, lead us to the only place of refuge and mercy and grace and safety. That is, the Lord Jesus Christ and a living relationship with Him. This we ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

He was a young attorney in graduate school. He had won a Rotary scholarship and so was doing a year, taking a break from his own law work. He had gone straight from law school into one of the most prestigious firms in the country, the Fulbright & Jorwarsky firm in Houston, Texas. He was one of the nicest guys that you would ever have wanted to meet. He was not in any way, apparently at least; openly immoral; he was from a Christian background; his language was never inappropriate; he was not suggestive in his behavior. He was one of those nice people that you run into from time to time. And as we got to know one another in the university halls over a period of a few months, I did notice that he was not attending church; and I did notice that he got distinctively nervous around me when the conversation veered anywhere in the direction of religious things. He knew that I was a minister, and I knew that that was a real conversation killer for some. But, as we conversed one day things did go in the direction of talking about spiritual things and his interests and such, and he became more and more nervous. So, to try and put my heart at ease he assured me, "But Lig, I talk to the Man upstairs every day." That did not set my heart at ease. He was a good friend. I kept in touch with him for a long period of time, but I wonder if in his niceness and in his moralness and even in his Christian background, if Paul would not have had a question for him: Do you think lightly of the kindness and forbearance and patience of God?

And I wonder if there are some here today who are in a similar boat. You may be more faithful at going to church than my friend was, but I wonder if you have come to grips with the realization of what your sin deserves and your need of

mercy. And the fact that that mercy and that need for mercy is met only in Jesus Christ.

The apostle Paul walks us through a scenario. He's speaking to the Jews of His day. But these words are just as much for us as they are for the Palestinian Jews to whom Paul spoke in that time. Paul has, I think, three questions for us to ask ourselves that help to understand the issue that he is raising. Having just said that he finds amongst his own people a propensity to condemn others for sin, while not realizing that they are sinful themselves and in need of forgiveness of sin, he continues that charge by saying, and let me say that that very attitude which condemns others without realizing the need for forgiveness in your own heart also is, in fact, taking lightly the kindness of God.

And so I'd like to look at this verse in three parts with you asking three questions. In the very first words of this verse we see Paul raise the issue of the danger of discounting God's goodness and mercy. Do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and tolerance and patience. Do you think lightly of God's mercy?

I. Do you think lightly of God's mercy?

That's the first question I want us to ask. Do you think lightly of God's mercy. Paul has said that the Jews knew right from wrong. They condemn those who did the wrong, and yet they practiced it themselves and, therefore, they were self-condemned. To that he adds another charge. He says, you have failed to appreciate the purpose of God's forbearance with you. In other words, Paul is saying to his Jewish friends, his Jewish brothers and sisters, you have a false security. You believe that because God has been kind to you and has forbore with your sin that He is in fact pleased with you, and that you are at peace with Him. What, in fact, He is doing is giving you the opportunity to come to peace with Him, in Jesus Christ because you are not, in fact, at peace with Him. Paul is saying to the Jew who has false security, when the Jew says, "Well, I have the law" Paul says right, You have the law, but you don't do it." And the Jew says, "Well, I haven't been abandoned to a life of gross immorality like the pagan Gentile that you just described." And Paul says, "I know that. You're still a sinner. You need grace." The Jew says to Paul, "Well, God's mercy to Israel will never fail. In spite of my sin, God is merciful." And Paul says, "That's right, God is merciful. But He's merciful so that you will be led to repentance." You see Paul is speaking, if we may, to the church-going believer of his day. He is talking about a false security that church-going people can often experience. They know the Bible; they know right from wrong; they know what the Bible says about the mercies of God; and they have taken false comfort without having ever come to grips with their own sin, their own need of grace, and the provision of Jesus Christ.

Those of us who are church-going Christians are susceptible to the same

mistake. We can even twist our theology, good truths to bad ends in this regard. We may take the doctrine of 'once saved, always saved' and say, well, I made a decision years ago as my friends did, that I just described. He walks down an aisle and made a decision years ago. And yet was not walking with the Lord and had not for many, many years. And many people would say, "Oh, well, I mean he's made a decision. He's in. He's got God's mercy." And the apostle Paul says are you taking lightly the kindness of God? Are you presuming upon the kindness of God? Are you assuming that you are at peace with Him, when in fact, you are not? And that is a danger of anyone who is religious. Anyone who is part of a worshiping community. They can be lulled into a false sense of security. Thinking lightly of God's mercy does not require that we openly reject it. We don't have to set up placards outside of evangelical churches condemning fundamentalists to think lightly of God's mercy. All we have to do to think lightly of God's mercy is not repent. All we have to do to think lightly of God's mercy, to manifest that we are thinking lightly of God's mercy, is not to live a life of repentance.

I just want to emphasize that repentance is not just a one-time thing that is sort of stuck right at the beginning of the Christian life, and then you're done with it. You remember one of the first of Luther's ninety-five theses was a criticism of the church's doctrine of repentance in his day. And he contrasted the church's doctrine of penitence to the biblical doctrine of ongoing, lifelong repentance. All you have to do to despise the mercy of God and think lightly of His kindness and forbearance and patience is not to live a life of repentance. Any response to God's covenant mercies without a life of repentance, means to despise and reject God's overtures of grace. Do you think lightly of God's mercy?

II. Do you understand who God is?

Secondly, Paul asks us this question. Do you understand who God is? First, he asked us if we thought lightly of His mercies. Now he asks us do you understand who God is? Notice he mentions here the riches of His kindness and tolerance and patience. He's showing us some of the characteristics of the God of all grace. He's asking us to reflect upon who God is. Who He is essentially. How He is towards us. Some of His attributes, some of the ways in which He deals with His people. He's asking, for instance, the Jewish people of his own time to go back and reflect upon the mercies which God has heaped upon them in His covenant. And he's asking those of us who are in the church and who have been blessed from our childhood, from our mother's arms, as the hymn says, with the knowledge of the Lord being preached and read and proclaimed. He's asking us, do we think lightly of God's kindness, God's tolerance, and God's patience? He's really telling us a lot about the character of God.

We've said all along that one of the secrets to really understanding the Bible, is going to the Bible, not first with a question, well, is there anything in this passage that's going to help me practically in what I'm doing today? That may be a

legitimate question to ask, but that's not the first question to ask when we study the Bible. The first question to ask is, what does this passage teach me about my God? And that's Paul taking us right to that issue: His kindness, His tolerance, His patience. Paul is showing us who God is and what He's like, and why He does what He does.

And let me say that's very important because today many Christians, even Christian leaders want to remake God in their own image. They want to create God in their image. They want to make Him like they want Him to be rather than like He is. And this happens in a couple of ways in the Christian community. Sometimes there will be an outright rejection of biblical truths about God. You've probably heard a Christian say at some point or another in your life – well, you know, the God of the Old Testament was a God of wrath. The God of the New Testament is a God of love. I choose to believe in the God of love, and so they reject a biblical teaching about God, through whatever conceived reason or rationale. Or perhaps you've heard someone reject the attributes of God even more boldly: Well, the Bible may say that about God, but I just think that's wrong. You may have heard someone who professes to be a Christian say that. That person is remaking God in his or her own image. That's one way that people alter who God is, by rejecting the scripture truth about Him.

The other way that people do this is by setting side by side two scriptural teachings about God, and preferring one over the other: Oh I know the Bible talks about God's justice, but I'd rather think about His mercy. I think His mercy is going to triumph over His justice in the end. And so they set two of God's attributes over against themselves. You can never do that. God doesn't allow us to set one attribute of God over against another. They are in perfect harmony in the nature of our God. But in doing that, we change who God is.

Now what Paul does here is he points us to three things that God is towards His people – kind, forbearing, and patient. And he says those three characteristics of God are designed to lead us to repentance. And if we do not repent, then we're really not apprehending God as he is. Think about those characteristics for a few moments. Paul speaks of three ways in which God displays His mercy towards those in the covenant community.

First of all, he says that God is kind. When he speaks of God's kindness, he's speaking of God's goodness and generosity in action to His people. Now it's true in general that God is kind. The Psalms tell us that God is kind to all, and, therefore, in general, God's kindness is designed to lead all to repentance. But Paul is even more specific here. He's speaking to the worshiping community, the Jewish people who held the truth, and he's saying, God's covenant kindness to you was designed not so that you would sit back and think well, I'm really special; but so that you would be led to repentance. God's generosity in action is there because He's drawing you to Himself in repentance.

He goes on to say God's tolerance, or God's forbearance is there to lead you to repentance. When he speaks of God's tolerance, he's speaking of God's restraining His final judgment. God's holding back in bringing to bear on sinners the judgment that they deserve in the here and now. It is God's temporary forbearance against sin. By the way, my friends, that definition of tolerance is radically different than the tolerance that is taught in our society today. The tolerance in our society today says you're intolerant if you think that you're right and somebody else is wrong. You're intolerant if you do not say that everybody is right, even if they disagree. You're intolerant if you condemn any action of anyone else. I want you to notice that that is not the tolerance of God. In this passage, the tolerance of God is God's forbearing a punishment which is deserved. He will bring to bear justice unless repentance brings that sinner out from under His just and deserving wrath, and into the domain of His grace. So Godly toleration is not based on everybody being right and everybody being good and making no distinctions between right and wrong and good and evil. Godly toleration doesn't evacuate and evaporate the categories of good and evil. Godly tolerance says, for a variety of reasons, we will forbear. The greatest of which is we long to see that person united to God in grace. And so God, He says, tolerates us, He forbears with us.

And he goes on to speak of God's patience, and God's patience is a reference to His long-suffering. God's ability to bear patiently in the face of sin and opposition even from his own people. We commented as we were studying the gospel of Matthew together that over and over you see Jesus' patience with His disciples. There are numerous times where Jesus would have been perfectly justified to rebuke His disciples, and He doesn't. And we said that if Jesus had rebuked His disciples every time they deserved it, and if the gospel writers had recorded it, then the gospels instead of reading like they do would read something like this: Peter, stop that. James, stop that. James, you're wrong. John, you are out to lunch. The gospels would read completely differently than they do. But Jesus forbore. He was patient with His disciples. And Paul says God is forbearing, too. He is patient with His people. And the purpose of that patience is to lead us to repentance.

Now, that raises the question for us. Have we used God's kindness as an excuse to be indifferent about eternal matters in our souls. Have we used God's kindness as an excuse to be indifferent towards Christ, indifferent towards the gospel. If we have, beware; because Paul is saying to the religious people of His day, you have seen actively displayed God's kindness and forbearance and patience and yet, you have not repented. You have not embraced the Lord Jesus Christ. And that increases your condemnation, you're under a heavier condemnation because you've been given so much.

III. Do you know why God is so patient?

And then he asks a third question. You'll see it at the end of verse 4. The question is, do you know why God is so patient? First, he had asked us, do you think lightly of God's mercy? And then he had asked do you understand who your God is? Do you know who He is? Now he asks, do you know why God is so patient? Paul here is reflecting upon the purpose of God's covenant mercies, and that purpose is to produce repentance. God's mercy and patience has a purpose. And, when we do not appreciate that purpose, we are despising God's mercy; we are thinking lightly of His kindness. Not knowing, he says, at the end of verse 4, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance. The religious people to whom Paul was and is speaking were utterly uncomprehending of the purpose of His kindness. They saw God forbearing their sin. They assumed that they were at peace with God. They were assuming that they were under the favor of God. They were despising His mercy.

There are at least two ways to despise God's mercy. You can, on the one hand, think that you don't need it. And that can be done more or less boldly. Now some person might say, well, I haven't sinned. I don't need to be forgiven. There are not many people that are that deluded. There are a few. They think they never sin. They think they don't need to be forgiven. But more often it's like this: Well, I've already received God's favor. I don't need to hear this again. There are those who think they don't need the mercy of God, and then there are those who take it for granted. They think that they've done something, they've gotten it. They don't need to worry about it. It doesn't matter that God isn't at the center of their life. It doesn't matter that they really don't love the kingdom Lord. It doesn't really matter that Christ is not the one who is the ruler of their hearts. They presume, they take for granted, the mercy of God. I grew up in the church. I've gone all my life. The apostle Paul says, don't you know that the kindness of God leads to repentance? It leads to a life of renouncing sin and self-service of Christ, of love to Christ.

You see repentance is not merely a one-time thing that a person does. It is a life-long change of mind and heart about sin and about self. Repentance sees our sin as God sees it. Repentance no longer looks at sin as attractive and beautiful. It sees sin as ugly and damnable. Repentance realizes that we deserve condemnation. It doesn't rail against God that He would dare condemn us. Repentance recognizes that in and of ourselves we are not self-sufficient, and so repentance cannot be self-satisfied. Repentance recognized that we can only find fulfillment in the Lord Jesus Christ, and we can only find peace with God in Him. And so repentance is a change of mind about sin and self, and it leads to a new life in Christ. It leads to a life of active service to God.

When I was in high school, I actually could see manifested in the lives and in the words and the actions of some of my classmates this particular desire. They were in evangelical churches, they heard the gospel preached from the pulpit, they had seen films, and they had heard presentations about the end times and about the final judgment, and they did not want to be cast into hell forever. They were genuinely fearful about it. And so they were actually quite anxious to make

professions of faith. But, they wanted to make professions of faith so that they would be secure from God's judgment in order that they could go on living their lives the way they wanted to live. They wanted to have their cake and eat it. They wanted to live life on their own terms, with their own priorities, with their own goals, with their own immoralities I might add. And they wanted to be secure from the condemnation of sin. And the apostle Paul is saying here, "No. That is taking the kindness of God lightly." When we think that we can be secure and in our sin at the same time, we are wrong. And so the apostle Paul says, do you know why God is patient? He's patient because He wants people to come to the realization of their own hearts and come to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. The only adequate response of the gospel is to repent and embrace Christ. To recognize that you do deserve condemnation; to recognize that your sin is ugly; to recognize that you need a moral transformation which you cannot bring about; to recognize that you need forgiveness which you cannot provide. It can only be provided in Jesus Christ. That's what the apostle is saying in this little verse. This powerful verse. A verse, my friends, that speaks directly to our hearts. Have we thought lightly of the kindness and the forbearance and the patience of God. Have we presumed upon His mercy? If so, then Paul would have us bow the knee today, right now and repent and find life in Christ. Let's pray.

Our Lord and our God, bring Your word home we pray to our hearts. Search us to see if there be any unclean thing in us, and then lead us to repentance and faith, by Your grace we ask it in Jesus' name, Amen.

©2013 First Presbyterian Church.

This transcribed message has been lightly edited and formatted for the Web site. No attempt has been made, however, to alter the basic extemporaneous delivery style, or to produce a grammatically accurate, publication-ready manuscript conforming to an established style template.

Should there be questions regarding grammar or theological content, the reader should presume any website error to be with the webmaster/transcriber/editor rather than with the original speaker. For full copyright, reproduction and permission information, please visit the First Presbyterian Church Copyright, Reproduction & Permission statement.

This article is provided as a ministry of [Third Millennium Ministries](#) (Thirdmill). If you have a question about this article, please [email](#) our *Theological Editor*.

Subscribe to *Biblical Perspectives Magazine*

BPM subscribers receive an email notification each time a new issue is published. Notifications include the title, author, and description of each article in the issue, as well as links directly to the articles. Like BPM itself, *subscriptions are free*. To subscribe to [BPM](#), please select this [link](#).