WRATH AGAINST THE SELF-RIGHTEOUS MORALIST

Series: Righteousness Revealed
Romans 2:1-16
Chadron Berean Church

Imagine that a person dies and stands before God. They're standing at the gates of heaven and God asks them, "Why should I let you into My heaven?" They say, "I was a pretty good person. I tried to obey my parents growing up. I worked hard in life, enjoying what I did. I think it was beneficial to society. I went to church. I raised my kids in church. I didn't cheat on my taxes. I gave to multiple charities. I wasn't perfect, no, but in all honesty that's just who I am." How do you think God would respond to that? It's honest. It's sincere. It's popular; most people think it's acceptable. And it's a real concern for those who know they don't always do as they should. Well, let's answer that question from Romans 2:1-16 as we see some principles by which God judges. We continue the Romans 1 the theme of God's wrath, but this time against the self-righteousness.

I. WRATH AGAINST THE SELF-RIGHTEOUS <u>MORALIST</u>. (2:1-11)

Therefore you have no excuse, everyone of you who passes judgment, for in that which you judge another, you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things. 2 And we know that the judgment of God rightly falls upon those who practice such things. 3 But do you suppose this, O man, when you pass judgment on those who practice such things and do the same yourself, that you will escape the judgment of God? 4 Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and tolerance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance? 5 But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God,

So we are in a section of Romans we might call the "sin section" of Romans (1:18-3:20). It's the bad news part of Romans. Romans is a book about the good news of the gospel and salvation, but in order for us to accept the good news of salvation, we need to first understand the bad news about sin and our lostness. A man doesn't seek salvation who doesn't know he's lost. So that's what Paul is doing in this section. He's revealing every man's sinful, lost, and desperate situation before God.

Last week Paul raked the **pagan Gentile** (non-Jewish) world over the coals. He revealed how the Gentile world is under the God's wrath of abandonment for having willfully rejected knowledge of God through the created order and are **without excuse**. Now Paul starts writing to the next kind of person on his list who would say, "You see those people in Romans 1? Those degenerates? I don't do what they do, therefore, I'm righteous." They might not say it, but they think it. They're well behaved on the outside but in whom sin lurks on the inside. We'd call them a **self-righteous moralist**. The person who *thinks* he's right before God based on his own righteousness. More than likely, he's specifically writing to the **Jew** (2:12-3:8) but he could also be writing to the **cultured Greek**. I think he leaves it open like that until vv. 17-29 where he directly addresses the **Jews**.

Some **Jews** thought of themselves as "the righteous" who will escape judgment simply for being Jewish. They thought that because God had a covenant with them, they were just automatically saved. So they had a false sense of security that led them to think they could get away with things that the Gentiles couldn't. Unlike the people in chapter 1, they didn't struggle with outright impurity and idolatry as much after the exiles to Assyria or Babylon. They also thought they kept the Law—an idea Jesus shot down with the Sermon on the Mount or situations like the woman caught in adultery. "He who is without sin among you, let him be the first to throw a stone." Or the Pharisee who thanked God he's not like the tax collector (Luke 18:9-14). He's writing to that person.

Paul also spoke of being under obligation to preach the gospel to both **the Greeks and the barbarians, the wise and the foolish** (1:14). Basically, everyone from high to low social classes. The term barbarian comes from the Greek word *barbaros*. It was a term that for a long time just meant "outsider" or "foreigner" but eventually became a cultural term that meant anyone who was uncultured.[1] It's humorous, but to the refined Grecian an outsider's language sounded like, "bar bar bar…" and that's where the term comes from. So you had the refined, educated and philosophic Greeks who contemplated and followed natural law (e.g. *Aristotle's Ethics*), and then you had the uncultured barbarians. Here, Paul is probably addressing that Grecian moralist as well as Jews.

To make it more applicable, he might be addressing the conservative but Christless moralist today or the sin-sniffing Christians today who forget grace and points fingers at others without taking the log out of their own eye first (Matt. 7:3-5). It's really easy to look around at our Romans 1 culture today and cry out about the depravity but forget that morality, while beneficial, isn't the answer. People need more than reformation. They need regeneration by the Spirit of God.

To all of these people, Paul says in verse 1, "**Therefore you have no excuse** [too]." You agree with God's judgment of the pagans—you give a hearty amen—but what about you? Are you without sin? Moralists tend to be hypocrites—hard on others, but soft on themselves. The moralist looks at the murderer and says, "See? I don't do that." But he hates people in his heart. He looks at the drug addict and says, "See? I don't do that." All the while he is addicted to food and entertainment. He's a glutton. The moralist looks at the adulterer and says, "See? I don't do that. Therefore, I'm righteous. God will accept me." All the while he goes on without thinking that his lustful thoughts are unrighteous and deserve to be judged. The moralist beholds others' sins but are blind or downplay their own. He compares himself with others and feels good about himself. He underestimates God's righteousness while overestimating his own.

So Paul says to the moralist, "Do you suppose this, O man, when you pass judgment on those who practice such things and do the same yourself, that you will escape the judgment of God?" He starts to argue with an imaginary person. He's not losing his mind. He's using a technique some of the Stoic philosophers used known as **diatribe**.[2] Philosophers would put on their philosopher's robe and publicly **reason** in the form of dialogue or write in the form of dialogue. You would put questions in the mouth of an imagined critic and then answer them to drive your audience to a desired conclusion.[3] One popular 2nd century writing where this is clearly used is Justin Martyr's

Dialogue with Trypho the Jew. He tries to win Jews to Christ through an imaginary conversation about Christianity with a Jew named Trypho. It's an apologetic. Too bad it's slightly anti-Semitic and that grew over time. But Paul is asking the moralist, who thinks he's righteous, to **reason** with him. Actually, the word "suppose" (*logizomai*) in verse 3 could be rendered "reason" or "think." He wants this person to think; to use logic in answering the implied question, "Are you really righteous? If you think you're good enough to get to heaven by your own righteousness, let's think about that for a minute." And Paul's first reason to *rethink* self-righteousness is:

God will judge in <u>truth</u> and <u>righteousness</u>.

He is going to judge "according to truth" (v. 2, KJV) "in righteousness" (v. 5). Not in incomplete truth or hypothetical truth or circumstantial truth—truth as perfect truth. God's omniscient, which means He knows everything. There's not going to be any debate. No secrets you can hide (v. 16). No jury trying to decide what's true. God will know *perfectly* and *completely* what is **true** and He will judge in *perfect* **righteousness**. It's not going to be like some of the court cases today where they let someone go who is obviously guilty. And the moralist who thinks he's getting to heaven because he's more righteous than others needs to remember that God's wrath is against *all* ungodliness and unrighteousness, including all of his own unrighteous **thoughts** and **deeds** and **words**. His sins, no matter how great or small, deserve wrath too. Every deed/work must be answered for.

God will judge according to <u>deeds</u>.

Verse 6 says, "[God] will render to each person according to his deeds: 7 to those who by perseverance in doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, eternal life; 8 but to those who are selfishly ambitious and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, wrath and indignation. 9 There will be tribulation and distress for every soul of man who does evil, of the Jew first and also of the Greek, 10 but glory and honor and peace to everyone who does good, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. 11 For there is no partiality with God.

So what Paul is doing here is both interesting and confusing. For those of us who understand the gospel and that we cannot be good enough to get in by our deeds, it raises the question, Did Paul just blaspheme by preaching a works-based gospel? The answer is no. We have to remember Paul is addressing **unbelieving moralists**, not believers. We're still in the "sin section" of Romans, not the salvation section. What Paul just wrote here is not the good news. It is, however, true hypothetically. You can inherit eternal life if you **persevere in doing good**—in theory. The catch is that no one does. No one ever acquires eternal life because of their own goodness. This is a bit of a spoiler, but Paul is going to say, "There is none righteous, not even one… there is none who does good, there is not even one" (Rom. 3:10, 12). It doesn't matter how moral or religious you are. If you don't have Christ, you don't have life. Repentance without faith in Christ is worthless.

The reality is that if we don't come to God according to the **grace** offered in Christ and His **perfect righteousness**, we come by **works** and our own **flawed righteousness**. The most terrifying thing I can imagine is standing before God based on my own merits because I'm not perfect either. No

one is. But if you reject the grace of Christ's righteousness and His sin-atoning work on the cross for you, God is left with no other choice but to judge you according to your works.[4] As an unbeliever you will be judged according to your works at the Great White Throne judgment (just after the Millennial Kingdom but just before God ushers in the eternal state; Rev. 20:11-15). I expect believers to be judged before the Millennial Kingdom for service in it (1 Cor. 3:5-15; Rev. 20:4-5). This believers' judgment has to do with loss or gain of eternal rewards, not salvation. That issue is settled when we place our faith in Christ. If anything, a believer's good works simply reveal his true spiritual state.

God will judge without <u>partiality</u>.

Another reason, however, to rethink standing before God based on your own self-righteousness is that **God will judge without partiality** (v. 11). He won't show any favoritism. There's no special treatment. Perfect justice is blind to rags and riches, bribes and tears. Think of it this way: With teachers, when the test scores come in, they can grade on a curve.[5] They can take the highest grade of 94% and make that the 100%. Then they can add 6% to the rest so they get a better grade. But in the final judgment of God, there is no curve. There is no extra credit. You can't retake the test. He will deal with what every person really did (v. 6), not with what they intended or wanted to do or regretted doing (Ps. 62:12; Matt. 16:27; Heb. 12:17). Once you die, it's final. There's no change to change your mind. So, every sin of the moralist must be judged and will be judged. Condemnation awaits him because God can't overlook his sin. To do so would make Him unjust. The result then is in verse 5:

God's will judge <u>inevitably.</u>

The moralist who constantly falls short of God's standards is just **storing up wrath for himself in the** [inevitable] **day of wrath**. Though the moralist may miss some of the consequential wrath for sin in this life—because in many ways he operates according to God's design—he's still going to face the **eschatological wrath** of God during the Tribulation (2:9) and the **eternal wrath** of God in the lake of fire. I read a true story last night about the British colonial government in India. They were concerned about cobra snakes becoming a problem so they put a bounty on cobras. At first a lot of snakes were killed, and the problem was being dealt with. But in time, people began to breed snakes so they could get money for them. Imagine that, people taking advantage of the system! Well, when authorities figured it out and the reward program was scrapped, cobra breeders let them all go and the problem was worse than before! That's exactly what happens with the Christless moralist. He is trying to clean up his life, but he just makes things worse. He keeps storing up wrath in his self-righteous, Christ-rejecting pride.

Why hasn't that wrath came yet? It's not because God is lenient. It's because He's patient. Verse 4 says it's because God in His **kindness** and **patience** is allowing time for a people to come to faith in Christ. It reminds us of 2 Peter: *"The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance."* His patience and kindness is intended to stimulate repentance. Some misread patience as God's passivity, but someday God will say enough. The dam will break and God will pour out His judgment on the world and we need to be ready for that by being in Christ. The other

thought I had related to that is that those who try to get into heaven by their own efforts think lightly of God's kindness in Christ. They trample on God's grace in Christ.

At this point, some might have heard Paul speak about God judging impartially and said something like, Well what about the people who never hear the gospel? How can God judge the Jew and the Gentile the same? Those are important and popular questions. Remember, Paul's been preaching 20 years. He knows the questions people ask so he responds.

II. GOD'S <u>IMPARTIAL</u> JUDGMENT. (2:12-16)

12 For all who have sinned without the Law will also perish without the Law, and all who have sinned under the Law will be judged by the Law; 13 for it is not the hearers of the Law who are just before God, but the doers of the Law will be justified. 14 For when Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves, 15 in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them, 16 on the day when, according to my gospel, God will judge the secrets of men through Christ Jesus.

So Paul basically says, whether you're Jew or Gentile, you're going to be judged by "law" you received from God—be it the **moral law in your conscience** through natural revelation or the **Mosaic Law as a Jew**. You're going to be judged justly, according to the revelation you received and both are sufficient to condemn a man.

God will judge according to <u>revelation</u>.

God gave the Law to **Israel**. It's **special, written revelation**. It was an advantage to the Jew that the Gentiles didn't have. They knew God more fully than the Gentiles and knew where they stood with Him more clearly. While the Jew has a privileged place in the program of God, they are also held more accountable. Remember, Jesus said woe to the cities of Chorazin and Capernaum because they were going to receive a stricter judgment than the Gentiles cities of Tyre and Sidon and Sodom (Matt. 11:20-24). Why? They had more revelation. They witnessed the Messiah do miracles in their midst and didn't believe. Others didn't see that. So more revelation means more accountability. Also, not only is salvation **to the Jew first**, but so is wrath. We see that today and in the Tribulation period which is designed to bring the nation to faith in Christ (Rom. 11:25-29).

While the **Gentiles** only received **natural (general) revelation**, they're not off the hook either. We talked about natural revelation last week (1:18-23). It's the idea that there is enough evidence in the created order for people to know God on a basic level. They understand there is a Creator they are accountable too. It's been made **plain to them** and so **within them**, in their **conscience**. It doesn't matter who they are or where they're from or what they say, everyone understands there is right and wrong. Even the indigenous tribes of the jungle know that murder, stealing, and lying are wrong. They don't like it when people do that to them. So their conscience, Paul says, becomes a "**law"** to them—**defending or accusing** them. They don't have the Mosaic Law like the Jews,

but God's moral requirements – "the things of the Law" – are written on their heart anyway and there's no escaping it (v.15). It will accuse every man of their guilt on the day when **God judges the secrets of men**. "For nothing is hidden that will not become evident, nor anything secret that will not be known and come to light" (Luke 8:17).

What this means is that **we're all without excuse**. The law of our God-given conscience accuses us. The Law of Moses accuses us. God did this, Romans 3:19, "So that every mouth may be closed and all the world may become accountable to God." I am accountable to God. You are accountable to God. Everyone is. And like the 150,000 people who die daily in this world, we're all going to stand before Him. And should He ask that question, "Why should I let you into My heaven?" we have **two options but only one choice: a) your own imperfect self-righteousness, or b) Christ's perfect righteousness** that He offers as a gift to you. I invite you to circle the one you choose on your bulletin insert. Before you make your choice, make sure you reason wisely with what Paul says, "by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for through the Law comes knowledge of sin. But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe" (Rom. 3:19-21). In place of your righteousness, He offers you His perfect righteousness (a justifying righteousness from God) as a free gift through faith in Christ who took the wrath you deserve.

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[1] Arnold Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Romans* (San Antonio, TX: Ariel Ministries, 2022), 54.
[2] Ibid., 55.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Andy Woods, *Romans 007-But I'm a Good Person*, accessed August 30, 2023.
[5] Ibid.