

September 29/30, 2012

The Gospel Story: No Favoritism

A Study of Romans

Romans 2:1-29

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One of the great stories in the Old Testament is the story of King David and one of the great moments in the story of King David is at a time when David has sinned against God. He's trying to hide his sin, and he is confronted by Nathan the prophet. Nathan the prophet tells him a story about a really bad guy who's doing really bad things and David is outraged and he finally asks Nathan the prophet, "Who is this really bad guy?" And Nathan the prophet points his bony finger in David's nose and says, "You are that guy!"

In a very similar fashion, Paul uses a similar technique in the early chapters of Romans. In Romans, Chapter 1, he's very careful about his pronouns. *They* have suppressed the truth. *They* are without excuse. *They* have exchanged the truth for a lie. *They* have worshipped the creature rather than the Creator. *They* are really messed up—and *they* are under God's wrath. And you can imagine a whole bunch of highly religious, moral people applauding Paul's conclusion and agreeing, "Yes, they are way out of bounds; they are really messed up, and they are going to get it." And then he turns to his readers and says, "Oh by the way, *you're* just as messed up and *you're* just as much under the wrath of God." That's what we want to talk about this morning.

If you have a Bible, turn with us to Romans, Chapter 2. The way this chapter is written would be a formula known as a diatribe. The significance of that is understanding that, as Paul now turns attention to his readers and says, "By the way, you're just as messed up and you're just as deserving of God's judgment," he expects an objection. And so the idea of a diatribe is: he creates an imaginary objector, a responder—and he's going to imagine what that objector would say. He's going to interact with those questions all the way through the chapter.

Now there is some discussion about who is the "you" that he refers to in chapter 2, verse 1. We would say, for sure, it's the religious Jews and as the focus narrows, that becomes more obvious. But it certainly could include the Greek and Roman moralists. In other words, in chapter 1 he describes those people who out of God's boundaries in their lifestyle. He describes those who have rejected God's design in their lifestyle and all the consequences of that—and oftentimes those consequences are more evident; they're more obvious. There would have been many people in the Roman culture that would have agreed with Paul, that this lifestyle is not good; it's not right; it's not acceptable. It is destructive. We would refer to them as *moralists*. They would have been people who tried to live good, responsible, moral lives—so the Jewish religious crowd, but also the Greek and Roman moralists. So as we talk about this, this morning, let's imagine that this room is filled with good, honest moral people. They might be socially right, might be socially left, conservative or liberal. Certainly the room is filled with highly religious people. Millions of people across our country will attend church this morning who are good, religious people. At least that's how they would view themselves. So now Paul turns the discussion on them.

Therefore...which I think is going back to verse 20—therefore if everyone is without excuse, then that includes **you**...

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. (*NASB Rom. 2:1)

Basically what he's saying is this: If you as a moralist, if you as a religious person, if you as someone who lives by certain morals and standards and seeks to live a good responsible life, you would look at the Romans 1 people and say, "That's irresponsible. It's out of bounds. It's not good behavior." But the only way to do that is to acknowledge there is such a thing as a *standard*. There is no way to judge anyone else unless you admit there's a standard by which behavior should be judged. Now this raises an interesting discussion in a *relativistic culture*. I would suggest to you, at the end of the day, no person actually believes in relativism. I think it's just a convenient excuse to live as we please and think we won't be held accountable. There are several ways that I think we can demonstrate no one really believes in relativism. One of those ways is to notice that the relativists are very judgmental of others. They criticize everybody that doesn't agree with them. If they were truly a relativist, you can't judge anyone. You can't say anyone's behavior is unacceptable because there is no standard. You're forced, as a true relativist, to just keep your mouth shut. You have no voice in it. But the fact that relativists judge, says they don't even buy their own system. They do think there's a standard and they think others have violated that standard.

What Paul is saying is that all of us that would look at the Romans chapter 1 people and say that behavior is wrong, indicates we believe there's a standard and it's based upon our standard that we judge. Therefore, what Paul is saying is based on that. We stand condemned because we don't even live up to our own standard, so we're all falling short of the standard. Verse 2:

And we know that the judgment of God rightly falls upon those who practice such things. 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? (vs. 2-3)

So he's asking them the question, "Do you think somehow you're exempt from God's judgment?" If you're going to judge the Romans chapter 1 people because they have failed to uphold the standard, then wouldn't you be under the condemnation of God because you have failed to keep the standard? And the obvious answer is, "Of course that's true." Verse 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?

What he's saying is: is it possible that **you think lightly**, meaning that you have presumed upon the **kindness and the tolerance and the patience of God**? The *kindness of God* is just what it sounds like: God is very kind and, because of that, He doesn't whack us every time we fail to keep the standard, every time we step out-of-bounds. If that's what God did, that's all He would be doing and that's what would define our lives. It just would be a continual whacking from God. But God doesn't do that because He's kind. He's also *tolerant*. It's an unusual Greek word that's rarely ascribed to God—basically means that God's slow to act, that God just doesn't immediately fly into a rage. As a matter of fact He puts up with a lot from us. And thirdly, He's *patient* which means He's long-suffering. He gives us lots of time. But the text says that God is kind and He's tolerant, and He's patient in order that we might **repent**, in order that we might turn from our sinful ways and respond to Him. But we start to presume upon the kindness of God and the tolerance of God and the patience of God when we start convincing ourselves that because God didn't whack me

today, apparently my sin's not that offensive. Apparently everything's okay between me and God. Apparently my behavior is acceptable. So we look at the Romans chapter 1 people and we say, "You people are all messed up," but we look at our own behavior and we think, "But I must be okay because God didn't whack me today." And what he's saying is: you're presuming upon God's kindness and His tolerance and His patience. He's intending for you to repent, to change your mind, to live differently; not to presume upon who He is. Verse 5:

But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart...

In other words these moralists, these highly moral people, these highly religious people —rather than repenting of their own sin, they've become stubborn; they've become unrepentant. They've convinced themselves that they're okay. This morning we might draw a distinction between the Romans chapter 1 people and the Romans chapter 2 people.

The chapter 1 people are people that are living out of bounds; the Scripture would typically call them pagans. They're outside of God's boundaries; they're outside of God's design; they really don't care what God has to say. They're going to live their own lives their own way and they live with the consequences of those choices and often the consequences are very messy.

The Romans chapter 2 people are people that are highly moral. They seek to live very moral lives; they seek to live responsible lives. They really disagree with the lifestyle of the chapter 1 people, but they don't see their own sin; they don't see their own messes. They don't see all the ways that they fail to live up to the standard. And the consequences often are more subtle and so they hide, and they live behind a mask and pretend everything's fine.

My experience in ministry would be that I have found Romans chapter 1 people much easier to reach with the Gospel Story than Romans chapter 2 people. The hardest people to reach are the highly moral, religious crowd. You can't even get them lost—in order to help them understand, they need to be saved! Romans chapter 1 people live with the consequences of their choices and that tends to kind of beat the stubbornness out of them. And they reach a point where they know, "I need help. I need a Savior." They're ready to reach out and respond. Over the years, one thing I have noticed about myself is I do tend to connect with people that are going through recovery, people that are in 12-step groups, or people that are in Celebrate Recovery. When I think about it, I have a lot of friends in that category. I think one of the reasons is because I find these people very refreshing. They're courageous people that will look at themselves in the mirror and say, "I'm messed up and I need help." I find something very refreshing about that and I'm attracted to people like that. I get very weary of the moral religious crowd who refuse to admit, "I'm messed up and I need help." Frankly the only difference between the Romans 1 people and the Romans 2 people is the Romans 1 people are willing to admit they are messed up and need help. But the religious, moral crowd simply won't admit it. And that's what he says. They've become **stubborn**; they've become **unrepentant**. "I don't have a problem." So what are the consequence of that?

...you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, WHO WILL RENDER TO EACH PERSON ACCORDING TO HIS DEEDS: (vs. 5b-6)

Now that's a very interesting statement: **to store up wrath for yourself**. Basically think of it like this: Think of God having both an *informal judgment* and a very *formal judgment*. The informal judgment is when the wrath of God is poured out upon us in living with the consequences of our choices. We talked about this last week: that when we choose to live outside of God's boundaries,

outside of God's design, there's consequences, and part of the wrath of God is to allow us to live with those consequences and live with the mess we have made of our lives. So, in a sense you would say that's God's *informal judgment*. All along the way it's intended to get our attention. It's intended to cause us to repent, to rethink some things, to get our lives back in line. But if I choose not to respond to that informal judgment, there is coming a day of a very *formal judgment*, a day when God will officially judge us and we will stand face to face before our Creator and give an account of our lives. If we become unrepentant, if we refuse to admit that we have a problem, then what we're doing is storing up judgment; we're storing up wrath that on that day it's not going to go well because we chose not to deal with our stuff all along the way. Then he quotes an Old Testament verse to remind us that the judgment will be according to our deeds. The judgment is not on the basis of whether you're elect or not. It's not on the basis of whether you're rich or poor or which side of the tracks you were born on. It's simply based on your deeds. It levels the playing field. Everybody has an equal chance to choose how you are going to live your life. Verse 7:

To those who by perseverance in doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, eternal life; but to those who are selfishly ambitious and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, wrath and indignation. There will be tribulation and distress for every soul of man who does evil, of the Jew first and also the Greek, but glory and honor and peace to everyone who does good, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For there is no partiality with God. (vs.7-11)

Now the first question is verse 7. Is Paul saying that on the basis of your good deeds you can inherit eternal life? Now as you read through Romans, you find out that's absolutely *not* what he's saying. He will be very clear about that. What is he saying? It's very important to remember the context of verse 7 in chapter 2 is the context *not* of the plan of salvation, but the basis for judgment and the basis for judgment is deeds. So what he's saying is, "If it's possible for you to live according to the standard every moment of every day, you can have eternal life. But if you blow it just once, then what you have coming is God's wrath." He imagines the objector to say, "Yea, but not us. We're the Jews. We're highly religious. Certainly you are not talking about us?" He says, "Actually I am talking about you! It's about the Jew first and then to the Greek." And then he reminds them that God has no favorites. *God shows no partiality*. There's not one group of people where God's going to say, "This judgment applies to everyone except you and you're the teacher's pet." Everyone is equally judged before God. You can imagine then before verse 12 the objector says, "But wait a minute, we're the Jews; we have the Law."

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 it is not the hearers of the Law who 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. (vs. 12-16)

So the objector says, "Wait a minute, I can see the Gentiles being judged because they don't know what they are doing, but we have the Law." And so Paul responds to that and says, "First of all, those that don't have the Law will be judged accordingly." But he reminds them just because they don't have the written Law doesn't mean they don't know the difference between right and wrong. Actually they do instinctively. What's written in the Law, because people are made in the image of God, God says, "I have written the Law in their hearts. They have a conscience. That's what I have

put in them in order to understand what's right and wrong." So Paul says they will be held accountable for their deeds because they knew the difference between right and wrong. But then he goes back to the Jews and says, "For those who have the Law, you are going to be held accountable for whether or not you obeyed the Law." And then he reminds them that just having the Law isn't enough. It's not those who *have* the Law that are made right before God; it's those that *keep* the Law that are made right before God. The objector would then say, "But wait a minute, I mean we're God's chosen people." Verse 17:

But if you bear the name "Jew," and rely upon the Law, and boast in God, and know His will and approve the things that are essential, being instructed out of the Law, and are confident that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of the immature, having in the Law the embodiment of knowledge and truth, (vs. 17-20)

So he's saying "This is true. It is true that you are a Jew and the Jews are the chosen people of God. **You do bear the name Jew. You do rely upon the Law.** God has given that to you and you do boast in the fact that you are God's chosen people. And you do know His will and you do know how you're supposed to live, because God has instructed you and you are to be **a guide to the blind. You are to be a light into the darkness.** You are to live this life separate as the people of God." But here's the problem:

...you, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself? You who preach that one shall not steal, do you steal? You who say that one should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who boast in the Law, through your breaking the Law, do you dishonor God? For "THE NAME OF GOD IS BLASPHEMED AMONG THE GENTILES BECAUSE OF YOU," just as it is written. (vs. 21-24)

So Paul says, "It is true; you are the chosen people; you are the people of God. You do have the Law of God. You are supposed to be a guide to the blind, you are supposed to be a light into the darkness, but here's the problem: you don't live that way. You don't live in obedience to the Law. You're not listening to your own teaching. You're not following your own ways." You're not acting as the people of God—so much so that one of the biggest problems for Gentiles coming to the God of the Hebrew people is the hypocrisy of the Jewish people. And then he quotes that from the Old Testament. Basically he's saying, "It is true that this is what you're supposed to be, but you haven't lived that way. You don't live according to the Law and you've actually become a problem. You've become a barrier to people coming into a relationship with God because of your religious hypocrisy."

We could certainly say as Americans, that probably no people in the history of the world have ever had what we have: unimaginable freedom. We have unimaginable access to God's truth. If you really want to know what God has to say, you can find a copy of the Bible everywhere. You can turn on the radio; you can turn on the television; you can go to the internet. Most people in the history of the world could not imagine what we have. No person from America could ever say, "I just didn't know." But there's accountability to that. Just becoming good, religious, moral people doesn't mean we get it. There's accountability to the truth that we have. It's easy to look at the people in Romans chapter 1 and say, "You people are all messed up." But what Paul is saying is: there's more accountability to the people in Romans chapter 2 because you have so much more. So there is so much more accountability to the truth of God. The objector tries one more time, "But wait a minute, we're the circumcised."

For indeed circumcision is of value, if you practice the Law; but if you are a transgressor of the Law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision. (vs. 25)

Remembering that circumcision is the mark of the covenant—that they were the covenant people of God—so they’re saying that because I have been physically circumcised, then certainly God won’t judge us. And Paul says, “Just because you’ve been physically circumcised doesn’t mean you get it. If you’re not living in obedience to the Law, then you’re actually uncircumcised in the mind of God.”

So if the uncircumcised man...that would mean the Greek...keeps the requirements of the Law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? (vs. 26)

You cannot imagine how unbelievably offensive those words would have been to a religious Jew, for Paul to say actually if there’s a Gentile out there who’s uncircumcised...but at least he lives according to the Law...he’s actually more circumcised than you are. This would have been shocking to the religious Jews. Just to twist the knife a little bit more, he goes one step farther:

And he who is physically uncircumcised, if he keeps the Law, will he not judge you who though having the letter of the Law and circumcision are a transgressor of the Law? (vs. 27)

This would have been unbelievably shocking for a religious Jew. They were convinced that, as the Jewish people, as the Hebrew people, as the people of God, they were God’s pets, and it was their job to judge the Gentiles, to judge the pagans, to call them out. So they look at Romans chapter 1 and they say, “These people are all messed up and they are deserving of the wrath of God.” But Paul says, “If a Gentile who is uncircumcised is actually living a more moral life than you, maybe he will end up being your judge as the circumcised.” This would have been shocking! Unheard of!

For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly; nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God. (vs. 28-29)

He reminds them at the end of the day: it’s not a religious ritual; it’s not a physical act. At the end of the day, circumcision is in the heart. It’s a heart that desires to walk in obedience to God. It’s the life of the Spirit. If we were to change that paragraph to capture people today, I can imagine people saying, “But wait a minute, I’m not a Romans chapter 1 person. I’m a really good person. I’m a moral person. I live a responsible life. I have two children and a white picket fence. I’m living the American dream. Everything’s fine. I go to church every weekend. I take communion. I’ve been baptized. I go to confession. I give my money. I’ve done all the religious stuff. Everything’s fine between me and God.”

And Paul is saying no amount of religious activity can possibly make you right before God. We can imagine that the people in chapter 2 were applauding the message of chapter 1. “Those people are all messed up. They’re deserving of the wrath of God. Good for you, Paul. Lay it on them!” But they are quite shocked in chapter 2 that Paul turns around and says, “By the way, you’re in trouble too—and you, too, are destined for the wrath of God.” Paul’s message in Romans chapter 1 and chapter 2 is that we all stand condemned, that there is no one who measures up to the standard. There’s no one who’s good enough. We’re all in trouble and we’re all headed for God’s judgment and wrath.

People in our culture oftentimes would say, “I know I’m messed up and I know you’re messed up, and since nobody’s perfect...” —this is where we make a huge mistake in our culture. “Because we’re all messed up, no one should judge anyone else. So let’s just live and let live.” That is the exact opposite of what Paul is trying to say. The message is not because we’re all messed up, let’s not judge one another. The message is: we’re all messed up and we’re all in trouble and we’re all headed for wrath, and if something doesn’t change, we’re all in trouble. And we better get that.

I know what you’re thinking this morning. You’re thinking, “Boy, I’m sure glad we chose Romans. It sure is encouraging. Sure is uplifting.” Is there no hope? You better come back next week. But I will tell you this: For the *good news* to really sound like good news, you better understand the *bad news* is really, really bad!

Our Father, we’re thankful this morning that you love us. Lord, You long for us to know the freedom of Your salvation. But, Lord, there’s no hope for that if we can’t admit that we’re desperate sinners in need of a Savior. Lord, there’s got to be people sitting here this morning who have convinced themselves they’re okay, they’re good enough. They point the finger in judgment at the Romans chapter 1 people, but they’ve become stubborn in their own sin and convinced themselves that everything’s okay. Lord, my prayer this morning would be that You would penetrate their hearts. Let them see their sin. Let them see their desperation, that they might understand their need for a Savior. In Jesus’ Name, Amen.

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Opening Discussion

1. Does Romans 1 describe our community? Why or why not? Does everyone in our community live that way?
2. Are there people you know who would agree with the condemnation of the behaviors in Romans 1 but would never imagine themselves as being condemned by God? Who are those people? Why would they think that way?
3. Do you believe religion is a barrier to God? Why or why not? How hard is it to reach good religious people with the truth of the Gospel? Why is this?

Bible Study

1. Review Romans 1:18-32. What is Paul's basic argument?
2. Read Romans 2:1-11. What does Paul mean when he says, "you judge another you condemn yourself" (2:1)? Can you judge another without some moral code?
3. The riches of God are described as God's kindness, tolerance and patience. What should those attributes lead to according to 2:4? What tends to happen instead?
4. What will be the basis for judgment? How does this level the playing field for all people?
5. Read Romans 2:12-16. How does this paragraph help us understand how people in various parts of the world can be held accountable before God for their deeds? According to Romans 1, 2 can anyone really stand before God one day and plead ignorance?

6. Read Romans 2:17-24. What is Paul's point? How might he make a similar point to "Christians" (broadly defined) in America? In what ways has religion turned "the Gentiles" away from God in our day?
7. Read Romans 2:25-29. What does Paul say to the religious Jews that would have "shocked" them? How might a similar scene play out in today's modern culture? Who might be the "circumcised" and who might be the "gentiles" in today's culture?
8. Summarize Paul's point in Romans 1:18-2:29. Why does bad news have to precede the Good News?

Application

1. Where do you think most people in our community would find themselves, in Romans 1 or in Romans 2? Why? What about you?
2. Which do you think are harder to reach with the Gospel Story, Romans 1 people or Romans 2 people? Why?
3. Is Paul's point that we are all sinners so we shouldn't judge one another or we are all sinners so we are all really in trouble? Why does this distinction matter?