

The Righteous Judge (Rom 2:1-16)

Intro

It seems to me that, in the church, we are always reacting to something and, whether consciously or subconsciously, overcompensating in the other direction. We have a negative experience, or come to realise something we've been taught isn't wrong, or even that it's damaging, and we react against it in search of a truer and healthier alternative. But what happens, probably more often than not, is we overcompensate and swing too far in the opposite direction.

I've been thinking about that this week because when I read, and re-read today's passage in preparation to teach on it, it made me feel quite uncomfortable. Today's passage talks about God's judgement and his wrath against sin that will one day come to a conclusion, when he will deal with sin and evil once and for all. And that includes people. People who are hardened to God, have rejected God, who want to seek their own desires rather than come to God, will be judged for their sin. And that makes me uncomfortable because, growing up, I think the anger and wrath of God against sin was overemphasised. In many ways I had a picture in my own mind of God that, at the very least, he was perpetually disappointed in me, and at worst, wanted me dead because I'm a sinner. *"But thankfully Jesus got in the way and God killed Jesus instead of me so now I can go to heaven instead of hell."* And that doesn't leave me feeling very loved but hell sounds awful so I'll take the deal. I'm caricaturing slightly but that's the kind of idea of God I had for a long time.

I am deeply grateful that God has led me to a truer picture of who he really is, but I think, if I'm honest, there have been times that I have swung too far in the opposite direction. I haven't wanted to talk about judgement at all, and I have avoided the idea of God's just and appropriate anger against sin. But I—and we—want to be submitted to God's authority expressed through his word, the Bible. That means we need to go where he goes, and teach what he teaches. We want to be good at reading, interpreting, and applying the Bible well, but we don't want to avoid things just because they are uncomfortable. I would rather avoid having to talk about it, but there is too much at stake. We can't skip over this. And if we are open to it, and receive it, his word will lead us to life. It is a lamp to our feet, and a light to our path.

Walking Through the Passage...

Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgement on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things.

'You have no excuse' echoes 1:20—God has plainly revealed himself through creation, therefore "they are without excuse."

The difference is that in CH1 he was addressing the Gentiles: people outside of God's chosen people, who reject God, want nothing to do with God and God's righteousness, and unashamedly follow their own sinful passions and desires. In CH2, however, he is addressing people who are self-righteously critiquing others from a place of moral superiority. He's directing his attention to people who assume they are in God's good books, and critique the people Paul was addressing in the first chapter.

Paul's point here isn't to say that we shouldn't come to judgements about what is right or wrong. Notice, at no point does he say, "Don't judge." His point is that when you judge others, you demonstrate that you have a moral knowledge and are thus accountable to live up to your own standards. If I say, "Don't get drunk," I show that I know that getting drunk isn't in line with the righteousness of God. So I'm without excuse when it comes to my own behaviour with drink. If I go and get drunk, I can't plead ignorance because I've already demonstrated I know it's wrong by telling others not to do it.

So, for both the blatantly immoral, and those who have confidence in their own morality, "they are without excuse."

Remember, this congregation in Rome is made up of Jewish Christians who had been exiled but have now returned, and Gentile Christians who don't have the same religious background as the Jews. The Jews are proud of their heritage as God's chosen people and want the Gentile Christians to conform to their Jewishness, and this is a source of conflict in the church.

In Chapter 1 Paul wrote that the gospel is the power of God for salvation for all who believe, "to the Jew first and also to the Gentile." Good news: everybody gets access to the gospel! But then in 1:18 it's like he rewinds to start showing why everyone equally *needs* the gospel. So last week Paul outlined the Apostle Paul's critique of the Gentile world—people suppressing the truth about God even though it's been revealed to them in creation, following their own sinful passions and desires. And you can almost imagine the Jews as CH1 is being read out nodding their heads in agreement, giving an 'amen' to Paul's critique of the Gentile world.

So the question is, as we enter CH2, who is Paul aiming these words at? Scholars disagree over this, although the more popular opinion seems to be that Paul is subtly transitioning to a critique of the Jews in the Roman church. What I think is going on here is that Paul is starting out in CH2 with the Jews in mind but he's being deliberately ambiguous and he doesn't identify or name them straight away. He's building an argument that the Jews will be on board with, agreeing with him, thinking that he's still addressing the Gentiles. But Paul is about to pull the rug from under their feet and show that they are just as guilty as the Gentiles, and just as in need of saving.

We know God's judgement on those who do such things is in accordance with truth.

To the Jews, God's truthful judgement would be biased in their favour, because they were 'the elect', his chosen people, and they assumed judgement would be against the nations. So at this point they think Paul is on their side. But really what Paul is saying is God's judgement is based on the truth of where people are really at in relation to him. No one can pull the wool over his eyes. All his judgements are completely perfect and true, and, as we'll see in a bit, impartial.

Do you imagine, whoever you are, [deliberately ambiguous language] that when you judge those who do such things and yet do them yourself, you will escape the judgement of God?

We've all been here, right? Where we critique others for something but give ourselves a free pass. Or we explain away why it's less of a big deal for us to have done the same thing. Paul is painting a picture of someone who is presuming to stand up alongside God, the judge who judges with truth, and to nod along in agreement with his sentence, looking down on others who are guilty, oblivious to the fact that they too are guilty.

You can imagine the Jewish section of the congregation nodding along as this letter is being read out, as though Paul is continuing to critique the Gentiles. But all the while he is drawing them in, ready for a big twist.

Or do you despise the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience? Do you not realise that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?

This is why I think Paul is subliminally aiming this at the Jews. There is a presumptuousness to those he is addressing. They are assuming God will be more lenient to them, and that their sin isn't as big a deal as others'. "*We are the elect. We are God's chosen people.*" But don't you realise the whole point of his kindness to you is that it results in repentance—in a change of heart and a change to the way you live?

A lack of repentance is a sure sign of hardness of heart towards God. And that's exactly where Paul goes next:

But by your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath, when God's righteous judgement will be revealed. For he will repay according to each one's deeds:

Again Paul is playing here on a theme that tracks with Israel's story throughout the Old Testament. They get complacent, taking God's grace towards them for granted, so their hearts become hard and they are not actually living from a place of repentance. They think they're in the clear because they're God's people, but actually there is wrath being stored up, and judgement is coming, and they are in danger. All the while they stand in judgement over others, oblivious to the fact that they too are guilty.

This is also one of the major themes of Jesus' words to the scribes and Pharisees and his parables throughout the Gospel accounts. He paints them out to be a people who claim to be representing God, all the while they are missing that God himself and the kingdom they're waiting for have arrived right under their noses, but they're missing it. Jesus repeatedly warned the Jewish leaders of a coming judgement, and Paul here picks up the same theme.

The sign of their guilt is their lifestyle, their works, their deeds. Paul outlines two options:

To those who by patiently doing good seek for glory and honour and immortality, he will give eternal life; while for those who are self-seeking and who obey not the truth but wickedness, there will be wrath and fury.

Before we start panicking that we have to somehow earn our way to eternal life through good works, that's not what Paul is saying here. It's obviously not what he's saying, because that would be in conflict with the whole point of the rest of Romans. We are saved from wrath, and to eternal life, as a result of faith in Jesus. But these works that Paul is talking about are the result of repentance, and the evidence of repentance. This is a really common theme throughout the New Testament. The apostles and early church could not conceive of a salvation that didn't result in a change in the way you lived.

Part of the problem for us is that the gospel has often been framed in a very formulaic way where you just have to give mental assent to the right beliefs and you're in. "Confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord, believe in your heart God raised him from the dead and you will be saved." 2+2=4. But we don't stop to think, what does it mean for Jesus to be *Lord*? And what does it mean to *confess* that he is Lord, of me, of my life. If Jesus is Lord, if we have staked everything on him, on his grace to us, on his work for us through the cross, the resurrection, and the ascension, that has to look like something.

His kindness is meant to lead us to repentance, and true repentance results in a new way of living. Not that we get everything perfect, but there is a discernible new trajectory to our lives.

Paul uses the language of *seeking* here. What are you seeking? What are you pursuing? What are you persevering in?

John Stott wrote, "The presence or absence of saving faith in our hearts will be disclosed by the presence or absence of good works of love in our lives."

As James puts it, "What good is it, my brothers, if someone claims to have faith, but has no works? Can such faith save him? ... faith by itself, if it does not result in works, is dead."

There are serious implications to this distinction. Paul continues...(and remember, the Jews still don't realise this is aimed at them.)

There will be anguish and distress for everyone who does evil, the Jew first and also the Gentile, but glory and honour and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Gentile. For God shows no partiality.

This reminds me of those films where right towards the end it begins to dawn on you that things are not as they seemed. You receive an extra piece of information that turns the whole thing on its head. My favourite film is *The Prestige*. In the final scenes there is a big reveal that makes you want to go back to the beginning and watch the whole thing again in light of what you now know.

As soon as Paul writes, "the Jew first and also the Gentile", these Jews who all along have been assuming Paul was on their side and the Gentiles were under fire, suddenly realise that he's been setting up this whole argument that indicts them. You can imagine them

wanting to go back to the beginning of the passage and read it all again now knowing that it is aimed at the Jews just as much as the Gentiles.

The Jews have been assuming that God would show partiality to them because they were his chosen people. But the message of the gospel is that, just as it is the power of God for salvation for *all* who believe (as Paul said in CH1), so also all are equally guilty and in need of this gospel. Whether it's the unashamedly immoral who got up to all sorts on the streets of Merthyr last night, or the polite religious types that are sitting in church this morning. Everyone is in the same boat before God.

The Jews in Rome were no better off than the Gentiles. They were in danger of taking God's kindness for granted, standing in judgement over others, all the while not actually seeing repentance and its fruit in their own lives. And Paul says wrath is being stored up against them, because their hearts are hard.

These are heavy verses for us to read. The stark reality is that there is coming a day when God will say, *enough is enough*. And he will finally put an end to sin and evil. And for many that will be a terrible and fearful day. And even worse for those who assumed that God would show partiality to them, but there was a lack of genuine repentance in their lives. That wrath that was being stored up will finally come to fruition. But even in the reality of judgement, we can trust that God is good and just, and he doesn't make wrong judgements because he has all the information. On that day, no one will complain that any of God's judgements are unfair. He will do right, by himself and by people.

So Paul summarises:

All who have sinned apart from the law [Gentiles] will also perish apart from the law, and all who have sinned under the law [Jews] will be judged by the law. For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous in God's sight, but the doers of the law who will be justified.

You can imagine, after Paul has done his big reveal and suddenly the Jews realise they're in the stand, being judged along with the Gentiles, that they protest, "But we have the law!" And Paul is saying, it's no use having the law unless you perfectly live it out. And no one is able to do that. We all fall short. We're all guilty.

When Gentiles, who do not possess the law, do instinctively what the law requires, these, though not having the law, are a law to themselves. They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, to which their own conscience also bears witness; and their conflicting thoughts will accuse or perhaps excuse them on the day when, according to my gospel, God, through Jesus Christ, will judge the secret thoughts of all.

So the Gentiles and Jews are in the same boat. They're both up in the stand under trial. The Jews are accountable because through the law they have knowledge of God's moral standard. The Gentiles are accountable because they have an internal sense of right and

wrong that they don't live up to either. On judgement day, God will judge *all* who have not come to repentance.

And we all, 2,000 years later, find ourselves in the same boat too. Whether we have grown up with a knowledge of God's law or all we've ever had is some internal sense of right and wrong, none of us have met the standard and all of us are headed towards a day when God will rightly judge sin. What's interesting is the passage ends with Paul saying, "on the day when, *according to my gospel*, God, through Jesus Christ, will judge the secret thoughts of all." In Paul's mind, judgement is part of the gospel; it's part of the good news. We are in a period of God's patience but a day is coming when he will not allow sin and evil to go on distorting and degrading his good creation.

And we all want evil to be dealt with. We all want justice to be done. We just want to avoid it being dealt with in us, or in the people we love. We want a free pass for our own contribution to the mess the world is in. But what the Apostle Paul wants to show us in this passage is that all of us are equally guilty before God and in need of saving.

The whole point of Paul going through all this heavy stuff is that the bad news exposes our need for the good news. The reason God hasn't enacted his wrath against sin already is because he is patient and wants everybody to come to repentance, to receive grace and mercy. For all those who come to Jesus, our sin has already been judged in Jesus at the cross. It is already dealt with. God has become human and has taken upon himself his own judgement against sin. So if we are in Christ, we have nothing to fear on judgement day. In Jesus, we are cleansed from our sin, we are holy and blameless.

Two Warnings & An Invitation

But I want to end on two warnings and an invitation.

Warning 1.

There is a vast difference between being united to Jesus by your faith in him, and being religious. The Jews had a long religious heritage, they had their ancient rituals instituted by God, they had the law, they had their festivals, they had the Sabbath. Yet they were in danger because they assumed that all this religious life made them right with God. But there was a lack of repentance in their life. And this lack of repentance was evidenced by a lack of good works.

Please, I urge you, do not presume that your Christian heritage or culture or lifestyle means you are right with God. It is not enough to attend church. On judgement day God will not be impressed by our religious activities. Have you entrusted yourself to Jesus completely? Have you submitted yourself to him as your Lord and your King? Are you relying on your own ability to be 'good enough' or are you relying on his saving work at the cross?

Warning 2.

It is so easy for those of us who have been in Church for a long time to slip into judgmentalism, assuming we are somehow superior to the immoral and irreligious. The Church has often been guilty of this, and often culture echoes the Apostle Paul's very own words, saying "You condemn others for doing the very same things you are doing." It is not

wrong for us to make judgements about what is right and wrong in love, in gentleness, and in the context of community and belonging. But it is backwards for us to presume on the kindness of God to us, taking his grace for granted, while not offering others the same level of grace to others as we offer ourselves. Let's focus first on our own repentance, on our own lives.

Invitation.

Whether warning 1 or 2 apply to us, the invitation is the same. Come to Jesus. Put your faith in Jesus. Trust Jesus. Submit to Jesus. Receive from Jesus. Love Jesus.

Paul wrote to the Corinthians: "Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realise this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you fail to meet the test!"

It is appropriate to examine ourselves and check, *is my heart hard to God? Or am I allowing his kindness to lead me to repentance? Am I taking his grace for granted, or is it being worked out in the way I live?* And, as he writes, it may be that after examining yourself that you realise Christ is not in you. That you've been playing a religious game. So receive him for the first time. Come to Jesus.