

Self-Righteousness Is Unrighteousness

Romans 2:1-4

Before we begin Romans chapter 2, I would like to take you back three thousand years to a courtroom drama in the palace of a king. The king is David and the prosecutor is the prophet Nathan. This scene takes place after David had secretly committed adultery with Bathsheba, the wife of his friend Uriah, and had sent Uriah to his death. David had quickly married Bathsheba, who was pregnant, and assumed his sins would remain hidden. But in 2 Samuel 12:1-6 we read:

1 Then the Lord sent Nathan to David. And he came to him, and said to him: "There were two men in one city, one rich and the other poor. 2 The rich man had exceedingly many flocks and herds. 3 But the poor man had nothing, except one little ewe lamb which he had bought and nourished; and it grew up together with him and with his children. It ate of his own food and drank from his own cup and lay in his bosom; and it was like a daughter to him. 4 And a traveler came to the rich man, who refused to take from his own flock and from his own herd to prepare one for the wayfaring man who had come to him; but he took the poor man's lamb and prepared it for the man who had come to him." 5 So David's anger was greatly aroused against the man, and he said to Nathan, "As the Lord lives, the man who has done this shall surely die! 6 And he shall restore fourfold for the lamb, because he did this thing and because he had no pity."

7 Then Nathan said to David, "You are the man!"

The revelation is striking---the judge who pronounces guilt is the guilty man. David's sins that he thought were hidden are all uncovered.

In many respects the early chapters of the book of Romans are a courtroom drama also. Paul is writing as a prosecuting attorney, systematically proving the guilt of the human race in its rebellion against God.

In Romans 1:18-32, Paul indicts people, primarily pagan Gentiles, for turning away from the one true God and worshipping idols. God in His wrath gives these sinners over to more sin: sexual immorality, homosexuality, and a long list of destructive relational sins. Being a Jew and a former Pharisee, Paul knew that his fellow Jews would be sitting on the sidelines, cheering him on: "Give it to those pagan sinners, Paul!" They smugly would be thinking, "Thank God that I'm not like those awful Gentile sinners" (Luke 18:11).

So in chapter 2, Paul aims his indictment at the Jews and others who think they are moral. You can see it in the pronouns Paul uses. In chapter 1 he speaks of "they." But in chapter 2, he directly addresses his reader as "you." He knows that it is easy to be blind to this deadly sin of self-righteousness, so he reaches out, grabs us by the lapels, shakes us a bit, and says, "I'm talking to you! Listen up!" Romans chapter 2 is for you. Romans chapter two is for those of you who liked Romans chapter one a little too much.

Self-righteousness is a very difficult sin to get people to see and condemn in themselves. But it's a serious sin because it keeps people from seeing their need for the gospel. It believes the lie that we can be good enough in ourselves to qualify for heaven. Thus we don't need a Savior who died on the cross to pay the penalty for our sins. "Maybe really gross sinners need a Savior. But me? Hey, I'm a basically good person! God wouldn't judge a good guy like me, would He?"

In Romans 2:1-16, Paul confronts those who think they are better than those rotten sinners, people who think their goodness can justify them before God. He will make it clear that the self-righteous person is as guilty before God as the unrighteous person. In Romans 1:20, Paul says that men are without excuse. In Ro 2:1, he personalizes this by saying, "You have no excuse."

Listen to God's word as I read **Romans 2:1-4**:

- 1 Therefore you are inexcusable, O man, whoever you are who judge, for in whatever you judge another you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things.**
- 2 But we know that the judgment of God is according to truth against those who practice such things.**
- 3 And do you think this, O man, you who judge those practicing such things, and doing the same, that you will escape the judgment of God?**
- 4 Or do you despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance?**

Paul lays out a three count indictment against the self-righteous here:

1. You condemn yourself when you self-righteously judge others (Ro 2:1).

Therefore you are inexcusable, O man, whoever you are who judge, for in whatever you judge another you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things.

If you've never judged anyone else, you're welcome to leave right now because I'd like to talk to those of us who have passed judgment on others. The word "judge" is a legal term that means to find a person guilty; it's the idea of setting oneself over another. I like how Eugene Peterson paraphrases this verse:

Those people are on a dark spiral downward. But if you think that leaves you on the high ground where you can point your finger at others, think again. Every time you criticize someone, you condemn yourself. It takes one to know one.

Let's just admit that we enjoy judging others and we tend to judge them most severely for the same things we're guilty of.

That reminds me of the elderly couple who had stopped at a restaurant while they were on a road trip. After finishing their meal, they jumped back in the car. After about twenty minutes the wife told her husband that she had unknowingly left her glasses back at the restaurant. The husband blew his top because there was no place to turn around. When they finally headed back, he grumbled and complained the whole way, scolding his wife for being so forgetful. When they finally arrived at the restaurant, the wife quickly opened the car door and hurried across the parking lot. The husband rolled down his window and yelled, "While you're in there, you might as well get my hat and credit card."

Paul is saying that if we think we can judge everybody else, then we will be judged by the same standard we set up.

We need to understand that Paul isn't condemning the act of judging right and wrong. Paul expects his moral Jewish readers to agree with him that the sins of the Gentiles

that he listed in chapter 1 are wrong. As he says in verse 32, **“those who practice such things are deserving of death.”** The problem with judging others is when you secretly engage in the same kinds of things that you openly condemn. When a pastor berates sexual immorality from the pulpit, but then it comes out that he secretly looks at pornography, he has condemned himself.

Jesus’ words are fitting:

1 "Judge not, that you be not judged. 2 For with what judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you. 3 And why do you look at the speck in your brother's eye, but do not consider the plank in your own eye? 4 Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me remove the speck from your eye'; and look, a plank is in your own eye? 5 Hypocrite! First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.

Tragically, we can all be self-righteous to one degree or another. We judge both ourselves and others poorly. Have you ever noticed how we like to “rename” our sins? We do that by ascribing the worst motives to others, while using other phrases to let ourselves off the hook.

Ray Pritchard provides the following examples: You’re a liar; I merely “stretch the truth.” You’re cheating; I am just “bending the rules.” You lose your temper; I have righteous anger. You’re a jerk; I’m having a bad day. You have a critical spirit; I’m just telling people the truth. You gossip; I share my concerns about people. You curse and swear; I let off steam. You’re opinionated; I have convictions. You’re greedy; I’m simply taking care of business. You stink; I merely have an “earthy aroma.” Are we a sad bunch or what? We need to be reminded that excuses for sin will not be excused.

When it comes to judging, we have no excuse. We’re all busted.

The second indictment ambushes us just as much as the first one...

2. God judges you for your self-righteous judgment (Ro 2:2-3).

Ro 2:2-3 state that our judgment by God is inescapable:

2 But we know that the judgment of God is according to truth against those who practice such things.

3 And do you think this, O man, you who judge those practicing such things, and doing the same, that you will escape the judgment of God?

God judges justly on the basis of what really exists, not what merely appears to be. He sees all the facts, the multiple motives, each action and every attitude. It was F. B. Meyer who said that when we see a brother or sister in sin, there are two things we do not know: First, we do not know how hard he or she tried not to sin. And second, we do not know the power of the forces that assailed him or her. We also do not know what we would have done in the same circumstances.

Why are we so critical and caustic with others? Think of it this way. Every time we are judgmental toward another person, we are in essence displaying our distrust or lack of faith in God to be the judge. Remember that He is God and we are not. Here’s a news flash for you: God doesn’t need any help in judging people.

Now, some of you may wonder why then the church speaks out against sin or why we would confront believers who go astray. One of the two charges I hear leveled against the church is that it's filled with judgmental people. The other claim is that it's heaping with hypocrites. While it's true that sometimes people are hypocritical and judgmental, the church is to be a place of grace.

When we talk to another believer about their sin we must do so humbly, in love, not in self-righteous judgment. Love calls us to speak up. To sit back and say nothing is not loving either. Take these words of Galatians 6:1-2 to heart:

Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.

Here's a principle to keep in mind: It should always be difficult to confront someone when they're straying. If you enjoy doing it, you're probably being self-righteously judgmental.

Look back to Romans 2:3, **"And do you think this, O man, you who judge those practicing such things, and doing the same, that you will escape the judgment of God?"**

Paul is showing that all of us have violated our own standards by doing the very things that we condemn in others. And so we are guilty before God. Our judging is inexcusable and our judgment is inescapable.

Paul third indictment gives us hope:

3. God's kindness should lead you to repentance (Romans 2:4).

God's goal is for our good. He rebukes us so that we will respond with repentance and His kindness should lead us to becoming contrite. Look at Ro 2:4:

4 Or do you despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance?

The word "despise" is very strong. It means "look down upon with scorn." Some of us struggle to think of God as kind while others of us consider His kindness as a justification for living any way we want to. Matthew Henry once said: "There is in every willful sin a contempt of the goodness of God." God's goodness toward you is not a stamp of approval for how you are living.

Paul is saying, "If you think that you can get away with sin because God is kind, tolerant, and patient, you're greatly mistaken! His kindness should lead you to repentance, not to self-righteous complacency. If you go on sinning, presuming on His grace, you're only storing up wrath for the day of judgment (2:5)."

Don't you love that God is not stingy with His goodness toward us? The word "riches" implies wealth and abundance. Look at how God opens up His treasure chest of love:

- The riches of His goodness. This points to the many good gifts that God bestows on this rebellious human race. He gives us air to breathe, food to eat, homes to live in, families that love us, and beautiful scenery to enjoy. He treats us far better than we deserve.

Psalm 145:17: "The LORD is righteous in all his ways and loving toward all he has made."

Psalm 33:5 says: "The earth is full of his unfailing love."

- The riches of His forbearance. This word means to "hold back" and was used of a truce between two warring parties. This points to the fact that God does not strike us dead instantly when we defiantly sin against Him. How many times we have known what is right and deliberately disobeyed! God could have struck us dead on hundreds of occasions and He would have been perfectly just, but He did not. He is patiently tolerant.

But just because God has shown you tolerance does not mean you are at peace with Him or that He is pleased with you.

- The riches of His longsuffering. The word literally means "long on wrath," or slow to anger. God gives us opportunity after opportunity to repent, without inflicting judgment. We are in a grace period right now. God's patience has a purpose. As Jonah stated in Jonah 4:2, God is "a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity."

Aren't you glad that God is good, that he holds back what we deserve and that He is patient?

Are you grateful for God's goodness or do you take it for granted?

Paul reminds us that God's kindness is meant to lead us toward repentance. In other words, his mercy should melt us because it is overwhelming and undeserved. God takes no pleasure in pronouncing judgment because His purpose is to produce repentance. We see this in Ezekiel 18:23, 32:

Do I have any pleasure at all that the wicked should die?" says the Lord God, "and not that he should turn from his ways and live? For I have no pleasure in the death of one who dies," says the Lord God. "Therefore turn and live!

To repent means to forsake and turn from sin and turn toward God. God receives sinners who repent.

Our judgmental attitudes are ultimately destructive while God's judgment is meant to be constructive. The purpose behind God's condemnation and His kindness is redemptive: He is waiting for us to repent...before it's too late.

Action Steps

1. Stop judging.

How many times a day do you talk about other people and look down your nose at them? Do you disdain people who sin differently than you do? Stop it. Instead of judging, realize that when you judge, you come under judgment. Remember that others are on a journey, just like you are.

2. Give God his job back.

Ask the Lord to help you be perfectly content to allow Him to judge people instead of trying to do his job for Him.

3. Respond with repentance.

Allow God's kindness to lead you to repentance, which means that you have a profound change of mind and heart so that you hate sin and hate your own self-righteousness and you turn to Jesus in humility and faith and say, "I need a Savior."

There is one place where the judgment of God and the love of God meet perfectly--at the cross. At the cross God's loving-kindness toward sinners and God's judgment for sin were both satisfied.

The Bible says that the wages of sin is death. And the Bible says Jesus died for our sins. God satisfied His love by sending His Son to die for us. God satisfied His judgment when Christ took our death penalty for us. As we come to the Lord's Table today, let's come with a brokenness of heart over our propensity to judge others and let's come with a sense of our sin that has caused a dreadful breach between us and God. During Passover the Jews made a diligent search for leaven, even lighting candles to search every corner of their homes. They then cast it out of their houses, even cursing themselves if they should willingly keep any of it around. Fellow sinner, take this time to do a search for sin in your life and when you find it, confess it, forsake it, and turn from it.

And let's be thankful that in the riches of his goodness, forbearance and longsuffering, God made a way for us to be reconciled through the substitutionary sacrifice of His beloved Son.