

Romans: The Revealing of Righteousness (part 5 of 9)

God's Kindness Should Lead to Repentance

Romans 2:1-11

Mark Vroegop

"Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things. We know that the judgment of God rightly falls on those who practice such things. Do you suppose, O man—you who judge those who practice such things and yet do them yourself—that you will escape the judgment of God? Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed. He will render to each one according to his works: to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury. There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. For God shows no partiality." (Romans 2:1–11, ESV)

The book of Romans is all about the righteousness of God that comes to human beings through the gospel. The good news of this book is that the righteousness that God requires is the righteousness that He gives. Or, as Romans 1:17 says: "the righteous shall live by faith." The righteousness of God comes to human beings, not on the basis of what we do, but on the basis of faith in what God has promised to do. That is why righteousness is based upon faith.

When that reality is understood, it changes everything. It is powerful in ways that are truly life-changing. It changes how you see God, yourself, your sin, obedience, commands, blessings, suffering, and eternity. But it also changes – or it should change – how you see others.

The gospel is a lens through which a person sees the world.

Why Such Heaviness?

We are in the middle of a heavy section in our study of the book of Romans. From 1:18-3:20, Paul's main focus is to show us the problem that necessitated the coming of the gospel. He wants us to see the bad news so that we can understand and believe the good news. Paul's aim is not just to convince us about our imperfection; who would dare suggest that he is perfect? Rather, his purpose is to show us our utter helplessness, our total inability to save ourselves. He wants us to feel the weight of the brokenness of our humanity.

Paul is leading us toward the conclusion that will be found in Romans 3:23.

“for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins.” (Romans 3:23–25, ESV)

You must keep this in mind as we wade through the dark texts leading up to this thought. Paul is building his argument verse by verse and line by line. He is showing us the various angles on the brokenness of humanity.

What Did You Hear Last Week?

Now last week was particularly heavy as we talked about the problem under the problem of humanity: the exchange of God’s glory for our own. And we specifically saw the way that this tragic exchange manifested itself in twenty-one sins, especially in regards to sexuality and homosexuality. We learned that our broken exchange extends so deeply into our human core that it affects our most intimate desires and actions. I hope that last week helped you to understand the Bible’s perspective on the problem of humanity and why Paul would use homosexuality as the most vivid example of the exchange of God’s glory for our own.

However, Paul knows people, churches, and religious people. And he knows that there needs to be an important balance between calling out certain behaviors and a judgmental spirit. You see, there is a danger of not speaking into the kinds of issues that we talked about last week. But there is also a danger that some would walk away from texts like last week and think, “It’s about time someone talked about ‘those people!’” There is a danger in getting so specific and so direct that people who consider themselves to be religious might think that they are better than others or feel as though the passage has nothing to say to them.

I tried hard to help you avoid that pitfall last week, but I still want you to ask yourself what you heard last week. Was Romans 1:24-32 about others or was it really about you? Did you walk away thinking about your own brokenness, or were you mostly glad that the sins of our society were “called out”?

Our text today is designed to balance out the direct statements about the pagan culture with equally direct warnings to those who are religious. It is likely that Paul is particularly focusing his pastoral sights on his Jewish audience, but the application extends to anyone who would be tempted to justify him or herself by religious pedigree. Paul does not want religious people to miss a very important warning. The exchange of God’s glory has many manifestations, even religious ones.

Seven Warnings to Religious People

Romans 2:1-11 extends the focus of God’s judgment from pagan and worldly sins to what might be considered religious sins. We have previously seen the consequences of unbelief (1:18-23), the effects of exchanging God’s glory (1:24-32), and now we see seven warnings to those who are religious. Paul wants the immoral person and the moral person, the Gentile and the Jew to understand the extent of their mutual depravity. Everyone has sinned and fallen short of God’s glory. That’s the point.

1. Hypocrisy is noticed by God (v 1)

Verse one changes the focus from the wrath of God being revealed against immorality to the wrath of God being revealed against hypocrisy. Some bring the judgment of God upon themselves because of their blatant disregard for God's laws. Others bring God's judgment because of their private rebellion. And Paul's point here is this: God sees the high-handed sinner and the hypocritical sinner.

The word "therefore" that begins our section serves as a connecting word from the last section. We have just seen what happens when God's truth is suppressed: human beings exchange the truth for a lie, resulting in all manner of sinful behavior. But there is another kind of truth suppression. Religious or moral people can suppress the truth about themselves. They can be judgmental of others while being just as guilty.

That is why Paul says "... you have no excuse, O man ..." He is fighting against the tendency in the human heart to believe that we are the exception to the rule. We tend to want the benefit of the doubt more than we will give it to others; we find that our explanations for our actions are much more compelling than others'; and we view our sins and imperfections as much less consequential than the sins of others. We are often outraged by the sins of others but excuse them in ourselves.

At first reading you might take a dim view of judging, as if we are never to define the morality of things or call people to change. I'm sure you have heard people quote Matthew 7:1 ("Judge not, lest ye be judged") as much as I have. But the Bible calls us to judge (see 1 Cor. 5:9, 2 Cor. 11:14, Phil. 3:2, 1 Thess. 5:21, 1 John 4:1). We are commanded to make accurate and clear appraisals of character based on conduct. That kind of judgment is necessary and helpful. What Paul is identifying here is a hypocritical and self-righteous condemnation of another person.¹

The key to understanding verse one is the second half of the verse. Judgment is not necessarily wrong unless it is tainted with hypocrisy: "... *For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things.*" (Romans 2:1, ESV) In other words, the dark content of the last section in Romans ought to make everyone humbled before God. Trusting in your religious background, your conservative values, or that you've never struggled with "such and such" does not make you immune from God's judgment.

God knows you better than you even know yourself. And Paul wants to dismantle the thought that can easily follow such a hard-hitting text: "I'm glad I'm not like that!" God sees our hypocrisy. And it is problem.

2. God is just (vv 2-3)

The first issue really relates to not understanding ourselves very well. This second warning relates to not understanding who God is. The distortion of our thinking not only results in thinking that we are the exception to the rule, but it also manifests itself in thinking that God will treat us differently. This was especially true for the Jewish people since they were God's chosen people

¹ Robert H. Mounce, *Romans*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995), 89.

and they had been given the Law. They prized their unique morality, but it caused them to make assumptions about God's justice.

Therefore, Paul shatters that issue by using their understanding of God's character against them. Verse two is something with which they would all agree: *"We know that the judgment of God rightly falls on those who practice such things."* (Romans 2:2, ESV) We can almost hear the "Amen" following this statement.

But Paul follows with a strong, personal ("O man") warning: *"Do you suppose, O man — you who judge those who practice such things and yet do them yourself — that you will escape the judgment of God?"* (Romans 2:3, ESV). You see, there is a tendency to force rank sin issues such that we feel better about ourselves. While it is true that there are some sins for which there are greater consequences because of the nature of the sin, it is inexcusable to think that you are not culpable of God's judgment for your sins. In other words, the darkness of the previous verses affects all of us.

A list of sins and a focus on sexual sin can quickly create a proud, self-justifying heart in those who are religious and moral. And Paul gives a strong warning here about thinking that God is not going to be equally just with you as He is with all of "those people." So be warned: God is just.

3. Blessings do not equal God's approval (v 4)

There is a third warning here, and it relates to a misinterpretation of the blessings of God. Now Paul is connecting this to the blessing of God upon the Jewish people, but there are applications beyond the nation of Israel.

There are two parallel rhetorical questions:

Question #1 – "Do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience?"

Because the Jewish and religious people were hypocritically judgmental of others, they were treating God's kindness (in not judging them) lightly or with contempt. In other words, God has not been kind to you because you are innocent.

Question #2 – "Don't you know that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?"

Some people might misinterpret God's blessings as a sign of His approval as if God's gifts were deserved. We have already heard a variation of this in 1:21 where it says that people "did not honor him as God or give thanks to him . . ." But in this context we see the religious expression of that ingratitude. Rather than willfully forgetting God, the religious person comes to believe that he or she deserves the blessings which God bestows.

Paul reinterprets the kindness of God in Romans 1:4, and his point is very important. God is kind in not immediately judging you, and He is also kind in granting blessings upon people, especially the Jews. But what are we to make of these blessings? According to Paul, they should never be interpreted as if we deserved them or as if they were due to our faithfulness. In fact, all the blessings that come from God are completely undeserved.

Matthew 5:45 makes it very clear that God is kind to unkind people: *"For he makes his sun rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust."* In the book of Matthew this to

motivate the people of God to be kind to those who treat them poorly. But in Romans Paul says that God treats people kindly in order to lead them to repentance. There is a message in the good things that we receive which is designed to turn people toward God in humble recognition of their need.

So a religious person should not scoff at a “pagan” who refuses to be thankful and acknowledge God when he is guilty of assuming that his blessings are from God but are deserved. Religious people are often thankful but for the wrong reasons. For instance, listen to the combination of gratitude and pride in the Pharisee’s prayer in Luke 18:11 – “... *I thank you that I am not like other men, extortions, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.*” He thanked God and was proud! How awful.

The warning here is to be sure that you do not equate God’s blessings with this approval. Everything we have is an undeserved grace gift!

4. Truth resisted hardens the heart (v 5)

The fourth warning identifies the cause of the misinterpretation of the blessings. The people have a heart problem. In particular, they have a hard and impenitent (unrepentant) heart. The idea of a “hard heart” would have been something familiar to the Jews that was addressing. The Old Testament used this kind of description for a lack of obedience, even connecting to the symbolic act of circumcision.

“Circumcise yourselves to the LORD; remove the foreskin of your hearts, O men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem; lest my wrath go forth like fire, and burn with none to quench it, because of the evil of your deeds.” (Jeremiah 4:4, ESV)

Now the idea of circumcision will be raised again at the end of chapter two when Paul talks about the true circumcision of the heart (see 2:28-29). But in this section it is simply the point that when religious people resist the truth, it creates a hardening of the heart. But it also creates a great accountability in judgment – “*you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God’s righteous judgment will be revealed.*” (2:5)

Now these should be words that sound familiar to you. Remember Romans 1:18? “*The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness...*” Lest the religious person think that he or she could be spared, Paul talks about the final day when God’s wrath will be revealed. And the problem for the moralist may not be his wild, fleshly sins but his hardened heart that led him to hypocrisy and any number of others sins. Robert Mounce summarizes the issue here very well:

*The person who knows but resists truth does not go away from the encounter morally neutral. Truth resisted hardens the heart. It makes it all the more difficult to recognize truth the next time around. Life is not a game without consequences.*²

5. Actions matter (v 6)

² Robert H. Mounce, Romans, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995). 90.

The fifth warning introduces a new paragraph that runs through verse 11. While most of the book of Romans is about faith, this pericope is about works or our actions. Keep in mind that the target of Paul's concern is people who are hypocritically judging others. And Paul wants them to know that their actions really matter. God is going to render to "each one according to his works" (Rom. 2:6). This is listed here almost as a principle, and verses 7-11 unpack it even further.

The point here is an important one to remember. Throughout the Scriptures, there is a clear sense that while people are not saved by their works, they are certainly judged by them (see Psalm 62:12, Prov. 24:12). There is divine accountability for the things that human beings do. Actions really do matter to God. Salvation is not based upon works, but judgment and guilt certainly are based upon works.

Sinful Jews are not going to be treated any differently than Gentiles at the judgment. They will not be able to appeal to their heritage, their upbringing, their observance of the Law, or their special place in God's heart. They will be judged according to their works, just like everyone else.

This is an important warning if you had the privilege of growing up in a Christian home and attending church much of your life, or if you had a significant exposure to spiritual truth. The warning here is simply that your background, religious knowledge, and family roots will not excuse you from accountability. Our actions really matter.

6. Eternity is connected to our present lives (vv 7-10)

The sixth warning will require some explanation because it seems to contradict Paul's emphasis on living by faith and not by works. These verses are set up in what is called a chiasmic formula, and they are designed to further clarify the principle that we read in verse 6 – that God will judge people according to their works.

The chiasm is set up like this:

A - "to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life;

B - but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury.

B - There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek,

A -but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek."
(Romans 2:7-10, ESV)

The point of the chiasm is simply that there is a connection between what a person seeks and does (notice the first A and the first B) and his eternal destiny. Those who are headed for everlasting glory are seeking the right things, and those who practice evil are setting a course toward tribulation and distress. In other words, there is connection between our present lives and eternity.

Is Paul saying that we are saved by works? No. The rest of the book of Romans will make it abundantly clear that a person is saved by faith. However, that does not mean that good works are not a validating part of genuine faith. I think Augustine said it best when he said, "Faith alone saves, but the kind of faith that saves is not alone." Last week I read part of a very important text in 1 Corinthians 6, and it has bearing here. It shows us the connection between works and true conversion:

"Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God." (1 Corinthians 6:9–11, ESV)

The warning is pretty clear: a changed life is a part of genuine faith. And Paul wanted the religious Jews to know that genuine faith being demonstrated in good works not your history, tradition or family background is what really matters when you stand before God.

7. God is impartial (v 11)

The seventh and final warning connects Paul's argument back to where he started in verse 1, where he stated that there is no excuse. A person's Jewishness or religious morality will not excuse him from God's judgment. A person may feel spiritually superior because his sin list is not as long or as colorful, but sin is sin when it comes to God.

Verse 11 is short, clear, and sober: *"For God shows no partiality."* God will not be persuaded with excuses, explanations, justifications, compensation, or threats. He knows us better than we know ourselves. And His judgment of the unrighteous will be the kind of justice that we have never seen. He will bless those who have put their faith in Him and whose lives have been changed by the power of the gospel. And He will judge those who depend upon their own efforts and who have expressed their unbelief through sinful actions.

So if you are the kind of person who thinks that you are going to get away with your sinful actions, I can promise you – there is no partiality with God. And if you think that you will be able to justify yourself through an explanation of the past, your religious activities or your spiritual heritage – there is no partiality with God.

God has not given you what you deserve. We do not deserve any of the blessings that He gives to us, and He has stayed His hand in final judgment for a while. But do not make the mistake of thinking that judgment is not going to happen. Again – there is no partiality with God.

Last week the text helped us understand our culture and the brokenness that we see and experience in the world. But do you know what this text does? It serves as a warning to people who are religious. Romans 2 speaks to the kind of people who would likely be in church this morning.

The Final Challenge: Humility and Holiness

When you understand the message of Romans 2 in light of the previous text, there are two words that come to the forefront: humility and holiness. Both of these words flow out of a right understanding of the gospel. If you come to embrace the fact that you are broken so deeply and profoundly in your very being and turn to Jesus to receive His righteousness by faith, you will understand humility and holiness.

You will be humble because you will know that God rescued you from yourself. If you understand the gospel, you will realize more and more how hopeless you were apart from Christ. You will hear sin lists like last week, and you will be cognizant of your own sin in the forefront of your mind and heart. What's more, you will see every blessing that you have as a gift that you did not deserve. You will see God's kindness to you everywhere. Because everything that you have is a gift from Him. You see, the more you understand about your depravity and God's grace, the more amazed you should become with God's kindness to you.

You will also be holy. You will know that you are not justified by your works. God gave you the righteousness that He requires. But you will also know that you are now a different person. You are not perfect, but you are indwelt by the Holy Spirit. You see life differently; there is a new power to say "No" to sin and "Yes" to what is right. It means that you have new desires that could only come from God. And it means that you long to be more righteous than you are today. Holiness is a longing in your soul, an attraction that only God could have created.

God's kindness has not led to judgment or justification of your sin. Romans 2 is a helpful chapter because it warns religious people that true faith will produce humility and holiness.

God's kindness leads to repentance.

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