

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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The Epistle to the Romans: Sins - The sophisticated Gentile, Greek or Jew (Romans 2:1-16)

Today we are looking at Romans 2:1-16. Our new chapter begins after Paul, in Romans 1, had traced the sinful history of the human race with an emphasis on the pagan world.

The Bible in Hebrews 12:23 describes God as, *"the Judge of all"* and in Romans 3:19 Paul writes that, *"...all the world may come under the judgment of God."* In Romans 2, Paul describes how God acts in judgment.

In our passage, Romans 2:1-16 Paul appears to focus on Jewish moralisers. He also includes the moralisers of the Greek and Roman world of his day. Paul addresses them as people who did not believe they were characterised by the behaviour he had described in Romans 1. The Jews thought themselves better because of their history and religion. The educated people of the Graeco-Roman world considered their birth, learning, culture and self-belief made them better than others. But both cultures were plagued by immorality, self-righteousness, injustice and pride. Paul explains how God exposes such hypocrisy and judges it for what it is.

Our passage, Romans 2:1-16 is best looked at verse by verse. So, let's start at Romans 2:1, the righteousness of God's judgment, *"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"* (Romans 2:1).

In Romans 2:1, Paul writes about those who believed themselves superior to others. These people used their self-belief and self-righteousness to cloak the very behaviour they judged in other people. The use of the title, *"man"* suggests Paul was addressing all men irrespective of national and religious distinctions.

Jesus gives us a clear example of this attitude of moral superiority in the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector: *"Also He spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others: 'Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, 'God, I thank You that I am not like other men - extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.' And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted'"* (Luke 18:9-14).

Paul describes those who in think this way as being, *"inexcusable"* (Romans 2:1) because they condemned in others that which they practiced themselves. This hypocrisy brought them under greater judgment. Jesus regularly exposed such behaviour amongst the Pharisees in the Gospels.

We are all capable of falling into a similar pattern of behaviour. God warns us about the dangers of pride. Pride is too often in evidence amongst religious people generally. As Christians we should beware of being marked by hypocrisy and especially beware of spiritual pride.

In contrast to such hypocrisy Paul writes in Romans 2:2, *"But we know that the judgment of God is according to truth against those who practice such things."*

Here Paul unfolds the character of God's judgment. When we judge others, we tend to be biased and inconsistent depending on our relationship with those we judge. We can be very forgiving of both our own behaviour and also that of people we like. At the same time, we can be guilty of condemning the same behaviour those we don't hold in the same regard.

Even in the matter of self-judgment we sometimes judge too lightly or, on the other hand, too harshly when we blame ourselves for things which are not our responsibility.

These different reactions demonstrate how faulty our judgments can be. But God's judgment is according to truth. It is also extensive. It takes into account all circumstances. It is not restricted to words and actions but also weighs the thoughts which lead to those words and actions.

This idea of "weighing" is a very important aspect of judging "according to truth" (Romans 2:2). You may remember Belshazzar's feast in Daniel 5:1-31. Daniel interpreted the message written on the wall of Belshazzar's palace, "And this is the inscription that was written: MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN. This is the interpretation of each word. MENE: God has numbered your kingdom and finished it; TEKEL: You have been weighed in the balances, and found wanting; PERES: Your kingdom has been divided, and given to the Medes and Persians" (Daniel 5:25-28).

God's central word to Belshazzar's was, "TEKEL: You have been weighed in the balances and found wanting." God judged Him according to truth. Proverbs tells us God hates false balances, "Diverse weights are an abomination to the LORD, and dishonest scales are not good" (Proverbs 20:23). This is not only a comment on dishonest commerce but moral corruption generally.

Paul writes later in the book of Romans, "Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out!" (Romans 11:33).

God's judgments are never dishonest, biased or inconsistent. We can only guess at people's thinking and motives. But God's knows and understands our thoughts, words and actions perfectly. He also understands their connections and relationships with all other thoughts, words and actions. He weighs all the evidence and judges perfectly.

In Romans 2:3 Paul writes about the certainty of God's judgment, "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 addresses the reasoning of people who judge in others the very things they practise themselves. God judges everyone in terms of their righteousness. Hypocrisy is often deliberate and based on feelings of superiority as we saw in the parable of the Pharisee (Luke 18:9-14). But sometimes we are unaware of our hypocrisy. We have simply never stopped to think about the inconsistencies of our actions.

For example, think of the times when we act in disrespectful and hurtful ways towards others. We will often rationalise such behaviour as self-assertiveness, straightforwardness or speaking our mind. But when we are on the receiving end of such behaviour, we are quick to point out its injustice. We need to pull ourselves up at times and reflect on the excuses we make for our poor behaviour whilst judging others who display the same behaviour.

Paul highlights our tendency to excuse ourselves whilst judging others. We like to feel better and appear better than others. But God does not measure us in terms of other people He judges us personally in terms His righteousness.

We all get caught out on occasions for our actions. But there are many times when we are not called to account. Take speeding, for example. When we are caught speeding, we can end up paying a fine or going on a speed awareness course for driving too fast. Often the excess speed seems only marginal and we feel we have been treated unjustly. But what about the times we drive well over the speed limit but are never caught? What about the lies, deceit, dishonesty, abuse and crimes which are never accounted for? What about the untold misery that humankind has endured throughout its history because of sinfulness its consequences?

Paul declares that although we may escape having to bear responsibility for our actions in our lifetime, there is a future day of judgment.

Paul's then points out, in Romans 2:4, the path of escape from God's judgment, "Or do you despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance?"

We may think we can escape responsibility for our actions, and we may go as far as despising the goodness of God. But it is the goodness of God which leads to repentance and faith in a Saviour, Jesus Christ. "The riches of His goodness" include God's preservation, His provision and His protection. God's forbearance and longsuffering demonstrate His patience towards us even when we refuse to respond to His kindness. Paul appeals to us to recognise our need of a Saviour and, in the chapters, which follow, he goes on to unfold the salvation that is in Jesus Christ.

It is striking that in unfolding the reality of the judgment of God, Paul makes known the path of escape - the riches of God's goodness. These riches and God's forbearance and longsuffering are perfectly seen in the Person of His Son Jesus Christ.

Perhaps the most powerful example of this is at Calvary. When Jesus was on the cross dying as the Saviour of the world, He fully displayed the riches of God's goodness. He expressed God's redeeming love in the sacrifice of His own life. John describes it John 3:16, *"For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."*

At Calvary the priests, soldiers and passers-by despised the riches of God's goodness, evidenced by their mockery and derision of the Lord Jesus Christ. But one man, the dying thief, was led by Christ's goodness into repentance and faith and passed from judgment to peace, *"Today you will be with Me in paradise"* (Luke 23:43).

These two reactions to Jesus Christ still persist. On the one hand He is either despised and rejected, and, on the other hand, and people are led into repentance and faith seeing in Him the riches of God's goodness. In Romans 2:5-6 Paul takes up the preciseness of God's judgement *"But in accordance with your hardness and your impenitent heart you are treasuring up for yourself wrath in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, who 'will render to each one according to his deeds.'"*

Paul warns of the dangers of being hardened in our attitude towards God and lacking in shame or regret about our sinful actions. There is an interesting contrast between the *"riches of God's goodness"* in Romans 2:4 and *"treasuring up for yourself wrath"* in Romans 2:5. Despising God and neglecting to recognise sinful behaviour effectively stores or "treasures up" judgment against the day in which God will judge the actions of each person. Instead of responding to the richness of God's goodness people accumulate a personal history which, the Bible teaches, they will one day have to give an account for to God.

We have a natural desire for justice and feel angry when crimes are not dealt with righteously. There is an inward sense of the need for wrongdoing to be addressed justly. The world, at present, is a very unjust place. There are many parts of the world which have suffered injustice over many, many years. Even affluent parts of the world are still plagued with the effects of deep-rooted injustice.

Christians look to the One who is called the King of Righteousness. We have hope in the Person Who judges righteously. It would be the greatest injustice of all if the actions which have harmed humanity since its beginning were not addressed. The Bible describes the day of God's wrath as the time when this judgment will take place.

In Romans 2:7-9 Paul look on to the outcomes of God's judgment, *"...eternal life to those who by patient continuance in doing good seek for glory, honour, and immortality; but to those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness - indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish, on every soul of man who does evil, of the Jew first and also of the Greek; but glory, honour, and peace to everyone who works what is good, to the Jew first and also to the Greek."*

It is important to note that before writing Romans 2:7-9 Paul had introduced, in Romans 1, the thoughts that God speaks to us in creation and God speaks to our consciences. And, as we have seen in Romans 2:1-6, God also speaks by the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering, to lead us to repentance.

Romans 2:7-9 need to be understood in the light of God's revelation in terms of creation, conscience and conviction. These revelations are designed to lead us to repentance and faith in Christ. In the Old Testament salvation was by faith in God which emerged through God's revelation of Himself. Of course, salvation in the Old Testament looked on to the future sacrifice of Christ. After God's perfect revelation in His Son Jesus Christ, we have faith in the finished work of Christ. This faith produces love in our hearts towards God and our fellow human beings. It is displayed through doing good and it also gives the certain hope of glory, honour, and immortality.

In contrast to these blessings, despising and rejecting the goodness of God leads to self-centredness, disobedience to the truth and a life of unrighteousness leading to God's judgment.

Paul makes it clear that trusting in ourselves and all the world offers on the one hand and in religion on the other does not answer the need of our hearts. We need a saviour, Jesus Christ. He is the one who makes the blessings of salvation real to our hearts.

In Romans 2:10-16 Paul writes about the impartiality of God's judgment. In Romans 2:11 we see that God does not respect persons, *"For there is no partiality with God."*

We cannot appeal to God on the basis of our race, education, intelligence, religion or ignorance. God treats us all the same. Paul writes in 1 Timothy 6:6-7, *"Now godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out."*

The Pharaohs were buried with great treasures and some kings even had servants buried with them. But the Bible makes it clear that whether vastly rich or miserably poor we can take nothing material out of the world. We bring nothing in, and we take nothing out.

The Greek philosopher Epicurus believed death was end of the body and of the soul. He said he did not exist before he was born and therefore would not exist after he died. He did believe in the Greek gods, but he did not accept that they judged human affairs.

It is interesting that Paul was confronted by Epicurean and Stoic philosophers when he was in Athens and spoke at Mars Hill. At the end of his address he said “[God] ... has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead.’ And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked, while others said, ‘We will hear you again on this matter.’ So Paul departed from among them. However, some men joined him and believed, among them Dionysius the Areopagite, a woman named Damaris, and others with them.”

Paul spoke about God appointing His Son Jesus to undertake the judgment of the world in righteousness. He was the Person who displayed the riches of God’s goodness to this world and, as a result, was judged and condemned to be crucified upon the cross. The One who was so judged by the world, the Bible declares to be the Person to whom all judgment is committed.

On Mars Hill there were three responses to this declaration:

1. There were those who simply mocked the message and had no interest in the grace of God;
2. There were those who did not reject the message but delayed any decision; and finally,
3. There were those who simply believed.

Today these three responses are still in evidence. People still mock and people still delay. But, thank God, people still believe.

So, we come to the final part of our passage, Romans 2:12-16, *“For as many as have sinned without law will also perish without law, and as many as have sinned in the law will be judged by the law (for not the hearers of the law are just in the sight of God, but the doers of the law will be justified; for when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do the things in the law, these, although not having the law, are a law to themselves, who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves their thoughts accusing or else excusing them)in the day when God will judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ, according to my gospel.”*

In Romans 2:12-16 Paul addresses the reality of people’s hearts and minds. He looks at people who lived under the law and those who did not. He argues that it is not sufficient to simply hear the law but to respond to its claims.

Paul demonstrates later in the book of Romans that our experience teaches us about our need of salvation and faith reaches out to God. In discovering our need of a Saviour, we are led, by faith, to come in simple faith to God clearly understanding our utter dependence on Him for salvation. This faith enables us to walk, in the words of David in Psalm 23:3, *“in the paths of righteousness”*. It also, as Paul points out in Romans 2:7 and in Philippians 1:11, produces in us the fruits of righteousness, *“being filled with the fruits of righteousness which are by Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.”*

This is the demonstration of the new life we have in Christ Jesus and of the person of the Holy Spirit dwelling in our hearts. The Holy Spirit equally produces in us the Fruit of the Spirit, *“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control”* (Galatians 5:22-23).

God’s grace cuts through all the distinctions man makes. It sees us as we are in all our need and has the power to transform us into the children of God. The riches of His goodness not only lead us to God and deliver us from judgment but makes us like His Son, Jesus Christ.

Thank you for listening to the *Truth for Today* talk, The sophisticated Gentile, Greek or Jew (Romans 2:1-16). This was part of a series on The Epistle to the Romans: Doctrinal 1: Sins, talk number T1082.

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