



God's Judgement (Romans 2: 1-16)

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From his melancholy review of human sin, Paul moves on to consider the position of the sinner. He recognises that there is little point in launching a moral crusade against social evils if their main cause is left undisturbed. The trail of sin and destruction which we observe in the world leads right back to its source in the human heart. This is why we are all without excuse. Whether we have indulged in a particular sin ourselves, or whether we have merely observed it in others, we are all fundamentally guilty, because in our hearts we have all turned away from God. This is the radical meaning of the opening verses of the second chapter of Romans, and unless we understand it we shall never grasp the true meaning of the Gospel for our lives.

It is a characteristic of religious people that they take stands on moral issues. This is part of our witness to God's law, and in itself it is right and proper. The trouble begins when we start applying our principles to specific situations and people. The religious person also tends to think that he is not involved in the sin he observes in others; it has nothing to do with him. So he can sit back and indulge in condemnation, secure in the knowledge that his own lifestyle is quite different. Some people who have been brought up in believing homes, may even start to worry about the genuineness of their own conversion, since unfortunately they have never known what it is like to be a sinner! If you feel like that, rest assured. The Bible tells us that we are all sinners, whether we have had a Christian upbringing or not! The problem of the religious person is one of the most frequent in the pages of the New Testament and we need to remember that it was among that type that both Jesus and Paul found the going most difficult.

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The religious people of their day were the Pharisees, a peculiarly devout Jewish group which tried its best to practise and to protect the law of Moses. Modern scholars sometimes tell us that the New Testament presents an unfair picture of these people, because it consistently criticises them instead of praising them for their sincere attempts to live a life pleasing to God. This reaction is understandable, but it strikes at the very heart of the difference between a sincere devotion to the law and an acceptance of the Gospel. For, try as we may, we can never adhere to the standards set for us in the law of God. The Jews managed to get round the requirements by interpreting them in ways which made it easier to comply with their demands – and incidentally,

made it easier too to condemn those who for one reason or another did not conform.

Today our biggest problem is to realise that although the Pharisees of old are dead and gone, the Christians of today have all too often taken their place. Inside each one of us there lurks something of the Pharisee, and if we pass by the needs of the world, silently thankful that we are different from other men, then the dormant Pharisee inside us has already sprung to life. Pharisaism is a disease which by its nature can only afflict religiously committed people. It does not make sense in any other context!

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Of course, we need to remember that there is always a justification for Pharisaism, and it goes something like this. Law and order are necessary. If we have no principles, we cannot live the life God wants to us enjoy. There is always a danger that somebody will attempt to spoil that life by the lingering presence of selfishness and sin. Therefore, sanctions are necessary to prevent laxity of this kind, and where there are sanctions there must logically be someone there to pass judgement on those accused of infringing the law. Rules and regulations may not be perfect, but they are necessary for practical living, and offer as good a guide as any to the kind of life we should be living for God.

Now the trouble with this argument, like the trouble with Pharisaism in general, is not that it is wrong. On the contrary! In itself, it is perfectly right, and Paul recognised, just as his opponents did, that the law of Moses was holy and just. The problem does not lie in the law but in the hearts of those who accept the law as the standard by which we should live. It is the hidden assumption among these people that they can keep the law in all its details, and that this ability gives them not just the right but the duty to condemn others whose standards are different, which lies at the heart of the problem. For inevitably people who think like that have an altogether superficial view of righteousness which serves them as a yardstick for measuring others – and for finding fault with them when it is convenient to do so.

The psychology of legalism is set out with great clarity in the Gospels. Jesus was constantly being attacked by people who knew it was wrong to eat with publicans and sinners, who would die rather than lift a finger on the Sabbath, the divinely ordained

day of rest. These people were very sincere, and they were well aware of how dangerous compromise could be. If you start making exceptions, even exceptions which seem to be good and right in themselves, where will it all end? If someone has waited all his life to be healed from blindness, would waiting one more day make that much difference? Surely good deeds can be combined with keeping the law, so that the principles are not sacrificed?

Jesus cut through this argument, not by denying the positive points it was trying to make, but by pointing out that inside every one of us there is a built-in desirability to maintain the standards set out for us by God. The crime of the Pharisees, as of many Christians today, is that they did not see themselves in the position of those they condemned. It never occurred to them that when they observed wrongdoing in others, they were witnessing something which is equally true of ourselves, though perhaps it is not equally visible. To judge such a person for his actions is therefore to condemn ourselves, all the more so since we are claiming to be free of any guilt in the matter. It is this sense of radical solidarity in sin, this awareness that in the sight of God we have fallen short, that we need to cultivate as Christians. When we come to realise that essentially we are no different from those whose actions we deem to be wrong, then we can begin to put things right, both in us and in them. God is our judge, and if we try to take his place, we shall pay the penalty for our rashness and false self-righteousness, as surely as if we had sinned by some more overt kind of wrongdoing.

So Paul tells us, as he tells everyone who might be tempted to stand in the place of God, that before we go anywhere or do anything, we need to think again about God's goodness towards us, and realise that we are just as much in need of his grace as anybody else. If we have had a Christian upbringing, if we have made a profession of faith from an early age, if we have studied the Bible until it is coming out of our ears – great! God's kindness, and his understanding and his patience towards us are limitless. We have been greatly blessed, and we can be no more than deeply grateful to him for it. But if the blessings we have received are to have any meaning we need to appreciate what they were given to us for. God's purpose is to point us to the need for repentance, and repentance presupposes that we are aware of, and that we feel guilty for, the sins we have committed. If that does not happen, then the rest is useless, and in fact it stands on our record not as a justification but as an even greater condemnation, because although we have had the light, we have failed to use it as we should.

Paul's analysis of our spiritual condition may be different from what we have read about in Romans 1, but it is every bit as damning. We are guilty of what he calls hardness of heart, a spiritual condition which implies that we are not open to receive the gifts and the teaching of God. To have a hard heart is to resist the call of God, even without realising it. God's Word just bounces off us as if we were a brick wall – nothing gets through. A person in this condition is convinced that he already has everything he needs, and he may even have worked out a series of excuses to help him deflect any potential attack. If someone comes knocking on the door, learn to say 'not today, thank you' and shut the door as quickly as possible! This is the technique

which the vast majority of people in the so-called Christian nations have learned only too well, and it goes a long way to explain why preaching the Gospel can be such a thankless task there. Missionary work may be fine in the jungle, but here in the West we do not need it. We have all the Christianity we need, thank you very much, and to go around preaching it is just being fanatical – not a very Christian attitude at all!

Paul wastes no time condemning this sort of attitude. People who think like that are storing up for themselves a punishment which will become apparent when God finally reveals his anger and his judgement. We do not know when this will be, but we do know what it will be like. When God finally decides to put an end to human self-deception, the world will be split into two unequal parts – and the dividing line will almost certainly not be where we would put it!

When God comes to execute judgement, he will give each one what he deserves. This should not be understood in a crude way, as if there were different degrees of salvation or reprobation according to the seriousness of our deeds one way or the other. God does not judge us in human terms, and as far as he is concerned, there are only two conditions which really matter. Either we are in his kingdom or we are excluded from it – anything beyond that is mere detail. For the moment we do not need to bother with that, nor do we need to decide who is in which group. The first thing is to understand what the differences between them are, and arrange our lives accordingly.

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The first characteristic of the righteous is that they should keep on doing good works. Perseverance in the face of discouragement and defeat is one of the surest signs of true faithfulness, because it shows that we are not just seeking the approval of others. Jesus never won any awards for his life and teaching: nobody ever gave him an honorary doctorate, or made him chairman of the board! These things have their place, but they are not the real signs of true Christian service. Carrying on when the going is tough and the rewards are nil is a much more persuasive indication that we are doing what God wants, and we have his promise that the rewards which elude us here on earth will catch up with us in heaven!

The second characteristic of the righteous is that they are constantly looking for things which will bring honour and glory to God. Of themselves, these words can be ambiguous, because they might mean that we are looking for praise from men as well as, or instead of, praise from God. But the third aim of our striving makes it clear how we should interpret these words here. This is that the righteous seek the things which cannot be destroyed. Human achievements are eminently destructible, and will eventually go the way of all flesh. The honour and glory of this world is an illusion – here today and gone tomorrow! Even the most ancient and powerful of secular institutions will

collapse eventually; only the kingdom of God is truly safe. That is why indestructibility is a characteristic which applies only to him and to his work. The glory and honour associated with that must therefore also be his glory and honour, and as such, be preserved from the destruction reserved for the things of this world.

The reward for the righteous is eternal life... not bound by the limitations of this world, but constantly open to the power of the Holy Spirit. In this sense we already enjoy eternal life here and now, because we know Christ through the indwelling presence of his Holy Spirit.

The reward for the righteous is eternal life, which means nothing less than life with God. We often tend to think of this as being just life that goes on and on – that is to say, as life in greater quantity. But really it is better to think in terms of life as higher quality, life not bound by the limitations of this world, but constantly open to the power of the Holy Spirit. In this sense we already enjoy eternal life here and now, because we know Christ through the indwelling presence of his Holy Spirit.

To those on the wrong side of the judgement, there is reserved only God's anger and condemnation. These people are characterised as men who fight against God, who oppose the truth and who indulge in evil practices of all kinds. We have already seen enough of this not to have to enquire further about what that involves! The important addition here is that the judgement falls equally on the Jew and on the Greek. The Jew, as usual, may enjoy a certain priority, but when the result is condemnation, it is a priority of somewhat dubious value. The main thing here is that each one is treated equally, because at the judgement seat of God there is really no distinction at all.

Paul goes on to develop this theme further in the next few verses. He returns for another look at those who are on the right side of the judgement, and says that God will give glory and honour to all those who do good. We now realise that those whom he chooses to live with him in his kingdom will also share in the glory and the honour which they have consistently given to him on earth. The reward for the believer will be to share eternally in this treasure which he has stored up in heaven during his life on earth. In addition, Paul mentions the word 'peace', a concept introduced for the first time here. The peace of God is one of his greatest and most precious gifts. For the sinner whose conscience will not let him go, to know the forgiveness of Christ is the most wonderful blessing imaginable. For the saint who has struggled against the power of evil all his life, to rest in the peace of God is a release from suffering which no human power can give. Once again, we notice that the gift is given equally and impartially to Jew and to Greek. As Paul adds, God is no respecter of persons!

The next few verses are among the most difficult in the whole Epistle, and we need to look at them with great care. Here Paul enlarges on the link which he has already made between Jew and

Greek, and tries to set the matter in the overall context of the recognised differences between them. To the Jewish mind, a Jew was somebody who had inherited, and was therefore in some sense bound by, the law of Moses. A Gentile was, in Rudyard Kipling's words, one of the 'lesser breeds without the law'. Such people could not be expected to conform to Jewish standards, so the less said about that the better. But now Paul tackles the age-old subject from the brand-new angle of faith in Jesus Christ. To the eye of faith, the difference between Jew and Gentile appears to be less significant than it had been before. A sinner by any name will still be judged by God!

No Jew would have been surprised by Paul's opening statement in verse 12; on the contrary, it would have seemed to him to be so obvious that it hardly needed repeating here. The second part of the verse might have raised a few eyebrows, but it too would probably have been accepted without much argument. The Pharisees certainly did not treat their own people more lightly than the Gentiles, as the case of Jesus makes clear. What would probably have caused real problems is the fact that the two are coupled together as equals – the thought of Jews and Gentiles being punished *together*, as if their crimes were in any way comparable, would not have gone down at all well. It would have been rather like putting down a horse and executing a human being at the same time, as if one were much the same as the other. The fact that the Gentiles would perish whereas the Jews would be judged, as this verse suggests, might be cited as evidence that the two sides would not have been treated with strict equality, but it is doubtful whether this observation would have brought much comfort to the stricter sort of Jew.

Nevertheless, it is at least possible that Paul would have carried his Jewish reader through verse 12 without too much trouble. Verse 13 might even come as a bit of relief, considered on its own. Paul says here that it is not enough to be a hearer of the law; one must also do it! This is obviously meant to refer to the average Jew, who would have learned what the law was all about, and who might well know enough to be able to follow it week by week in the synagogue. Like many well-meaning people of this type, he would probably agree with its principles, expect it to be taught to his children, and be genuinely glad to nod in agreement as sinners were denounced and the penalties to be visited on them read out in all their gory detail. Each week he would probably return from Sabbath prayers fortified in his own assurance of being right with God, and rejoicing at his good fortune to be a member of the Chosen People, the heirs of the Covenant promises and the privileged observers of God's judgement on the rest of humanity.

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Of course, keeping the law would be a slightly different matter. Some things would probably be taken for granted, like refraining from murder, for example. The dietary laws might be observed with varying degrees of strictness, whilst other, more

obscure things would be quietly passed over in silence. For a Jew living outside Palestine, where social pressures would undoubtedly have played a role, it must have been relatively easy to excuse non-observance of the more inconvenient provisions of the law as and when expediency dictated. Not only would it be less likely that the guardians of the nation's conscience would find out, it would also be easier to excuse oneself for the occasional lapse. After all, when in Rome do as the Romans do – or find life made almost intolerably difficult!

Paul did not have much time for people who had an easy conscience in religious matters

Paul did not have much time for people who had an easy conscience in religious matters and for Jews of that kind least of all. But here again his views would not have differed markedly from those of the Pharisees, who were equally outraged at the thought of a Jew, of all people, failing to live up to expectations. But any Pharisaic nodding in agreement at verse 13 would surely have turned to outrage as Paul draws his startlingly new conclusions. For it turns out that the Gentiles can keep the law by nature, even though they have not got the written text! This claim of Paul's has baffled generations of theologians, especially those with a highly developed sense of man's inability to live up to the law's demands without assistance from God. If the Jews cannot do it, how should we expect it from Gentiles?

The conclusion is then drawn that these must have been Gentile *Christians*, whom the Holy Spirit has enabled to keep the law without the kind of guidance given to Jews. But this explanation is too ingenious to be correct. For a start, there is no reason to assume that Paul pictures these Jews as keeping the *entire* law; it is just as probable that he has in mind a partial fulfilment on occasion – rather the sort of thing that might reasonably be expected from most Jews. Then too, the Bible never describes the Christian life in terms of keeping the law in the Old Testament sense, so the form of expression is inappropriate to convey the meaning here. Finally, Paul makes it plain that the Gentiles keep the law *by nature*, i.e. in their condition as Gentiles, not by any grace or special illumination they may have received from God. The possibility that they might have been Christians is therefore rather remote!

It seems best to interpret this statement less as a comment on the Gentiles than as a comment on the law. The law of Moses may have been given by God, but there was much in it which could be paralleled in other religions and cultures. Stealing, murder and adultery were usually condoned in pagan legal codes, and we may easily suppose that there were many Greeks and Romans whose personal code of conduct was far superior to that of the average Jew. Even today, the concept of a 'good pagan' is far from dead, and many people may legitimately wonder whether such a person is not to be preferred to a sanctimonious Christian! If, like the Jews, we build our religion on morality we shall find a ready echo in other races and beliefs, whose ideas may be just as elevated and advanced as our own. Morality will never serve as an adequate distinguishing mark between the Christian and the non-believer, and we are deceiving ourselves

if we think otherwise.

Paul's message is that everyone has standards of right and wrong, whose intrinsic worth is not to be judged by his or her inability to live up to them. Gentiles are capable of high moral principles even without the law, since the conscience does duty where the written text is missing. He does not excuse them or hold them up as superior in some way to the Jews; his main point is simply to state that the Jews have no monopoly on standards and cannot afford to look down on the Gentile quite as readily as they often do. The final message, for both Jew and Gentile, is that when the secrets of men are revealed on the day of judgement, both will be condemned. There is really no escape for either side, because nobody has ever fully lived up to the standards given him by God.

Even today, the concept of a 'good pagan' is far from dead, and many people may legitimately wonder whether such a person is not to be preferred to a sanctimonious Christian!

The Gospel of Christ merely assures us that both Jews and Gentiles will be treated equally. Those who have received Christ as Saviour will be pardoned and given eternal life, whilst those who have not will be judged according to whatever moral code they might possess – and be condemned! At the end of the day it will be of no use to be either a Jew or a Gentile if Christ is not present at the centre of our lives. That is Paul's aim, and it is with that in mind that he proceeds to develop his theme farther.



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