

GOD'S RIGHTEOUS JUDGMENT

Romans 2:1-16

Key Verse: 2:5

“But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God’s wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed.”

In 1:18-32 Paul indicted the fallen Gentile world that lived without God. They suppressed the truth by their godlessness and wickedness and became idol worshipers, immoral and depraved. Upon them God’s wrath was being revealed. When we hear this indictment, we may say, “Yes, that is right! Punish those evildoers - they deserve it!” However, Paul makes a sudden shift in chapter 2 from “they” to “you.” The personal pronouns, “you,” “your,” “yourself,” appear 15 times in verses 1-5. Here, “you,” refers to those who pass judgment on others based on their own moral standard. Now Paul turns his attention to moralists, whether Jew or Gentile. Probably, Paul’s main target was the Jews, whose morally superior lifestyle set them apart from pagan Gentiles. They freely condemned the Gentiles as animals. Yet, Paul also addresses moralists among the Gentiles, such as the Stoics, including Cicero and Seneca. They recognized the natural order in the universe and tried to distinguish right and wrong. They had a high ethical standard, followed a moral lifestyle and were respected by their people. They judged others based on their own standards but did not think of themselves as sinners. Paul indicts moralists, both Jew and Gentile, based on God’s truth and declares that they are under God’s judgment, and without excuse.

In some sense, it may be more difficult for moralists to accept the gospel because it is so hard to recognize that they are sinners. So they easily judge and condemn others. This was the problem of the Pharisees and the elder brother of the prodigal son (Lk 15:28-30; 18:9-12). This can be our problem too. When we hear someone honestly confess all their sins, we say, “Wow! What a terrible sinner. Thank you, God that I am not like that wretched person.” Of course, we would never say this openly, but we tend to have a judgmental attitude in our hearts. Paul exposes this hypocrisy by telling us about God’s righteous judgment. In this passage, the words “judge” or “judgment” appear nine times. Paul describes God’s judgment; it is inescapable (1-5), and righteous (6-16). Furthermore, he tells us that God’s

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real intention is not judgment, but salvation that comes through repentance. Let's learn who God is and find ourselves before him.

First, God's judgment is inescapable (1-5). While fallen Gentiles suppress the truth by their wickedness, moralists suppress the truth by passing judgment on others. Verse 1 says, **"You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge another, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgement do the same things."** Here the word "you" means mankind in general - anyone who passes judgment on others. Such people think they are excused from God's judgment. But Paul confronts them: **"You have no excuse."** It is because they do the same things, so their judgment condemns they themselves.

Here "judgment" is not public judgment, such as in a court of law. Public judgment is necessary to promote justice and order in society. Those who have authority for public judgment are God's servants to reward the righteous and punish wrongdoers (13:3-4). Rather, in 2:1,3, the words **"pass judgment"** indicate those who sit in the judgment seat like God and condemn others. They do this without compassion, mercy or love. Why do people do this? They want to be right and others to be wrong. Then they feel superior to others. It is even entertaining and makes them feel good. They easily assume that they are serving God and pretend to be righteous before people's eyes. But in fact, they secretly do wicked things. Jesus said that kind of person has a plank in his own eye but tries to remove the speck from others' eyes; Jesus called them hypocrites (Mt 7:3-5). It is so easy to detect others' faults, point them out and talk about them and find the reason for all of our troubles in that person's fault. But it is hard to find our own fault, even when it is much larger than the small faults of others. Ironically, when we pass judgment on others, we judge ourselves. Jesus said, **"Do not judge, or you too will be judged"** (Mt 7:1). We have no right to judge others. Judgment belongs to God alone. Judging others violates God's sovereignty (Ro 12:19).

Verses 2-3 say, **"Now we know that God's judgment against those who do such things is based on truth. So when you, a mere human being, pass judgment on them and yet do the same things, do you think you will escape God's judgment?"** In these verses **"such things"** and **"the same things"** refer to the sinful acts mentioned in chapter 1. God will judge those who do such things based on truth. Truth is absolute, infinite, universal and

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one of the essential attributes of God (Isa 65:16). God is impartial. No one can violate his standard, whether Jew or Gentile, without being judged by God. However, self-righteous people think they are exceptions to God's judgment. This is a false assumption. In verses 2-3 there is a contrast between human judgment and God's judgment. Human judgment is based on outward behavior and physical evidence. If a human court cannot find clear evidence, the suspect is released even though he may be guilty. This happens regularly. Clever people think they can beat the system. So, people may think they can escape God's judgment. But God's judgment is different. It is based on the complete knowledge of all the evidence. And God sees the heart of each person with his eyes of blazing fire (Rev 1:14). No one can hide from his sight. Hebrews 4:13 says, **"Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account."** There is no loophole in God's judgment and it is inescapable.

Paul deals with another false assumption about God's judgment in verse 4: **"Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, forbearance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness is intended to lead you to repentance?"** It is easy for children to think that their parents should sacrifice for them, saying, "That's your job." In the same way, we may assume that God should be patient and kind and forgiving, saying, "That's God's job." We think that because God is love, we are unconditionally accepted and free to live as we please and commit sins at random. When God does not punish us immediately, we confirm this assumption. Of course, God with his mighty power and wisdom could punish every sin immediately and thoroughly. He could terrify sinners and force us to change. But he does not do that. He wants us to repent willingly. This is why he is so kind and patient (Ex 34:6-7a).

When we read Israel's history, we are amazed by the Lord's patience. For example, Manasseh was the most terrible king ever in Judah. He worshiped idols more than anyone else and led Judah astray. He shed so much innocent blood and even sacrificed his children in the fire to idols. He did much evil in the eyes of the Lord, arousing his anger. This went on for 52 years. Bearing such a person is unthinkable for us. But the Lord bore with him. Then, when Manasseh was in distress as a prisoner of the Assyrians, he humbled himself and prayed to God sincerely. Surprisingly, the Lord was

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moved by his plea and delivered him (2Ch 33:1-13). Sometimes when we see people who commit terrible sins, we wonder why God does not bring justice immediately. But we need to remember how God has been patient with us. Apostle Peter said, **“But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance”** (2Pe 3:8-9). We should always thank God for his patience, repent of our sins, and do our best to win people to Jesus before he comes.

Though God is so patient and kind, still some people refuse to repent. This shows contempt for God. Then, what happens to them? Let's read verse 5: **“But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed.”** Here stubbornness is a refusal to be corrected based on reason, facts or truth and insistence on one's own way as an expression of pride. Though God does not judge immediately, he does not overlook the stubbornness of unrepentant people. Actually, they store up wrath against themselves like those who continually use a credit card and accumulate debt day by day. When will this wrath be revealed? On the day of God's final judgment. This will happen when Jesus comes again. In the meantime, each of us will face the day of our own death. Hebrews 9:27 says, **“Just as people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment....”** Everyone dies, but we don't know when we will die. After death, we cannot change our destiny. We will stand before God, give an account for what we have done, and receive his judgment (2Co 5:10). God's judgment is inescapable.

Second, God's judgment is righteous (6-16). Paul has mentioned that God's righteous judgment is revealed (5). In verses 6-10 he tells us why God's judgment is righteous. Here we can find some of God's criteria in judging sinners.

First of all, God judges according to what each person has done (6). Verse 6 says, **“God will repay each person according to what they have done.”** God will judge people one by one, not family by family, or tribe by tribe. Each person is responsible for their own words and deeds. No one can

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blame their parents, the government or the system. A husband cannot rely on his wife's righteousness, or vice versa. Children cannot rely on their parents' righteousness, or vice versa. The verb "do," repeated four times in verses 6-10, refers to the actions that come out of a person, be they good or evil. Ultimately these actions are the fruit of our inner life. Words can be deceptive, but fruit is the unmistakable evidence. The fruit of our lives is the basis for God's judgment. Social position, education, wealth, or family line are irrelevant. God's judgment is unbiased and fair to everyone.

Secondly, God judges according to life purpose and motive (7-11). Let's read verses 7-8: **"To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life. But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger."** Here Paul's emphasis is on what a person is seeking, which reveals their life purpose and motive. Knowing one's motive is necessary to make a proper judgment. If someone gives a lot of money to charity, but their motive is selfish, they fail God's judgment. Basically, there are two kinds of people: those who seek glory, honor and immortality, and those who are self-seeking. Self-seeking is serious sin. Why? It is exalting one's self to the place of God, a form of idolatry (Gen 3:5). Self-seeking people inevitably reject the truth and follow evil. No matter how noble their actions may appear, whatever they do is sin, because it is from an evil inner motive. For all who follow evil, wrath and anger are inevitable. On the other hand, those who seek God's glory and true honor and immortality by persistence in doing good will receive eternal life.

When we read verse 7 we may think that God will give eternal life on the basis of good deeds. That's not true. In verses 7-11, the tenses of the verbs "seek," "reject," "follow," and "does evil," "does good," indicate **"are doing and will continue to do so."** It means doing good constantly, without fail, with the right motive. This is impossible for fallen people. In reality, our good deeds weigh ounces while our evil deeds weigh tons. Isaiah said, **"...all our righteous acts are like filthy rags..."** (Isa 64:6). This means that doing good is not a means of salvation. Doing good is the fruit of believing the gospel (Titus 2:14). Only those born again by the Holy Spirit through believing in Jesus can do what is good continually and with a right motive.

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Verses 9-10 are a general description of the consequences for those who do good or evil. Sometimes we envy worldly people thinking that their lives are carefree and fun all the time. They seem to be healthy, rich, popular and happy. But that is an illusion. On the inside they suffer from guilty feelings. They have no lasting peace, joy or satisfaction in their hearts (9). On the other hand, those who do good will be blessed with glory, honor and peace (10). They have a real and unshakable hope of God's reward. In these verses, **“first for the Jew, then for the Gentile”** is repeated. In the same way that God dealt with the Jews, he deals with the Gentiles. God does not show favoritism to any group of people (11).

Thirdly, God judges according to the law (12-15). The law is the standard of God's judgment. In verses 12-15, Paul uses the word **“law”** eleven times. Generally, he means the law of Moses, but he also shows that the Gentiles have a law for themselves. Verse 12 says, **“All who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who sin under the law will be judged by the law.”** His point is that God judges sin whether people have the written law or not. Those who know and violate the written law will be judged by it. Whether people recognize it or not, the consequence of sin is certain. Hearing the law is not enough to be righteous in God's sight; one must obey the law (13). But no one can do so. James 2:10 says, **“For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.”** There are 613 commandments in the Old Testament. If a person kept 612 commandments, yet broke just one before they died, they become a lawbreaker. That person will be under curse and judged by God. So, Paul says, **“Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law”** (Gal 3:10).

Someone may say, “Gentiles do not have the law, so how can God judge them?” Paul tells us that even though they do not have the written law, they do by nature things required by the law (14). This means that they know in their hearts the requirements of the law. What evidence is there of this? Each person has a conscience. When they commit sin, their conscience testifies against them and they feel guilt (15). They constantly struggle inside to justify themselves. This is well illustrated by the Russian novelist Dostoevsky, in “Crime and Punishment.” When we commit sins, our hearts become like a court of law. This is why we have no excuse. God is right when

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he judges according to the law, whether it is written on tablets, or on the human heart.

Lastly, God judges people's secrets through Jesus Christ (16). Verse 16 says, **“This will take place on the day when God judges people's secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares.”** The Bible declares that God will judge the whole world. Jesus said, **“Moreover, the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son”** (Jn 5:22). On the day of judgment, Jesus will be the Judge. People sin secretly, thinking, “No one sees me.” However, on that day, everything will be revealed, and Jesus will judge people's secret things. On that day we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ (2Co 5:10a). Jesus warned repeatedly that those judged guilty will be thrown into hell, where **“the worms that eat them do not die, and the fire is not quenched”** (Mk 9:48). They will be in eternal agony in the fiery lake of burning sulfur (Lk 16:24-28; Rev 21:8). No one can avoid this judgment. But there is good news. Jesus said in John 5:24, **“Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged, but has crossed over from death to life.”** When we believe in Jesus, we will be exempt from the dreadful judgment. Jesus rescues us from the coming wrath (1Th 1:10). This is the gospel, the power of God that brings salvation for everyone who believes.

God's righteous judgment is certain and unavoidable. But this is not what he desires to do. Ezekiel 18:23 says, **“Do I take any pleasure in the death of the wicked? declares the Sovereign Lord. Rather, am I not pleased when they turn from their ways and live?”** God our Savior wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth (1Ti 2:3b-4). Let's come to Jesus who alone can deliver us from the wrath to come.