

“Just in Case You Think You’re ‘Better Than...’”

Romans 2:1-4

It’s been more than a month since we finished the first chapter of Paul’s letter to the Christians at Rome. Let me quickly give a summary of where we’ve come. In Romans 1:16-17 Paul gives us the theme of this letter. This is the gospel, the “good news of God.” Verse 16 says, “I am not ashamed of the Gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.” What this tells us is that God has a great desire, a passion to save people from sin and death and judgment and Hell. And so He moves, He intervenes in power in human history to provide His good news, through which, if anyone will put their trust in it, they will be saved. In verse 17 he explains how this salvation happens: “For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written, ‘The righteous will live by faith.’” There is a righteousness that God Himself has accomplished for us (Christ in His life, death, and resurrection) that we can have as a gift if we will trust in Christ. The righteousness that God demands (from us) He freely gives to us, not on the basis of our works, but on the basis of our faith. This is why Christianity is good news. It is God providing for us in Christ what we can never provide for ourselves, namely, a righteousness good enough to receive God’s favor and blessing. God gives it to us freely if we will acknowledge that in our sin, there’s no way we can produce a righteousness that is pleasing to Him. We need to stop wasting our time relying on ourselves and what we think we can do to please God, and start trusting Him.

The devastating impact of sin, and the utter futility of relying on ourselves to make ourselves right with God is what Paul then addresses in the rest of Romans chapter one. But Paul doesn’t stop there. He continues this discussion throughout all of chapter two, and doesn’t stop until the 20th verse of chapter three. This draws the response: isn’t this overkill? What’s the purpose of rubbing our noses in this bleak and hopeless picture of humanity? Paul’s purpose is to prove to us that in our sin, we’re all hopelessly lost, we’re all in need of this salvation, this righteousness from God. Do we really doubt that we’re the people described in this section of God’s Word? Well, yes, we do. We suppress the truth because it is so uncomfortable. We may be willing to make some general concessions that we are not perfect, because obviously nobody is perfect. But not many of us are willing to admit that deep down inside we are really flawed and proud and selfish and rebellious, acknowledge and admit the desperate need we have for God to do something extraordinary to save us from our sin. But the Bible is wonderfully and painfully realistic and will not let us off the hook. It’s only when we really and truly acknowledge who we are without Christ that we can appreciate the utterly amazing thing God has done in saving us.

To set the context of today’s passage, I want to refer back to the previous section. In Romans 1:18-32, and especially in verses 29-32, Paul gives a laundry list of what happens in people’s lives when they reject God. They become “filled with wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil, they disobey their parents; they are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless.” There’s no question there were some people in the church at Rome who wholeheartedly agreed with Paul’s assessment of the flagrantly immoral people he’d just described. These people were Jews who were feeling pretty good about themselves in response to what they’d just heard. They were thinking, “That’s not us! We don’t hate God, we’re not full of murder and envy and wickedness and depravity. We’re in good shape when it comes to our relationship with God.” With that, let’s look at Romans 2:1-5.

It’s easy to read this part of Romans and make the quick (but incorrect) assumption that Paul is talking about a lot of “Jewish stuff” that really doesn’t have anything to do with us today. But that couldn’t be further from the truth. There are several parallels that can apply to us today: The Jews believed that simply because they were Jews, they were “in good” with God no matter how they acted. It’s not uncommon for Christians today to believe that simply calling yourself a Christian, regardless of how you act, gets you “in good” with God. The Jews believed that complying with certain external acts and regulations (circumcision, Sabbath observance, etc.) automatically made them righteous before God, regardless of what was going on in here. Today, many Christians think of Christianity as a “check list:” getting baptized, attending church, becoming a church member, and

wearing certain types of clothes makes them right with God. We have a word for claiming for ourselves a righteousness that doesn't match what's really going on inside of us: hypocrisy. What does hypocrisy look like? Verse one describes it as criticizing others for their failures, when at the same time we fail to practice what we preach. To play the hypocrite is to visibly act the part of the pious Christian, yet know inside that it's all just a performance. Hypocrisy is doing good deeds for selfish motives, so people will notice you and praise you. Hypocrisy is devastating to the believer, and it gives Christianity a black eye; hypocrites turn people off, turn them away from Jesus and from the salvation He offers. If you've ever blamed Christianity for hypocrisy, I hope you'll see in these verses what God's response is to hypocrisy, and you'll make up your mind about God and Christ and His way of salvation not on the basis of what some religious people are like, but on the basis of what God is like.

Two things are what I want us to see about God in His response to hypocrisy. First, God is just, and His just judgment is coming not only on the so-called pagans who reject God and engage in flagrantly immoral acts, it is also coming on self-righteous people who criticize and despise these people, yet do many things that show they're no better. The hypocrite wrongly believes he's exempt from God's judgment because he has not sunk to the immoral extremes Paul has just mentioned. But that sin list in Romans 1:29-31 not only includes God-hating, murder, and malice, it also includes greed, gossip, and being unloving and unmerciful. Can anyone claim they never have gossiped, never been greedy, have always been merciful and loving as they ought to be? Our passage tells us that the hypocrite brings greater judgment on himself because God not only judges him for the sinful things he does, but also for his self-righteous judgment of others.

The second thing this passage tells us about God's response to hypocrisy is that He is kind. In verse four Paul writes of the "riches of His kindness." That means that God is not just a little bit kind, but that He has huge resources, limitless resources of kindness to pour out on us. In fact, He's pouring those riches out on us all right now. His kindness shows itself in His "tolerance" and His "patience." What this tells us is that God's justice doesn't demand that He punish us for our sins immediately. His kindness leads Him to tolerate and be patient with us. That word "patience" in the original Greek is just like our word "longsuffering." It means that God may endure months and years and even decades of our stubbornness and resistance to Him. So what's the purpose of this kindness, this tolerance, this patience? It's not to excuse us for our sin, but to convict us of it and then lead us to repentance. Repentance is an "about face." It's when you have a profound and dramatic change of mind and heart so that you hate sin and hate hypocrisy; you turn your back on it and you turn to Jesus in humility and faith and claim all the promises of forgiveness and help and life that He offers you. Repentance is certainly a one-time event; it's a basic part of coming to salvation in Jesus Christ. But it's also part of the ongoing process of growing in Jesus Christ, of moving closer to Him. Why? If we're honest, really honest, we have to admit that we face hypocrisy, we struggle with it regularly, simply because we don't live consistent lives spiritually. We're able to separate how we act, what people see, from what's going on in here (what people can't see). It's too easy to criticize bad behavior and sin in others, it's too easy to think of ourselves as "better than, I'm so thankful I'm not like that awful person." We need to confront those attitudes, confront them daily, confess them to God, to turn from hypocrisy to humility. To realize it's not our goodness, it's God's kindness, His grace that saves.

We're trying to encourage that ongoing process at the beginning of our worship as we acknowledge our sins before God. We repent of them, we confess them to Him and claim the forgiveness that is ours in His Son, the result being, as we grow in Christ, that we would do "nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than ourselves." That, we know, is the attitude, the mindset of our Savior and Lord, the attitude and mindset He desires for each, for all who call Him Savior and Lord.