



In the Gospels we read about a strained relationship between Jesus and the Pharisees. At first sight it appears that Jesus is overly critical of these guys. He calls them names like “white washed tombs” or “a brood of vipers.” He says they are “yeast,” “hypocrites,” and the list goes on. The relationship is so negative that the Pharisees begin to look for a way to kill Jesus! At first glance it appears that Jesus’ indictment of them is unmerited. What caused this relational tension? The strained relationship emerged because of the religious façade of the Pharisees.

You see, on the outside the Pharisees looked like they had it all together. They looked like the model to follow if you wanted to be closer to God. But Jesus knew that on the inside, their hearts were far from God. The Pharisees cared more about what others thought of them than their relationship with God, and that is why Jesus was so critical. They were self-righteous religious men.

But before we point our fingers at them we need to address some of our own self-righteousness. Self-righteousness is such a broad category, and although we may not be comparable to the Pharisees, we have our own areas of weakness. Self-righteousness comes out in the small things in our life—in our thoughts or statements like, “I can’t believe that person is still watering their lawn; don’t they know we’re in a drought?” Or “My grandchildren would never act like that.” Or “Has that person ever thought about a little diet and exercise?” Now I’m sure none of you have ever thought any of these things, but I have, and when we think thoughts like these, or make similar comments, we’re being like self-righteous people.

There is a solution to our problem and it’s the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In the first three chapters of Romans, Paul shares the life-transforming power of the Gospel. Last week we saw, at the end of Romans 1, that if a person rejects the Gospel, God will hand them over to their sinful desires and they will spiral further downward into their brokenness and sin. Now in chapter 2, Paul shifts our attention to people who look like pretty good people. They’re moral, rule-following people who were a part of the church in Rome. The problem was that they thought they were better than everyone else. We know this about them because they passed judgment on others. They were basically nominal Christians who attended weekly but never embraced the life-changing power of the Gospel.

Turn with me to Romans chapter 2 where Paul shifts his attention to this new group of people. These verses give us an

opportunity to examine our own lives. We get the hard task of looking deep into our own heart and examining our inner thoughts. Only when we expose our own heart can we ask if we are making ourselves out to be better than we really are. And when our heart is exposed, and if the answer is “yes,” what can we do to bring about change in our lives?

### **God’s Judgment is Inescapable**

Paul begins this section of Scripture by explaining what happens when we pass judgment on others.

**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 judgment do the same things (Rom. 2:1).**

The word “therefore” connects us to the previous chapter; when the Bible was originally written, there were no chapter breaks like we have today. So who is the “you” Paul is addressing here? The letter was written to the church in Rome, not to an individual person. In the first four verses Paul is going to address “you,” or a variation of it, 14 times. This person is most likely an imaginary character who the apostle engages in this conversation.

Let me say this, the meaning of “pass judgment” is not merely a recognition of simply saying “that’s wrong.” God expects His people to identify evil and stand up for what’s right, but that’s not what Paul is saying. The people Paul is addressing were passing judgment on others to make themselves feel better. Paul uncovers a common human shortcoming, namely our tendency to be critical of everybody except ourselves. Think about it, we have a keen ability to point out in others the faults we see in ourselves. We expose the shortcomings of others while concealing our own similar shortcomings. This tendency was made popular in 20th century psychology by Freud and is called “projection,” but we see that Paul described it centuries before.

It reminds me of an encounter that occurred between the king of Israel and the prophet Nathan in the Old Testament. Nathan came to King David and shared a short story about a rich man and a poor man. The rich man had a huge farm and tons of livestock, but the poor man had only one little sheep and this sheep was like a member of the family to him. The rich man had a guest in town, but he didn’t want to turn any of his cows into hamburger so he went to the poor man and forcefully took his only sheep for his guest’s dinner. David burned with anger and

instantly condemned the man. Then Nathan extended a pointed finger at David's chest and revealed to him that he, David, was the rich man in the story. You see, David committed adultery with Bathsheba and killed her husband to cover up his sin, but he was so very quick to judge the other man in the fictional story.

I find that I am more likely to find fault with my children for things I struggle with myself than for issues I don't tend to struggle with. Let me give you an example. One of my daughters is constantly saying, "I want." When she says this I get upset, but each time these words leave her mouth I get increasingly upset. As I've examined this I've realized the failure lies within me. My disgust with my daughter's words is a direct reflection of my own selfishness. She hears me say, "I want a new iPhone," "I want a new GoPro." I am the hypocrite. I am condemning my daughter for my failure! As I said earlier, we are far quicker to judge others than we are to judge ourselves, and by doing so we condemn ourselves!

We judge others based on human standards, but thankfully God judges us based upon the truth.

**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? 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? (verses 2–4).**

Paul's readers would have agreed that they could not escape God's righteous judgment. God's judgment is inescapable. We will all face God's judgment one day, but remember that God's judgment is based on truth. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, *"Do not judge, or you too will be judged."* The judgment here is in reference to judging other people. It's the critical spirit we've been talking about that focuses our attention on judging others while failing to address our own junk. This would be a double standard of behavior or more simply stated, this is hypocrisy.

The answer to the questions in verses 3 and 4 for these people who think they are better than others is in both cases an emphatic "yes!" Notice that in both situations it is said that we do the same things. The Biblical scholar John Stott put it like this: "We work ourselves up into a state of self-righteous indignation over the disgraceful behavior of other people, while the very same behavior seems not nearly so serious when it is ours, rather than theirs."

Thankfully, there is hope. God's kindness, as explained at the end of verse 4, is intended to give us space to repent. God's kindness is not an excuse to continue living a life of sin. When God shows His kindness and patience to people, He's revealing part of Himself to humanity. God's kindness is intended to lead us to repentance. Think about the kindness of God as expressed in our lives. If God is so kind to us, then we really have no right to judge

others for the same things we do. This is an area each of us can work on this week. There are two aspects I want to present for us to work on. The first is the easier of the two: to stop passing judgment on others via your words. This week, make a conscious effort to guard your speech in relation to passing judgment. This might mean biting your tongue more often, or being vigilant regarding your words. It requires a conscious effort of thinking before speaking and choosing your words carefully.

The second part is much more difficult because words are simply a by-product of our thoughts. The real work is addressing the root of the problem and examining your heart. It's asking yourself tough questions like, "Where are these thoughts coming from?" It's taking the time to do some internal processing and finding the deeper issue of what you're saying. You might discover that the deeper issues are pride, jealousy, anger, selfishness or coveting what someone else has. It's digging deep to find the hidden sin and confronting them in your life. If you're having a hard time identifying these, make a commitment to praying every morning and asking God to reveal them to you. To accomplish this will take time, but it will be so worth it.

### **God's Judgment is Righteous**

We all have our own areas to work on, but unfortunately these people continued to resist God's kindness.

**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. God "will repay each person according to what they have done" (verses 5–6).**

The word that Paul uses here for "storing up" is typically not used with wrath. In fact, the word is normally used for storing up a precious treasure. So because of their actions, they were storing up for themselves the wrath of God instead of a precious treasure. Most scholars think that verse 6 is a direct quote from Psalm 62, although Proverbs 24:12 says the same thing but in the form of the question. The prophets Jeremiah and Hosea also said the same thing. As you read the New Testament, you will find that Jesus repeated it, so did Paul, and it's in the book of Revelation. Let's not get hung up on where Paul is quoting it from but see what it means for our life.

What we're really talking about here is the principle of exact retribution. In verse 5 there is an allusion to a day of judgment that will come. When that day comes God will judge us based on the way we have judged. Jesus also talked about this in the Sermon on the Mount where He says, *"For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you"* (Matt. 7:2). For our entire lives each of us has used a standard of judgment to sift and sort things out. We all have hidden issues and secrets, but on the last day these hidden things will be made known in the presence of Christ.

Now don't begin thinking that Paul has lost his mind and is talking about salvation by works, which he is not, because this section of Scripture is not dealing with salvation. Paul is talking about judgment in this section. Keep this in mind as we continue reading.

**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. There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile; but glory, honor and peace for everyone who does good: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For God does not show favoritism (verses 7–11).**

These verses elaborate on verse 6, mainly on the principle that God will judge us based on the way we have judged others. This is enough to make us examine our own thoughts and actions.

In parallel sentences Paul gives us two carefully crafted alternatives that concern our goal, our desires and our end. God has always given us an option; God has never forced us to follow His ways. Let me summarize the options for us. The first option is to pursue good and seek the Lord. It involves things like glory, honor and peace. The second option is to reject God's truth and embrace evil. The outcome of this choice is wrath and anger. Upon comparing these statements, I can attest to finding peace in God when I have pursued the truth. On the other hand, I have not always lived for Christ and at one point rejected the truth and experienced trouble and anger. In the end, those who seek God will receive eternal life while those who are self-seeking will experience God's wrath.

Remember this: it's our choice. God does not force anyone to follow Him or embrace His truth. We are a people who like options, right? Think about the last time you ate out. On the menu there were multiple options for you to choose from. In your work place you might be provided options for your 401(k) or your retirement package. New parents must make a choice on what diapers they will use for their child. And there are endless options of where to vacation! You could go to Napa or Tahoe. Will you go to Kauai or Maui?

We are overwhelmed with options, especially in the United States, but there comes a time when we must choose to either reject or accept the Gospel. The Romans here were counting on their good works to save them in the end. They were counting on the things they had done, not on what was done for them. And their judgment would be based on their actions. At the end of our lives we will be judged based on the choices we made here on earth. The time to choose is not tomorrow, the time to choose is today because God's judgment shows no favorites.

## **God's Judgment is Impartial**

We've talked about how none of us will be able to escape God's judgment and that His judgement is righteous. Finally, Paul is going to talk about how God's judgment is impartial.

**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. For it is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God's sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous. (Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts sometimes accusing them and at other times even defending them.) (verses 12–15).**

At first glance this might sound confusing with all these ten different mentions of the Law. This is actually Paul's first reference to the law in the book of Romans. I've found the comments RC Sproul makes in his commentary on the book of Romans to be helpful here: "Paul is saying that those who have the law perish with the law, and those who do not have the law perish without the law." The conclusion we come to is that everyone is perishing whether they attempt to earn God's favor with or without the law. Paul takes time to specifically mention the Gentiles here in all these references to the law because the church in Rome was comprised of Jews and Gentiles.

Verse 12 puts Jews and Gentiles in the same category for sin and death. We too fall into this category of "all." A better reading of the text would say, "all who sinned" because the sin Paul is talking about is a completed action in the original language. There is a fundamental difference between Jews and Gentiles, though. Jews have been raised with the law and they know the law. Gentiles, on the other hand, have not been raised with the law and therefore they don't know it. That is why Paul is stating that some Gentiles sometimes do some of what the law requires them to do, but there are times they do not because they haven't been raised in it.

You might be wondering, "Has anyone ever been able to keep the entire law?" The answer would be no. You might even think it seems unfair for God to hold the Gentiles accountable to a standard they know very little about. Most theologians rely upon what is called "the law of nations" to explain this. In our daily life we show that the law of God is written on our hearts. I'm not talking about the law of God that Jeremiah the prophet talks about but the law that was given from the beginning of the world. Think more of Romans 1:20, "*For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.*"

If you hang around a school playground or visit a park you might see some of this in action. Little kids seem to know that it's not right to push another child down. Although some kids at the park are just mean! At some point in life though we all choose to make a choice to disobey. But this natural law stays in our hearts. Kids know they aren't supposed to steal a candy bar. A husband knows it is right to be kind to his wife and children and provide for them. People know it's right to pay their taxes. Not everyone we meet are thieves, murders and adulterers. So Paul is explaining that God will be even-handed in His judgement. None of us are without excuse. Paul time stamps all of this in verse 16.

**This will take place on the day when God judges people's secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares.**

The works Paul is talking about in verses 7-10 will be the basis for this judgement. Did you notice the three aspects on which God will judge? We will be judged on our secret thoughts. The judgement will come through Christ Jesus and it will all be a part of the Gospel. Paul knows that's waiting for all of us. There will come a day when the deep down secret thoughts that we thought no one would ever know will be judged. You know those thoughts that you never want anyone to know about? God will judge each of us for those. Thankfully the judgment will come through His Son, who loves us so much that He gave His life for us. Don't be caught unaware here, because if this text has taught you anything it should be: You're not as good as you think. The finger isn't pointing solely at you; the truth is that I'm not as good as I think I am either.

In these verses Paul has shown us that people who think they have it all together may not be as good as they think. At first glance it might seem like there is not much for us to apply to our lives. But I think the contrary; I think there is a lot we can learn from this passage. If you think back to my earlier story of my critical judging of my daughter there is a lot of deep work I need to begin. It is difficult to share a general application for everyone because the hidden things in each of our hearts are so different. But there is a common theme running throughout, which is that we are all sinners who desperately need salvation.

We are not as good as we think because we live in a sinful world and we are sinful people. We compare ourselves to others to make ourselves feel good. The reason Paul can write so directly

about this is because he was once one of these self-righteous people. Think about the Pharisees from the beginning of the sermon. Remember the guys who had it all good on the outside but were full of evil on the inside? Before Paul encountered Jesus Christ, he was a Pharisee. He too looked great on the outside. He did the right things and he said the right things. He appeared to have it all together. But lurking inside him was an evil heart, a heart that was willing to commit murder. Sure, on the outside he looked good, but it was a façade that covered what was really happening on the inside.

What we really need to do is get to the root of this problem. On the surface it looks like self-righteousness, but hidden deep inside our hearts is a root of pride. The root of pride says, "I am better than you. I can do this on my own. I don't need the help of anyone." We have to expose the dark places of our heart to the truth of Christ so that He can remove this prideful root. We need to allow the Holy Spirit to come in and do redemptive work in our life. It's no wonder Jesus spoke so directly about this. *"You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of. A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him. But I tell you that everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned"* (Matt. 12:34-37).

It almost seems like we are hopeless, but thank God, we are not! There is hope for our self-righteous actions. There is hope for the non-Christian, for the nominal Christian, and for the believer who is struggling with this. The answer is not to simply act good; we already talked about that. The solution is not to just pretend that everything is fine. The solution is to allow God to expose our evil thoughts, actions, and inner desires to Himself, our caring and compassionate God. It means making a conscious choice to press into these dark areas to find healing in Christ. It can be difficult to expose these areas but after doing so, there is healing and freedom in Christ that only comes from the Gospel.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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Catalog No. 1418-5FC