



The Return of the Prodigal Son is by far one of my favorite oil paintings by Rembrandt. It was most likely one of his last paintings finished a few years before his death in 1669. One art historian said, "It's the greatest picture ever painted." The painting depicts the biblical story found in the Gospel of Luke, chapter 15. Many of you know the story well. If you don't, what you see in this painting is the wayward son who took his inheritance, ran off to a foreign country, and squandered it all on reckless living. After hitting rock bottom he comes home, hoping to become a servant in his father's house. Instead, much to his surprise, he is embraced by his father who immediately restores his son back into the family. In the painting you see how ragged the son looks—his shoes are falling apart, his head is shaved but he is being lovingly embraced by his father. I want you to notice the hands of the father who in the biblical story represents God. It's believed that his hands represent the mothering and fathering aspects of God. The left hand looks masculine and the right looks feminine. What many miss when they read the story or look at the painting is the person standing to the right. That is the older son. In the story, it's the older son who stays home, works hard, and who should receive all his father's inheritance. He is furious at how his father receives his younger brother back. Here's the exchange between the two in Luke 15:28-32:

"The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!'

"'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'"

The whole point of the story is both sons are lost, both are alienated from the father, and both need salvation. One was really bad and one really good. I wonder if Apostle Paul had this story in mind as he wrote the letter to the church in Rome.

If you were with us last Sunday we looked at irreligious people. In many ways we did a case study of the life of the younger brother. Paul says, they suppress the truth and God gives them

over to what they want. The results are a prodigal son lifestyle of all kinds of sin. My point was, you are worse than you think. This week Paul turns his attention to who I would call moralists. Moralists are rule followers. They are typically really good people. Some are even religious people. They look and act like saints on the outside, but inside they are really messed up. I've been around the church world long enough to know just how true this is.

This week I am going to once again give you my big idea up front: you're not as good as you think! If you walked out last week thinking about how all those terrible pagan sinners heard such a perfect sermon for them, you're going to walk out this week having heard the perfect sermon for you! People have told me over the years, "The reason I don't go to church is because it's filled with a bunch of hypocrites and self-righteous people." I surprise them when I say, "You're right! I'm a hypocrite too! And so are you!" Does any one of us live up to our own standards that we've set for ourselves? I sure don't! And what happens if we are not careful is we begin to develop a tendency to be critical of everyone else but ourselves. Our moralism comes out in the small things every day; "I can't believe that person is still watering their lawn, don't they know we're in a drought?" Or "My kids would never act like that." Or "Has that person ever thought about going to the gym and dieting?" We're all hypocrites. We're all self-righteous. You are not as good as you think. I can't even preach a sermon or say a prayer without sinning. I am not as good as I think. So, welcome to the imperfect church of God!

By the time of this letter to the church in Rome, Paul had been preaching the gospel and pastoring churches for over 20 years. He knew the human heart so well and knew how people would respond to his message. There would be a whole group of people in the Roman church who would cheer his words from last week, "They are worse than they think! Especially those Gentile pagans. Preach it Paul!" Paul now shifts his attention to moralists, those self-righteous people who think they are really good. Let's read Romans 2:1-4:

"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. 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?"

Moralists Pass Judgement on Others

Why are moralists not as good as they think? For starters, they pass judgment on others. To pass judgement is to believe others are worthy of God's judgment but you are not. It's to "criticize, find fault, condemn, and to question them." Today we would call these people haters! What's being criticized here is not an acknowledgment of something that is wrong or evil. God expects his people to make that kind of assessment and stand up for what's right. But, these people were "passing judgment" on others. In the original language there is actually a play on words in verses 1 and 3. The words "pass judgment" are used in two different ways. Moralists pass judgment on others and at the same time God is judging them. Just think about yourself for a moment. Wouldn't you agree that we are all far harsher and more critical of others than ourselves when it comes to sin and moral matters? Most often we are critical of the very things we struggle with! Paul gives us three reasons why we should stop passing judgment on someone else:

- You are condemning yourself
- You do the same things
- You will not escape God's judgement

Let's look at each of those.

Moralists shouldn't judge others because they are condemning themselves. Why are they condemning themselves? Like I said at the beginning, no one lives up to their own standards, let alone God's. Just after Jesus told people not to judge others, he said, *"Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?"* (Matthew 7:3). In other words, you have plenty of issues you need to deal with first before you judge someone else.

Moralists shouldn't judge others because they do the very same things. They may not do the very same acts as irreligious people, but their attitudes are the same. Moralists disguise their sin by outward forms of righteousness. They sin on Saturday night, but hit church to get forgiven on Sunday morning. Moralists may not drink, smoke, or see R-rated movies, but Paul says they are just as lost. Listen to what Jesus told the religious people of his day, *"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean"* (Matthew 23:27). Your behavior looks good on the outside, like whitewash, but inside you are spiritually dead. Moralists and the self-righteous tend to find deficiencies in others where they feel they are strong. Personally for

me, I can juggle lots of things at the same time and do them all pretty well. So, I can be very critical of people who do not have a lot of bandwidth or make excuses for themselves. Lord forgive me! And so what we do is come up with all kinds of excuses for ourselves and reasons why it was ok for us to pass judgment but not ok for us to do the same; we were misunderstood, hungry, angry, lonely or tired. We so easily give forgiveness to ourselves but hardly ever consider the burden of someone else.

Moralists shouldn't pass judgment on others because they too will not escape God's judgement. A moralist or self-righteous person will often acknowledge the existence of God but sees no need for him and therefore believe they will be fine on judgment day. But, Paul says here, no one will escape God's judgement. The irreligious, moralists, religious, Jew or Gentile are all in the same boat. God's final day of judgment is coming and no one will escape it, no matter how good you are. But then in verse 4 he offers a glimmer of hope. It's the kindness and patience of God that leads people to repentance. Instead of passing judgment on others, consider the great judge, who has been patient and gracious to you. Next, Paul will go on to further diagnose the problem with the moralists. Their problem lies within. Let's read verses 5-11:

"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." 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."

Moralists are Under God's Wrath Too

In chapter 1 Paul made it clear: prodigal sons are under God's wrath. Elder brothers would applaud that statement. But now, Paul says, elder brothers/moralists are under God's wrath too. Why? Because of their stubbornness and unrepentant heart. The word "stubbornness" means hardness, harshness, roughness, and a self-righteous condition. "Unrepentant" means they do not feel shame or regret about their actions or attitudes. It's like their minds cannot be changed and they are almost beyond repentance. Internally, moralists resist God with every fabric of their being. Paul is diagnosing people's attitudes, not just their actions. He wants us to consider what is really driving some of the bad and good things we think, say and do. The problem lies within our hearts.

Moralists think they have good hearts and intentions, but in fact, they are storing up God's wrath. Paul is using a term here that usually means to store up fine treasure. Instead of storing up treasure, moralists are storing up wrath against themselves. Adam, our High School Director, compared this idea to a scene in the *Pirates of the Caribbean* movie. The pirates think they had stored up all kinds of treasure but it turns out that hidden underneath that treasure was a terrible curse that would haunt them for eternity. Ironically, the act of storing up the treasure (the very thing they thought would save them) is what ruined them. Like the pirates, these moralists actually fall into another form of idolatry. Idolatry is anything we worship in the place of God. Moralists find their self-worth in their rule-keeping. The human heart for some reason loves rules and man-made religion. It makes us feel safe and secure. Religious rules make more sense to us. If I do X and Y then Z should happen. For moralists, grace and freedom in Christ can be a scary thing and too good to be true. So, a personal God is exchanged for a religious system.

Not only do moralists have a heart problem, not only are they storing up God's wrath, Paul says God will repay everyone for what they have done. Now wait a minute! Is Paul saying in verse 6 that we can now earn our salvation? No! We are saved apart from the law and anything we do. However, he is saying we will be judged on the basis of our works. He is most likely quoting from Psalm 62:12 or Proverbs 24:12. Paul is speaking about two very different kinds of people. On the one hand, those who trust in Christ and show the fruit of their relationship with him—doing good, seeking glory, honor, and immortality—God will give eternal life. On the other hand, those who are self-seeking, who reject the truth and follow evil, they will get exactly what they want—themselves along with God's wrath. God does not show favoritism.

Paul, like the Apostle James, is making the connection between works that accompany faith. We are saved by faith, but without works our faith is dead. Justification is by faith. Judgment is according to works. Think about a fruit tree for example. The fruit on the tree proves there is life, but the fruit doesn't provide that life. Fruit is the evidence that the tree is alive, but it's the roots that pull in the nourishment to keep it that way. Likewise, faith in Christ alone provides new life, but a changed life is what proves we have real faith. What is the "fruit" that someone is right with God? Paul says, they live in a godly way. They do good works because they want to serve Jesus. There is a deep desire to honor God in all they say and do.

But, the moralists also produce a type of "fruit." They are self-seeking, reject the truth and follow evil. Moralists, unlike authentic Christians, are self-seeking. They are selfish and self-centered people at their core. They live for themselves. They are the ones whose Instagram account is primarily selfies! And if you just thought, "Yes! Not me! My Instagram is not primarily selfies!,"

then it is you too. Self-seeking people can be both irreligious or moralistic. They can achieve their selfish goals in life through irreligious means (sexual immorality and the 21 sins Paul referred to last week) or through moralism (I know better than God, I am a better person than most people I know, etc.) What we see in both is an unwillingness to learn from God's truth.

So, what does God do? God does not show favoritism, that's what Paul reminds them. Both the irreligious and the moralists equally deserve and have earned God's wrath. If you seek God, you'll receive eternal life. If you are self-seeking, you'll receive God's wrath. Both the younger brother and the older brother are on common ground; they both need the love and grace of the Father. Paul then concludes this passage by saying, moralists think they are saved by obeying the rules (law) but they are not. Let's read verses 12-16:

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

Moralists Think They are Saved by Obeying the Rules (Law)

Paul, for the first time in Romans, introduces the Mosaic law, which will have a central place in this letter. The Mosaic law was given by God to Moses at Mt. Sinai. It consisted of the Ten Commandments as well as 613 total commands. You should know that the law is used in several different ways in the New Testament. It can be confusing and difficult to understand what Paul means when he talks about the law.

What he is saying here is that Jews and Gentiles appear to differ in fundamental ways when it comes to the law. Jews hear and know the law. It was given to them originally and read every sabbath day in the Synagogue. Gentiles do not have the law. It was not given or revealed to them. Yet, they have the law of nature. Paul writes, "*Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature...*" That's natural law. Then in verse 15, speaking of the Gentiles, he says, "*the law is written on their hearts.*" I think Paul's point in these final verses is that the difference can be exaggerated too far.

Paul then introduces a category of Gentiles/moralists who do not know the Jewish Law but somehow obey it. This makes

sense. Think about it, not all people are thieves, murderers, and adulterers. There are some very good people out there. There are people who honor the sanctity of life, are faithful to their spouse, never lie or cheat, and do good but do not know God personally.

Paul is answering the question, "How can people be judged according to a standard they didn't know?" Paul says God's law is inborn with people. It's innate. It's written on their hearts and their consciences. All people everywhere know the basic principle of right and wrong. Why is murder, rape, and abusing children considered wrong in most cultures around the world? Because God has placed his law on our hearts. Paul says in Romans 1-3 that through creation, our conscience, and ultimately in Christ, people are without excuse. Bottom line is this: all people will be judged because of their sin, not because of their ignorance to a standard (the law) they did not know. Jews, who know the law, will be judged by the law. Gentiles, who don't know the law, will be judged by natural law (creation and conscience); they too will be judged by what they know. It's a level playing field. God's judgment is impartial.

You're Not as Good as You Think!

In the book *The Reason for God* Tim Keller says, "It is possible to avoid Jesus as Savior as much by keeping all the Biblical rules as by breaking them. Both religion (in which you build your identity on your moral achievements) and irreligion (in which you build your identity on some other secular pursuit or relationships) are, ultimately, spiritually identical courses to take. Both are sin." This means there are probably three kinds of people that go to church:

- irreligious people who get dragged here
- moralistic and religious people
- authentic Christians

How can you tell the difference? The authentic Christian sees everything that comes as a gift from God. They believe they are in debt to God. The moralistic person is someone who is working

hard, making an effort and trying to be good. They go to Bible studies and say "no" to everything bad. They try to put God in their debt by their good lives. That's the difference. A moralistic person is someone who is trying to save themselves through their goodness. They've tried so hard and now God owes them. An authentic Christian is somebody who sees themselves in God's debt. They believe undoubtedly that they are not as good as they think. So, they live a life to honor and glorify God instead of themselves. Do you see the difference?

How do you know if you are the moralist Paul is talking about? Ask yourselves these hard questions:

1. Do you feel you are a hopeless sinner, whom God would have a perfect right to cast off this minute because of the state of your life and your heart?
2. When you think about how those outside the church live, do you judge them in your heart, or do you think: My heart is by nature just like theirs; it just shows itself differently.
3. Do you, deep down, believe that when you stand before God your own righteous deeds will outweigh your bad? Or have you accepted that your own values will condemn you, and that you will need to be given a right standing that you could never achieve on your own?

Everyone, irreligious or moralist, are under God's wrath. We don't escape God's wrath through good works or by ignoring God. We escape it only by Jesus. You are not as good as you think. But, thankfully Jesus obeyed the Father perfectly. Both prodigal sons and elder brothers can come to Jesus in faith and receive his righteousness.

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. 1418-5N