



ROMANS

ROMANS 2:1-16

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JUDGMENT FOR THE JUDGMENTAL

JUSTICE — EVERYONE WANTS TO WEIGH IN!

Justice is important! Mechanisms for adjudicating conflict and determining blame are crucial if we are to have a civil society. The judicial branch is one of three branches of the United States government. Our legal system provides for federal, state, and local courts presided over by judges, along with lawyers who can prosecute and defend. The dockets are always full.

That people have great interest in this process is evident in the perennial popularity of TV shows like *Perry Mason* and *Judge Judy*, books by John Grisham, and TV coverage of dramatic cases like the Watergate hearings or the O. J. Simpson trial. We are not merely interested. We are involved! We like to do our own judging. Everyone has an opinion, and we are generally quick to form our judgments and announce our verdicts. We start as small children (“It’s your fault!”). Our readiness, even eagerness to pass judgment continues into adulthood.

Have you noticed that making judgments is more common among outwardly good, religious people than among the manifestly wicked? The story Jesus told of the two men who went to the temple to pray (Luke 18:9–14) is an ancient illustration of that truth. Unfortunately, that pattern continues. One of the common criticisms leveled at the church these days is that Christians are too “judgmental” toward others (as Dan Kimball recounts in his book *They Like Jesus But Not the Church*). In Romans 2,



Paul tackles the subject of judgment, judgmental people, Judgment Day and the Judge Himself.

TARGET: THE JUDGMENTAL

ROMANS 2:1-3

We were moving easily through the end of chapter one, nodding knowingly as Paul ticked off his list of wrong-doers, the usual suspects, those “gossips, slanderers, haters of God” and all the rest of that crowd. We grunted approval to hear Paul’s verdict: “those who practice such things deserve to die” (1:32). Let ‘em have it! Hang ‘em high!

But now the very first words of Romans 2 ring out like a gunshot, and there’s no doubt about the target. The pronouns announce it. No longer are we reading about what “they” do. Now it’s all about “you” (second person singular — seven times in the first three verses of Chapter two). Paul says, in effect, “You! Yes, I mean YOU doing the judging!” Is there any one of us who ought not to suddenly cringe to read these words? We’ve been caught in the act. It’s what Nathan the prophet announced to guilty King David, “You are the man!” (2 Sam. 12:7). He said that, incidentally, just after David passed angry judgment against a sheep-stealing rich man in Nathan’s story. We are numbered with David among the judgmental who are to be judged.

In this section on judging, Paul is not speaking of the necessary and loving practice of admonition undertaken by Christian parents as they rear their children, or by those in the fellowship of faith who must endeavor to correct and restore a sinning brother (Matt. 18:15–18 and 1 Cor. 6:1–7). What is in view, rather, is our propensity to evaluate behavior that is unclear or motives we cannot see - to become, as they say, the judge, jury, and executioner of another person. Jesus does not say there should be no “judging” at all, but that we must be exceedingly careful attempting it. He said there is great danger for us in doing so “for with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged” (Matt. 7:2).

What should make us tremble is the realization that “you, the judge, practice the very same things” (v. 1). So that we cannot miss Paul’s point, he repeats it in almost the same words two verses later: “You who judge those who practice such things and yet do them yourself” (v. 3). It’s bad enough that we judge others. Even worse, he says, is that we commit the same sins. Our non-believing neighbors and acquaintances know hypocrisy when they see it, and for many of them it’s a deal-breaker when it comes to involvement in the church.

“Do you suppose...that you will escape the judgment of God?” (v. 3). Did you hear that? “The judgment of GOD!” He’s the Judge. That means we aren’t. Those who presume to judge others are usurping the rightful place that belongs only to God the Judge. He alone “looks on the heart” (1 Sam. 16:7). He alone knows who are really His (2 Tim. 2:19). Those who have sat in a courtroom realize what a presumptuous thing it would be to interrupt the proceedings and utter our opinion while the judge is still hearing testimony. The rule is crystal clear: keep silence or leave the courtroom! The judge will do the judging.

A CLOSER LOOK AT THE JUDGE

ROMANS 2:4-11

There comes a day in court when the verdict is rendered and sentence pronounced. In the divine courtroom, God the Judge has appointed a “day of wrath when...judgment will be revealed” (v. 5). We’ll say more about Judgment Day later, but first we attend to Paul’s description of the Judge Himself.

The most basic requirement of a judge is that he be impartial. The blindfolded statue of “justice” on the Supreme Court building in Washington, D.C., is a vivid representation of this ideal. In God’s courtroom, says Paul in Galatians 3:28, there is “neither Jew nor Greek.” Though God prepared a sequence in salvation’s arrival “to the Jew first and also to the Greek” (1:16), it is plain here that punishment will also be delivered in the same sequence “for...the Jew first and also the

Greek” (v. 9). “For God shows no partiality” (v. 11). The older translations say He is no “respector of persons.” That truth was enacted before Peter in Acts 10, when God sent a vision of a sheet full of animals clean and unclean to demonstrate the equal accountability of Jews and Gentiles in the eyes of God.

Yes, God is impartial, but He is not simply a stickler for “law and order.” He’s a Judge with a heart for everyone who comes before His bench. We are not case numbers, but creatures He made and loves. Paul opens to us the heart of God the Judge. He speaks of the “riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience” (v. 4). God is not being soft on wrongdoing! His kindness has a gracious goal: “God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance.”

The word “you” signals that the entire section is very personally directed at us. What motivates you to change your behavior? Do you react more readily to the threat of punishment or to the realization of someone’s kindness? Paul elsewhere answers the question by saying, “the love of Christ controls us” (2 Cor. 5:14), a sweet articulation of how this kindness is intended to work for the believer. Even Aesop (in his fable of the wind and sun) knew that the warmth of the sun was stronger than the howling of the wind in influencing behavior. Let the sun of God’s kindness warm you, Paul might say. But he is not hesitant to sound a warning for those who refuse to let the Gospel of Jesus move them: “you are storing up wrath for yourself” (v. 5).

THE ROLE OF WORKS

We humans like to think we deserve some credit. “I just want what’s coming to me!” We assume there is considerable measurable good in our personal ledger book and that it will tilt the scale in our favor. This idea needs examining. What’s the role of good works in God’s courtroom? Won’t good deeds count for something on Judgment Day?

Paul answers directly. “Yes,” he says, God “will render to each one according to his works” (v. 6). We are initially taken aback. How does this square with “to everyone who believes” in 1:16 and “by grace you have been saved through faith” in Ephesians 2:8?

A common explanation is that good works are the “evidence” that a person either believed in Christ or did not. In a courtroom, jurors wait to hear and see evidence that will establish the guilt or innocence of the defendant. Jesus Himself warns that at the judgment there will be people who claim to be His, but who did not “walk the walk” (see Matthew 7:21–23). “Faith by itself, if it does not have works,” James said flatly, “is dead” (James 2:17). The *Apology of the Augsburg Confession* goes so far as to say that good works are meritorious, not for salvation, but for other physical and spiritual benefits (Ap IV, 194).

Paul does not want to supply a final answer about the role of faith and works too quickly. That will come in Chapter three. For now, he allows his readers to imagine two groups:

- a. those who “by patience in well-doing [good works!] seek for glory and honor and immortality” (v. 7); and
- b. those who are “self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness” (v. 8).

Paul is trying to bring his readers to a general acceptance of the truth of God’s just retribution - that people will in fact get what’s coming to them! God does indeed reward good and punish evil. Soon enough Paul will demonstrate that pursuing “glory and honor and immortality” by persistently doing good (2:10) finally applies to no one at all! For now he is patiently laying the groundwork for the devastating diagnosis, “all have sinned and fall short” (3:23).

WHAT TRANSPIRES ON JUDGMENT DAY

ROMANS 2:12-16

The time appointed for such retribution is Judgment Day. Paul describes it as a “day of wrath” (v. 5) when “God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus” (v. 16). Paul wasn’t the first to speak this way. The Old Testament prophets routinely pointed to the “Day of the Lord.” That day, warned Zephaniah, will be a “day of wrath,” sudden, universal, and dreadful (Zeph. 1:14–18). It will enact retribution, said Obadiah, anticipating the Golden Rule: “As you have done, it shall be done to you” (Obad. 15). Amos warns people who say they are eager for it that it will bring them a surprise: “darkness, and not light, as if a man fled from a lion, and a bear met him” (Amos 5:18–20)!

Paul echoes the prophets. Jewish readers of Paul’s letter, who had grown up being taught that God would let His chosen people off easy, might have felt serious discomfort hearing Paul insist that Judgment Day would bring everyone alike before the Judge. Those “under the law” (Jews) who have sinned will be held accountable no less than those who have sinned “without the law” (Gentiles).

All will stand fully exposed before the Judge. No “secrets” (v. 16) will be hidden on that day! All will see “the whole truth and nothing but the truth.” Jews will be judged by the “law” they were given (v. 12). Gentiles who would excuse themselves because they “do not have the law” (v. 14) do in fact have a kind of “law” written inside them called a conscience. The word “conscience” (the word means “knows with”) is a source of awareness of right and wrong, even for people who never learned the Ten Commandments. “Your conscience takes up more room inside you than anything else,” says the old man in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. That voice, says Paul, may “accuse” or “excuse” (v. 15). Is your conscience working? Is it a quiet warning light or a jangling alarm bell? Does it nudge you, or do you ignore it? Jiminy Cricket sang, “Always let your conscience be your guide.” For those who aren’t schooled in God’s Law, it’s at least a place to start.

Those who are schooled in the Law are about to be addressed directly. In the next lesson, Paul enters a pointed dialogue with his Jewish readers.

As we close, we need a word we can take hold of. In this section full of judgment, there comes a hint of the good news to come. We hear Paul say that God will judge the secrets of men “by Jesus Christ” (v. 16). It is a glimpse (only three words!) of coming grace. There is hope for all of us judgmental folks, but we will have to wait until Chapter three to hear it plainly spoken that we are “justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (3:24).

PERSONAL APPLICATION

ROMANS 2:17-3:8

Lord God, through Your Word, speak to me in a personal way. Open my ears. Soften my heart. Humble my pride. Work Your will in me. I ask it in the name of Jesus. Amen.

For Review:

1. Why do judgmental people have “no excuse” before God? (2:1-5)

2. What are two distinguishing characteristics of God the Judge?

3. Share new insights you gained about “conscience” and the role it plays.

Romans 2:17-24

4. Paul presents his case in the form of a dialogue with an imaginary Jewish opponent. According to verses 17-20, how could that opponent complete this sentence: “I can stand unafraid before God because I...”

5. Who do you suppose is meant by “the blind...the foolish...infants”?

6. List any advantages you had in your growing-up years that gave you a similar sense of confidence before God.

7. Paul lists three examples in which Jews might not be practicing what they preach. Could you make a similar list of how Christians today commonly do not practice their preaching?

8. According to verse 24, what results when God’s people live lives that do not match their professed beliefs?

Romans 2:25-29

9. Read Genesis 17:1-14. What was the original purpose of circumcision?

10. The Jews regarded circumcision as a kind of “guarantee” of their good standing. What, according to Paul, could invalidate circumcision? (v. 25)

11. Read Deuteronomy 30:6. What does Paul mean by saying “circumcision is a matter of the heart”? (v. 29)

Romans 3:1-8

12. Paul answers objections from his imaginary Jewish opponent. List the objection in:
verse 1- (two of them)

verse 3

verse 5

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13. What's the advantage of being a Jew, according to verse 2?

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14. Paul makes another Old Testament citation in verse 4. What's the source of the quote? (Check your Bible's footnotes for this.)

Briefly compare the quote here with the original source and you will see the citation is not "word for word." Can you think of possible reasons for this?

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15. Paul's chain of reasoning is more complex in this section and may leave some of us confused! Write down questions YOU have as you read through 3:1-8 and ask your small group or instructor to help you grow in your understanding.

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16. Have you made any discoveries in these opening chapters of Romans that have surprised you?
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