

CONDEMNATION—THE WRATH OF GOD REVEALED (1:18–3:20)**A. The Unrighteousness of the Gentiles Condemned (1:18–32)****B. The Moralist Condemned (2:1–16)**

In chapter 1 Paul discussed the reasons why the irreligious are condemned. Their vile thinking and subsequent actions make them deserving of God's wrath. Having no righteousness of their own, they need the gospel. But not all plunge to the levels of degradation Paul described in chapter 1. There are men who believe in a Creator and are able to discern between good and evil. Chapter 2:1–16 turns our attention to them. Why would they need the righteousness found in the gospel? On what basis are they condemned?

Paul's answer is twofold:

(1) First, they are condemned by their own judgment of sin (2:1).

Even moral people do the same things which they judge to be sin in others. If they recognize sin in others, and then do what "sinners" do, they are identifying themselves as sinners as well. They condemn themselves on the same grounds that they condemn others.

(2) They are also condemned by God for their sin (2:2–16).

The moralist is condemned by his own judgment (2:1)

In 1:18–32 Paul referred to people who had rejected God and His revelation in creation in the third person ("they"); in chapter 2 he uses the second person singular "you." This does not mean that Paul is now accusing his readers of these things, for if that had been the case he would have used the second person plural ("you-all"). Rather, Paul is using diatribe. Diatribe is a style in which the writer envisions an imaginary dialogue with a student or an opponent. Elements of this style include frequent questions and emphatic rejections of possible objections. Romans 3:1–8 is a clearer example of diatribe (Moo, 125, 126).

2:1 Therefore you have no excuse, everyone of you who passes judgment, for in that which you judge another, you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things.

Some believe that Paul is changing targets from the Gentiles in chapter 1 to the Jews in chapter 2 (Moo, 128). This is possible; however, if Paul was addressing Jews in 2:1, we might have expected him to say something like, "in the same way also," not "therefore" (which clearly connects 2:1 to chapter 1 which is directed toward Gentiles). Romans 2:1–16 may be simply introducing principles that could be applied to any moral person—whether Jew or Gentile. By speaking in generalities first, Paul will cause the Jews to realize through the process of discovery that they, like the Gentiles, are under condemnation.

The key words in 2:1–16 are "judge" (3X) and "judgment" (6X). The section starts with man on the throne of judgment ("*everyone of you who passes judgment*"—2:1) and ends with God as the judge ("*God will judge the secrets of men*"—2:16).

“To judge” can mean (1) to be unjustly critical or judgmental of others (Ro. 14:4, 10, 13; Matt. 7:1–2), or it can mean (2) to use judgment or have moral discrimination, to distinguish between right and wrong. Paul has the latter meaning in mind.

Why are those with moral discrimination going to be judged by God?

The “for” in the second half of the verse provides the answer. They are not condemned for seeing evil in others; they are condemned because they do the same evils that they condemn (Ja. 1:14; cf. II Sam. 12:1–15). In fact, when they do what they clearly know to be wrong they are even more culpable for their actions. In Romans 1:32 Paul had said that unbelievers not only indulge in sin, they applaud others who do the same; that is, they approved of what they did. Those in 2:1 do something of which they disapprove. The second group is worse than the first (McClain, 72–73). Thus, Paul argues, they expose themselves to the judgment of God and leave themselves without excuse or escape (cf. 1:20; Stott, 82).

The moralist is condemned by the judgment of God (2:2–16)

The moral man is self-condemned (2:1). He is also God-condemned (2:2–16).

There are four principles of judgment that can be seen in this section.

- 1) Judgment is according to truth (2:2; Jn. 8:16).
- 2) Judgment is based on man’s works (2:6).
- 3) Judgment is without partiality (2:11).
- 4) Judgment is according to the gospel and will include the secrets of men’s hearts (2:16).

2:2 But we know that the judgment of God is according to truth against those who practice such things (NKJ).

2:3 But do you suppose this, O man, when you pass judgment on those who practice such things and do the same yourself, that you will escape the judgment of God?

God judges in accordance with the facts of the case. This means that there is no partiality with God (2:11); there are no special privileges (Murray, 57), there is no room for interpretation, no excuses, no debating the facts. Every motive (I Cor. 4:5), action, thought, and word (Matt. 12:36) will be weighed against God’s moral standard of truth (reality) and be declared what it is. How then can anyone suppose that they will escape judgment?

2:4 Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and tolerance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance?

“Kindness” or “goodness” is attributed to God in Romans 11:22 where it is the opposite of severity. In Ephesians 2:7 the riches of God’s grace is expressed in His kindness. In Titus 3:4–5 it is an attribute personified in the Savior: “when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, He saved us.”

“Tolerance” and “patience” express God’s withholding of judgement that is deserved. Patience (μακροθυμία - makrothumia) is not a passive action, but an active self-restraint that does not retaliate

when wronged. It is used elsewhere of God's attitude toward the sins of men (Psa. 86:15; 103:8; Jer. 15:15).

When taken together, the terms "kindness," "tolerance," and "patience" are essentially equivalent to "mercy." Thus Paul is asking if they are taking God's mercy lightly. To take something lightly means to underestimate the significance of it. It is the failure to accord the esteem that is due (Murray, 59).

The question in verse 4 is related to verse 3. Paul wants to show that people who think they are beyond judgment are, in fact, showing contempt for God's mercy. Mercy should be received with gratitude and cause people to turn from sin, not encourage them to continue in it.

To state it simply, mercy (God's kindness, tolerance, and patience) is seen when God withholds the judgement that sinners deserve. When we sin and the consequences for our sin are not immediately experienced, we have received mercy instead of judgment. What do we do with the mercy we receive? Do we take it lightly, continue to sin, and expect there to be more mercy to follow? Or do we realize that God has exercised great kindness and patience toward us and repent? The attitude of the person who continues to sin even after mercy has been received is identical to the person who believes they will be acquitted at the judgment regardless of what they do. That's Paul's point. Both undervalue the significance of mercy.

Thus, to continue in sin and assume we will be exonerated at the judgment is to take God's mercy for granted; it is to treat it as if it was nothing. Mercy does not lessen guilt, nor is it intended to give confidence to the sinner; it is to stimulate repentance. By taking the kindness and patience of God lightly we are compounding our guilt.

Paul's argument in verse 1-4, therefore, flows as follows:

When we commit the same sins that we condemn in others, we identify with them and condemn ourselves as sinners. If we condemn ourselves, we will surely be condemned by God (2:1).

Because we know that truth governs God's judgments (2:2) why would we "suppose" that we would not be judged like everyone else? (2:3) Do we treat God's mercy as not being worthy of our attention and continue in sin anyway (2:4)?

2:5 But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God,

2:6 who WILL RENDER TO EACH PERSON ACCORDING TO HIS DEEDS:

2:7 to those who by perseverance in doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, eternal life;

2:8 but to those who are selfishly ambitious and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, wrath and indignation.

Men's reasonings that lead them to believe that they will not be judged in spite of their sin are simply smokescreens. In reality, we cannot stop sinning; we do not want to stop sinning; we are stubborn, unrepentant, and are storing up wrath for the judgement to come.

No matter what we want to believe, sin will not be excused; on the contrary, each sin is being stored; it is being recorded and kept. Someday all our sins will be used as the evidence that will condemn us at the climatic eschatological outpouring of God's wrath on the Day of Judgment (the "revelation of the righteous judgment of God"; 2:5).

Works: the basis of judgment

God will not mindlessly excuse people at the judgment; He will judge each person according to what they have done. This is the clear testimony of Scripture (Psa. 62:12; Pro. 24:12; Jer. 17:10; 25:14; Matt. 16:27; Jn. 5:29; 2 Cor. 5:10; Rev. 2:23; 20:12–13). "Deeds" include observable acts, actions done in secret (Mk. 4:22; Eph. 5:12–13), careless words spoken (Matt. 12:36), thoughts and intentions (Heb. 4:12), and each individual's response to revealed truth (Matt. 11:21–24; Lk. 10:12–14; Ro. 2:12–16).

What Paul means by "God will render to each person according to their deeds" (2:6) is amplified in verses 7 and 8; those who do good will gain eternal life, but those who do not obey the truth will experience wrath. The personal benefits of those who receive eternal life are described by the words "glory and honor and immortality." The negative effects of those who do not receive life are said to be "wrath and indignation."

Piper comments that in many Christian circles the notion that seeking "for glory and honor and immortality" (v.7) is thought to be improper motivation.

He rightly says,

... if we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, "it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased" (quote from C.S. Lewis). (Sermon by John Piper, Ro 2:6-10, Dec, 13, 1998 - © Desiring God. Website: desiringGod.org)

Some may think that in verses 7 and 8 Paul is teaching that men can be saved by doing good works, but that is not the case. First, if that were possible, the righteousness of God which is found in the gospel (1:17) would be unnecessary, yet the necessity of the gospel is the very point that Paul is arguing. Secondly, Paul would contradict himself in Romans 3 where he declares, "There is none who does good, no, not one" (3:12) and "by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight" (3:20).

We may ask, in what sense can Paul say that those who do good receive eternal life if the righteousness is only found in the gospel (2:7–8)? A number of answers have been suggested; however, the following seems most reasonable to me. Paul is laying down the general principle by which God judges humanity.

The basis of salvation has always been the death of Christ, but knowledge of salvation hasn't been the same in every generation (see notes on "Salvation in the OT"). As history progressed, revelation about God's plan of salvation became clearer and clearer. Men in ages past were not accountable for all that

would be revealed about salvation, but only for what *was revealed* up to the age in which they lived. For example, in the age of the law, men knew nothing of the death of Christ. In those days God required that men keep His law, and if they broke it they had to bring a sacrifice. *It was obedience to the truth that constituted what was good and the result was eternal life.* In this age obedience to the truth entails believing in the Son (Jn. 6:28–29).

In other words, in verses 7 and 8 Paul is not dealing with one particular age but is laying down the principle by which God will judge men of all ages. “When God reveals a certain truth in a certain age, there are two classes that emerge. One class is obedient to the truth, and the other is rebellious” (McClain, 76). Paul is not teaching that some are saved by their deeds, but is stating the basis of judgment. To those whose hearts are directed toward God, who are obedient to the revelation they have received, God will grant eternal life. The unbelieving in every generation receive wrath. In this age, belief in the gospel is what God requires; “believe in the Lord Jesus Christ” is what men must “do” to gain eternal life. To those who respond to the gospel as God demands, “honor and immortality, eternal life; but to those who are selfishly ambitious and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, wrath and indignation” (2:7b–8).

2:9 There will be tribulation and distress for every soul of man who does evil, of the Jew first and also of the Greek,

2:10 but glory and honor and peace to everyone who does good, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

Verses 9 and 10 clarify that the consequence of one’s deeds is either eternal life or wrath. The same principle holds true for both Jews and Gentiles. Everyone who does evil will be judged; everyone who does good will be rewarded.

2:11 For there is no partiality with God.

Impartiality is the third characteristic of God’s judgment. “Before the New Testament there are no instances of the Greek word that is used here for ‘partiality’ or ‘respector of persons,’ but the idea was in the Old Testament: God does not ‘receive face,’ they would say, that is, he is ‘impartial’ - he is not moved by irrelevant external appearances. He sees through them and goes to the heart of the matter and is not partial to appearance and circumstance. Nobody breaks the rules and gets away with it, no matter how powerful or clever or wealthy or networked. All are judged by the same measure.” (sermon by John Piper, Ro 2:11-16, Dec, 27, 1998 - © Desiring God. Website: desiringGod.org)

All of this shows why even a moral person needs the gospel.