

A Wonderful God: Fair Judge

Romans 2:1-16

I. The self-righteous are also subject to God's wrath; 2:1-5.

¹ You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge the other, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things. ² Now we know that God's judgment against those who do such things is based on truth. ³ So when you, a mere man, pass judgment on them and yet do the same things, do you think you will escape God's judgment? ⁴ Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness leads you toward repentance? ⁵ 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.

Paul has shown in 1:21-32 that Gentiles have suppressed the truth that God revealed to them in nature and they therefore have "no excuse" before God. He now begins to show that Jews also suppress the truth God has given them and that they, too, are "without excuse." In the very act of condemning others, they automatically condemned themselves because they were guilty of doing the same things.

People tend to criticize in others those negative traits of which they themselves are guilty. Nothing blinds a person more than the certainty that only others are guilty of moral faults. Jesus warned against condemning others. In the Sermon on the Mount He said, "Do not judge or you too will be judged" (Matt 7:1). The kind of judging both Jesus and Paul referred to was not appraisal of character based on conduct but a hypocritical and self-righteous condemnation of the other person. In the same context Jesus told His followers to watch out for false prophets, who are to be recognized by their fruit. That would be difficult, to say the least, apart from determining which actions are moral and which are not. Evaluation is not the same as condemnation.

The person who knows but resists truth does not stay neutral. Truth resisted hardens the heart. It makes it more difficult to recognize truth the next time around. Life is not a game without consequences. You are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath, when His righteous judgment will be revealed. By our response to God's revelation, we are determining our own destiny.

II. God judges every human being on the same basis; 2:6-11.

⁶ God "will give to each person according to what he has done." ⁷ To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life. ⁸ But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger. ⁹ There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile; ¹⁰ but glory, honor and peace for everyone who does good: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. ¹¹ For God does not show favoritism.

God assesses Jews and Gentiles on the same basis. There is a level playing field when it comes to God's ultimate verdict. The Jew, therefore, simply by virtue of being a Jew cannot claim immunity from judgment. Jews, just as much as Gentiles, are sinful and in need of the gospel. Their law cannot protect them from judgment, and the gospel provides for the true fulfillment of the promises God made to them in the Old Testament.

Sin is a serious matter, whether we are in Christ or not. The believer is eternally secure in Christ; and this security puts the Christian in a different position than the Jew under the old covenant. But the Scripture also teaches that a lack of concern about sin is incompatible with true faith. Thus, Paul's warning in this text about "presuming on God's grace" carries a warning for the Christian as well as for the Jew.

So how can Paul say that doing good will lead to eternal life? Does he not make it clear elsewhere that our works can never put us in right relationship with God? In the immediate context Paul was not teaching how we are made right with God but how God judges the reality of our faith. Faith is not an abstract quality that can be validated by some spiritual test unrelated to life. God judges faith by the difference it makes in how a person actually lives.

Paul is building a case that is complete in chapter 3: salvation for both Jew and Gentile is available only by doing good; the power of sin prevents both Jew and Gentile from doing good; therefore, no one can be saved by doing good.

All people are under sin's power and can escape the wrath that sin brings only by responding in faith to the gospel of God's righteousness in Christ. Only those who have placed their trust in God through Jesus Christ are capable of, or even want to, seek godliness. We can trust in the absolute fairness of God who has revealed Himself in Jesus Christ.

III. Every person is judged through Jesus Christ; 2:12-16.

¹² 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. ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ (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, ¹⁵ since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them.) ¹⁶ This will take place on the day when God will judge men's secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares.

Though Jews are in the same situation as Gentiles when it comes to God's judgment, they have many privileges and blessings from God that the Gentiles do not have. Paul shows here that the Jews possession of the law does not give to them a decisive advantage over the Gentiles. It is doing, not possessing, the law that counts, and even Gentiles have "law" in a certain sense. Their recognition of many of the requirements of that law (do not murder, steal, or commit adultery) show that they have a knowledge of God's basic moral requirements.

Judgment will be through Jesus Christ. God has entrusted all judgment to the Son. This is the gospel Paul preached. The gospel remained at the very center of his ministry of reconciliation. The gospel is to be your gospel. God has entrusted it to you.