

The Book of Romans

Lesson 3: God's Righteous Judgment and the Law -- Romans 2:1-29

There is a particular pleasure the human heart takes in the failures of other people. We would rather not admit it, but it is there. A coworker gets caught cutting corners, a public figure falls, a neighbor's marriage unravels, and somewhere underneath our concern is a quiet voice that says, at least I am not like that. We shake our heads at the scandal in the news while feeling, by comparison, rather good about ourselves. Paul has just finished a withering description of human sin, and he knows exactly what his religious readers are doing as they listen. They are nodding along, pointing at those pagans, those sinners, out there. So in chapter two he wheels around and looks straight at them, and at us. Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges.

It is one of the great turns in all of Scripture. The very act of condemning others, Paul says, condemns you, because you do the same things. The judge climbs onto the bench, picks up the gavel, pronounces sentence on the prisoner, and only then realizes that the charges being read are his own. Paul is dismantling a particular and very dangerous illusion: the idea that being religious, or moral, or on the right team, exempts a person from God's judgment. The Jewish reader trusted in the law and circumcision. The modern reader trusts in church membership, good intentions, a decent upbringing, a sense of being basically a good person. Paul says none of it will hold. God shows no partiality.

But notice the tenderness folded into the warning. Paul asks whether we presume on the riches of God's kindness and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead us to repentance. Every day God does not give us what our sins deserve is a day of mercy, an invitation. The patience we so easily take for granted is actually God holding the door open, giving us time to turn. The question is whether we will read His kindness rightly, as a summons home, or wrongly, as permission to keep going as we are.

Then Paul says something that startles many readers: God will render to each one according to his works. The same apostle who will soon insist that no one is justified by works of the law also says that God's judgment takes honest account of how we have actually lived. These are not contradictions; they are two true things held together by grace. So read this chapter slowly and let it strip away every false security. Paul is not trying to leave you hopeless. He is clearing away the rubble of self-righteousness so that, when he reaches the gospel, you will run to it with empty hands.

Group Discussion: Paul warns against judging others for the very things we excuse in ourselves (vv. 1-3). Why do you think it is so much easier to see sin clearly in other people than in ourselves, and how can a congregation be honest about sin without becoming harsh and judgmental toward one another?

Personal Reflection: Paul says God's kindness is meant to lead us to repentance (v. 4). Think about a specific way God has been patient with you, withholding what your sin deserved and giving you time to change. Have you been treating that patience as an invitation to turn, or quietly as permission to stay the same?

Read Romans 2:1-29

Study Questions

1. Paul says, You have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things (vv. 1-3). What is the difference between the right discernment Scripture calls for and the hypocritical judging Paul condemns here, and why does condemning others actually condemn the one who judges?
2. Paul exposes the hypocrisy of seeing clearly in others what we excuse in ourselves. Be specific: what sin or fault are you quick to criticize in other people while quietly tolerating a version of it in your own life? What would it look like to turn that same honest scrutiny on yourself this week?
3. Paul asks whether we presume on the riches of God's kindness, forbearance, and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead us to repentance (v. 4). What does it mean to presume on God's kindness, and how does this verse teach us to read God's patience rightly rather than as evidence that our sin does not matter?
4. Paul warns that a hard and impenitent heart is storing up wrath for itself on the day of judgment (v. 5). Is there an area where you have grown comfortable with a sin, assuming you will deal with it later? What is the danger of putting off repentance, and what would it look like to soften your heart in that area now rather than later?
5. Paul says God will render to each one according to his works, eternal life to those who by patience in well-doing seek glory and honor, but wrath for the self-seeking who do not obey the truth, and that God shows no partiality (vv. 6-11). How can this be true alongside Paul's later insistence that no one is justified by works of the law, and what does it teach us about the place of a faithful, obedient life in God's final judgment?
6. Paul speaks of those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality (v. 7). Patience in well-doing means keeping on with the good even when it is hard, slow, and unnoticed. Where are you tempted to give up doing good because the results are not coming, and what would help you persevere faithfully?
7. Paul says that even Gentiles who do not have the law sometimes do by nature what the law requires, showing that the work of the law is written on their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness (vv. 14-15). What does this teach about how God has given every person a moral witness through conscience, and what does it tell us about the basis on which God will judge those who never received His written law?
8. Paul says that on the day of judgment God will judge the secrets of men by Christ Jesus (v. 16). Imagine the hidden parts of your life, the private thoughts, the secret habits, the things

no one else sees, brought into the open before God. Where is there a gap between your public reputation and your private reality, and how does the truth that God sees in secret call you to integrity?

9. Paul confronts the religious person who relies on the law and boasts in God yet dishonors Him by breaking the law, so that God's name is blasphemed because of them (vv. 17–24); then he says real circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit and not the letter, and that the true Jew is one inwardly whose praise is from God and not man (vv. 25–29). What is the danger of resting in outward religious markers (heritage, membership, ritual, reputation) while the heart is far from God, and what does Paul mean that God wants an inward, heart-level reality and not merely external conformity?
10. Look back across this searching chapter. Paul has confronted hypocritical judging, the danger of presuming on God's kindness, judgment according to works, the witness of conscience, the judgment of secret things, and the call to a circumcised heart. Name one specific way you sense Jesus forming you through these verses. What is the single truth from Romans 2:1–29 that you most need to carry into this coming week?

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Matthew 7:1–5, removing the log from your own eye before the speck from another's; 2 Peter 3:9, the Lord's patience as His desire that all reach repentance; Matthew 23:25–28, the warning against outward cleanliness covering inward decay; Deuteronomy 10:16 and Jeremiah 4:4, the call to circumcise the heart; 1 Samuel 16:7, the Lord looks on the heart rather than outward appearance