

Romans 2:17-29

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[0 : 00] Please take your copy of God's Word and join me in Romans chapter 2. This morning we will take our third and final look at verses 1-16 of the second chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans.

It's been some time since we were in this text together and I'm glad to be back at it. So that we don't get lost in the weeds before we get to our text.

I want to remind us that the theme of Paul's letter is justification by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone.

We must not lose sight of this either to be faithful followers of Jesus Christ or to not be distracted by all of the debate of our age.

Let's not take for granted that justification is by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone. The thesis of Paul's letter to the Romans is stated in chapter 1 verse 16 and 17 where he says, For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

[1 : 21] For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith. As it is written, the righteous shall live by faith. And I am not overstating it, beloved, when I say that the rest of the letter is unpacking these two verses.

Everything else that we're going to read and study is shoved into these two verses. It is a good and clear thesis for the rest of the letter.

He places in these two verses front and center the need to be saved and tells us how it is that we can be saved. In order to be saved, we must place our faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ so that God's righteousness will be granted to us.

But saved from what? Paul certainly does not leave us guessing in chapter 1 and verse 18, he says, For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.

We need to be saved from the wrath that is coming. The right, righteous indignation of our God against rebellion, against his name and against his ways.

[2 : 48] And this is a wrath that you do not want to experience. You need to be saved. And he proceeds to write that all mankind, although suppressors of the truth, know that there is a powerful God.

That they have disobeyed him and therefore they are without excuse. Paul still seems concerned at the beginning of chapter 2 with any of his readers ability to wiggle out of what he's saying.

He seems like he's thinking someone's going to say, yeah, but not me. Surely I can avoid what he's talking about in the last half of chapter 1.

But we need, all of us, the justification that comes by grace alone, through faith alone, in Jesus Christ alone.

So Paul sets himself to press that point by speaking of God's judgment. We will receive God's wrath if in that day of judgment we don't have God's righteousness.

[3 : 57] So again, he's continuing to build this point out. Why should we care about this gospel that he speaks of? This gospel of faith that grants to us the righteousness of God.

The author of Hebrews, in Hebrews chapter 9, verse 27, writes, It is appointed for man to die once. It will happen. The inevitability of it is sure. You will one day die. And then the author of Hebrews says, And after that comes judgment.

I think that this is a reality that should cause every one of us to shudder. Even those of us who are in Christ.

Even those of us who know, who have great confidence that we have been justified by grace, through faith in Christ. We ought to shudder at the idea of judgment.

[5 : 01] All of our work laid bare before God. And it ought to cause us afresh to flee to Christ for the righteousness that he gives to us.

So we've looked at this text, verses 1 through 16 of chapter 2, in two points already. One on each Sunday. And I didn't look back at the actual dates that we looked at those together.

So I'm going to say some weeks ago. Months perhaps. We looked firstly at the justice of God's judgment.

You see this succinctly in verse 2 of chapter 2. We know, Paul writes, that the judgment of God rightly falls on those who practice such things.

He's just given a list at the end of chapter 1. A litany of things that are rebellious against God. And he says, we know the judgment of God rightly falls.

[6 : 00] It is just and it is proper. If God is to be a judge, he must justly judge. It's right that he punishes sin.

None of us want a creator and ruler of the universe that isn't just. It's good and proper. We just don't want that justice poured out on us.

Paul's even careful to address that attitude. In verse 4 he says, Do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience? Not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance.

God withholding that judgment from you. The common grace given to mankind. This forbearance and this patience is meant to lead us to repentance.

We would know that there's a good creator, ruler, and judge of the world. And that he has given to us this good news. And I hope that you'll hear it today.

[7 : 07] God is the judge. Jonathan Edwards said in a sermon on this text, it's on your bulletin. God is in fact the supreme judge of the world.

He has power sufficient to vindicate his own right. He has declared himself the judge is what Edwards is saying there. And he has the power to do that and for it to remain the case.

As he has a right which cannot be disputed, so he has power which cannot be controlled. His power to judge will be aimed in wrathful indignation against those who don't place their faith in Jesus Christ.

And God is just for judging in this way. Secondly, in some weeks after that first point, we looked at the basis of God's judgment.

You see, verse 6, Paul says he will render to each one according to his works. And without spending too much time on that, we'll spend a little more time on this in today's point.

[8 : 13] We will be judged on the basis of our works. But recall, he is making an argument. There is an arc to what he is saying to us.

So we can't neglect the rest of Romans and get all caught up in half of a single verse and have our theology go awry. In Romans chapter 3, shortly after, quoting from the Old Testament in verse 10, he says, None is righteous.

No, not one. No one understands. No one seeks for God. All have turned aside. Together they have become worthless. No one does good. Not even one.

He's setting up a great problem for us. The problem of our need for salvation. He is saying to us, you will be judged according to your works and you cannot do good apart from the saving work of Jesus Christ.

Again, we need this outside righteousness, what Luther called an alien righteousness, a righteousness granted to us, a righteousness accomplished by the Lord Jesus Christ.

[9 : 21] So we'll deal with the text now in our third point, but let me read it in its entirety before we do. Beloved, this is God's word to us, written for his glory and our good.

So we would all do well to listen to it in order to believe its promises and obey its commands.

Romans 2, verse 1 and following. Therefore, 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. We know that the judgment of God rightly falls on those who practice such things.

You suppose, O man, you who judge those who practice such things and yet do them yourself that you will escape the judgment of God? Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?

But because of your hard and impenitent heart, you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed.

[10:29] He will render to each one according to his works. To those who by patience and well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life.

But for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury. There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek.

But glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. For God shows no partiality. For all who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law. And all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law. For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified. For when Gentiles who do not have the law by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves even though they do not have the law.

They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts while their conscience also bears witness. And their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus.

[11:44] So this morning, let's briefly conclude our study of these verses with point number three, the impartiality of God's judgment.

And we'll focus our attention on verses 11 and following. The point is very tidily summarized by verse 11.

For God shows no partiality. It's been made mention in the previous verses of the Jew first and also the Greek. And we'll develop this idea later on, particularly in chapter 11 of Paul's letter.

But God shows no partiality. Paul is saying that your ethnic, national, or political status does not change the fact that one day you will stand before God and give an account for your life.

The rest of this portion of chapter 2, Paul is working to make that fact abundantly clear. Paul doesn't want anyone to escape his argument. Not because he desires condemnation for anyone, but because he desires that all people would see their need of Christ's righteousness to withstand the judgment of God.

[12:58] That all people everywhere would repent and believe the gospel of which Paul is not ashamed. Remember, he's not ashamed of it because it is the power of God for salvation.

He wants people to see their desperate need of the justification that comes by grace alone, through faith alone, in Jesus Christ alone. Verse 12.

For all who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law. And all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law.

Paul labors all throughout his writing to divide people into only two eternally significant categories. Those who are in Christ and those who are not in Christ.

This is the only eternally significant category that matters. The world, in contrast, labors to divide people in all sorts of other ways.

[14:05] Specifically in our text, Paul is addressing the tendency of his Jewish hearers to think they were outside the judgment of God. They were given some sort of pass as God's chosen people.

That their ethnic and national identity automatically included them in God's favor. And for the tendency of his Gentile hearers to think they weren't accountable to the law because they did not have it.

So we see expressed the world's labor to divide in this division, Jew and Gentile. And Paul is just saying, no, it should only be divided.

The internally significant division is those in Christ and those not in Christ. He says it another way in verse 13.

For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified. So those in Christ and those who are not in Christ.

[15:07] Doers of the law and not doers of the law. Now, specifically, more narrowly, the hearers of the law he's referring to would have been Paul's Jewish hearers.

I think perhaps that we most readily identify with this group as those who sit under the teaching of the word. Most of us, I know, not all of us, but most of us have grown up in one measure or another hearing God's instruction to us.

We live in a nation that largely still identifies as Christian. But most good studies dig down deeper and we could come to see, oh, these these people don't understand the gospel at all. It's kind of a national identity that we take on. And I think there's a great danger there. James writes in chapter one and verse 22, be doers of the word and not only hearers deceiving yourselves. And then again, James in chapter two and verse 18 says, but someone will say you have faith and I have works. Show me your faith apart from your works and I will show you my faith by my works. [16:31] Right. An evidenced faith in the way that our lives are changed. We are not saved by good works.

Remember, justified, saved by grace alone, through faith alone in Christ alone. But we are saved for good works. That's a careful distinction to be made. We are not saved by good works, but we are saved for good works. The way our lives are changed evidences the work that God has done in our hearts. So having by faith put on the righteousness of Christ and identity change, not in Christ, now in Christ, clothed in his righteousness.

Right. Right. Able to stand before the judgment of God, making an appeal to the righteousness of Christ. I have been granted his perfect life. We are gratefully compelled to good works. [17:34] Now, just a moment ago, and I'm thankful, been read to you from Ephesians chapter two. I'm going to do the same. This is beginning in verse eight and through verse 10.

Ephesians two, eight through 10. Paul there says, for by grace, you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing. This is a reference to the faith. This is not your own doing. It is the gift of God, not a result of works. Again, we're not saved by our works so that no one may boast.

That's the end of verse nine. No one can say I saved myself. It's an impossibility. If you are in Christ, then you have been saved by grace through faith in Christ. And then Paul goes on in verse 10 for we are his workmanship created in Christ. Jesus, right? Made new, changed in identity, right?

[18:34] Not in a degree, but in a status, not in Christ. Now in Christ, lost, found, enemy, friend. Created in Christ Jesus for good works.

So we're not saved by our works, but we are saved for good works, which God prepared beforehand. That we should walk in them. Beloved, this is a very, very careful distinction. It is taught all over the scriptures. You must take it up and read and you must understand this distinction that's being made. Please ask questions if you don't.

To press it just a little bit further. We've been reciting on Sunday mornings from the Heidelberg Catechism. I don't know that we'll make it this far into the Catechism. I'm not sure if we'll continue reciting the Heidelberg at this point.

But let me read the question and answer 114 and 115 for you. This section of the Catechism is all about the law of God.

[19:42] Particularly the Ten Commandments, the Decalogue, which is the summary of the law. Question 114 says, but can those converted to God keep these commandments perfectly?

It's an important question, is it not? And the answer is no. In this life, even the holiest have only a small beginning of disobedience.

Nevertheless, with earnest purpose, they do begin to live not only according to some, but to all the commandments of God. I love that. No, they can't.

But with earnest purpose, they do begin to live not only according to some, but to all the commandments of God. Right? We are sanctified. Having been justified, we begin to live in a way that's pleasing to God, not in perfection.

We make small gains over time by His grace. Question 115 then asks, If in this life no one can keep the Ten Commandments perfectly, why does God have them preached so strictly?

[20:49] They've made the case that God wants the commands taught. We are not antinomians, which means without the law. We would not argue that the law has been put away altogether, but that the moral law still stands and should be taught.

Here, they say strictly, right? Taught strictly. And answer 115 says, First, so that throughout our life we may more and more become aware of our sinful nature and therefore seek more eagerly the forgiveness of sins and righteousness in Christ.

That we would long for Christ. Second, so that while praying to God for the grace of the Holy Spirit, we may never stop striving to be renewed more and more after God's image until after this life we reach the goal of perfection.

This is a thing that people who are in Christ, who have been given Jesus' righteousness, desire, that out of grateful obedience we would live in a way that pleases Him.

But what are those people who are unaware of God's law? Again, Paul is not going to let anybody wiggle out of his argument.

[22 : 04] Verse 14, he says, For when Gentiles who do not have the law by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law.

And he's referring specifically to the law of Moses, right? Brought down from the mountain, the Decalogue and the development of it in the scriptures.

Even the most lawless of people obey some of God's law. And Paul is saying that this is self-attesting.

Where does morality come from? We live in a society of people who are set against God. Believe that there is no God and yet they still have some moral compass.

From where does that morality come? Someone may believe, as an example, that the murder of an unborn child is justifiable, which is a breaking of God's law.

[23 : 07] But few with such a practice or view would ever murder a toddler. Why? It seems inconsistent to me. But why? Even though ungodly and unrighteous men by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.

Chapter 1, verse 18. They, by God's mercy, still know some truth. That's where anything moral comes from.

It comes from God's law. Creator, sustainer, ruler, judge. Verse 15. They show.

They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts. When they do anything that is consistent with God's law, they show that the law is written on their hearts.

You could go into the deepest of jungles, the most remote of places, and you will find people made in God's image living in ways that are consistent with his law.

[24 : 12] Why? Paul tells us. Because his law is written on their hearts. Even though in their unrighteousness they suppress the truth, right? There's still some truth that bubbles out of them.

He goes on to say, while their conscience also bears witness and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them. Mankind knows at some core level God's good design for us.

You know at your very core that there is a God. He created the world. And he's put in order things in the world that should be a particular way.

You can find examples of this reality everywhere. Many people do things that are categorically good. They seek justice. They feed the poor.

They advocate for children. They aid the elderly. They strive for the good of their neighbor. And they do so all without the commands of the Bible motivating them. And say, why do you do the thing that you do?

[25 : 17] And they would never say, well, the scripture teaches that I should do this thing. This type of living is to be celebrated. It's a common grace to mankind that they have the law on their hearts.

But it is not saving. One can only be justified by grace alone, through faith alone, in Jesus Christ alone. The best of our efforts are still stained with sin.

We need the righteousness of Christ. Christ, mankind needs the righteousness of Christ. It's why we must not be ashamed of the gospel and the adverse and the positive.

It's why we must be proud of the gospel, because it is the power of God for salvation. Otherwise, Paul tells us, our works only serve to condemn us.

All the good things we do, if we're not found in Christ, only work to testify against the fact that we know that we ought to be living differently.

[26 : 23] We know that we're falling short of what God has required of us. Know what Paul says about the conscience. The conscience is that innate understanding of what is right and what is wrong.

People often think of their conscience as that little voice in their head, right? Communicating to them what is right and what is wrong. Verse 15 says that mankind's conscience is conflicted.

On the one hand, justifying. I am good enough. Look at all the good that I do. On the other, condemning.

I am not nearly good enough. Look at all the evil that still resides within me. And that conscience is at odds with itself.

There is no system in the world that sets us free from that conflicted conscience other than the gospel of Jesus Christ.

[27 : 30] It says, no, you're not good enough. And you need a goodness to withstand the wrath of God. And it's a goodness that you cannot accomplish. And so it must be granted to you.

It must be given to you from somewhere else. Every religious system, every philosophy of life, all fails at this point.

Every single one of them say, here are the rules. Try to measure up. And anybody living in any of those systems, if they're really honest with themselves, know that their conscience is conflicted.

And we will not find relief for that except in the gospel of Jesus Christ. I've read this poem to you before. I think I read it the first week we were in Romans.

I think it expresses this well. Oh, long and dark stairs I trod. With trembling feet to find my God. Gaining a foothold bit by bit, then slipping back and losing it.

[28 : 35] Never progressing, striving still with weakening grasp and faltering will. Bleeding to climb to God while he serenely smiled, not noting me.

Then came a certain time when I loosened my hold and fell thereby. Down to the lowest step my fall as if I had not climbed at all. Now when I lay despairing there, listen, a footfall on the stair.

On that same stair where I, afraid, faltered and fell and lay dismayed. And lo, when hope had ceased to be, my God came down the stairs to me.

This is an expression of the gospel of Jesus Christ. This God, this judge of all things, the right, just judge of all things, became a man.

That he might live the life he requires of us. Die the death that we deserve. That by faith, our sin is given to him.

[29 : 51] And his righteousness is granted to us. We see Paul say that there's going to be this conflicting conscience. That's going to either condemn or justify.

Verse 16. On that day when. According to my gospel. Notice that he connects the idea of the good news of Jesus Christ.

God's judgment. According to my gospel. God judges the secrets of men. By Christ Jesus. No one will escape.

The judgment of God. God sees all. And will judge all. We live our lives. Corum. Deo. This is Latin. For before the face or in the presence of God. He's everywhere at all times. He knows all things. To what will you appeal on that great day of judgment?

[30 : 54] Your works will never stand before his judgment. You will not be able to say, well, I did such and such. Look at the way in which I live.

The only appeal that will stand in that day. Will be an appeal to the completed work. Of Jesus Christ. We will be right to say.

Jesus lived for me. And died for me. We are justified. By grace alone. Through faith alone. In Jesus Christ alone.

Let's pray together. Thank you.