



The Religious Need the Gospel

Lesson 3 | Romans 2:1-16

On one occasion a preacher was warning a large group of teens about the need to turn from sin and to have “a growing in holiness and a desire, not to be like Brittany Spears, not to be like the world, and not to be like the great majority of American Christians, but to be like Jesus Christ!” The crowd began applauding, so he paused for a minute. When they were done, he looked at them and said, “I don’t know why you’re clapping; I’m talking about you.”¹

Can you think of any biblical examples of people who saw the sin of others but not their own?

The prophet Nathan once told David a story about a wealthy man who stole from a poor man the only lamb he had. David was furious, until Nathan pointed his finger at the king and said, “Thou art the man.” At the beginning of his book, Amos tells the nation of Israel about God’s judgment coming on all their sinful neighbors: Damascus, Gaza, Tyre, Edom, Ammon, Moab, even Judah! And right as the proud Israelites are smiling and nodding their head in agreement, Amos hits them with the final nation on which God is sending judgment: Israel.

We tend to be like those teens, David, and the Israelites Amos preached to. We all like to think other people have problems and need to repent, but certainly not us. We have no problem when warnings of judgment are read, after all, there are other people who need to hear them. We are like the inmate at a detention center who once told the preacher, “Man, I’m glad you’re here. These guys really need it!”

Why is it that we can so easily see problems in others, but we don’t see them in ourselves?

Last week we saw Paul teaching that the pagans were a mess. Wholly given to rebellion, their actions, thinking, and desires had led them into a cesspool of idolatry, immorality, and misery. It was an ugly picture indeed, but what about those who didn’t do such things? The Jews, for example, condemned homosexuality and idolatry. Some Gentiles were God-fearers and sought to live by God’s law. Paul’s message up to this point would have seemed obvious to any Jew or God-fearing Gentile: those who rejected God would know the wrath of God. “Amen!” these hearers would have shouted. This meant that they were safe, right? Surely they weren’t under God’s wrath like the pagans!

In Romans 2 Paul turns to the one who thinks he is right before God and reminds him that God judges everyone, and God’s judgment is perfect. It’s not enough to know what God wants or even to even agree that God’s way is best and look down on those who rebel. You must personally follow God’s laws. As Paul will make clear later in this letter, that is a problem because everyone breaks God’s laws.

¹ <https://www.sermonaudio.com/saplayer/playpopup.asp?SID=52906154239>

God Will Judge Universally: You Can't Escape the Judge (2:1-5)

After condemning the sinful pagans, Paul now turns to the self-righteous religious. He tells them they are "inexcusable," or without any kind of defense before the judge of the universe. This same word shows up in Romans 1:20 where the pagans are without excuse because they sin, even though they know about God from creation. In 2:1 the religious are without excuse because even though they know God's law, they sin. These people think that God's judgment is for other people, but that they will escape it. Such people think they will escape for at least two possible reasons. First, some feel good about themselves because they judge others and think that somehow makes up for their own sin. Second, some think they will escape God's judgment because they don't see God judging them currently, so they assume they are fine. Both groups are wrong.

Judging others won't spare you judgment (2:1-3)

We are all good at judging. Even those who criticize others for being judgmental often find a way to do so with a smug superiority. It's very easy to point out the flaws in others. It's very hard to see those same flaws are in our own lives. Paul reminds those who are shouting "Amen" that they, too, stand under the judgment of God.

Why do we feel better about ourselves when we judge others?

How can this judgmental attitude creep into our own lives without us noticing?

Paul asks those who hold others to God's standards but fall short themselves if they will avoid God's judgment. God will judge everyone one day, as these religious people know very well. But Paul warns that the way to escape judgment isn't by pointing out the faults in everyone else, because doing so, even if you are right, doesn't address the faults in your own life.

What is the difference between a sinful spirit of judging, and taking a biblical stand for holiness by calling out sin?

God's goodness won't spare you judgment (2:4-5)

God is good, and patient, and kind, and merciful. When we think about the audacity of a creature of dirt rejecting the Word of the Creator God, it's incredible that God does not strike us dead when we rebel against Him. And yet people rebel and sin, sometimes quite boldly and blasphemously, and are allowed to continue breathing God's air and living on God's planet. Many people assume that because God delays His judgment, there must be nothing to fear. The Bible warns, however, that God delays His judgment so that there is an opportunity for repentance. When a person is shown goodness and rejects it by their willful rebellion, that goodness turns to wrath and is stored up for the day of judgment.

Why do we naturally assume if we get away with something, it must not matter that much?

Can you think of any examples in Scripture where God's judgment came swiftly on people who had been given much time to repent?

God Will Judge Impartially: You Can't Corrupt the Judge (2:6-11)

Judges are supposed to be impartial. They aren't supposed to give "not guilty" judgments to criminals who are their buddies or who pay them money. Everyone wants judges to be impartial, until they commit a crime and are on the stand. Then we suddenly hope the judge likes us and lets us go free. If people can't escape God's judgment, many hope that God might just throw out their case. But Paul is clear in this section – God will never do that. Everyone will be held to the same standard, regardless of their age, race, ethnicity, or any other factor someone might try to point to as reason why they shouldn't be judged.

God rewards the righteous and the unrighteous.

This passage teaches that God "renders to every man according to their deeds" (2:6). In other words, God will judge based on what people do. His judgment is fair and objective, and those who live righteously will be rewarded while those who live sinfully will be punished. The idea that God will judge us for our works is a common theme in Scripture (Matthew 16:27; 2 Corinthians 5:10; 1 Peter 1:17; Revelation 2:23; 22:12). Although Paul will later argue that those who have the Spirit can live lives of true holiness, before coming to Christ such righteousness is impossible. In Romans 3 Paul will later make it very clear that no one does good, and no one seeks after God.

Why are we unable to live up to God's perfect standard? Why is it that no one is able to earn eternal life?

Some people don't live lives of righteousness, but they expect God to show them the blessings of those who live such lives. They think that they can sin and God will overlook that sin and give them the rewards that come only to those who live righteous lives. Paul cuts through this thinking with some blunt statements: God rewards everyone according to their deeds, and God shows no favoritism.

God doesn't show favoritism.

The Jews thought they would be exempt from God's judgement because they were the chosen people of God. Paul will later agree that there are special advantages to being Jewish, but those advantages don't include escaping God's judgment. In fact, Paul states in this passage both that God's blessings come to the Jew first and also to the Gentiles, but he also says that God's judgment comes to the Jew first and also to the Gentiles. Rather than excusing their sin because they are His people, God holds Jews to a higher standard. All of this is grounded in the final statement of this section, "there is no respect of person [favoritism] with God" (Romans 2:11).

What are some things people today cling to thinking it will convince God to give them a free pass?

The Jews looked to their status as the chosen people of God and thought that meant they would not be held accountable for their actions. Many people today hold on to shallow hopes for why God will let them off free even though they have repeatedly broken His law. Some look to a church membership, or their participation in a certain special group, or their citizenship in a country, or baptism, or all sorts of other things, none of which change the fact that they are sinners who stand guilty before a perfect judge.

God Will Judge Fairly: You Can't Argue with the Judge (2:12-16)

If I can't escape judgment, and God's impartiality means that He won't play favorites, maybe there's some excuse that will get me off. A Gentile might say, "I didn't know that was wrong" and a Jew might say "but

I heard your law taught regularly, and I listened carefully and agreed with it!" Paul anticipates these arguments, and he concludes this section on the inexcusability of sin by arguing that nothing

God will fairly judge those who know the law (2:12-13)

In Deuteronomy, Moses charged the people to hear God's law, so that they would "observe to do it" [be careful to do it] (Deuteronomy 6:3). Jesus said that those who heard His teachings *and did them* would be blessed (Matthew 7:24-27). James warned about being hearers of God's word, but not being a doer (James 1:22-25). Here Paul says the same thing: it's not enough to hear God's law, we must actually obey it (Romans 2:13).

Why do we often act as if it's enough to simply hear God's Word, even if we don't do it?

How can we avoid the danger of hearing but not doing?

God will fairly judge those who don't know the law (2:14-16)

But what if you never heard of the Bible your entire life? Surely such a person could argue that they didn't know any better! Paul has already addressed this some in Romans 1:18-32, but he adds another argument here as to why God can justly judge those who don't have any special, direct communication from Him (Scripture). Not only do the pagans have the witness of creation, they also have the witness of conscience.

Conscience is that internal sense of what is right and wrong. Our consciences don't always work, because they too have been twisted by the fall. But while the conscious is an imperfect guide to obedience to God, it is a guide. When people feel the pain of conscience and do naturally the things that God has said in the law, they prove that they know better. When they violate conscience, they either feel the weight of the consciences accusation or else coming up with excuses as to why it's not that big a deal.

What are some things that even people totally opposed to God still realize are right and wrong?

God is not a kindly grandfather who will never get around to judging us. God is not a crooked judge who will let you go just because you're his friend. And God is not some fool will be convinced that a guilty person should be let go. God will judge, and when He does so He will judge everyone and He will judge them fairly and accurately. Paul is showing that we are all in trouble, the hardened rejector of God and the self-righteous student of His law. God will judge us by our works, including the hidden things that no one else sees.

If all of man stands guilty before God, why don't more people feel guilty?

Why do so many people today think that God will not judge them?

What should we as Christians do to warn the world that there is a judgment coming?