

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	Special Messages		Pastor/Teacher
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Escaping the Judgment of God?

I am reminded of the preacher who preached on Hebrews 2:3, a text that declares, “How shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation?” The preacher proceeded to give his congregation a “How To” list of how to go about actually escaping God’s judgment if they did ignore such a great salvation! Interestingly enough, all of his points were drawn from the four possibilities of escape for those who offend human laws. In the first place, it is possible that the offense shall not become known. Illustrations of this in human experience abound. Second, there is always the chance that the guilty person may be able to escape the bounds of the legal jurisdiction under which the crime was committed. Further, there may occur, after apprehension by the authorities, a breakdown in the legal processes. And, finally, the ultimate hope of the criminal is that he may escape from detention and live in a measure of freedom. The major problem with such a scheme is that there are no such possibilities with an all-knowing God (cf. Hebrews 4:13). God’s judgment is not only real and inescapable, it is absolutely just. Divine judgment by its very nature is always right. In Romans 2:1-16 the Apostle Paul will set forth the principles of divine judgment. He has already demonstrated the guilt of the Gentile world. He will now turn his attention to the Jew and those who think that their religiosity will somehow merit them special consideration.

It is absolutely necessary that in examining *any* portion of this epistle we keep always in our minds the purpose Paul had in his mind when he first penned a particular passage.¹ You can easily lose your way going through Romans if this is not done. In this section of the epistle Paul expressly tells us in verse 3:9 that he is striving to convince both Gentiles and Jews that they are guilty in the eyes of God for their particular sins. Chapter one focuses on the sins of the Gentile world and chapter two undertakes to demonstrate to the Jews that they too are guilty before God and, therefore, likewise subject to judgment. There are four variations of this theme in 2:1-16, but the essential message is the same.

I. GOD’S JUDGMENT IS ACCORDING TO REALITY (2:1-4)

Romans 2:1 in the Greek text begins with “Therefore”—DIO. It is the strongest inferential conjunction the Apostle had at his disposal. It *links* what Paul is about to declare with what he has already stated. The Jews knew the sins of the Gentiles deserved God’s wrath—but this did not alleviate their guilt. “Our own share of evil is not removed by condemning evil in others.”² In 2:2, the first variation of the principle of righteous judgment is introduced. God judges according to *truth*. The judgment of God concerns itself with the reality of the matter (cf. I Samuel 16:7). Therefore, NO escape is possible (2:3). God’s goodness and patience does not mean He is indifferent to sin. To treat God so only shows contempt. Do you really think you can do this and escape God’s judgment? The Apostle frames the question so that the answer is obvious. “The verb translated *think* (which comes first in the Greek) is quite Pauline. It is properly an arithmetical word and means ‘to count’, ‘to reckon’. But it is often used metaphorically, where numbers are not in question, with a meaning like ‘take into account’, ‘reckon’, ‘consider’. It is a word that invites to reasoning, which may be why it turns up so often in Romans. It is suited to the argumentative style that Paul adopts throughout this letter.”³

II. GOD'S JUDGMENT IS ACCORDING TO WORKS (2:5-11)

The second variation of Paul's theme is now developed. The Jews by refusing the Gospel are, in fact, storing up wrath for themselves on the day that God will render to each person exactly what his deeds deserve. Remember, Paul is expounding the Law—which can only condemn. “God's judgment is not according to one's special privileges, but according to one's deeds, as the Mosaic Law itself teaches.”⁴ Some Christians have a difficult time understanding this verse in light of the doctrine that we are saved by grace and not by works (Ephesians 2:8). But there is no contradiction. Christian faith is a *doing* faith. It produces good works. It bears fruit.

III. GOD'S JUDGMENT IS ACCORDING TO IMPARTIALITY (2:12-15)

The third variation is introduced. God's judgment is just. He deals with all as they deserve whether Jew or Gentile. Each is judged by the light he possesses whether it is the light of the Mosaic Law, the moral law, or conscience. Note carefully that the light men possess by nature (general revelation) is not sufficient to bring salvation. God will deal with individuals according to the knowledge they have—but mere knowledge of God's being and expectations will not satisfy divine justice. “The only virtue in hearing the law lies in hearing to do. This is exceedingly simple. A child might hear his parent's command, might admire the clearness of his voice and the perspicuity of his words, but what of his approval if he did not obey and do as told?”⁵ The point Paul is making is this: all men stand accused by the law of nature, the conscience and the memory. These three witnesses for prosecution will render everyone without excuse when they stand before God's tribunal.

IV. GOD'S JUDGMENT IS ACCORDING TO THE GOSPEL (2:16)

Paul is seeking to drive people from their false hopes. This section of the epistle has been described as “a general statement of divine principles of judgment, made in order to destroy the refuge of lies.”⁶ God's judgment will deal with outward conduct but also secret or hidden things. This is a reference to the secret motions and motives of the heart (cf. I Samuel 16:7; Psalm 139:1-2; Jeremiah 17:10). This is clearly stated as well by Jesus (Matthew 6:4, 6, 18). This will occur on the appointed Day of Judgment. Note the role Paul gives the Gospel. Some think this awkward or strange. But the Gospel does *not* preclude the thought of judgment, as Morris has written, it demands it. “Unless judgment is a stern reality, there is nothing from which sinners need to be saved and accordingly no ‘good news’, no gospel.”⁷ Over the last few years people like Norman Shepherd, N.T. Wright and their followers in what is called The Federal Vision have radically departed from the classic Reformation understanding of this text. This passage has been interpreted in a variety of ways.⁸

- A. Direct Contradiction.* Some hold that Paul is setting forth two completely incompatible ideas. It is not easy to think that he would lose sight of a central tenet in the middle of his argument. In any case the view has not commended itself widely; it so obviously does not fit the passage.
- B. Purely Hypothetical.* Others think that Paul is not speaking of the way things are, but setting out in forthright terms the way things would be apart from grace. But Paul says God “will render,” not “would render.” His words point to a fact, not a hypothesis. However, this interpretation does have some validity, as Shedd observes, “That any man will actually appear before this tribunal with such an obedience, is neither affirmed nor denied, in the mere statement of the principle. The solution of this question must be sought for elsewhere in the Epistle.”⁹
- C. Law, Not Gospel.* Paul is expounding the law, not the gospel. To be sure there is, Paul affirms, even for Christians, a final judgment to pass through (II Corinthians 5:10). But the works that are taken into account in that judgment are the *product* of justifying faith and not the *basis* for justification itself. In addition, the fact that this verse is

introduced to confirm and explain the reason for the Jew's condemnation in v.12b also indicates that its purpose is not to show how people can be justified but to set forth the standard that must be met if a person is to be justified. And this standard, as Paul indicates in Romans (3:31; 8:4), is not a "doing" of the law, however great the number of works and few the number of failures, but a "fulfilling" of the law that is possible only "in Christ" and through the work of God's Spirit (cf. 2:28-29). As Calvin paraphrases, "If righteousness be sought from the law, the law must be fulfilled; for the righteousness of the law consists in the perfection of works."¹⁰

D. *The Entrance and the Life.* The Swiss commentator Godet puts it this way: "justification by faith alone applies to the time of *entrance* into salvation through the free pardon of sin, but not to the time of judgment... God demands from [the sinner], as the recipient of grace, the fruits of grace," (he further says, "faith is not the dismal prerogative of being able to sin with impunity").¹¹ A variant of this position sees the reference to goodness of life, not however as meriting God's favor but as the expression of faith.

E. *Justification Does have to do with Works.* The "doing of the law" refers to a faith-oriented obedience (covenantal nomism). But as Moo observes, "But there is insufficient evidence that Paul uses this phrase to mean anything different from doing 'the works of the law' or 'the works' to which he denies the power to justify (3:20, 28; 4:2). Moreover, while there may be NT precedent for applying *DIKAIOS* to vindication at the final judgment, in which works indicate the presence of faith (cf. James 2:20-26), Paul does not usually use the verb this way. For him, *DIKAIOS* denotes the verdict of acquittal pronounced by God, a verdict that rests, on the human side, on faith alone."¹²

CONCLUSION: There will be no escaping the day of God's judgment. It is coming, and with each passing moment it draws closer. God *must* judge sin—all sin. He can do no other. He is holy and righteous in all that He does. How will you fare before Him? What will you do when He calls you to account? The Gospel message declares that Jesus Christ, God's own dear Son, died for sinners. He was judged in their stead. He atoned for their sins. Heed the words from Augustus Toplady's famous hymn: "When I soar to worlds unknown, See Thee on Thy judgment throne, Rock of Ages, cleft for me, Let me hide myself in Thee."

ENDNOTES

¹ We are experiencing in the culture at large and within the ranks of evangelicalism, a hermeneutical crisis. Stanley Grenz, a professing evangelical theologian who teaches at Regent College, urges Evangelicals to develop a new paradigm for understanding the Christian faith. Evangelicals, Grenz says, must shift from a creed-based-propositional understanding of their faith to one that is more in touch with the Post-modern world. Part of this Post-modern approach would entail revamping our definition of truth and require us to locate authority in the "community of faith" rather than in the Bible. Among other things this new hermeneutic tells us that the meaning of any particular passage depends not on what the Biblical author meant but on how the text functions for the reader. Thus the text may not be objectively and universally authoritative but is culturally conditioned. For a critique, cf. D.A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Zondervan, 1996), pp.443-489 and R. Albert Mohler, Jr., "Contending for the Truth in an Age of Anti-Truth" in *Here We Stand: A Call from Confessing Evangelicals*, eds. J.M. Boice and B.E. Sasse (Baker, 1996), pp. 63-68.

² Adolf Schlatter, *Romans: The Righteousness of God* (Hendrickson, 1995), p. 48.

³ Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* (IVP, 1988), p. 111.

⁴ S. Lewis Johnson, Jr., *Romans: Believers Bible Bulletin* (Believers Chapel, 1980), p. 4.

⁵ James Stifler, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Revell, 1949), p. 31.

⁶ W.H. Griffith-Thomas, *St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans* (rpt. Eerdmans, 1962), p. 81.

⁷ L. Morris, *op. cit.*, p. 129.

⁸ I have summarized these from L. Morris, *The Epistle to The Romans* (IVP, 1988), p. 148.

⁹ W. G. T. Shedd, *A Critical and Doctrinal Commentary on the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans* (rpt. Klock & Klock, 1978), p. 45.

¹⁰ As cited by D. Moo, *Romans: The Wycliffe Exegetical Commentary* (Moody, 1991), p. 144. Calvin goes on to say: “The sense of this verse, therefore, is that if righteousness is sought by the law, the law must be fulfilled, for the righteousness of the law consists in the perfection of works. Those who misinterpret this passage for the purpose of building up justification by works deserve universal contempt. It is, therefore, improper and irrelevant to introduce here lengthy discussions on justification to solve so futile an argument. The apostle urges here on the Jews only the judgment of the law, which he had mentioned, which is that they cannot be justified by the law unless they fulfill it, and that if they transgress it, a curse is instantly pronounced upon them. We do not deny that absolute righteousness is prescribed in the law, but since all men are convicted of offence, we assert the necessity of seeking for another righteousness. Indeed, we can prove from this passage that no one is justified by works. If only those who fulfill the law are justified by the law, it follows that no one is justified, for no one can be found who can boast of having fulfilled the law.” *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries VIII* (rpt. Eerdmans, 1973), p. 47.

¹¹ F. Godet, *Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans* (rpt. Zondervan, 1970), p. 96.

¹² D. Moo, *op. cit.*