

ROMANS

2:1-29

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Taught by Simeon Forder on Sunday morning, 12th February 2023 @ Deal Christian Fellowship

Reading: Luke 18:9-14

Introduction

We are studying our way through the 45th book in the Bible - Romans - the first of Paul's letters that we find in the *order* of books in the New Testament, written between 57-58 AD (also making it one of Paul's earliest letters), written after his letters to the Thessalonians and Galatians, and around the same time as his letters to the Christians in Corinth, where he is now writing this letter from, to the Christians in Rome.

Chapter overview of Romans

- **Chapters 1-8:** Christian doctrine
 - Sin (1-3), Salvation (4-5), Sanctification (6-8)
- **Chapters 9-11:** Israel
 - Israel - Past (9), Present (10), Future (11)
- **Chapters 12-16:** Practical Christian living
 - Practical Christianity

As a quick reminder of the layout of this book, the first 8 chapters focus on Christian doctrine (that is what we believe), while chapters 9-11 deal largely with Israel, and the final 5 chapters are very practical - instructing us how to live as Christians.

Here in these opening 3 chapters we've already seen Paul start to address sin, and in a sense, this is the lowest part of the book - for it's deeply challenging, so long as we're not ignorant of what it says. It's dealing with the very worst part of our character - it's dealing with *our* sin. But as we move through the subsequent chapters Paul will build point after point until we reach the highest point of the book, indeed one of the mountain tops of scripture where he asks "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" and concludes that *nothing* "shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord." And we *should* look forward to getting there.

However, don't make the mistake of thinking "why don't we just skip ahead to that". For the good news of Jesus dying for us only makes sense if we know *why* He died for us. It's like this - imagine you had a phone call from your doctor out of the blue saying he or she wanted you to start some new treatment to save your life from a terminal disease. Your first response wouldn't be "give it to me" - it would be "hang on, what on earth are you talking about? - I feel fine!" because as far as you know, there's nothing wrong with you.

That's what Paul does here. He shows how everyone has fallen short of God's standards; starting in chapter 1 with the unrighteous man, before here in chapter 2 he deals with the self-righteous man, and then in chapter 3 concluding that we have *all* fallen short of God's standards - showing that God's law doesn't help us, but rather shows us how helpless we are. Not only because it reveals how wicked our actions are, but also how wicked our thoughts are. And that will make the good news of the following chapters make sense.

As we start to understand this, we find that God's law has a function - that is, it has something that it is going to do to us. We read in Galatians chapter 3...

Galatians 3:24

Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith.

So - God's law is the very thing that brings us to Christ. What the law does is reveal our sin to us. It shows us our need for a saviour, just like a mirror shows you how dirty you are and that you need a wash. And so increasingly we see how amazing it is that there is indeed a way to be saved from the punishment due to us, for we cannot make ourselves clean in God's sight. That's the very opposite to the Roman and Greek cultures of appeasing the gods.

Overview of chapter two

So then, as we look at chapter 2, we are going to consider the self-righteous man. Breaking the chapter down a little more we see...

Overview of chapter one

- v1-16 - Self-righteousness is inexcusable too
- v17-24 - It is not having the law, but keeping it that is righteous

- v25-29 - Circumcision without holiness is worthless

In the first 16 verses, how self-righteousness is just as much of a problem as unrighteousness. We'll read that it is inexcusable. Then in verses 17-24 we'll see that the law only helps us if we keep it. And in the final 5 verses Paul will say the act of circumcision means nothing if there is no holiness.

Chapter two

So, let's dig into this chapter. Prior to this, Paul showed the depth of sin that the world has sunk to. However, the temptation is to look at those things listed in chapter one and think - that's not me! I'm a good person, really. I mean, I'm not Hitler or Stalin or Putin. But we don't give ourselves an honest appraisal. Our sin always looks worse on others.

In chapter one Paul said that the unrighteous are in trouble before a just and holy God. Now he'll say the self-righteous are in the same trouble. We all have the same predicament. We read:

Romans 2:1

Therefore you are inexcusable, O man, whoever you are who judge, for in whatever you judge another you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things.

In case you're thinking he's only speaking to men, he is not - for the Greek word used for *man* here is **anthropos** - part of where we get our word anthropology - which refers to a human being, whether male or female. Just as we use the English term *mankind* to speak to both sexes.

And let's be clear, Paul *doesn't* say, "because you're a hypocrite, what the unrighteous man is doing is actually OK." No - he says "You're sinning as a hypocrite, just as the unrighteous man is sinning - and you're both out of God's will". Here he says the self-righteous man is inexcusable, just as he said the unrighteous man is without excuse back in chapter 1 verse 20.

Of course, this is the sort of verse that unrighteous men love to quote out of context. Just as they do with John 8:7 where Jesus said to those wishing to stone to death the woman caught in the act of adultery; "He who is without sin among you, let him throw a stone at her first." But they neglect to note there that Jesus then said "Go and sin no more", just as they fail to note all that precedes and follows this verse here in Romans.

While we are not to be judgemental, it doesn't mean we are not to have good judgement. And To propose we should say nothing about sin is completely unBiblical.

So, what Paul is addressing here is not the calling out of sin, but a self-righteous attitude that considers oneself better and more worthy than another, just as the Pharisee did toward the tax collector in Luke 18 that we read earlier. And I suggest that if we are found standing on a street corner shouting at people, telling them they are sinners, without *any* explanation of grace, or acknowledgement that we've only been saved by grace ourselves, we are not only being disingenuous - we are in fact, being self-righteous.

What should our heart show, then, to those who are unrighteous? It is not condemnation, but compassion - that we might share with them the gospel. What should our heart show to those who are self-righteous? Also compassion - that we might show them how their perceived righteousness is as filthy rags, and they need a Saviour too. Because we read...

Romans 2:2

But we know that the judgment of God is according to truth against those who practice such things.

While the possibility exists that the self-righteous man preaches against the very sins he *knowingly* commits himself, it is often the case that he picks on that which he, in his pride, believes he is not guilty of. But God will not hold you or I to account according to our standards, but according to His standards. And He will not draw the line at your actions, but at the thoughts and intents of your heart. You will not gain favour with God for not committing adultery in the physical sense, if you are secretly watching pornography, or exchanging flirtatious messages with someone other than your spouse. God will hold each one of us to account.

When preaching in Athens, Paul noted:

Acts 17:30-31

Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent, because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead."

Indeed, God will judge the whole world according to *His* standards. While many would *gladly* believe that that murderers and rapists will be judged by God, they believe there is no need for God to judge them - but that won't change the fact that God *will* judge *everyone* according to the truth of His Word - both the unrighteous and the self-righteous.

Romans 2:3

And do you think this, O man, you who judge those practicing such things, and doing the same, that you will escape the judgment of God?

This week I started reading Jeremiah, one of the Old Testament prophets, and it's been incredible to me to see the similarities to opening 2 chapters of Romans. With regard to the self-righteous, we read there in chapter 2 verse 35...

Jeremiah 2:35

Yet you say, 'Because I am innocent, Surely His anger shall turn from me.' Behold, I will plead My case against you, Because you say, 'I have not sinned.'

In other words, God will reserve no special treatment for you because *you* think you're a good person. Your self-righteousness will never save you. Only God's righteousness applied through the blood of Jesus Christ is able to do that, because it will be God Himself that will bring His case against you. And you won't be able to escape.

Think of it like this. If you break a man-made law, such as those set by our Parliament, there are 7 ways in which you can escape the punishment you deserve:

Possible ways of escape from the law

1. Your offence will not be discovered
2. You may escape beyond the jurisdiction of the court

3. After arrest, there may be a legal technicality that will cause breakdown of legal proceedings
4. You will face an unjust judge or jury
5. If found guilty, you may appeal to a higher court
6. After conviction, you may escape from prison and stay undercover
7. The wrong person gets convicted in your place

Now consider how those apply when God is your judge. He is God - there is no way that He doesn't know what you've done, for He even knows your thoughts. And there is nowhere in the universe you can go to escape His jurisdiction - He created all we see... it is all His. Given that God is Holy and perfect, you cannot hope a legal technicality will let you off, nor that He will be unjust - as rather, He will see that justice is done. That leaves the certainty that you'll be found guilty - but unlike a human court, there is no higher authority to appeal to. And there is no escape from the eternity in Hell that is the sure destiny of all who have sinned. So the only remaining hope you have is that the wrong person gets convicted in your place.

And that final option is indeed what our entire hope is based on. Not on the good we have done. Not on God overlooking our sin. But in justice being done, through Jesus dying in our place. Now we start to see how amazing God's grace is, right?

But Paul warns...

Romans 2:4

Or do you despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance?

God has been very patient with us. And He has been incredibly kind to us. We were entirely without hope, given that we had sinned against Him. But as Paul notes later in this letter:

Romans 5:8

But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Knowing all that Christ suffered, not because He deserved it, but that we did, should leave us speechless. And the knowledge of what we've done, and what He's done should lead us not merely to remorse, which acknowledges "I broke God's rules", but repentance that says "I broke God's heart". God's goodness, His holiness, is not a stick to beat others with. It is what leads us to Him.

But Paul says the self-righteous man has failed to see his need to repent.

Romans 2:5-6

But in accordance with your hardness and your impenitent heart you are treasuring up for yourself wrath in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, who "will render to each one according to his deeds":

That is, the self-righteous man so stubbornly refuses to accept that he could *possibly* have done any wrong, that he stores up wrath from God, Who will one day judge him for each and every sin that he has committed. God will not be unfair.

And here Paul is now going to contrast what awaits those who do good with those who do evil. But we should keep in mind something we will read in chapter 3, that “there is none righteous, no, not one” and “there is none that does good, no, not one”. So really Paul is revealing the sorry state of the self-righteous sinner here. God will be fair to those who have lived righteously - but the problem is, no-one has. Including the self-righteous. We read...

Romans 2:7

eternal life to those who by patient continuance in doing good seek for glory, honour, and immortality;

Is this saying salvation is by works? Not at all. Rather, Paul is saying that one day all unbelievers will stand before God at the Great White Throne judgement that we read of in Revelation chapter 20 - and they will be judged according to how they have lived. If any are found to have lived a perfect life, without sin, then they will enter into Heaven for eternity. However, the reality, and the problem, is that no-one has done good. And we continue...

Romans 2:8-11

but to those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness—indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish, on every soul of man who does evil, of the Jew first and also of the Greek; but glory, honour, and peace to everyone who works what is good, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For there is no partiality with God.

That is, it doesn't matter if you're a Jew or Greek, black or white, Asian, European, American, Australian or from any other continent or nation. It doesn't matter whether you grew up in a Christian home or not, whether you have spent much time in church, or no time at all. It doesn't matter if you are a student of God's law or if you have never read the Bible. It doesn't matter if you are a Pharisee or a tax collector. If you have ever disobeyed God in any regard, you are in trouble. Your background, culture, social status, employment status, or good works will offer you no protection from the judgement you'll face for your evil works.

God is impartial - noted here, as well as in Deuteronomy, 2 Chronicles, Job, Acts, Ephesians, Colossians, James and 1 Peter. He cannot be swayed by who you are. How you have *lived* will determine whether you are innocent or guilty before Him - and, since we know all of us have sinned, we are all in need of a Saviour.

Romans 2:12-13

For as many as have sinned without law will also perish without law, and as many as have sinned in the law will be judged by the law (for not the hearers of the law are just in the sight of God, but the doers of the law will be justified;

Without the law, we still have our conscience that will indict each one of us. We still innately know that murder is sin. That violence is sin. Likewise, those that have full knowledge of the law won't receive any privileges for holding it in their hands, when they've not kept it in their hearts.

So either way, we are guilty before God. We are not guilty based on whether we've heard the gospel or not - we're guilty based on whether we've sinned or not.

Romans 2:14-15

for when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do the things in the law, these, although not having the law, are a law to themselves, who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves their thoughts accusing or else excusing them)

That is, if, without the law of God, mankind concludes that murder, adultery, rape, and more are wrong, then they show how the law is indeed written in their hearts.

Now some try and dispute this, such as one anthropologist - Margaret Mead - who was famed for reporting how Polynesian cultures, before the influence of Western society, traded husbands and wives freely, and everyone was continually happy. However, that's simply not the case - for her interpreter later revealed how she was sold lies by the people she studied, and they would tell jokes about her at night, laughing at all the false information they were giving her.

The conscience indeed bears witness of right and wrong, put there by God Himself. And there is no evolutionary explanation for this. Why do we instinctively know that it is wrong to lie? or to murder, or steal or commit adultery? Of course, there are many who like to ignore their conscience, But that does not mean it is not there. And as we read in chapter 1 - if you want to live unrighteously, God will give you over to it. He will let you have at it.

But there will be a day of reckoning. God will judge not only our actions that others see, but by even the secrets that He sees.

Now, you'll have noticed verses 13-15 are in brackets to give us deeper understanding - but reading from verses 12-16 we understand the flow of what is being said...

Romans 2:12

For as many as have sinned without law will also perish without law, and as many as have sinned in the law will be judged by the law

Romans 2:16

in the day when God will judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ, according to my gospel.

That is, we won't be able to honestly stand before Him and say "I didn't know that it was wrong to do X!" And we should take note of this - the secrets of men. You know, God knows everything that we do, say, and think. And that leaves us totally exposed as sinners before a just and holy God. And now, Paul is going to really break down the case of the self-righteous man...

Romans 2:17-20

Indeed you are called a Jew, and rest on the law, and make your boast in God, and know His will, and approve the things that are excellent, being instructed out of the law, and are confident that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of babes, having the form of knowledge and truth in the law.

And so Paul is playing to the ego of the self-righteous Jew: "You think you have *all* these things figured out. You think you can teach others how to live." However...

Romans 2:21-22

You, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself? You who preach that a man should not steal, do you steal? You who say, "Do not commit adultery," do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples?

While Paul is speaking to the Jew, there is such application for us here. Is there hypocrisy in *your* life? If, as a Christian, you're telling others how they must turn from their wicked ways, yet you are wicked yourself - then don't you see the problem? Don't you realise you shouldn't do these things either? Again, our sin always looks worse on other people. Paul gives 3 examples.

We might loathe those that steal, but do we play fast and loose with our work expenses, or paying tax? Or do we hoard that which God has given us rather than giving it back to Him for His purposes? That's the trap Israel fell into that God addressed through Malachi:

Malachi 3:8

"Will a man rob God? Yet you have robbed Me! But you say, 'In what way have we robbed You?' In tithes and offerings.

We might look down on those that commit adultery - but do we look with lust? Do our eyes wander as we watch TV shows? Do we have any friendships or working relationships that are inappropriate?

And while you might even mock those who worship cows or a statue of Buddha, do you not set up idols of family, friendships, money, power, career, and more in your own life?

Paul continues...

Romans 2:23

You who make your boast in the law, do you dishonour God through breaking the law?

You see, the Jews were so proud of their law - that God had given them the law. Yet they failed to keep it and as a result dishonoured God. And the implication of that was...

Romans 2:24

For "the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you," as it is written.

That was the resulting reputation that the Jews had - that one minute they were hot, another they were cold. One minute they are worshiping God, the next they are worshiping idols, and putting other things before God. And the kicker is that Paul says "as it is written". Referring to possibly Ezekiel 36 verses 20 and 23. God knew they would act this way.

But, before we get all self-righteous thinking how Israel strayed from God so often - we need to realise that this is us too. We've even sung about this - "I say on Sunday how much I want revival, then on Monday, I can't even find my Bible". And we know that's true.

So, how consistent are we as Christians? Do our hearts glorify God as much in traffic, or in the supermarket as they do when we are worshipping Him on a Sunday morning? How do our colleagues or our school friends look at us? What about the other parents collecting their children from the school gates, or our neighbours? Do they see us saying one thing and doing another? Do we cause them to speak disapprovingly of God?

I've seen Christians act in such an ungracious way that you would not know they are Christians at all. What kind of message are we sending if we do this?

Hypocrisy in the life of a Christian always causes those who don't know the Lord to speak badly of Him - not only of you. We see far too many people scarred by this, saying "I was hurt by someone at church, now I don't go at all". Now that can be a ridiculous excuse, for you wouldn't stop going to all restaurants because you had a bad experience in one, but sometimes our actions and example can have a lasting and profoundly negative effect on others and how they see God.

And sin in our lives gives the skeptic, the cynic, the unbeliever a reason to not become a Christian. Let us not cause people to speak or think badly of Christ because of how we live.

Paul continues...

Romans 2:25

For circumcision is indeed profitable if you keep the law; but if you are a breaker of the law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision.

That is, the law is great... if you keep it all. But if you don't, it won't help you - it won't set you apart, and in fact will leave you in the same predicament as the rest of the world.

Romans 2:26-27

Therefore, if an uncircumcised man keeps the righteous requirements of the law, will not his uncircumcision be counted as circumcision? And will not the physically uncircumcised, if he fulfils the law, judge you who, even with your written code and circumcision, are a transgressor of the law?

What does all this mean? Consider this analogy - If I am a faithful husband, then my wedding ring is a symbol of that, and good one - it says to others "hands off, I'm Sian's husband", and it reminds me that I have cut off all other opportunity for romantic relationship. However, if I were an unfaithful man, then my wedding ring would be as useless as a chocolate teapot.

However, if another man were faithful to his wife, and honourable in all his conduct, then that separation, that cutting off all other romantic opportunity, would speak far more to others than wearing a wedding ring ever would. Are rings worthless? No. But the *symbol* of faithfulness is only of benefit if there *is* faithfulness.

And so in a similar way, circumcision was to be an outward sign of what was to be an inward reality - and an illustration of God's dealing with the flesh. Cutting away of all that isn't holy.

Romans 2:28-29

For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh; but he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter; whose praise is not from men but from God.

This, of course, has such a parallel to believers baptism too - which is your own free choice to be baptised as an outward expression of an inward change. But if there has been no change on the inside, then Baptism is quite frankly a waste of time. God is interested in your heart. And baptism without belief is just a bath.

Conclusion

Sadly, the church at large has failed in it's duty to share the gospel correctly by allowing so many to become involved in the church as an institution. There are likely thousands if not tens of thousands in our country alone who have arranged flowers, welcomed people, run church cake sales, done all manner of good works but have never repented of their sin, and never put their faith in Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and Saviour. Rather, they are relying on their self-righteousness to give them eternal life. But the heart of the problem has always been the problem of the heart, which the Bible describes as desperately wicked. We are not to be self-righteous do-gooders. God doesn't want pharisees, he want's disciples. Those that live by faith, with good works following. Whose praise is of God, not of men.

Application questions

This week, consider these questions as you go home:

- Do you look down on others sin with pride, or compassion?
- Are you more worried about what God thinks, or people think about you?
- Do your friends, family, or colleagues speak well about Jesus because of you?

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