

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR THE WEEK OF APRIL 21-27

Message Title: ARE YOU THE JUDGE?

Message Text: ROMANS 2:1-16

Before Your Small Group Meeting:

- Watch Pastor John's Message
- Read Romans 2:1-16

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is one thing that challenged you from the message this week?
2. Read Matthew 7:1-5. Why do we find it so easy to point out the sin in others but not be broken over our own sin?
3. What impact does a hypocritical attitude have on a Christian's ability to share the good news of Jesus Christ?
4. When was the last time your stubbornness prevented from experiencing something great?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Commentary on Romans 2:1-16

2:1-4 Chapter 2 begins with "therefore," a term that normally introduces the result of that which immediately precedes. In this case, however, the connection with chap. 1 is not clear. The final section of that chapter (vv. 18-32) established the need for righteousness among Gentiles. By the time we reach 2:17 it is obvious that Paul was addressing his remarks to Jews. But to whom were the intervening verses directed? Some think Paul was for the moment addressing his remarks to certain Gentiles known for their superior morality. Others think the verses refer to anyone, Jew or Gentile,

who was inclined to judge others. Stott says Paul “seems to be confronting every human being (Jew or Gentile) who is a moralizer, who presumes to pass judgment on other people.” However, the entire second chapter probably was a warning to the Jews not to assume that their national identity was sufficient to provide them a right standing before God.

Earlier we learned that Gentiles who rejected the revelation of God in nature were without excuse (1:20). Now we learn that Jews who passed judgment on their pagan neighbors had “no excuse” (2:1). In the very act of condemning others they automatically condemned themselves because they were guilty of doing the same things.⁵⁹ In fact, they “habitually practice” (Montgomery) them. It is psychologically true that people tend to criticize in others those negative traits of which they themselves are guilty. Psychologists call this “projection.” Nothing blinds a person more than the certainty that only others are guilty of moral faults.

Jesus warned against condemning others. In the Sermon on the Mount he said, “Do not judge or you too will be judged” (Matt 7:1). The kind of judging both Jesus and Paul referred to was not a sane appraisal of character based on conduct but a hypocritical and self-righteous condemnation of the other person. In the same context Jesus told his followers to watch out for false prophets (v. 15), who are to be recognized by their fruit (vv. 16–20). That would be difficult, to say the least, apart from determining which actions are moral and which are not. Evaluation is not the same as condemnation. It is the latter that passes sentence.

In v. 2 Paul established a point of agreement with his Jewish readers. Both agreed that God is absolutely right in passing judgment on the wickedness of those described in the latter half of chap. 1. God’s judgment is “based on truth,” that is, it is “utterly impartial” (Phillips). It is in accordance with the facts. But now comes the catch. The Jews were guilty of the “same things.” So to pass judgment on the sins of others, while at the same time practicing those very same sins, was to pass judgment on themselves. Paul’s readers would have to agree that they could not “escape God’s judgment.”

We are reminded of the encounter between David and the prophet Nathan (2 Sam 12:1–14). David agreed that the rich man who killed the poor man’s pet lamb deserved to die. But having passed judgment on another, he quickly learned from Nathan that he had judged himself. “You are the man!” declared the prophet. You have taken the lamb (Bathsheba) of the poor man (Uriah) for your own pleasure. In judging another, you have judged yourself. God’s judgment is based on truth. It is impartial and makes no distinction between rich and poor, king or pauper.

The answer to the question in Rom 2:3 (“Do you think you will escape God’s judgment?”⁶⁴) would have to be no. That God judges fairly (v. 2a) leads necessarily to the conclusion that those who do what they condemn in others must receive the same penalty.

Romans 2:4 comprises two parallel questions. Honest answers to each would have to be yes. “Are you not, by your hypocritical involvement in the very sins you condemn in others, holding the kindness, tolerance,⁶⁶ and patience of God in contempt?” “Don’t you realize that in withholding punishment, God is trying⁶⁸ to lead you to repentance [paraphrase]?” God’s gracious dealing with his own people should have taught them of his kindness and patience. But, true to human nature, such things are rather quickly forgotten. They are “known” yet “forgotten” and must be brought to mind repeatedly.

2:5–6 Instead of turning from their sinful ways, those to whom Paul was writing continued to resist God’s kindness. Their stubborn hearts were hardened.⁷¹ Ironically, the delay in divine retribution gave them even more time to accumulate a store of wrath. This wrath will be brought against them

on the day when God's righteous judgment will be revealed. The wrath of God spoken of in 1:18 is being revealed in the present time. In 2:5 it is eschatological. It belongs to the end time when God will reward righteousness and punish wickedness. That day of wrath is prophesied in Psalm 110 and recognized as being fulfilled in Rev 6:17. This truth has serious implications. The person who knows but resists truth does not go away from the encounter morally neutral. Truth resisted hardens the heart. It makes it all the more difficult to recognize truth the next time around. Life is not a game without consequences. By our response to God's revelation we are determining our own destiny.

God, whose judgments are absolutely fair and just (v. 5), will render to every person on that day of final reckoning that which is appropriate in accordance with his or her deeds (v. 6). Here we have a basic principle of divine judgment. God will "give⁷⁵ to each person according to what that person has done" (cf. Ps 62:12; Prov 24:12; Matt 16:27). But you say, I thought Paul taught clearly that a person is saved by faith. That is true. A bit later he affirmed that a person "is justified by faith apart from observing the law" (Rom 3:18). But in the immediate context Paul was not teaching how we are made right with God but how God judges the reality of our faith. Faith is not an abstract quality that can be validated by some spiritual test unrelated to life. God judges faith by the difference it makes in how a person actually lives. A. M. Hunter is right in saying that "a man's destiny on Judgment Day will depend not on whether he has known God's will but on whether he has done it." That is why Jesus taught that those who respond to the needs of the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the sick, and the prisoner will be rewarded with eternal life; but those who fail in these down-to-earth tasks will "go away to eternal punishment" (Matt 25:31-46).

2:7-8 These verses consist of two couplets, the second of which follows in reverse order and expands the first (A-B-B-A). In v. 7 we learn of "those who ... seek glory, honor and immortality." They are set over against "those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil" (v. 8). These descriptions help us understand what Paul said about God judging on the basis of a person's actions. The first group has directed their lives toward the qualities that ennoble humans. By a steadfast commitment to doing good they seek to share in the glory, honor, and incorruptibility that finds its source in God. But not the second group. Their lives are controlled by selfish ambition. They have rebelled against truth and allowed themselves to be persuaded⁸⁰ by that which is wrong, "always resisting the right and yielding to the wrong" (Williams).

And what are the destinies of these two radically different groups of people? Paul said that God will give eternal life to the first, but for the second there will be wrath and anger.⁸² Actions determine destiny. Some have questioned whether Paul was saying that if people pursue the right goal in life (glory, honor, and immortality) they will be rewarded with eternal life apart from faith. When the question is posed in this fashion, the answer obviously is no. Paul did not teach mutually contradictory truths. It is beside the point to interpret the verses to mean that if a person did persist in good deeds God would grant eternal life because no one can live a perfect life. It is better to assume that only those who have placed their trust in God through Jesus Christ are capable of, or even want to, seek godliness. Paul was clear that "no one seeks God" (Rom 3:11).

2:9-10 These verses reverse the order of vv. 7-8. They treat first the evildoer and then the one who does good. In addition the order within each statement is reversed. This puts the emphasis on the results of what is done rather than on the one who acts. For the first group there will be "trouble and distress." This group consists of those who persist in wrongdoing.⁸⁶ As the wise man of Israel declared, "There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death" (Prov 14:12;

16:25). This is true of all people. As Paul put it, "First for the Jew; then for the Gentile." Ironically, priority in blessing (Rom 1:16) results in priority in judgment. Israel was privileged to be the first to receive the revelation of God. But spiritual privilege carried with it spiritual responsibility. Failure brought "trouble and distress." Concerning Israel, God said, "You only have I chosen of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your sins" (Amos 3:2).

The end result is radically different for those who do good. For them there will be "glory, honor and peace." The redeemed will be participants in the glorious reconciliation between God and humans. People will bask in the honor that God so rightly deserves and that, at the dawn of eternity, will be universally recognized (Phil 2:10-11). They will experience the *shalom*, the peace, that only God can give.

The section ends with the assertion that God shows no favorites (v. 11). Ethnic background or racial privilege will not deter God from blessing those who do good or from punishing those who do evil. As Paul stated earlier (v. 6), God will reward each person on the basis of what that person has done.

2:12 Once again Paul compared two groups of people—those who were apart from the law and those who were under the law. The Gentiles were "apart from the law" in the sense that they had no responsibility to obey the commands and ordinances given to Israel through Moses. Israel was "under the law" because they were the recipients of God's revelation through Moses, the great law-giver. Although both groups had sinned,⁸⁹ the basis for judgment was different. The Gentiles would "perish apart from the law," while the Jews would be "judged"⁹¹ by the law." The Mosaic legislation will play no part in the judgment of those who have not heard. God judges the "heathen" on the basis of the light they have received. In the case of those who have heard, however, the law will serve as the standard for judgment. From a Jewish standpoint the Gentiles, who were outside the law, would certainly perish. But Jews considered themselves to be safe because of the law that had been given to them. They were familiar with passages such as Wis 15:2 ("Even if we sin we are thine"). What Paul was about to tell them was that obedience to the law, not possession of the law, was required.

2:13 Paul said that it was those who obeyed the law who were declared righteous, not those who merely heard it read. Obviously Paul was not teaching salvation by works. Later, in his summary of this entire section (3:20), Paul clearly stated that "no one will be declared righteous in [God's] sight by observing the law." In the immediate context Paul adopted for the moment the perspective of Judaism. What needs to be added is that no one could ever keep the law so perfectly as to be considered righteous before God. People have a fatal tendency to substitute passive agreement for action. But God does not pronounce people righteous because their doctrine is correct. Only those who do what God requires are declared righteous (cf. Lev 18:5). Hearing what the law requires is only the first step. Unless hearing becomes doing, it has no particular benefit (Jas 1:22-23, 25). This point would be broadly accepted among the Jews. Rabban Simeon (son of Gamaliel I, under whom Paul studied) is cited as saying, "Not the expounding [of the Law] is the chief thing but the doing [of it]: and he that multiplies words occasions sin" ('Abot 1.17).

2:14 At this point Paul inserted a parenthetical remark, underscoring for his Jewish audience the critical importance of actually doing what the law said. Whenever Gentiles⁹⁷ by natural instinct did what the law required, they demonstrated the existence of a guiding principle within themselves.

Twice in v. 14 Paul stressed that non-Jewish people had no specific knowledge of the Mosaic legislation. They did “not have the law.” Yet in certain cases they did instinctively the kinds of things required by the Jewish law (e.g., they cared for the sick and elderly, showed kindness to strangers). They were, as Paul put it, “a law for themselves.” That does not mean that law was irrelevant in their case but that their conduct revealed a general knowledge of God’s requirements for a principled and virtuous life. Not only did God reveal himself to them in nature (Rom 1:19-20) but he created them with a sense of moral obligation. This moral impetus encouraged a conduct that at many points overlapped what was taught in the laws of God given to Israel.

2:15 The Gentiles by their conduct showed that what the law required was written on their hearts. Paul was not saying that God’s specific revelation to Israel through Moses was intuitively known by pagan peoples. He was saying that in a broad sense what was expected of all people was not hidden from those who did not have the revelation given to Israel. Their own conscience acknowledged the existence of such a law.¹⁰¹ Thrall suggests that Paul was saying that in the pagan world the conscience performed roughly the same function as the law performed in the Jewish world. The conscience, however, is not a norm for action but an inner witness that judges whether or not an act is right or wrong.¹⁰³ It is customary to point out that in v. 15 Paul distinguished three ways in which the pagan was apprised of moral responsibility—the law, the conscience, and thoughts that accuse or defend. But since Gentiles were “apart from the law” (v. 12), law in their case hardly could function for them in that sense. Further, two parallel clauses with which the verse closes are closely related. Although the conscience is not specifically the thoughts that accuse and defend, it is not wrong to say that they represent the way they function. The second clause clarifies and explains the first. In other words, one ought not to separate the conscience from the inner thoughts that alternatively accuse or defend. The picture is that of people inwardly debating an issue of moral conduct.

2:16 The NIV considers vv. 14-15 to be a parenthetical remark. Thus v. 16 continues the thought of v. 13 and specifies the time when God will declare righteous those who have obeyed the law. The Greek text is less clear. It appears to link v. 16 with what immediately precedes. This latter alternative is preferable and means that one’s conscience will bear witness on the day when God judges¹⁰⁷ the things that they have kept secret. God’s judgment will be fair because there is absolutely nothing, not even the secrets of people’s hearts, that are not known to him. That judgment will be “through Jesus Christ” in the sense that God has entrusted all judgment to the Son (John 5:22). This agrees with the gospel Paul preached. He called it “my gospel” because it was given to him by revelation from Jesus Christ (Gal 1:12).

Paul’s attachment to the gospel was profound. Some of his harshest words were for those who would twist the good news for personal benefit (see Gal 1:7-9). The gospel remained at the very center of his ministry of reconciliation. To the Corinthian church he wrote that he was resolved to know nothing while he was with them “except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor 2:2). In a day when so much preaching has sold its birthright for a pot of psychological porridge, the need for renewed focus on the essential gospel has never been greater. The gospel is to be *your* gospel. God has entrusted it to *you* (2 Cor 5:19).¹

¹ Mounce, R. H. (1995). [Romans](#) (Vol. 27, pp. 87–97). Broadman & Holman Publishers.