

Sermon for Sunday, October 4, 2009
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EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT JUDGMENT
Romans 2:1-11

The members of a certain family were in a confessional mood, sometimes laughing at past mistakes, sometimes asking forgiveness for them. In that setting, one daughter made a surprising confession. When she was about eleven, she thought her baby brother was so cute when he cried and so cuddly when comforted afterward. She liked the cuddling so much, she decided to cause a few tears. When her parents went out for a short errand, she told her brother, "Mommy and Daddy didn't want to tell you, but they're never coming back." Big tears, big comfort. Talk about guilty pleasures! No wonder she wanted to confess! And the parents thought (judged incorrectly) that the big sister was good babysitter.

It's a principle that false condemnation is far worse than false acquittal. It's better that ten guilty men go free than that one innocent man be convicted. For many of us, this is our first judgment about judgment: it's evil to condemn the innocent. Our second thought: Even correct judgment is evil if it's delivered the wrong way at the wrong time by the wrong person. But there is more to say about judgment. Sometimes it's necessary and it can go wrong in more than one way.

1. A word to judges

Context: Last week, we heard God's indictment of human sin. We have offended God and sinned against Him by failing to worship Him as God or to glorify or thank Him for His gifts. Jews and Christians are most culpable because we have Scripture. But secular people - outsiders - are culpable because nature itself reveals the power and majesty of God.

Sin against God reaches its apex in idolatry, but we also sin against our fellow neighbors. We murder and gossip; we are greedy and envious.

A great many people get up caught up in sin. They wish they could stop. They feel both trapped and ashamed. They want to confess, but they're terrified – what will happen if they do and people know the way they lie, cheat, gamble or try to solve their problems with alcohol or drugs? It is truly sad.

But others are proud of their rebellion; they sin boldly, cursing God. They lie, cheat and steal and are proud of it. "Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them" (1:32).

This is very theological, but Paul is a real man speaking to real people. By the time he wrote Romans, he had proclaimed the faith for almost thirty years. For about fifteen years he had done pioneering work with Gentiles. He had talked about the problem of sin in synagogues, lecture halls and town centers hundreds of times – usually in the style of a town hall meeting or a seminar. People objected and argued with him on the spot. By now he knows how people will respond, whether to agree or disagree. He starts with some who will agree. His first point: When we judge others, we don't do anything noble; we don't accomplish anything.

On contrary, when we judge others, we condemn ourselves. After Paul completes his indictment of human sin, he knows some readers will agree: "Yes, Paul, some people are terrible sinners. They deserve God's wrath for their idolatry, adultery, and depravity. You say they don't even care, they deserve judgment."

Paul's cheering section would include some virtuous pagans who find the sins of their culture repulsive. Philosophers like Seneca and Epictetus lamented the morals of their day. But Paul's fellow Jews

were his main supporters. They would agree that any idolaters, liars and murderers deserves judgment. They might add, "And I'm so thankful I don't sin like that." Paul replies:

When we judge others, we condemn ourselves (2:1-4)

"You who pass judgment on someone else... are condemning yourself because you who pass judgment do the same things." How so? First, when we pass judgment, we accept the principle that judgment is just or fair or necessary (2:1, 3).

We accept and use a standard by which we condemn certain sins. In 2:2, the phrase "now we know" means "We agree on this." (Paul uses the phrase when he knows his readers agree: vs.3:19, 8:28, 1 Timothy 1:8). If we believe that God is a judge and uses His law to make proper judgments, then we are liable to judgment, too. When, as you think, you join God in judging others for their sins, you judge yourself:

"So when you, a mere man, pass judgment on them and yet do the same things, do you think you will escape God's judgment?" (2:3). Above all, when we "pass judgment on someone else... we condemn ourselves, because we "do the same things" (2:1). Of course, we don't literally commit every sin we condemn – murder, robbery, etc. But we do commit the kinds of sins we condemn in others. We condemn murder and we get very angry. We condemn theft and we're envious. But sometimes we do exactly what we condemn:

- So you hate gossip; do you ever make guesses and accusations about others? Do you ever tell tales to people who do not need to know?
- You hate it when people come late to your meetings; do you ever come late to the meetings of others? (I never do!)
- You who hate braggarts and preening, do you ever brag or preen?
- You who hate fast lane abusers, do you ever cruise aimlessly in the fast lane?
- You who become angry when others make promises they do not or cannot keep, do you ever make foolish promises?
- You who scorn flirtation, do you ever flirt?

You who hate interruptions, do you ever interrupt others? I once knew a woman who found it hard to let anyone finish a sentence. but woe to the person who tried to resume their thought. Her credo: "Stop trying to talk while I'm interrupting you." (Am I being judgmental when I say that?)

When we start to feel self-righteous about our virtue, we can get irritable and censorious. "It's easier catching people doing the wrong thing than affirming the many more things they do right... I've taken on the role of an Olympic judge with score cards in hand, and I'm not giving out any 10s." (Scotty Smith)

So the first thing people say when they hear Paul's description of sin is "I agree. It's terrible. We see things the same way. It's so lamentable, but at least we see the evil of it all." Paul says, "Yes and that plus a cup of coffee will get you an appointment with Jesus on judgment day. After all, you know judgment is essential."

2. A word to the complacent

The first comment is "I agree." The second is "Wait a minute, I thought God is kind, merciful and gracious." As one person said "God has to forgive; that's His job." There is a famous 1948 sermon about grace by Paul Tillich:

"We cannot transform our lives, unless we allow them to be transformed by [the] stroke of grace. It shall not happen so long as we think we have no need of it. Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness. It strikes us when we walk through the dark valley of [an] empty life. It strikes us

when we have violated another life, a life which we loved, or from which we were estranged. It strikes us when our disgust for our own being, our indifference, weakness, hostility, and lack of direction become intolerable to us. It strikes us when, year after year, the longed-for perfection of life does not appear, when the old compulsions reign within us... when despair destroys all joy and courage. Sometimes at that moment a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying: "You are accepted. You are accepted, accepted by that which is greater than you, the name of which you do not know. Do not ask for the name now; perhaps you will find it later. Do not try to do anything now... Do not seek for anything; do not perform anything... Simply accept the fact that you are accepted!"

We resonate with Tillich's description of our misery. And it's true that grace strikes at the darkest hour, but he says we are accepted by a name we do not know and should not seek, we pause. Then we note that he doesn't mention God or Jesus. Later he says "to be struck by grace.. does not mean that we suddenly believe that God exists, or that Jesus is the Savior." No, he says, "It would be better to refuse God... Christ and the Bible than to accept them without grace."

Slowly we realize that for Tillich, sin is "what's wrong with the world" and "grace" and "God" mean "whatever brings me healing." We are accepted, but by whom? No agent is specified. This is important because Tillich promotes the idea that God is a principle, not a person. Do you ever think of God that way? As the principle of grace or love? God is love and love is God?

But God is more than the idea that sinners can be forgiven, that the broken can be mended. Jesus was the son of Joseph and Mary. He lived over there. He made tables. And the Father is just as personal as the Son. He plans, creates, grieves and rejoices. God is a person, not a principle. He does not forgive because that's His job. He actually won forgiveness. He was born here, worked there, prayed in a garden we can still visit, etc.

He forgives, even though he grieves over sin, because he is compassionate: "The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love... As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him" (Psalm 103).

You hear the difference. Tillich said grace strikes the restless and the alienated. The Bible says God has compassion on those who fear him, those who honor and love him, "who keep his covenant and obey his precepts" (Psalm 103:8, 11). That is, we at least try.

Paul warns people "who show contempt for the riches of [God's] kindness, tolerance and patience." We show contempt for God when we make Him a principle that strikes. We respect God when we believe He makes just judgments.

God's patience leads to repentance.

Paul continues: "God's kindness leads you toward repentance" (2:4). Don't misunderstand His patience. We survey the world and see sin going unpunished. We can think, "So far God hasn't punished the celebrities and politicians, hasn't punished my neighbor or me. Therefore, He will never punish. He is supremely tolerant. He overlooks everything."

No, says Paul, wrong conclusion. God's patience grants us time to repent. His patience is judgment postponed, wrath restrained. He gives us time and opportunity time to hear His voice, His call to repent and to find mercy.

God's justice leads to judgment

But one day judgment will come. The pressure in the volcano builds and builds and one day it blows. The Nazis had their way for a few years, but the world rose against them. It was the same with Stalin and his friends.

You have seen brothers at play when the younger brother is in a certain mood. They are building something; the older brother is serious. But the young brother leans on the older, touches his hair, drools in his hair. He touches his brother's tower, pushing things into the wrong shape. The older knows he must not hit his little brother; he remains calm. But the pressure builds and suddenly, pow!

The biblical illustration is the flood. At that time, the human race was very small in number, but great in sin. "The Lord saw how great man's wickedness... had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time" (Genesis 6:5).

Therefore, the Lord called Noah to build an ark, a long process. For one hundred years he built a great wooden box, suitable for one thing – floating. While he worked, one day was the same as the next. No sign hinted at the coming rain. We imagine that his neighbors mocked him; we know they ignored him. Jesus says they ate, drank, worked, as if their entire lives stretched before them. They "knew nothing until the flood came and took them all away" (Matthew 24:38-39). So the Lord gives us ample time to repent and return, not to a principle of "forgiveness", but a person, the living God.

But if we never take the opportunity to repent, and ask for grace, what then? We will eventually die and stand before the righteous God.

3. God's judgment will be just and impartial

Justice and impartiality

When we do stand before God he will judge with perfect equity. He shows no favoritism. The term "favoritism" is a compound from "receive plus face." That is, God isn't swayed by appearances. A pretty smile makes no difference, a powerful build make no difference.

There is trouble for everyone who does evil and glory, honor and peace for all who do good. Paul says God judges "Jew and Gentile" (2:9-10). We might say Europeans, Africans and Asians. The song says, "Red and yellow, black and white". Still, we will face judgment and 2:6 catches our attention: God will repay or "render to each one according to his works." We ask, "How can God repay or judge everyone according to their deeds? What happened to grace?" Good question.

Judgment according to deeds

The gospel says we are justified by faith. Yet the Bible consistently says God will judge our works: our deeds, words and thoughts. Why? Above all, God sees our deeds and they matter. That's why Jesus says, "he will reward each person according to what he has done" (Matthew 16:27). Twenty passages from prophets and apostles say the same thing. God will search, examine, call to account and render what is due. (Proverbs 24:12, Psalm 62:13, Isaiah 3:10-11, Jeremiah 17:10, 2 Corinthians 5:10, 11:15, 2 Timothy 4:14, 1 Peter 1:17, Revelation 2:23, 20:12.)

This is not salvation by works. It's a reaffirmation that our words and deeds follow our heart commitments. The only affirmation of faith that counts is the one followed by deeds. Jesus said, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord' will enter the kingdom... but only he who does the will of my Father."

Consider friendship. It's great to hear someone say, "You are my friend." But if your friend never calls, never spends any time with you, what good is it? We recognize a friend by acts of friendship.

Just so, real faith is known by deeds. Not perfect deeds, but *some deeds* that show a genuine effort to follow Jesus. Prayer, worship, acts of costly obedience and sacrificial love are such deeds.

Sadly, we all know people who affirm the creeds and orthodox theology. They go to church at times. They are pleasant, respectable folk. Yet "there is nothing distinctively Christian about their behavior. They may be decent neighbors and perform a little community service. But there is no real self-sacrifice, no costly obedience, no good deeds that go against their grain, nothing that challenges their well-designed life." ¹

Paul doesn't say this to alarm us. Judgment by works is no problem if we love God. When Psalm 62 says, "O Lord, you are loving. Surely you will reward each person according to what he has done", he means that as a comfort. How so? David wrote Psalm 62 when he was in a bag of trouble, surrounded by enemies and liars who blessed him to his face and cursed him behind his back (62:3-5). He called out: "My soul finds rest in God alone... He alone is my rock... and my fortress; I will never be shaken" (62:1-2). Men may be faithless, but God is strong and faithful. He "will reward each person according to what he has done." (62:12).

Because David trusts God, he knows his works will reflect that - and God will see it. David expected the Lord to **see** his loyalty. And so should we, as we **give him something to see**. He will forget no good word or deed.

This reminds me of a woman I know. When she was young and newly married, she worried about opening her home. Her possessions weren't nice, money was tight and she fretted over the duties of a hostess. But year by year she changed. Now people are in her house all the time, catching a meal, sleeping in a spare bed. She hardly seems to notice the labor and she welcomes all who come to her door so that she has played "second mom" to dozens of people.

She barely recognizes that she does all this, but I do, and the Lord does even more. So then: while we give thanks that the Lord loves us more than we deserve, we may be more lovable than we realize. "Grace meets us where we are but does not leave us where it found us." (Anne Lamott)

Our passage ends in 2:7-11 with the question: what are you aiming for?

God judges according to our goals and the deeds that follow

Romans 2:7 makes a surprising offer: "To those who by persistence in doing good, seek glory, honor and immortality, God will give eternal life." Meaning what?

Option #1: Paul is offering salvation by works. If we could save ourselves by trying hard, what is the point of Jesus' sacrifice for our sins?

Option #2: It's a hypothetical offer. If you can persist in doing good... But no one can. Therefore, we need Christ.

Option #3: Paul speaks of believers who seek the glory that reflects God's glory and goodness. They seek eternal life by faith. God doesn't grant life to those who deserve it, but he does grant it to us as we seek it in context of covenantal love and obedience.

But those who are selfish or self-seeking and reject the truth receive wrath and anger. The selfish seek positions for the advantage they may gain. They take jobs strictly for the money, not to serve clients, but

¹ Dan Doriani, *James*, page 80

to gain their money and live well. They are builders who want to construct profitable homes, not livable ones. They are teachers who pick the job not for the kids, but because they get the whole summer off. They are doctors who care more about payments than patients.

For the selfish, for evildoers, there will be trouble and distress [now and later].

For those who do good, glory honor and peace [Now and later].

Notice: God says people get what they want. If you want yourself, you will get yourself – but not God and all His blessings. But if you do good – if you do the ultimate good, trusting God and following Him, and if you "seek glory, honor and immortality" then God will give glory, honor and peace" (Compare 2:7 and 2:10)!

Here is the question: What is your goal in life? What do you seek? What do you want to do with your life? Don't leave today without starting to answer that question. It isn't easy, but it's important. What do you seek? Selfish gain? A life of love? A life of glory? Is that too much? How about honor? Eternal life?

People seek glory and meaning in many ways. In China in 1900, one became a mandarin, an official. In China in 1960, a Communist party official. In America in 1900, a captain of industry. In America in 1960, a movie star, baseball star. Some hope to marry well, some aim for power. What about you?

You know you need an answer. God does call us to account. Paul says and we admit that there is a need for judgment. We all meet God one day. He patiently gives you time to prepare. There are lots of ways to do that: Repent, believe, do good from a spirit of love and faith. But you also prepare by knowing what you seek: Glory, honor, peace, eternal life? What do you seek, my friends, what do you seek?