

Sam Storms

Enjoying God Ministries

Romans #10

January 24, 2021

The Justice and Kindness of God:

Can Both Be True?

Romans 2:1-5

To the extreme frustration of most preachers, sermons are frequently forgotten moments after they are delivered. I ought to know, I've preached my fair share of truly forgettable sermons!

But there are a handful of sermons that are quite unforgettable. In fact, there are a few that are so profound and powerful that they live on in the memories of men and women for generations. If you were to ask an informed student of American religious history, "What are the two most unforgettable sermons ever preached in this country," he most likely would answer: "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," by 18th century Puritan pastor, Jonathan Edwards, and "Payday, Someday," by 20th century Southern Baptist pastor R. G. Lee.

Edwards's sermon was preached at Enfield, Massachusetts, on July 8, 1741. Needless to say, I wasn't present for it, but I have read it numerous times. However, I was present on one occasion when R. G. Lee preached, "Payday, Someday." It was at First Baptist Church in Midland, Texas, and I was about 11 or 12 years old. There is nothing unusual about that, given the fact that Lee preached that message over 100 times during the course of his ministry. One interesting fact is that my mother served as Lee's secretary for some four years at Bellevue Baptist Church in Memphis, Tennessee, and was responsible for typing the manuscripts for several of his books.

But the important point I want to make has to do with the reason why these two sermons are so widely known and remembered. The reason is their theme. Both messages concern the nature and reality of divine judgment. Now, you might think that, if anything, sermons on divine judgment would be the kind that people would deliberately forget. And yet they linger. It may be due in part to the vivid imagery that Edwards and Lee employed, or perhaps the mystery surrounding the notion of hell and eternal punishment. But I am inclined to believe that *such sermons are unforgettable because they are*

undeniable. It is the inescapable, uncomfortable truth of divine judgment that accounts for our inability to forget these sermons.

I seriously doubt if my message today will prove to be unforgettable, but like the sermons of Edwards and Lee, it too is concerned with divine judgment. But not only judgment. It also concerns God's kindness and patience and longsuffering. Our focus in this passage, or should I say the focus of the Apostle Paul, is on both God's justice and his kindness. And as I asked in the title to this message: Is it possible that God can be both?

The Flow of Paul's Argument

Earlier in our series in Romans I pointed out that beginning in Romans 1:18 and extending all the way until Romans 3:20, Paul is taking on the role of a prosecuting attorney. In these chapters he is building a case against the entire human race. He is amassing undeniable evidence for the universal sinfulness of all mankind. His conclusion is reached in 3:9b where he says, "For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin." His aim in presenting the evidence of universal rebellion against God is "so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God" (Rom. 3:19b).

In making his case that the whole world is under the righteous judgment of God for sin, he began in 1:18-32 by indicting the Gentile world. He repeatedly made use of the third person plural: "For what can be known about God is plain to *them*" (Rom. 1:19a). "So *they* are without excuse" (Rom. 1:20b). "*They*" became futile and "*their*" foolish hearts were darkened (Rom. 1:21), and so on all through the remainder of chapter one.

But when he comes to Romans 2, he shifts from the third person plural to the second person singular. "*You*" have no excuse (v. 1), every one of "*you*" who judges, for "*you*" condemn yourself (v. 2), and so on. Most believe, and I agree, that this is one indication that whereas Paul was describing the unbelieving, pagan Gentile world in Romans 1:18-32, now in Romans 2 he turns his attention to the Jewish man or woman.

You may wonder why Paul makes use of the second person singular rather than the second person plural. After all, if he is charging Jews with sin and hypocrisy, wouldn't he have addressed them as "you all"? The answer is found in a literary device that we need to understand, because it will appear again and again all through Romans. It is called a **diatribe**. In a diatribe, an author will create an imaginary opponent with whom he will dialogue. He will put questions in the mouth of this conversation partner, and on occasion will portray the individual as posing questions and even objections to Paul. That is what he is doing here.

It was typical in Paul's day for Jews to look down on Gentiles, regarding them as far more sinful than themselves and thus much more likely to incur God's displeasure. So here in Romans 2 Paul is describing the moralistic, self-righteous Jew who is, at were, standing at Paul's side as he describes the sins of the Gentile world, and says, rather arrogantly, "Yeah, that's right Paul! You tell 'em. Those dirty Gentiles are so wicked. They deserve everything coming to them."

Simply put, from this point through Romans 3:8 Paul is addressing the Jewish man or woman who thinks that he/she is above the sins of chapter one. This is the ethnic Israelite who mistakenly believes that simply because he/she is an Israelite that they are exempt from judgment. God will overlook our sin, so thought many Jews, because we are the physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. We are members of the covenant God established with our forefathers. We possess the law of Moses. We get a free pass. Bottom line: "God will hold us to a different and lesser standard than the Gentiles because of his covenant with us."

You may recall that John the Baptist called their hand on this. When the religious leaders came to him for baptism he said, "You brood of vipers! . . . And do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father'" (Matt. 3:7, 9). As Paul will say repeatedly all through Romans, heritage doesn't save you; your ethnicity doesn't save you; obeying the Law of Moses doesn't save you; only faith in Jesus will save you. You Jewish people, male and female, young and old, are in just as much danger as those Gentiles whom you despise.

Why? Because when you pass judgment on them you bring condemnation on yourself, for "you practice the very same things" (Rom. 2:1b). You habitually judge others for sinful actions that match your own conduct! Just as Paul said of Gentiles back in Romans 1:20, that "they are without excuse," he now says the same thing of Jews, right there in 2:1 – "Therefore *you* have no excuse."

The Basis of Judgment (v. 1)

The only way that anyone might escape judgment is if they are morally perfect, without sin, never having committed the very sins for which they judge others. But Paul's point in v. 1 is that by judging others, Jewish men and women are bringing condemnation upon themselves because they "practice the very same things." Paul most likely has in view the sins he just described in Romans 1:29-31, things like coveting, malice, envy, strife, gossiping, slander, boastfulness, being foolish, ruthless, and so on.

It is, therefore, primarily the sin of hypocrisy that Paul has in mind. You stand there high and mighty, pointing your finger of disdain and contempt at Gentiles who commit these sins, all the while that you commit them yourselves.

Now, I need to slow down here and address one question that everyone asks. ***“Is it always wrong to pass judgment on another person?”*** Didn’t Jesus himself say in the Sermon on the Mount, “Judge not, that you be not judged” (Matt. 7:1). Yes, he did. But Jesus was not forbidding all instances of judging. We know this from the extended context.

Non-Christians (and not a few misguided believers as well) use this text to denounce any and all who venture to criticize or expose the sins, shortcomings, or doctrinal aberrations of others. One dare not speak ill of homosexuality, adultery, gossip, cheating on your income tax, fornication, abortion, non-Christian religions, humanism, etc. without incurring the wrath of multitudes who are convinced that Jesus, whom they despise and reject(!), said that we shouldn’t judge one another!

Many think this verse demands that we never exercise ethical discernment in our evaluation of others, indeed that we never evaluate others at all. We are told we must always manifest complete and uncritical tolerance and affirmation toward every conceivable lifestyle or belief.

The irony, of course, is that in judging us for judging others they are themselves violating the very commandment to which they want to hold us accountable! To insist that it is wrong to pronounce others wrong for embracing a particular belief or moral practice is itself an ethical position, a moral judgment. To insist on uncritical tolerance of all views is extremely intolerant of those who embrace a different perspective.

But Jesus is not telling us to suspend our critical faculties or that we must always turn a blind eye to sin and error and refuse to discern between good and evil.

Let’s start with the immediate context. Virtually all of the Sermon on the Mount both preceding and following this text in Matthew 7 is based on the assumption that we will (and should) use our critical powers in making ethical and logical judgments. Jesus has told us to be different from the world around us, to pursue a righteousness that exceeds that of the Pharisees (because theirs is a “bad” or inadequate righteousness), to do “more” than what unbelievers would do (because what they do isn’t enough, another judgment), to avoid being like the hypocrites (now there’s a word of judgment if ever I saw one!) when we give, pray, and fast, etc.

Not only this, but immediately following this word of exhortation in Matthew 7:1 Jesus issues two more commands: don’t give what is holy to dogs or pearls to pigs (again, powerfully critical words of judgment!), and beware of false prophets (there it is again!). “It would be impossible to obey either of these commands without using our critical judgment. For in order to determine our behavior toward ‘dogs’, ‘pigs’ and ‘false prophets’ we must first be able to recognize them, and in order to do that we must

exercise some critical discernment” (Stott, 176). Furthermore, such critical judgments can only be made if there is an absolute standard against which such behavior can be measured.

As for the rest of the NT, I simply direct your attention to such texts as Matt. 18:15-17; Rom. 16:17-18; 1 Cor. 5:3; Gal. 1:8; Phil. 3:2; Titus 3:10-11; 1 John 4:1-4; 2 John 9-11; 3 John 9-10; and especially John 7:24 where Jesus himself says, “Do not judge according to appearance, but *judge with righteous judgment*.”

What, then, does Jesus mean here in Matthew 7? Having already denied that Jesus is prohibiting all judging and critical discernment, we must still be extremely careful in this arena. The temptation to be sinfully judgmental is very real and powerful. Christ’s call to holiness in Matthew 5-6, the call to be different, can lead to arrogance and a condescending attitude to others if we forget that all that we are is wholly of grace.

It would appear that Jesus is prohibiting that sort of judgmental criticism which is *self-righteous* (in that we think we are wholly free of the sin which we so readily see in others), *hyper-critical* (in that it often is excessive and beyond what is necessary to achieve the end in view), and *destructive* (in that it does not edify or restore but tears down the person whom we attack). He is prohibiting that sort of judgment which we pass on others not out of concern for their spiritual health and welfare but solely to parade our alleged righteousness before men.

But we must not stop with Matthew 7:1, for Jesus has much more to say on this subject in the verses that follow. The reason he gives for not judging others in a self-righteous and censorious manner is that “with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you” (7:2). *All criticism must be preceded by confession*. Before we point out a fault in others let us first confess its presence in our own lives.

This principle applies to any number of situations, such as denouncing the external, visible sins of the flesh, like adultery, theft, murder, in order to excuse or minimize the internal, less visible sins of the heart, such as jealousy, bitterness, greed, or lust. Related to this is the tendency to point out the faults of others precisely to throw them off the scent of our own sin. This form of judgment is nothing more than self-justification. We think to ourselves that if we can just make known to others the gravity of their sins, we will by comparison come out smelling like a rose.

Again, far from forbidding all criticism and rebuke, Jesus actually commands it in v. 5. What he opposes is judgment that precedes rather than follows self-examination. “Again, it is evident that Jesus is not condemning criticism as such, but rather the criticism of others when we exercise no comparable self-criticism; nor correction as such, but rather the correction of others when we have not first corrected ourselves” (Stott, 179).

There is, on the other hand, an opposite and equal danger. In v. 6 Jesus says, “Do not give dogs what is holy, and do not throw your pearls before pigs, lest they trample them underfoot and turn to attack you.” Here Jesus points out the danger of being overindulgent and undiscerning. In loving our enemies, going the extra mile, and not judging unjustly, there is the peril of becoming wishy-washy and of failing to make

essential distinctions between right and wrong and truth and falsehood. Whereas the saints are not to be judges, neither are they to be simpletons!

So, it is clear that both Jesus and Paul are not forbidding the passing of all judgment on the behavior of others. They aren't telling us it is wrong to tell others they are wrong. They are condemning and forbidding hypocritical, self-serving judgment in which we think ourselves innocent of the things with which we charge others when in fact we are guilty of committing the same sins. They are both addressing the bizarre and unbiblical belief that a person can get away with committing the very sins that he/she condemns in others.

The Justice of Judgment (v. 2)

We cannot quickly slip past v. 2, where Paul assures us that whatever judgment God brings to bear on sinful men and women, it is always accurate and fair. The words translated “rightly” in v. 2 is literally, “according to truth.” The point Paul is making, and one that ought to be reassuring to us all, is that when his judgment comes it is always accurate. There is never a miscarriage of justice in God's world. No one will be unjustly treated or falsely accused. Truth prevails in God's court.

Someone once pointed out that in our human courts, we all too often see arbitrary, capricious, and inconsistent verdicts rendered. For example, a crime may go altogether undetected, and thus the guilty go free. Or a person may flee the country to avoid prosecution. Or perhaps an exceptionally clever lawyer secures the release of his client on a little-known technicality. Or a person may be convicted, be sent to prison, only then to escape.

But “the judgment of God,” says Paul, is always, unchangeably, unalterably according to the truth of the facts as they exist. He judges on the basis of reality and never merely on appearance, regardless of whether one is a Gentile or a Jew. As Paul will say in v. 11, “For God shows no partiality.” Your tribe doesn't matter. Your political party affiliation doesn't matter. The color of your skin doesn't matter. The accent in your speech doesn't matter. Only the truth about your conduct matters.

The Certainty of Judgment (v. 3)

I know that some of you wish that I wouldn't say anything about divine judgment. So, why do I? Why do I run the risk of driving people away? I speak on it because it is real and inevitable and I love you too much to let you remain in ignorance of what you need to know to escape it. I speak on it because it is everywhere present in the Bible. Just three examples from the dozens I could quote will suffice.

“And if anyone will not receive you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet when you leave that house or town. Truly, I say to you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town” (Matt. 10:14-15).

“The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead” (Acts 17:31).

“it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment” (Heb. 9:27).

My conscience demands that I tell you the truth of Scripture on this.

There are always those who remain convinced that they will escape divine judgment. They labor to convince themselves that they haven't done enough bad to warrant being judged. Or they think that just as they have eluded justice on earth, they will weasel out of it on that final day when God holds all accountable. But Paul won't have it. Do you really “suppose,” he asks, that you will slip through the cracks? Do you really think that the failures of human justice and the loopholes that allow the guilty to go free in this life will obtain when you stand before God? No.

In a video posted to social media on Friday, January 8, in a clip from her weekly podcast, the secular Jewish comedienne and actress Sarah Silverman claimed that there is no hell. She said that she wanted to alleviate the fears of those who believe in eternal punishment. “If you're in the range of my voice right now,” said Silverman, “and you're someone who believes [in] and fears hell, let me release you of that fear right now. There is no hell. I promise you.” “I mean, what do I know?” Silverman, added, seemingly recognizing that she could be wrong. However, she followed with, “But I believe it with my whole heart.”

Well, there you have it. Don't worry, Sarah Silverman has decided she doesn't like the idea of God holding his creation accountable for their moral rebellion and idolatry and immorality, so the easy thing to do is simply declare that there is no hell. But the Apostle Paul begs to differ. Writing under the inspiration of God the Holy Spirit, he assures us all that no one will escape.

The Kindness of God (v. 4)

Silverman wasn't finished. She went on to say, “If there's a hell, may God strike me dead right now.” Because she did not die, Silverman smiled and said, “See, no God.”

Actually, no, Sarah. The fact that you were not struck dead on the spot is confirmation of the truth of what Paul says in v. 4. You have been extended time to repent. The very thing that leads you to conclude that God doesn't exist is one of the glorious truths about God! He is kind. He is patient. You don't deserve to be given opportunity to repent, time after time after time. But because God is infinitely rich in kindness and exercises forbearance and is incredibly patient, he doesn't strike you dead so that you will have yet another opportunity to recognize your sin, to come to grips with the inevitability of judgment, and to turn from your wickedness and put your faith in Jesus Christ.

God's "kindness," says Paul, has a purpose. He is withholding judgment as long as possible so that you will recognize the eternal jeopardy in which you have put yourself and turn to him, crying out for mercy and forgiveness. The fact that God doesn't immediately strike you dead, or anyone else for that matter, isn't because he has turned a blind eye to your sin. It isn't because he intends to excuse your rebellion. It isn't because he is indifferent to your contemptuous disdain for him. It isn't because he is weak. And it certainly isn't, as Silverman wants us to believe, because he doesn't even exist. It is because he is immeasurably more kind than you can possibly imagine. It is to stir your repentance. So don't presume upon this grace. Don't take it for granted. Repent! Now!

There is only one reason why any of us are alive today, sitting up, breathing, thinking, eating, sleeping, and going to work. We owe this to the kindness of God. Don't presume upon it, says Paul. Seize this glorious opportunity and embrace Jesus as your only hope.

The Revelation of God's Wrath (v. 5)

Paul makes use of vivid imagery in v. 5 to describe the horrid consequences of presuming upon God's kindness. Some people faithfully save their money, piling up wealth for the future. Elsewhere in the NT we find this language used of storing up treasure for one reason or another (see Matt. 6:19-20; Luke 12:21; 1 Cor. 16:2; 2 Cor. 12:14; James 5:3). But here Paul envisions the unrepentant person storing up ever-increasing expressions of God's wrath that will eventually be brought to bear against him on the day of judgment.

Try to envision in your mind a dam with water rising at a constant rate, the rain never ceasing. People in the valley below take for granted the restraint on the water that the dam provides. They ignore the obvious cracks in the dam wall. They think nothing of the rising waters behind it, until the day when the dam breaks and all are swept away. Thus, when Paul spoke back in Romans 1:18 of God's wrath being revealed against the unrighteousness of Gentiles, he now makes it clear that all human beings are included, Jews no less than Gentiles.

Conclusion

I asked a question in the title that I need to answer: Is it really possible for God genuinely and sincerely to be both just and kind? We have a hard time believing it could be true because we see so little of this in people. There are many who are extremely strict and judgmental, always quick to condemn and point out the shortcomings and sins in other people. We often say of them, "There isn't so much as an ounce of kindness in that person's heart." And all too often that is true.

But then there are also those who are so compassionate and loving and tolerant that they are almost incapable of holding others accountable for their behavior. They gloss over faults and excuse the sins that others commit. They almost never speak words of judgment or make moral distinctions for fear that they might hurt the feelings of the guilty party.

Rarely, if at all, do we find a man or woman in whom there is perfect harmony between justice and kindness. One almost always seems to triumph over the other. But not with God!

God really is both! Look at how Paul describes our God. In v. 2 he refers to "the judgment of God." Again, in v. 3 he mentions "the judgment of God." And in v. 5 he mentions the "wrath" and "righteous judgment" of God. If that were all you read about God you might envision him as an inflexible, uncaring ogre who revels in nothing but consigning people to hell.

But he also describes God as rich or wealthy or immeasurably abundant in "kindness" (see also Eph. 2:7; Titus 3:4) and "forbearance" and "patience" and how God desires that you and I come to repentance. In

Romans 11:22 Paul speaks explicitly of both “the kindness and severity of God; severity toward those who have fallen, but God’s kindness to you.”

Be sure you understand this one thing. By indicting both Jew and Gentile of sin and immorality and idolatry Paul is telling us that there are no isolated or insulated pockets of people anywhere in the world, at any time of their existence, who are exempt from divine judgment. You might be a powerful and wealthy CEO of a Fortune 500 corporation or a cab driver or custodian who barely scrapes by on a minimal income. You might be a well-educated theologian or a high school dropout. You might be a pimp or a pastor. But one thing is clear: We will all stand before God and give an account of our beliefs and behavior.

The glorious good news is that if you can, on that day of judgment, honestly point to Jesus Christ and say, “I have nothing in my life on which I can rely, nothing to which I can point to secure your mercy; all I have is Christ,” you will never taste the wrath of God. As Paul said back in Romans 1:16-17, the one thing that will be required on that day is the one thing that none of us has and that none of us can produce on our own: the righteousness of God himself. But the gospel, says Paul, is the power of God to save, precisely in that because of Jesus Christ, his righteousness can become ours by faith alone.

What an amazing God is the God of the Bible, the only God! He is both just and kind. He is both gracious and righteous. He is both merciful and holy. He is both gentle and wrathful. He is both patient and pure. He is both loving and lawful. Would you want it any other way? Is he not worthy of your worship and gratitude and praise? If so, stand with me and tell him how good and glorious and kind and holy he is, all at once!