

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Romans – Jesus’ Gospel Sets You Free!

Finally, a Just Judge

(Romans 2:1-16)

Study #3

Introduction: The idolatry/injustice link...

I drove to Dallas after church last Sunday. While in Dallas I had a couple of meetings, visited with my twin sister, and attended a day-long seminar at Dallas Seminary led by Andy Crouch, titled “Recovering Our Creative Calling.”¹

I have been to a lot of these types of seminars over the years. Some of them have been decent. More of them have been pretty disappointing. This one was quite good.

One of the more provocative thoughts Andy brought had to do with the theme of injustice.

Among the things that God hates, it is clear that He hates idolatry. It is just as clear from lots of places in Scripture that God hates injustice. Andy Crouch’s contribution to my own thinking about injustice is the link between the two. Here is a summary of Andy’s thoughts about injustice:

- *Idolatry* is the worship of anything other than the one true God.
- *Injustice* is the idolatrous act of one person playing God in someone else’s life.

¹ Andy Crouch is a journalist and has written quite widely, most recently [Culture Making](#) (Inter-Varsity Press)

Injustice happens when someone lords it over someone else by way of an abuse of power OR when they help someone in a way that robs the “helped” of dignity.

The Bible is full of stories of idolatry. When it mentions idolatry, it condemns it out of hand as a monstrous evil. We got a taste of the Bible’s perspective on idolatry last Sunday as we considered Paul’s words at the end of Romans, chapter 1.

The Bible is also full of stories of injustice. Large parts of the Bible - the prophets and the Gospels, especially - are given to calls to God’s people to work for justice and rebukes of people who unjustly take advantage of others. God hates injustice and that may be because, as Andy Crouch suggests, it is a close cousin of idolatry.

This morning we are turning to one of the passages in the Bible that most clearly lays out a case for the justice of God. You and I long for justice in our world. We are torn up when we see injustice. All over the world we see injustices, sometimes in the highest places.

Paul assures us here that in the highest place, justice reigns. God is just and He is a completely impartial Judge.

Last Sunday’s sobering look into Scripture took us to the theme of the wrath of God.

Because God’s glory is easily seen in creation, we *should* all be drawn to worship and serve the one, true God. Sadly, we haven’t worshiped God. Truth be told, we have worshiped everything BUT God.

So, God has pours out His wrath on us. And the form His wrath takes is to “*give us over*” to what we want to do. This “giving over” leads to impure hearts, degraded passions, and depraved minds.

It is easy to envision someone reading Romans 1 and thinking to himself (or herself), “*Such people - idolatrous and immoral - deserve God’s wrath. Way to go, God!*”, thinking that they, personally, are exempted from any guilt for sin.

They think that they are doing just fine, thank you, because they obviously haven't sunk to the same level of depravity as those just mentioned who worship other gods, practice immoral behavior, and are covetous, disobedient to parents, unloving, and otherwise "sinners."

This is the moralist, and today, Paul deals with the moralist. His message to them? "*You're really not doing so great either, sport...*"

God's Judgment - on Those Who Sin (vv. 1-3)

Moralizing Judges Condemned. (v. 1)²

The perspective of the moralist

There were morally upright people in the 1st century just as there are morally upright people in the 21st century, too.

Our neighbors, generally speaking, are decent people who work, are committed to their families, don't cheat as a rule, and generally want to do what is right.

So are most of the people at our schools and at our workplaces, most of the time, generally good folks.

But, after writing about the way people have "exchanged" God's good order for one of their own making, Paul points an accusing finger at the person who thinks he's doing OK.

The culpability of the moralist

[1] Therefore³ you have no excuse, everyone of you who passes judgment, for in that which you judge another, you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things.⁴

² There are many who think that Paul is solely addressing the Jews as of verse 1 (Cranfield, Murray). However, there is a more obvious break at verse 17 where Paul makes a transition to speaking explicitly to Jewish concerns. Verses 1-16 deal with the more general thread of those who (Jew *and* Gentile) see themselves as essentially moral, and how God's judgment works in their case.

Let that sink in for a minute. The moralist - the guy who prides himself on being better than the sinners around him, the guy who tries hard to do right - is guilty of the same exact types of sins as the person he thinks is ten rungs lower on the absolute scale of sinfulness.⁵

And all who commit sins will be judged by God. But that is just what we would have expected, right? After all, that is only righteous.

"Practicing Sinners" Condemned. (vv. 2-3)

[2] And we know that the judgment of God rightly falls upon those who practice such things. [3] But do you suppose this, O man, when you pass judgment on those who practice such things and do the same yourself, that you will escape the judgment of God?⁶

The "judgment" in view

Back in chapter 1, God's wrath was expressed in terms of what happens on this earth and in this life (He "***gave them over***").

The thought here (v. 3) is of a future judgment after this life is over.

³ The "therefore" at the beginning of verse one points us back to what comes before, and builds toward the new point of this passage. It serves as a link between the passages. The thought is, "*I have been speaking about the judgment of God which falls on notorious sinners. You, also, who commit any sins, be they the same sins or not, are nevertheless guilty.*" In personal Bible study, it is always helpful to pause and think what the "therefore" is there for.

⁴ Another suggestion has been that in judging fellow sinners, the moralist has committed the most basic sin of idolatry, as he places himself on the throne to act in God's place.

⁵ As E. J. Carnell has written, "*Either the moralist underestimates the height of God's law or he overestimates the height of his own moral conduct.*"

⁶ Paul's reference here to "judgment" is not simply a reference to someone standing before God to determine guilt or innocence. He is speaking of a condemning judgment.

Yes, Paul is referring here to Hell, and the reality of Hell, eternal separation from God, the thought of NO SECOND CHANCE, is the most sobering truth found in the Bible.⁷

As we listen to the words of Jesus in the Gospels and to the apostles in the letters of the New Testament, it is inescapable that “Hell” is exactly what people who sin have to look forward to.

The judgment rightly falls on sinners

Bexar County judges who sentence others for burglary and tax evasion are not “above the law.” If it is discovered that one of our county judges is skimming off the top or extorting money from people who come to him for justice, he’ll be thrown in jail, too. He won’t be exonerated just because he judged others correctly.

It would be unjust to not judge that judge! And it would be unjust of God to dismiss charges against people who are generally moral, but who also sin.

So, judgment is coming for those mentioned in chapter 1 AND for the generally morally, good ol’ boy who sins. Everybody who sins is under the judgment of God.

But we don’t see the judgment yet. And not seeing the judgment yet, we might be tempted to believe that the judgment is not coming.

That would be a very wrong conclusion to draw, and Paul goes on to explain the reason for the delay of God’s judgment. The reasons are wrapped around three very powerful words.

The reason judgment is delayed (v. 4)

[4] Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and tolerance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance?

The Greek word we translate here “*kind*” was used to describe Jesus’ actions when He dealt with the woman who was taken in adultery. (John 8) He was *kind* to her, in dramatic contrast to the grotesque and cruel and unjust mistreatment of her accusers.

Second, God shows us *forbearance*. Forbearance has to do with refusing to instantly execute wrath.

God will not allow anyone to sin forever with impunity (i.e. - without paying the price), but He does allow a temporary reprieve from condemnation.

In a word, as Paul says here, God is *patient* with us. Patience is the way someone deals with you when he has it in his power to avenge himself, but chooses to not do so.

Paul would tell us, “*Don’t think that the fact that God has not punished you is a sign that God will not punish you.*”

The only reason His judgment does not hit NOW is because of His kindness, forbearance, and patience.

And for what purpose does He delay judgment? To what end is God holding off on the exercise of His judgment?

Why God deals with us as He does.....

It is to give us additional time to turn to Him, or, as Paul puts it here, to repent.⁸

⁷ C.S. Lewis writes of hearing preacher say from the pulpit once, “*If you do not flee the wrath of God and place your trust in Jesus Christ for salvation, then you will experience negative eschatological consequences.*” After the worship service was over, Lewis approached the man, and asked, “*Did you mean to say that if a person doesn’t place trust in Jesus Christ, they would go to Hell?*” The preacher nodded and said “*Yes.*” Lewis replied, “*Then why didn’t you say so?*”

⁸ Greek “*metanoia*” - literally “to change one’s mind.”

Kathy and I have a wonderful dog, Scout. Scout is a two year old, eighty pound puppy-at-heart. She loves it when we take her on walks around the neighborhood.

When walking Scout, we always keep her on a leash with a choke collar. Of course we keep the choke collar somewhat loose (as sort of an undeserved favor). But that looseness gives Scout the opportunity to stray from our side and to not “heel” - and she will, from time to time, stray.

When she strays, I jerk on the leash, which tightens the choke collar and pulls her back to my leg.

Our God has put us on a long leash. He has kindly given us the freedom to wander away from His side.

If we respond to that long leash by wandering away from Him, He will eventually have to jerk that leash. We will face His wrath for wandering.

It is far better for Scout to not stray. If she doesn't stray I won't have to jerk her back to my side. And it is far better for each one of us to respond to the freedom God has given us and run to His side NOW.

Paul is certainly not saying that everyone who experiences the kindness of God in this life is led to repentance, for that is clearly not the case. Everyone in this life does experience God's kindness, but not everyone comes to faith.

But God has shown everyone kindness, forbearance and patience so that everyone has a chance to turn to Him in trusting dependence, rather than continue on a self-serving and self-destructive course.

To this point, Paul has shown that all will stand before God's judgment. The notorious criminal and the morally upright will both be judged.

So...when the judgment comes, on what basis will God render His “guilty” or “innocent” verdict? Let's keep reading.

God's Judgment - an Impartial Evaluation of Works (vv. 5-11)⁹

Judgment is ALWAYS by Works (vv. 5-6)

[5] But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, [6] who WILL RENDER TO EACH PERSON ACCORDING TO HIS DEEDS.¹⁰

At the end of a long day playing poker or blackjack, a gambler eventually has to settle the score with the house. He'll either pick up his winnings or pay his debts to the house. So, at the end of a life, every one of us will answer to God for our deeds.

All debts eventually come due. And the judgment of God is always on the basis of works.

First, let's hear what happens to the person who “does good.”

“Working Out” Judgment by Works (vv. 7-10)

The ones who do good... (vv. 7, 10)

[7] to those who by perseverance in doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, eternal life...[10] but glory and honor and peace to everyone who does good, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

⁹ There have been at least ten different interpretations offered for this section (vv. 5-11). The most attractive to me is that Paul is arguing from the presuppositions of the Jew and of the moralistic Gentile, who sought justification on the basis of his works before God. Paul's point (chapter 4) will be that such an attempt to gain a right standing with God is impossible, and that “the one who does good” (absolutely and completely) in fact doesn't exist.

¹⁰ Paul's insistence that God will render to us according to our deeds, having already demonstrated that all people are guilty of sin, is tantamount to asserting that the only way a person CAN be justified is by some other way than works - namely by faith.

Now, I am going to tell you at the outset that there are several ways to understand what Paul is saying here.¹¹

And I am not mentioning this diversity of opinion solely out of insecurity. I just want you all to realize that there are some Bible passages that are, frankly, difficult to understand and tough to explain.

From time to time, you will come across a section of the Bible where there is not unanimous agreement among everyone as to a proper interpretation.

Usually, the passage in question won't involve a watershed of either lifestyle or doctrine, but we might as well admit it. There are different ways to read different passages.

This is one of those cases. And here is how I understand what Paul is saying at this point in Romans 2.

Picture someone who has hopes for eternal life based on how well he has lived. He pursues eternal life by doing good. And this person is REALLY good!

He doesn't sin. In fact, he has never sinned. (If he had sinned, he would fit in the category of those who "practice" sin.)

Here, I think Paul is sort of "playing along" with those who are seeking justification before God on the basis of their works.

So, with tongue firmly planted in his cheek, he says that IF someone doesn't ever sin - and he has just said that even the strictest moralist sins - he or she will have eternal life.

And what about those who do sin?

The ones who do evil... (vv. 8, 9)

[8] but to those who are selfishly ambitious and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, wrath and indignation. [9] There will be tribulation and distress for every soul of man who does evil, of the Jew first and also of the Greek

In view here are people who sin. These are the people who don't lead lives of 100% obedience to God's moral requirements.

This is the sobering truth that God doesn't grade on a curve. With God it is "pass/fail." Those who don't sin, pass. Those who sin, fail. And all those who fail will receive the wrath of God.

As it was in the case of those who do good, so here, there are no exceptions to the rule.

God is an impartial Judge who never plays favorites. Unlike in some classrooms where there are favorites, there are no "God's pets." He shows no prejudice against anyone and no favoritism toward anyone. There is no partiality with God.

No Partiality with God (v. 11)

[11] For there is no partiality¹² with God.¹³

I was with a small group of men recently, engaged in meaningful discussion. One of the men shared a particularly painful story of not receiving justice at his place of work. His employers weren't treating him fairly. It was a tough story.

¹² The Hebrew word for partiality derives from the same root that means "face." It means to especially turn one's face toward another for blessing or cursing in a selective way. Paul says that God is not like that.

¹³ The Jew of Paul's day typically thought that he would have unmixed reward in the afterlife.

¹¹ The commentaries I read listed ten different interpretations to Paul's words here.

At the end of his story I asked the rest of the guys present if they had ever been in a situation where an employer had treated them unfairly. Not surprisingly, every guy there raised his hand.

There have been times when I have been treated unfairly.

Perhaps you have been treated unfairly. Maybe it was because of your ethnicity, skin color, financial status, religion, age or something else distinctive about you.

You need never fear that God will deal with you unfairly. He will always be absolutely just. Not impartial. No prejudice. No favoritism. You will get exactly what you deserve from God.

Some people, having read Romans, or other portions of Scripture which speak about the Jews being God's chosen people, might conclude that God did, in fact, play favorites.

But Paul, writing as a Jew, assures us all that there is no immunity for the guilty Jew. No greater degree of reward or punishment is accorded the Jew. There is simply priority in terms of those with whom God deals first.

He will deal with the Jew first. But, Jew and Gentile, female and male, young and old, rich and poor, free and slave, haves and have-nots will be treated the same when it comes to evaluating their status for judgment. Everyone stands or falls before God on the basis of works.

That all makes perfect sense. God deals with everybody on the basis of their deeds. And He doesn't play favorites. There is no partiality with God.

But I can imagine a Gentile in the church at Rome reading what has been written thus far and still wondering,

“Well, of course, God should condemn Jews who sin. After all, they had the Mosaic Law. We Gentiles, though, should not face condemnation because we never knew what God expected from us.”

As if Paul anticipated this response, he addressed himself in the final verses of this passage to the two groups of people in the world: Those who do have the written record of God's Law, and those who don't.

Here, he deals with the issue of judgment for those who haven't had the advantage of knowing the Law of Moses. He is speaking to the situation of the Gentiles. (We'll consider the special case of the Jew next Sunday.)

God's Judgment - According to Law/law (vv. 12-16)

Obedience to the Law Justifies (vv. 12-13)

[12] For all who have sinned without the Law¹⁴ will also perish without the Law, and all who have sinned under the Law will be judged by the Law;¹⁵ [13] for it is not the hearers of the Law who are just before God, but the doers of the Law will be justified.¹⁶

Those who sin without or without the Law, perish (v. 12)

In view here, again, are the Gentiles who have not had access to God's written record. How will that group of people be judged?

Paul doesn't say that those who are without the Law perish without the Law, as if not having the Law of Moses was the basis for their culpability and guilt before God.

¹⁴ But, if they don't have the Mosaic Law, they must have some "law," for, as Paul says later (chapter 5 of Romans) where there is no law, there is no imputation of sin.

¹⁵ Reading this verse, John Murray says, "In the context of this chapter...there is undoubted allusion to the degree of its severity." That is, Paul's reference to "perish" for the one who does not have the Law is contrasted with "judged" for the one who does, judged being a harsher dealing because he had the greater light of revelation.

¹⁶ This is the first time - and not the last. - that the term "justification" is used in Romans.

He says that those “*who have sinned*” without the Law will perish. People who sin without the Law will perish - that is, they will experience the wrath of God.¹⁷

(Of course, those who have the Law of God, the Jews, will be judged by that Law, the point being that simply being a Jew doesn't mean that a person is saved. It is obeying the Law that is the thing.)

The person who pleads his case before the judge saying, “*I usually don't rob banks.*” or “*I agree that the law on the books regarding speeding is a good one*” is still punished if he speeds or robs banks.

Those who OBEY the Law are justified (v. 13)

The key to justification - gaining a right standing before God - is perfect, uncompromising, without exception, down to the last detail obedience to the Law. Only those who obey the Law are justified by the Law.

Paul is telling us how a person seeking justification according to his deeds can be justified. In a word, it is by being PERFECT.¹⁸

But, back to those who don't have the Mosaic Law...

How can God say that those without the Mosaic Law are judged guilty of sin when in order to be found guilty there has to be a broken law? Again, let's keep reading...

The Principle of law - for Those Without the LAW (vv. 14-16)

[14] For when Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves

¹⁷ There is no suggestion that any who are “without law” attain to the reward of eternal life. Paul doesn't even address the hypothetical possibility of someone without “law” not sinning.

¹⁸ “*Whether anyone will be actually justified by works either in this life or at the final judgment is beside the apostle's interest and design at this point.*” (John Murray) Paul will take up the theme of whether or not works can ever justify later in chapter 4. But for now, he wants us to recognize that nothing short of complete and total obedience to the Law even has a chance.

[15] in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them, [16] on the day when, according to my gospel, God will judge the secrets of men through Christ Jesus.

Picture a person who lives in a very remote part of the world, way out of touch with the “first world,” far from contact with other cultures (Papua New Guinea? somewhere deep in the Amazon jungle?). This person has zero access to the Mosaic Law or to any word about Jesus Christ.

Will this man be judged and condemned because he didn't keep the Levitical dietary stipulations? Is he lost because he hasn't responded to a Gospel he has never heard?

In a word, NO.

God holds people accountable for what they do with the truth that is accessible to them. Anything else would be unjust.

But Paul says that Gentiles who don't have the Mosaic Law still give evidence of being aware of “law.”

Every culture has some things it deems “right” and some things it deems “wrong.” Some cultures may differ from others about what those right and wrong things are. But every culture has those rules.

And there is, within every person, a moral sense. We refer to this moral sense as “conscience.” The person who breaks these “laws” and violates his conscience is guilty of breaking the principle of “law.”

Like a baseball umpire, our conscience doesn't make the rules. An umpire simply calls the play according to the rules of the game. Our conscience does not make the rules.

Our conscience simply brings inward pressure to bear on our decision-making process in the light of the existing rules.

God will not judge someone who has had no access to the Bible on the basis of whether he or she obeys what the Bible says. But He will judge that person on the basis of how he or she has responded to the promptings of his or her conscience.

When conscience is violated, it demonstrates rebellion against a recognized moral standard. It is a violation of “law” (lower case), which is the essence of sin (see 1 John 3:4).

Each person man will one day face God’s judgment. At that judgment, outward deeds will be examined. Paul also says that *[16]... God will judge the secrets of men through Christ Jesus.*¹⁹

So, not only will our deeds be judged. So will the hidden things of the heart. Everything about us will be laid bare before the only just Judge.

Conclusion:

The beauty of the Christian Gospel is that in Christ, God has put together a plan that provides a way for sinners to escape the sentence of judgment their sin justly would require.

As we move further into Romans, that plan will be laid out in great detail and we will see it in all of its brilliance.

But, today, we should all understand that God never abandons His means of judgment. It has always been and will always be on the basis of works.

The person who has never placed trust in Jesus for forgiveness of sin will stand before God’s bench.

He will be judged on the basis of whether he has given to God the worship that is due Him, since everyone can see all they need to see of God in creation.

He will be judged by his obedience to God’s written revelation if he knew it.

He will be judged on the basis of his response to the “law principle” if he didn’t know it, and his violations of conscience will show his rebellious heart.

The man or woman who does not believe in Jesus will be judged on the basis of their response to the light they have been given. Did he worship? Did she obey the law she knew? Did he respond to his conscience’s prodding? Did she sin?

And, if they have not measured up to the standard of perfection God requires, they will face His wrath and will spend an eternity separated from Him in Hell.

If a person does trust in Christ, they are still judged according to works. BUT, the believer in Jesus is judged on the basis of His (Jesus’) work.

When you trust Jesus to forgive you of your sin, an incredible transaction takes place. Jesus’ righteousness is credited to you. And, on the basis of Jesus’ sacrificial work on the cross, God declares you - the believer - righteous, too!

¹⁹ I suspect Jesus was making the same point in the Sermon on the Mount when He re-defined sins like murder and adultery, to emphasize that it is not only the actual physical committing of the act, but even the relishing of the thought that brings guilt.