



The Case for the Prosecution Grace Reigns: God's Gospel for All Peoples Series #18

Romans 2:1-5

David Sunday

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Please open your Bible to Romans 2. We are continuing in our new series through Paul's letter to the Romans.

Let's pray together as we prepare to hear God's Word.

Holy Father, we bow in Your presence, calling on Your name, the name of Your Son, Jesus, Who is the way, the truth and the life. We acknowledge our need for on-going salvation from the sin that dwells in us, from the spirit of this age and from the enemy who wages war against our souls. As we look into Your Word, we pray that it would be our rule; that Your Spirit would be our Teacher and that Your greater glory would be our supreme concern. We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

We have probably all had the experience of sitting in a sermon and thinking, "I wish that the person over there would listen carefully to what the preacher is saying because they really need it." The Apostle Paul knew that was happening as he spoke about the wrath of God revealed against all the ungodliness and unrighteousness of men in Romans 1. He knew that as he wrapped up his argument in verse 28 that there were people listening who were saying, "Go get 'em, Paul!" Listen to what Paul said in Romans 1:28-32:

And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.

You are right on track where Paul is heading with his argument, and you are so much in agreement that you stop to write the Apostle Paul a letter. I found this in a book by Christopher Ash:

Dear Paul,

I have just read the second half of Romans 1. I congratulate you on a vigorous, refreshing exposé on evil. I agree with you that it is disgusting when people not only behave badly but actually approve of bad behavior. It did me good to read your chapter. You will be glad to know that I, for one, do not for a moment approve of those who practice these terrible things. On the contrary, I recognize them for the evils they are and agree that such people are without excuse. I look forward to chapter two.

Yours Sincerely...

If you could sign your name to that letter, God has a bucket of cold water he wants to dump on you. It is called Romans 2. This chapter is a masterstroke of the Apostle Paul, designed to arrest us in our tracks. If you are feeling dull toward the gospel or smug about yourself, and if you are not abhorring all your sin and adoring only Him, this chapter is designed to make you see your sin and your need for a Savior. It will help you understand how to put your trust alone in this crucified and risen Savior.

The first thing Paul wants us to see is that whenever you see sin in someone else, you are looking at something that dwells in you, too. Look at verse one: *“Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things.”*

This is a difficult thing to grapple with because every one of us makes judgments. We do it all the time. Sometimes it is over trivial things, like what someone wears, how their voice sounds, their sense of humor or just how they act. Every day of our lives, we file away judgments in our minds about people. Sometimes these judgments are born out of prejudice. We think people are weird because they are not like us.

Kate and I had breakfast about 100 miles from here this week in a restaurant where a group of older people was speaking very loudly. We couldn't help but listen to what they said. In the course of conversation, they talked about certain people they did not understand. One of the men asked, “Why do people do that?” And one of the ladies profoundly answered, “Because they are dumb.” Everyone agreed. That settled the question.

At a much more horrible level, racism is a form of judgment against a group of people born out of prejudice. On Wednesday night, a white man walked into a historically African-American church in Charleston. After praying and listening to the Bible with these people for an hour, he opened fire and took nine of their lives: Sharonda Singleton, Pastor Clementa Pinckney, Cynthia Hurd, Tywanzaa Sanders, Myra Thompson, Ethel Lee Lance, Reverend Daniel L. Simmons, DePayne Middleton-Doctor and Susie Jackson. In view of such horrendous evil, the thought of a God Who judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus starts to sound more like good news than bad.

This is what Paul said in Romans 2:16: “[There is coming a] *day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus.*” In other words, the truth of God’s judgment is a gospel truth. You take God’s judgment out and you have less good news, less of a gospel than we do with the truth that God will judge the secrets of men by Christ Jesus. If there is not a God Who is able to make wrongs right or hold people accountable for their wicked behavior, then there is no hope in this world.

Every one of us must make judgments about what is pleasing to God and what is not. We have to do that. If we do not call sin “sin,” we fall into the trap of Romans 1:32, giving approval to those who practice unrighteousness. God does not want us to applaud evil. Here is what Paul said in Romans 2:1: You can never look at Dylann Roof, the shooter, and think, “I’m not like him. I’d never do that. I’m better than that. He deserves God’s judgment more than I do.” You can’t do that.

Whenever we condemn another person, Paul said, we condemn ourselves. How so? Because what you see in them, God sees in you. Do you believe that? Really? I think it’s easier for us to look at Dylann Roof and say, “I am not like that man,” than it is for us to look at him and say, “I’m looking at something that is inside me, too. The seeds of every possible evil dwell in me, too.”

I think it is probably easy enough for most of us to get through the day without murdering someone. Congratulations! But how many of us can go a day without feeling some unrighteous anger welling up in our hearts? How many of us have not been surprised at how trigger happy we can be when it comes to striking out at others or at the rage that can rise up in us unexpectedly? How many of us can say we have never harbored any thought of racial prejudice, or that we have always loved our neighbor 24/7 as we would love ourselves? Why do we see this sin in others, yet remain blind to it in ourselves? How can we condemn the sin in others and yet excuse it in ourselves?

Why is it that when I misplace the car keys, I want everyone to be patient and understanding? I want them to help me find them, but when someone else does it, I get angry? Why is it that when someone speaks unkindly or unfairly about you behind your back, you are incensed? You write a letter of protest and think of how unfair and wicked it was that anyone would speak that way about you. But you can talk that way about someone else and you might not even notice; it is just a blip on the radar. You have all kinds of excuses for why you can talk that way: “I was tired.” “They really made me mad.” “They irritated me. They provoked me.” “It really wasn’t such a big deal.” We say these things to ourselves, working ourselves up at the same time into a state of self-righteous indignation toward others and their behavior.

I read a comment that struck me recently. “On the day of final judgment, when the secrets of men are revealed and you stand before Jesus Christ, the council for the prosecution will be you.” How is that? Look at verse two, where Paul said, “*We know that the judgment of God rightly falls on those who practice such things.*” We know it is right for God to judge the wickedness we can see in others. Our ability to pass judgment on what’s right and what’s wrong in others shows that we know the difference between right and wrong. Here is the clincher: apart from the merciful intervention of God in our lives, none of us is as hard on ourselves as we have been on others. None of us is. Paul said in verse three, “*Do you suppose, O man—you who judge those who practice such things and yet do them yourself—that you will escape the judgment of God?*”

Francis Schaeffer had a great illustration that drives this truth home. He said, “Imagine that every baby who has ever been born has a cassette recorder put on his neck when he’s born.” Today that would be an mp3 player. Suppose this mp3 recorded every moral judgment this child made about other people as he grew up: every expectation that was disappointed, every fault that was noted, every righteous judgment and unfair or harsh criticism that was made. Recorded. Suppose that child is you. There are thousands and thousands of moral judgments by which you have bound other people through the years—things you have not even consciously thought about but have been judging. Then one day you stand before God, on that day, when, according to the gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus. God turns to you and says, “Let me press play on that mp3 recorder.” You start to listen to all the judgments you have made against other people. Then God says to you, “Where do you stand in light of your own moral judgments?” Every voice would be silenced because none of us has lived up to even our own standards, let alone God’s standards.

We all would be prosecuted by our own judgments and found wanting on the same basis by which we have tried to judge others. As I think about this, it is very sobering. I’m thankful

there is an alternative. Paul suggested this alternative in verse four. What does God do with people who are specialists at looking down at others and with people like us who are better at finding fault with others than we are at finding fault with ourselves? Verse four says that this God is kind. He is forbearing. He is patient toward judgmental people like us. What are we going to do about God's kindness, forbearance and patience in our lives? Are we going to harden our hearts? That is the question verses four and five are driving home.

The second point, from verse four, is that you are not punished immediately every time you sin. God gives you time to repent. Let's look at verse four. *"Or do you presume on (or, as the NIV says, 'show contempt for') the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?"* The New Living Translation says, *"Don't you see how wonderfully kind, tolerant, and patient God is with you? Does this mean nothing to you? Can't you see that his kindness is intended to turn you from your sin?"*

Question: Is there anyone in the universe who is more kind, more tolerant or more patient than God? Ephesians 2:7 says we have been saved by grace *"so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus."* For all eternity, we are going to marvel at the kindness God has shown to sinners. What does this kindness look like and consist of?

I love the way Paul described the kindness of God in Titus 3:3-5a:

For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another. But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy..."

When He saw us in our disobedience, hostility and wickedness, He drew near to us in kindness and saved us. He washed us by regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit. He washed us, *"and he poured out [the Spirit] richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace (being declared righteous in His sight, not because of anything we have done, but because of His mercy and grace) we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life"* (Titus 3:6-7).

This is the kindness of God that everyone who trusts in Jesus has experienced. It was a kindness that came to us when we were wretched, miserable and poor with nothing to offer. God chose forbearance. What does that mean? Someone has described it as a cease-fire, a time to

cool off and think things over. He's tolerant and He's patient. God has a long temper, not a short fuse. He puts up with an awful lot.

Why does He do it? To lead you and me to repentance, so that we will turn away from our self-centered, self-righteous, smug ways and love, trust, submit to and follow Jesus. He is kind. Every time He does not punish us as our sins deserve (which are an innumerable number of times), He does it to lead us to repentance, moving us to turn from our sin and compelling us to change.

That should be our response every time we hear the gospel. We should walk out of church saying, "Change me, Lord. Don't let me stay the same. Transform me." But the time is now. Someone has said, "We don't have forever for our hearts to melt."

That brings us to verse five and the **last point: The longer you linger without repentance and the longer you linger with your heart smug, self-satisfied and self-righteous, not turning to Jesus, the harder your heart will become.** Look at verse five: *"But because of your hard and impenitent (or 'unrepentant') heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed."*

What happens every time you see sin in someone else but refuse to see and repent of the sin that is in your own heart? Your heart gets a little bit harder, a little bit harder, and a little bit harder. Every time I am more focused on what is wrong with someone else than I am with what is wrong with me and how I need a Savior, there is a heart-hardening taking place.

One of the main reasons we like to pass judgment on others is because we want to keep up a high opinion of ourselves. It feels better to focus on what's wrong with someone else than to face who we really are—to come out of hiding with all our sin, shame and ugliness; to speak to God about what is inexcusable in me; to admit to God what is ugly in me; to say, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner." That is hard to do. We are ashamed to face who we really are, but God is saying to us in these verses, "Don't harden your heart."

There is a God Who draws near to repenting sinners. What did Jesus do when He began His earthly ministry? He walked down to the Jordan River. Whom did He find there? His cousin, John the Baptist, eating locusts and wild honey and dressed in an austere fashion. What was John doing? He was calling people to repent and turn from their sins. As people went into the waters of the Jordan River, John baptized them—a baptism for repentance. As they acknowledged, "We are sinners and need the salvation that God is coming to bring in the Messiah," they were preparing the way for the reign of Jesus Messiah in their lives. Who came walking toward that river one day? John saw Him in the distance and said, "Behold, the Lamb of

God, Who takes away the sin of the world!” What did Jesus do? He came down into that river of repentance. He said, “Baptize me.” John said, “Oh, no! I’m not even worthy to untie the sandals on Your feet! You should be baptizing me.” Jesus said, “Oh, no, you must. It is fitting for Me to fulfill all righteousness.”

What was Jesus saying? “I Who have no sin am going to take the place of sinners. I Who have no sin am going to stand among those who have no righteousness. I am going to go into the river of repentance so I can take their sins upon Me and give My righteousness to them.” Jesus made that commitment when He entered into baptism and He kept that commitment all the way to the cross.

Today, if your heart is tender and repentant, it doesn’t matter how strong the case of the prosecution is against you. Your Judge is willing to stand up as your Defender and you will be able to stand before Him in that great day when the secrets of men are revealed. You will be faultless and will have great joy if you trust in Jesus.

Don’t let your heart be hardened. Don’t think what Paul said in verse five is, “If you die with any unconfessed sin, you are going to hell.” That would be a gross abuse of the gospel that Paul preached. That is not what he said. However, he said, “If you think you are righteous in your own eyes and have no need for repentance due to your morality, goodness and superiority, you are just as far from the gospel as the people whose wicked behavior you condemn.”

Don’t let that be true of you. Say to God: “I am a hopeless sinner. You have every right to cast me off this minute because of the state of my life and my heart, but I trust in Jesus, the Lamb Who takes away the sin of the world. I need Him to take away my sin today.”

New Covenant Bible Church

4N780 Randall Road, St. Charles, IL 60175

(630) 584-2611 ♦ www.newcbc.org

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