

Romans 2:1-16
(Psalm 119:1-8; Matthew 7:24-27)
“So They Are Without Excuse” II

Introduction

In this section of the letter, Paul is painting a dark backdrop against which the gospel will shine in all its glory. In the verses we examined last week, he described people who suppress what they know to be true, and whose rebellion consists of a three-fold betrayal of God: first a spiritual betrayal in which they exchange God’s glory for created images, secondly an intellectual betrayal in which they exchange God’s truth for a lie, and finally a physical betrayal in which they exchange the natural order of things for ways of living that are contrary to nature. Paul also describes the consequences of this three-fold betrayal, and the final consequence is that people not only do evil but approve of it.

But that raises the question, what about people who may not believe in God and may not receive the gospel of grace, and yet who grieve over the state of the world? There were such people in Paul’s day as there are in ours, moralists such as the pagan philosopher Seneca, who condemned the vices of the Roman Empire. So the question is, what is the spiritual state of those who do not approve of the immoral behavior of the surrounding society? To this question Paul now turns and addresses those who, far from approving such behavior, judge it, criticize it and condemn it. Just as he said in chapter one that those who suppress the truth are without excuse, now he says that those of us who sit in judgment on others are also without excuse. How can he say such a thing?

Body

1. Paul warns us, first, against judging others differently than we judge ourselves (2:1-3).

This is the universal tendency: we accuse others and excuse ourselves. We see others in a critical light and ourselves in a favorable light. In fact, we often tend to become the most indignantly critical of others for the very things that we struggle with ourselves.

2. Paul then warns us against presuming upon God’s kindness (2:4-5).

This is, to me, the most convicting statement of the passage before us, and perhaps one of the most needed texts in American Christianity. We emphasize the comforts of the gospel. We assure one another of God’s grace, mercy and kindness in a way that may make us careless about sin. But Paul says that God’s kindness is not meant to enable us in our sinful behavior, but rather to call us to repentance. The view of grace too often espoused today is

not biblical grace, but presumption – the presumption that it is God’s job to forgive and that his judgment will never come home to us.

3. Paul explains the basis on which God will judge us (2:6-11).

This sounds at first reading as though Paul is promoting the very view that he is attacking in this letter. It sounds as though he is describing salvation by good works. However, we know from what has gone before and from what is coming that this is the very view that Paul rejects in this letter, as in all his works. Then how are we to understand verses 6-11?

The key is to remember what he has just written in chapter one about humanity’s first betrayal of God, the spiritual betrayal of refusing to honor the Lord as God and exchanging God’s glory for the things of this world. Here, he says that those who will inherit eternal life are those who have *not* exchanged God’s glory for things of this world and refused to honor him as God (1:21-22), but who rather “seek glory and honor” (2:7), meaning God’s glory and honor. We know that is what he means because he contrasts these people with those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth.

In other words, he says that those who are granted eternal life will be known by their transformed lives, a point on which all of Scripture agrees. God’s righteousness will be vindicated in the day when all can see the difference between those who have lived for God’s honor and glory and those who have lived for their own.

4. Finally, Paul explains the reason that God is able to judge every one of us, whatever our cultural background, according to the same standard (2:12-16).

Even those who have never heard the Ten Commandments find those commandments written on their consciences. Thus all people of all times and places are accountable before God for whether or not they have kept the law as they understand it, for whether they have always sought to do what is right. And, as Paul will later show, no one has done so, so “None is righteous, no not one” (3:10).

Conclusion

A day is coming when “God judges the secrets of men” (2:16). If Paul stopped the sentence there, we would be consumed with dread. But, thank God, he finishes the sentence with the words, “by Christ Jesus.” And thus he reminds us that for those outside of Christ it will be a day of reckoning and judgment, when sin is judged and God’s righteousness is vindicated. But for those in Christ, it will be a day when God’s grace and mercy are displayed. Are you in Christ today? Can you say this morning from the heart, “On Christ the solid rock I stand; all other ground is sinking sand”?

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