

Prayer

Lord Jesus, open our hearts and our minds to the generosity of Your love and the rightness of Your justice, so that we might respond in a godly way to the difficulties of everyday life. Guide us by Your Holy Spirit as we make everyday judgements about what is right and wrong, and make us agents of hope in a troubled world. May Your Kingdom come, Lord Jesus: AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

If you use an internet form of social communication, look at the posts from people you know, and pray for them and the issues they raise

On-going prayers

- **Pray for people on low pay.** Pray for the reform of industries that rely on low pay, and the economies that depend on it
- Give thanks to God for the Holy Spirit and for His sustenance
- Pray for those who are seeking the freedom of their countries

Meditation

In the Kingdom of God there will be peace.

Peace to think;

to dwell on what is good and right and true
and not be oppressed by temptation.

Peace to love;

to offer ourselves in unrestrained affection
and not fear rejection from anyone.

Peace to see;

to open our eyes to the beauty all around us
and not be influenced by fashion and publicity.

Peace to listen;

to hear what is said and enjoy music's breadth
and not be subjected to the noise of the world.

In the Kingdom of God there will be peace, and so much more.

Bible passage – Romans 2:1-11

¹ So, whoever you are, you have no excuse when you pass judgement on others; for in judging someone else you condemn yourself, because you do the very same things for which you judge others! ² Now, we know that God's judgment rightly falls on those who do such things.

³ But you, do you imagine that when you pass judgement on those who do these things and yet do them yourself, you will escape God's judgment? ⁴ Or do you presume upon the riches of His goodness, tolerance and patience, disregarding the fact that God's kindness is intended to lead you to repentance? ⁵ Because of your stubborn and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath, when the truth of God's judgements will be revealed. ⁶ For He will repay everyone according to what they have done: ⁷ giving eternal life to those who strive for glory, honour and immortality by persistently doing good; ⁸ but wrath and fury to those who are selfishly disobedient to the truth but follow wickedness. ⁹ Trouble and distress will come on every one of you who brings about evil, Jew first and Greek as well. ¹⁰ but glory

and honour and peace for every one of you who does good, Jew first and Greek as well. ¹¹ For there is no partiality with God.

Bible Study

Review

Romans chapter 2 begins with strong words from Paul about God's judgement, following on immediately from what he has just said about the all consuming nature of evil in the world (1:18-32). His message is that God alone is the judge of what is right and wrong and of what is good and evil, and the manner in which people make their own judgements is somewhat presumptuous. This can sound rather pompous, as if Paul is calling on God's judgement but being rather judgemental himself. But if we are to read Paul's words with understanding, we must accept that he was genuinely trying to convey a truth about God not a personal opinion. He, of all people, knew that he would stand one day before God himself.

The first two verses of this passage sound as if Paul is arguing with objectors, and it not too difficult for us to work out that they were Jews. Jewish people were found in every congregation of the early church, and they firmly believed that they had a special relationship with God and were exempt from God's judgement on sin; they had been chosen by God and believed that He would therefore save them. Once we have spotted that Paul is arguing against Jews, the whole passage becomes clear. Paul is insistent that all people are equal before God, whether Jew or Gentile, and he concludes at the very end of the passage, '*there is no partiality with God*' (1:11). Such words would have sounded beyond the pale, even to some Jews who had become Christians, but it needed to be said.

Without understanding this, we will find ourselves misinterpreting the passage, and we can easily become diverted towards all kinds of secondary issues. For example, some might think that the passage says we should never 'judge' others; but this is entirely impractical. Although it sounds very pious to refrain from judging others, in general, none of us can escape the need to make choices about our own behaviour or to make decisions about the behaviour of others, in all sorts of life situations. Working our way through such things is part of life, and judgement is necessary if we are to be decisive, or to learn and be taught. Moreover, this passage is about God's ultimate judgement, not the details of everyday life.

The next paragraph makes this clear, and Paul explains why the Jews do not have special favours from God. The people of Israel had received the benefits of God's grace over centuries, or as Paul puts it, the '*riches of His goodness, tolerance and patience ...*' (2:4); but they had failed to do God's will in the world and were stuck in sin. The kindness of God towards His own chosen people had been intended to lead Israel '*to repentance*' (1:4), but they had not repented, and although Paul does not say it here, he most certainly had it in mind that as a consequence, they had killed God's Son, the Messiah (1 Thess 2:14-16). This rejection of their God meant that they were the subject of His anger or as Paul says here, his '*wrath*' (2:5), where wrath is the opposite of God's love.

The last five verses of this passage (2:6-11) describe God's final judgement, and this is triggered by Paul's frustration at Israel's rejection of God. He rounds on them for claiming advantage over others and says plainly that the time will come when the '*truth of God's judgements will be revealed*' (2:5). He says that at the last judgement, God will decide people's eternal fate on the basis of the good they have or have not done; but please remember that he is intentionally describing God's judgement without taking account of the Gospel mercy of Christ. He is building up to a description of this later on, and wants everyone to understand that without Christ, there is no hope.

There is much to take in, but it is important. Some read through Romans and miss out this section because it is difficult to interpret. We cannot afford to do this, because it is all part of Paul's greater description of the work of God in Christ, the Gospel.

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- The nature of Judgement
- Judgement for Jews and Judgement for Gentiles?
- Salvation according to good deeds?

Going Deeper

The moral nature of the world and the judgements of God are no small matter. Some of what Paul says and the way that he says it are difficult to understand, but as we look at this text, we will see that Paul is careful to be even handed towards all people because he knew that the Gospel was for all people. Paul describes God's judgements as absolute and impartial.

The nature of judgement

The first few verses of chapter two make a compelling case for all people to refrain from making judgements about the sins of others (2:1-3), because all stand before one Judge, who is God. However, we should be careful about what this means. Paul himself makes frequent criticisms of people and their behaviour in his own letters (see, for example, Gal 3:1-5, 2 Thess 3:11, Rom 16:17,18), so is he really engaging in some kind of hypocrisy? Can he make comments about the behaviour of others on the one hand, and here, say that all people who judge each other are at fault?

To sort this out, we must be clear about what this passage is saying. It does not tell people not to engage in the normal processes of making judgements in life, for we have to do this all the time, just as Paul did. Paul's condemnation is for those who make the unjustified claim that they are all right before God and do not have a problem with sin, when according to God's Word, all people have a problem with sin. Paul's point is a specific one. When it comes to making judgements about sin, it is a good rule of faith to refrain from saying or implying that we know best ourselves, but point to the Gospel and the teaching of Jesus Christ. All of us stand condemned before God without the mercy of Christ; God is our Judge and Jesus is our Saviour.

Judgement for Jews and judgement for Gentiles?

Paul would have been very aware that although his letter was addressed to a Gentile church, Jews as well as Gentiles would have read it. The early church mostly contained both, and Paul would have been concerned that Jewish readers of His Gospel would have claimed that they had a relationship with God through their ancestry, and so already possessed a favourable judgement from God. He needed to address this presumption head on.

In order to understand why Paul was concerned about Jewish attitudes, we must look in some Jewish literature which was very influential in the first century, the so-called 'apocryphal' books of the Bible. These books were part of Scriptures in Jesus' day, but because they were originally written in Greek, not Hebrew, the Jews omitted them from the Old Testament a few centuries after the time of Christ. (Incidentally, Catholic Bibles reflect this ancient form of the Old Testament because their form goes back to before the time of this decision. The Protestant Bible reflects the fact that Luther decided to use the Hebrew Old Testament in agreement with the Jews.) Now in Jesus' day, a book of the Apocrypha called the 'Wisdom of Solomon' was very influential. It contains these verses:

'But You, O God, are kind and true, patient, and ruling all things in mercy. For even if we sin, we are Yours, knowing Your power; but we will not sin, because we know that You acknowledge us as Yours. For to know You is complete righteousness, and to know Your power is the root of immortality.' (Wisdom of Solomon 15:1-3)

These verses were well used in Jesus' day, and they clearly imply that if Jewish people sin, they will be accepted by God because they 'know God'. When this ancient passage talks about 'knowing God', it means having the laws of Moses and the heritage faith in the Covenant given to Abraham, their forefather. So if anyone sought to argue against Paul then he could well have quoted these words.

Paul, however, would not have wanted an argument about this. He wanted to make the point that the goodness of God is intended to lead us to repentance (2:4), he was not interested in making a case for special favours! It was essential to Paul's argument that God sought to save those who accepted their sinful nature, not those who sought to avoid responsibility for their actions by claiming special favours.

Paul goes on, for there is a sting in the tail for those who 'think they will escape God's judgement' (i.e. the Jews - 2:4). By refusing to repent and accept their own sinfulness, they display a stubbornness of heart which has consequences; they store up 'wrath for yourself on the day of wrath' (2:5). Here Paul demonstrates a feature of his writing which we have not yet met in Romans; he connects what happens now with what will happen in the future on the 'Day of the Lord'. In other words, verse 5 means that those who are un-repentant are judged by God; they receive the consequences of his wrath not just now, but finally on the Day of the Lord when His wrath will be released on all evil (Rev 11:8 etc.)

Salvation according to good deeds?

The whole of our passage up to this point speaks about God's final judgement of all things (2:2,3,5), but it is only in verses 6 to 11 that Paul begins to describe this in detail. Elsewhere in Scripture, the so-called 'Last Judgement' is described in different ways, often as the 'Day of the Lord', or 'the Day of His Coming'. Paul explains here that the moral nature of the world God created requires that good is rewarded (2:7) and evil is met with God's 'wrath and fury' (2:8).

Many Christians have difficulty reading this, even when it is explained that this is part of Paul's explanation of the moral nature of the world as created by God, where the saving work of Christ has not yet been proclaimed. It is therefore helpful if we compare what Paul says here about the Last Judgement with what Jesus said in his last parable before he died, the famous 'sheep and the goats' (Matt 25:31f.). In this parable, Jesus warns starkly that the sheep who are saved by God at the coming of the 'Son of Man' are those who did the good deeds of feeding the hungry etc. not knowing that in so doing they served Jesus Himself. The goats who are condemned to everlasting damnation (25:46) are those who judged for themselves that they were safe, but in reality, they had not served their Lord or done good, and God gives them no further explanation before they are condemned to hell! Jesus' own picture of the moral nature of the world and the final judgement is a great deal more scary than Paul's! Again, many Christians have great difficulty with this parable because it appears to tell us that the only way we will escape the wrath of God is by doing good.

The truth is that both Paul and Jesus were saying that it was impossible for anyone to escape the judgement of God on the basis of their own perceptions of doing good. If you read Jesus' parable carefully, you will realise this is what it says. The sheep who were saved did not know what they had done, and the goats who thought they had done well found themselves outcast. Jesus' parable tells us that God's judgements are right and true, but that our judgements about 'doing good' are invariably ill-advised. Paul's letter tells us exactly the same. In Matthew's Gospel, the answer to the conundrum posed by Jesus' last parable is provided by His death and resurrection, which comes immediately next in the Gospel. In Paul's letter to the Romans, he goes on to explain how we are saved from the predicament in which we find ourselves.

Application

This passage teaches us that while we make judgements all the time about various things, and we need to do this in the course of ordinary life, absolute moral judgements belong to God and God alone. In addition, we must be people of repentance, who respond to the evils of this world not by pointing the finger, but by turning to Almighty God ourselves. This is also the only way we can respond to the teaching of the parable of the sheep and the goats, which strongly suggests that no one can judge themselves 'righteous' in God's moral world, where His judgement alone is correct and final. It is the purpose of this parable as well as our text today to point this out to us, so that we can understand how it affects our eternal destiny.

Now, in his letter to the Romans, Paul is building a platform upon which he will build a full description of the Gospel, so he must start by describing the moral nature of God's world before he can go on. This is certainly emphasised strongly, and it may seem to us that the issue is overplayed. However, the reason why Paul goes into great detail about the moral nature of the world is because throughout history and even to this day within the Christian church, this is often ignored or misunderstood. For example, people quickly say to themselves that this or that sin 'does not matter', when in truth, it does. Too many Christians harbour sins that become so deeply hidden that they will not even accept that God's Word points out their sin! Even within the church, we can find people who act with great domination of others, and seek to justify their actions. Some rebel against parents, others abuse others by words and have long stopped worrying about it. Unrepentant anger and unforgiveness are also common problems faced by those who seek to deal with sins amongst God's people. In truth, too many Christian people think, just like the Jews of Paul's day, that once they have a relationship with God, what happens next does not matter because God will somehow just deal with it. In this way, the Gospel is treated like a special favour rather than a matter of the very life or death of our souls.

We may feel that what Paul says in this passage is not the Gospel. I reckon that Paul would reply something like this; 'No, it is not the Gospel of salvation, it is the moral truth about our world, and it explains why we need a completely radical Gospel that changes human life completely to restore the image of God.'

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. In your experience, do you find that Christians are judgemental people, or do they refrain from judgement about others? How does this affect the church?
2. How important is 'repentance' to the life of the church? How can repentance become something that lies at the heart of a Christian community?
3. Discuss in your group what you believe about the meaning of the 'wrath of God'.

Personal comments by author

How often do you pass judgment on others? Why is it that you or I do this? Clearly, this passage warns us against making judgements about others, but how do we strike a balance between judgement which is not right before God, and the judgements of what is right and wrong we need to make in order to live a life that is worthy of being a disciple of Christ? There are no easy answers to this, but it is worth considering that we should not engage in that kind of natural and rather 'human' form of judgement that is readily accusing of others without submitting ourselves first to the Holy Spirit and the opinion of our Lord. We should not want to stand accused of making unworthy judgements about others, unthinkingly or not.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *How do you see this passage of scripture applying to you? It is very difficult to read this passage and not feel that we should be very cautious about our judgements of others. On the other hand, we must live by the moral standards God reveals to us, and this means making a considerable number of personal decisions about what is right or wrong, and we do this from what we observe in others. Pray for the Lord to help you retain a repentant heart.*
- *Pray for those who feel judged by the church unnecessarily and feel the finger is pointing at them. Ask the Holy Spirit to overcome the misunderstandings that can generate such situations.*

Final Prayer

Lord God Almighty, You have given us the greatest of gifts; You have given us life and You have saved us. Accept the worship and service of our lives, as we take part in all You have provided for us to do this day. Revive our souls for all that lies ahead of us we pray: AMEN
