

What makes one person better than another person? Or maybe the better question is, what makes one person think he or she is better than another person? What do we assume gives a person advantage? What do we assume grants a person privilege? Now historically, we've determined that on the basis of wealth. If you have money you get treated differently, get better opportunities, more doors are open to you. Or on the basis of class. If you possess a certain social status, you get certain privileges. Sometimes it could be your family name that gets you special treatment. I've been the recipient of that with my dad being a Sergeant with the Hillsborough County Sheriff's Department. It comes in handy when you get pulled over. Privilege has been granted on the basis of gender, on the basis of race, on the basis of ethnicity, on the basis of nationality. Studies have even shown that

certain judgments are made on the basis of such silly, inconsequential traits as height and hair color. Tall men get treated differently. Blonde women get treated differently.

So when it comes to us, what criteria do we use to elevate a certain person or a particular group above another?

What is our standard of measurement? Or, to ask it more personally, what criteria do YOU use to elevate

YOURSELF above others? What qualities allow you to consider yourself superior to someone else? Education?

Intelligence? Political allegiances? Appearance? Morality?

And here's why I ask that. Here's why it matters. In the first chapter of the Apostle Paul's letter to the church at Rome

– what we know as the NT book of Romans – he talks about this message, the gospel. It's the message of the

eternal Son of God taking on humanity and coming to

earth as the Son-of-God-in-flesh to live as a perfect man, to die for imperfect men, and to rise again to rule and reign as the Son-of-God-in-power. It's the message for which Paul had been called and set apart as an apostle, an ambassador. It's a message to bring about the obedience of faith for all nations. It's the message that is the power of God to save anyone who would believe it. It's the message that reveals God's gift of righteousness that comes by faith. But all of that talk left us with the question of why we need this message. Why we need to be saved. Why we need the gift of righteousness.

And so Paul spends the second half of chapter 1 explaining just that. He says that man needs God's gift of righteousness because we are unrighteous. He explains that God has made Himself known clearly and plainly in

creation, and mankind has rejected Him. We traded the truth about Him for a lie and traded the wisdom of seeing Him for who He is and responding properly for the foolishness of worshiping other things instead. And so, because of our refusal to honor God and our determination to worship created things (we call that idolatry), God's wrath is revealed against our sin and unrighteousness and ungodliness. His judgment is to hand mankind over to our sinful desires. And Paul lists some of these: sexual immorality, homosexual activity, unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice, envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness, gossip, slander, hating God, insolence, haughtiness, boasting, inventing evil, disobeying parents, foolishness, faithlessness, heartlessness, ruthlessness. And he applies this accusation, this judgment, to the whole world, to all of

mankind. It seems pretty straightforward. The world is guilty. The whole world stands condemned. All people are deserving of God's wrath and judgment because of sin.

But have you ever had a hypothetical argument? Have you ever had a debate with an imaginary opponent? Like maybe you were confronted in public and you didn't know what to say or you said something wrong, but now it's a few days later and you know what you should have said and so you're laying in your bed or you're standing in your shower and, in your head, you're just letting them have it. Have you ever had that kind of conversation? Well that's kind of what Paul does in Romans 2. He devises this anonymous, fictional individual. He imagines a religious, observant, righteous Jew hearing all that he just wrote and concluding: Fantastic! Wonderful! Absolutely! THOSE

people totally deserve God's wrath. THOSE people out there in the world – those immoral, idolatrous, wicked, godless, atheist sinners who CLEARLY have been handed over to the unrestrained, shameless display of their disgusting urges and animal impulses – they deserve condemnation. They are obviously guilty. Good for God, giving them what they deserve. And so, in **chapter 2 of Romans**, Paul answers this imaginary person, this argument, this posture of privilege and advantage claimed on the basis of religious affiliation and ethnicity, the assumption that I am better than THEM. I am superior to THEM. THEY are deserving of God's wrath; I am not. And I want you to hear what Paul says. So if you haven't already, I would invite you to take a Bible and turn with me to the book of Romans, chapter 2, and follow along as I read, beginning in v.1 [READ ROMANS 2:1-16]. In these

sixteen verses, Paul addresses three worthless foundations for confidence before God. Three things you THINK are advantages, but truly as not. Three things you THINK matter, but really don't.

He begins with this one: **your presumption**. Your arrogant assumption that you THINK you know how things truly are. You THINK that matters, you THINK that should give you confidence before God, but it doesn't. Looking at vv.1-5, what is happening in the mind and heart of this representative religious person, this observant Jew? What word does Paul use three times in v.1? Judge. Every one of you who judges. Passing judgment on another. You, the judge. This individual and those like him are passing judgment on those who do all the things he just listed in 1:18-32. He's indicting, trying, and convicting them of sin

that is worthy of God's wrath. He's declaring them guilty.

No question. No excuse. No mercy.

And yet, Paul says, in doing that, you condemn yourself.

And why? Because you practice the same things. You do

what you condemn. Now is he saying that every religious

Jew, or the average religious Jew, or even ANY religious

Jew is guilty of ALL the sins he listed in the same way that

the world is guilty of those? Is he saying that the entire

religious community is eaten up with open, shameless,

unrestrained and unapologetic sexual immorality and

homosexual activity and idol worship? Clearly not! But go

back for a second just to 1:29-31 [READ]. Are there not

more than a few of those that even religious people might

be guilty of? Coveting, desiring something for yourself that

someone else has? Malice, mean-spiritedness toward



someone? Envy, being jealous of what else possesses, an ability, recognition, success, relationships? What about strife, conflict, quarreling? Or deceit, dishonesty, misleading others? What about gossip, whispering about the faults and failings and shortcomings of other people? Or slander, the same thing, but proclaimed out in the open for everyone to hear? Or boasting, self-glory, drawing attention to yourself for what you have or what you've done? And even the ones we may not be guilty of outwardly, we may certainly be guilty of in thought and attitude and speech. In the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7 Jesus reminds people the law says not to murder. And just when He's got them thinking they're ok because they haven't ever murdered anyone, He tells them that if they've ever lashed out at someone in anger, they stand guilty and are liable to judgment. He reminds

them that the law says not to commit adultery. And just when He's got them thinking they're ok because they haven't cheated on their spouse, He tells them that if they've ever lusted in their heart, they are guilty. So Paul is telling this imaginary religious man who, in fact, represents a whole lot of REAL religious people, that you think you're superior to those out in the world because you don't sin in the same way they do, but you are JUST as guilty! And, in v.2, you KNOW that the guilty will suffer the judgment of God, so, v.3, do you think that YOU will escape that judgment? That's presumption. It's the arrogant assumption that you know how things truly are, when, in fact, you don't. Presumption.

As a religious person, you read and you learn and you talk and you teach and you sing about God's abundant,

extravagant kindness and forbearance and patience. That was at the heart of His relationship with Israel. It's at the heart of His relationship with the church. But here you are, Paul says, presuming that God's kindness and forbearance and patience are guaranteed and that they will spare you from His wrath even though you're guilty of the same things as those whose judgment you applaud. Paul is saying yes, God is kind to you. Yes, He is extravagantly patient. Yes, He generously perseveres with you. But don't you know why? Don't you understand that His patience and kindness are intended to bring you to repentance from all those things you practice? The fact that they presume to sit in judgment on an unrighteous world when they are just as guilty, arrogantly thinking that God's kindness will spare them while the rest of the world burns, when, in fact, God's kindness has been for the

purpose of their repentance, is evidence of a hardened heart. They persist in hypocrisy, judging others while they themselves are guilty. That shows an insensitivity to the goodness of God. They are proud and unrepentant, unmoved and without remorse. And Paul tells them that every moment they continue in that presumption, not only will they not avoid judgment, but they are compounding wrath for themselves on the day of judgment. They are storing up, collecting judgment. The bottom line is that God is not fooled. God is not persuaded by their presumption. His judgment is righteous and just, and it is according to truth and facts and reality. Should they persist in their presumption, His judgment against even the most religious will be fully revealed on the day of wrath.

So I think there's a warning there for us. There is a temptation for us to be presumptuous, for us to arrogantly assume that we are superior to those in the world because their sin looks different than ours. That passage I preached on last week, specifically the section that talked about those who engage in homosexual behavior, has been used exactly that way by some. Look how awful. Look how disgusting. Look how repulsive. THOSE kinds of sinners deserve God's wrath. I'm glad I'm not as bad as they are. THAT'S the attitude Paul is confronting here. I want to be clear: I'm not saying not to call out sin, not to name it for what it is. But be real careful that you don't start to believe that your own sin is any less deserving of judgment or that you are somehow not as "bad" as they are because your sin doesn't carry the exact same natural consequences or it's more culturally acceptable. Don't be

presumptuous regarding your own religiosity. Presumption offers you no deliverance from God's wrath.

The second worthless foundation is **your religious pedigree**. For the Jew, that certainly would have been wrapped up in his ethnicity as well. In vv.6-11 Paul shifts gears to talk about HOW God judges, the criteria He uses. If it's not a presumption of righteousness or some self-designation of religiosity, then what is it? Surely being Jewish, especially an observant Jew, has to count for something, doesn't it? I mean, the Jews are God's chosen people. Surely that matters, right? Well look at v.6. What does Paul tell us? God will render to each one according to his what? Religious pedigree? Ethnicity? No, his works. You get what you deserve. It seems to be a clear-cut, merit-based system of evaluation. No grading on a curve.

No one gets any extra credit. No advantage, no privilege. He says essentially the same thing in v.11. God shows no partiality. It doesn't matter if you're Jew or Gentile, religious or non-religious.

Paul offers two options. In v.7, he describes those who display patience in well-doing, and they seek glory and honor and immortality. Those last three are things that mankind under judgment had failed to do. Instead of honoring the immortal God, they traded His glory for images of created things. But this person has the proper attitude toward God, engages in the proper actions, pursues the proper goals. His mind and heart are set on good things, right things. And the reward? Eternal life! He says the same thing in v.10. Anyone who does good is rewarded with glory and honor and peace. The reward is

not based on ethnicity or religious identity. It doesn't matter if you're Jew or Greek. It's not who you ARE; it's what you DO. It's not where you're FROM; it's what you DO. It's not who you're WITH; it's what you DO. That's the positive side of the equation, but the negative side works the same way. Look at v.8. Those who are self-seeking, those who disobey truth, those who obey unrighteousness can expect a reward of wrath and fury, God's anger and indignation against them due to their sin. Same thing in v.9. Those who do evil can expect tribulation and distress, suffering, pain, grief, misery, affliction, woe. And again, there's no distinction based on ethnicity. Being Jewish offers no advantage when it comes to judgment. What matters is what you've done.



So Paul's made it pretty clear that the criteria here is works. Good works lead to eternal life, glory, honor, and peace. Evil works lead to wrath, fury, tribulation, and distress. So how do we square that with the gospel? Cause that ain't the gospel. The gospel says we are justified by God's grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone apart from works. Go back a chapter to Romans 1:16-17 and it says that the gospel saves by faith from first to last. Jump ahead a chapter to Romans 3:28 [READ]. Romans 4:5 [READ]. So is Paul contradicting himself? Is he confused? It's a problem, right? How do we resolve it? Well, we've got two possible options, but they both lead to the same place. Option 1 is that Paul is speaking hypothetically. Hypothetically, if a person is able to patiently do good, seeking glory and honor and immortality, and do it perfectly, without fail, he would

indeed earn eternal life. Hypothetically, if someone were truly to do good and only good, without fail, perfectly, they would receive glory and honor and peace from God.

What's the problem? No one has and no one can. So

what's the result for Paul's readers? They are guilty, deserving of wrath and fury and tribulation and distress.

Yes, God will judge according to works, but everyone's

works render them guilty. No one survives based on their

works. That's option 1. Option 2 is that Paul is speaking of

works that accompany someone who is saved by faith,

works that give evidence of God's justifying grace. Those

works prove genuine salvation, and the absence of them

prove a lack of salvation. So what's the problem for Paul's

audience? They show no evidence of these affirming

works. So what's the result for them? They are guilty,

deserving of wrath and fury and tribulation and distress.

God judges according to faith in the gospel, but saving faith is affirmed by good works, and their lack of works render them guilty. So it's the same either way. Which is the whole point of the passage. Paul is attempting to show these religious people that their sin has placed them under the wrath of God. Their religious pedigree is of no value. And neither is yours. How many generations of your family have belonged to this church, how many years you've been coming here, how often you show up, how much you give, how faithfully you serve, none of that by itself is enough to make you acceptable to God and deliver you from His judgment.

And then the third worthless foundation is your **familiarity with the law**. Paul has been speaking to the religious Jew, someone who likely took pride in having received the OT

law and in knowing it: laws about morality and worship and rituals and sacrifices and purity and diet and behavior and speech and the social order. They often believed that merely the possession of that law gave them an advantage over the Gentiles who had never heard or read the law. They were totally ignorant of it. So that HAS to give some advantage to the Jew, right? They know the law; the Gentiles have never even heard it. So what does Paul say? He says that the distinction between those who are right with God and those under His wrath has nothing to do with whether or not you have the law. The question is, "Have you sinned?" And he says you can sin with the law or without the law, but either way, you perish. Look at v.13. Paul says it doesn't matter if you have the law, hear the law, know the law, can recite the law. That doesn't make you righteous. You aren't righteous by hearing it, but

by doing it, which you have not and cannot. Then in vv.14-15 he says that the Gentiles don't have the law, but sometimes they choose to do right. That's because even Gentiles have an innate, natural sense of right and wrong. Theologians call it natural law. It's an instinctive sense of morality where right and wrong are, in a sense, written on the heart of every single person. It's why even a non-religious person can feel guilt or shame or denial. It's why even non-religious people often hide their sin. It's why, when a child takes a cookie, even if they cannot comprehend the 8<sup>th</sup> Commandment (do not steal) will lie about having taken the cookie. They know it was wrong. It's why even the most remote, isolated tribe operates by rules about killing and stealing and lying and adultery. Even someone with no awareness of God's written law has a conscience, and the conscience accuses them

when they do wrong and affirms them and excuses their guilt when they do right. And it is those very thoughts and secrets of the heart that will be judged on the final day. We will be judged based on what we did with the law we had, whether it was the law of nature and our conscience written on the heart or the law of God written on stone tablets and paper. But the end result is the same for both. Regardless of what law we had, we violated it. We transgressed it. We failed to keep it, and so we are guilty. All of us. Jew and Gentile. That's the bad news.

The good news is that He will judge us, Paul says, according to His gospel, which is the only hope for us because it is the only way that we can be judged righteous. Only when we place our hope and trust in the perfect life of Jesus lived on our behalf to earn us

righteousness, only when we place our hope and trust in the sacrificial death Jesus died in our place to take our penalty for our sin, only when we place our hope and trust in the victorious resurrection Jesus accomplished to defeat death and secure eternal life for us, only when you trust in Him and His work will you be delivered from God's wrath and declared righteous in His sight. That's the gospel. If you have not placed your faith in Christ, the invitation is open. Come to Jesus and be rescued from your sin. And if we have, let us heed Paul's words here. Let us not become presumptuous, pointing fingers at others who we judge more sinful than ourselves. And let us not become complacent toward our own sin, failing to examine our own hearts and our own lives. And let us not presume that God cannot or will not save those we may not expect. Yes, His judgments are just. Yes, His wrath is fierce. But His grace

is greater than our sin, and He is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to Him through Christ.