**GOD’S RIGHTEOUS JUDGMENT**

**(Romans 1:18-2:16)**

***“Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, forbearance and patience, not realizing that God’s kindness is intended to lead you to repentance? But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God’s wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed.” (2:4-5)***

In our introduction to the Book of Romans last week, Apostle Paul pointed our hearts and minds back to the gospel, *“the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes” (1:16).* In the gospel, God’s righteousness is revealed, a righteousness made available to us through faith in Jesus Christ. However, if you went around sharing Romans 1:16-17 with people on the street, you would probably get reactions life: “I’ve heard that message before.” “Ya, thanks, but I’m good.” “Righteousness? What does that even mean?” “This offends me. Stop pushing your outdated belief system on me.” Why such indifference and animosity towards the good news? Without understanding who we are as sinners and who God is as the righteous Judge, the gospel is like a seed never planted. Only when it is shown to be so precious and so vital to our salvation does it begin its life-giving work. This is what Paul begins to do in today’s passage. His words especially ring true for Gentiles like us. Let’s look past our cultural biases to see things as they really are, and accept the gospel newly for the treasure it really is.

**I. A world without faith (1:18-32)**

Through Romans 1:18-3:20, Paul answers some of the most basic theological questions posed by Gentiles, such as: “Why does it matter if we believe in God or not? What does it mean that we are ‘sinners’? How can God hold us accountable for our sins?” To address these difficult questions, Paul begins in verse 18a, ***“The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people…”*** Here the revealing of God’s wrath directly parallels the revealing of God’s righteousness in the previous verse. So, what is God’s *wrath*? It is not at all like human anger, an irrational outburst in which we lash out at others when we are having a bad day. Rather, it is a fierce, relentless anger against that which opposes God’s perfect will—that is, sin. It is rooted in righteousness. God is holy; he will not allow sin to go unpunished. If he did, he would no longer be consistent with his own nature. God therefore hates all of the godlessness and wickedness displayed by human beings.

Of course, we know that God does not pour out his wrath onto each of us directly after we sin, treating us as our sins deserve. If he did, there would be no one left on the face of the earth. God’s judgment is far from reaching its full measure. Nevertheless, Paul claims that God’s wrath ***“…is being revealed…”*** God’s wrath is often seen in the way that he deals with people in this life. He punishes evildoers and vindicates the righteous as he sees fit. Moreover, God’s wrath is clearly revealed in the Scriptures. Overall, the situation can be thought of like a dam holding back a deluge of water. Every sin that a person commits against God creates another crack in the dam’s structure. While God has been holding back the full measure of his wrath, there will come a day when it is poured out without mercy.

Some might say, “What did we ever do to deserve this?” The chief sin of all mankind is unbelief. Look at verses 18b-20. ***“…who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.”*** Denial of God’s existence is a deliberate decision. No one can claim “innocence through ignorance” because God’s eternal power and divine nature are all over the place. As Francis Bacon, the founder of the scientific method, famously taught, God has written two books so that we might know him: the book of the Bible and the book of Nature. In the stars, in the mountains, in the trees, in the animals, at the tiniest levels, and even within our own bodies, the beauty and diversity of God are on full display. Everything is so wonderfully ordered. That breathless sense of awe we’re left with is meant to be directed toward God, that we might worship him as Creator. But sinful mankind suppresses this. It is not so much an intellectual problem as it is a spiritual and moral one. Sinful man knows that an Almighty God means an Almighty Judge who can tell them how to live. A holy God is inconvenient for those who don’t want to be held morally accountable. So people close themselves off from the truth because of their love of darkness and for fear that their deeds will be exposed (Jn 3:19-21).

This only serves to make things exceedingly worse. Verse 21 reads, ***“For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.”*** Knowing full well that God does exist, all people are obligated to worship him, that is, to glorify him and render the thanks that is due him as Creator. Failing to do so is an egregious sin of omission stemming from pride and ingratitude. God has graciously provided each of us with unique abilities: brilliant minds, compassionate hearts, musical talents, strong bodies and all sorts of special skills. He has entrusted us with these so that we might use them for his glory. But apart from God, people misuse these gifts for their personal benefit, oftentimes at the expense of others. Their life loses meaning and becomes a foolish chasing after the wind. Expending all one’s brainpower to understand how the universe works while denying God’s existence ultimately leads nowhere—in fact, it leads further away from the truth. Moreover, denial of God makes one’s heart desensitized to sin. They only become more enslaved by greed, bitterness and hatred.

God made each of us with a God-sized hole in our hearts, which only he can fill. So if we do not fill it with God, we naturally fill it with something else. Look at verses 22-23, 25. ***“Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles…They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen.”*** If not the Creator, then some created thing. This describes much of human beings throughout history. Some cultures have or had a very strong worship of Nature embedded in their culture. Sometimes it was mixed with the ideas of god-like figures, like the gods of Egypt or the Greek/Roman gods. One might argue that secular people today are above such foolish practices. But everyone’s heart gravitates towards someone or something that they set their hope in. Even humanism is a worship of oneself as the highest source of good and the one worthy of deciding one’s own purpose. Exchanging the truth about God for a lie does not make man great; it makes him stupid and evil.

This is the reality that God has been dealing with since the Fall. God loves us so much despite all our sins, yet he respects the freewill he gave us as human beings in his image. So what did God do? Rather than simply destroying us, he has thus far judged us in a different way. He has let us do as we desire, with all its terrible consequences, to run its course as an act of judgment. This is the meaning of Paul’s words, ***“God gave them over”*** in verses 24, 26 and 28. When mankind stubbornly rejected God’s purpose for them, God said, “Enough! Go your own way from now on.” Apart from God’s purpose for sex and marriage, people plunged headlong into sexual immorality, doing whatever felt pleasurable to them. This led to rampant adultery, polygamy, incest, rape and every other kind of sexual sin under the sun. Eventually this extended to homosexual practices, which are abnormal and particularly detestable in God’s sight (Lev 20:13). But it wasn’t just sexual sin. God gave mankind over to ***“…a depraved mind, so that they do what ought not to be done” (v. 28b).*** Just look at the sins listed in verses 29-32. Committing sin is not without cost. It leads deeper and deeper into sin, like a progressive and contagious disease. Hating God and hating one’s neighbor became the norm, destroying individuals, families and societies gradually. As a result, people suffer from the natural consequences of their sin even in their current lives and bring God’s eternal condemnation. In short, a world without faith brings hell on earth.

Is the condition of the world then hopeless? By no means! As long as there is a Father God who loves us, there is always hope. He did not give man over to sin without purpose. His heart is like that of the father in the Parable of the Lost Son (Lk 15:11-32). In this parable, the younger son says, *“Father, give me my share of the estate.”* He considered his father dead to him and wanted to live his life on his own terms. His father does not deny his request but gave him the money and let him go. But this was not because he didn’t love his son. He loved him so much, and stayed up every night praying and watching for his return. It was only after the son blew his money on prostitutes and hit rock bottom that he realized the error of his ways. His suffering under the weight of his sins led him to come to his senses and return to his father with a repentant heart. When he came home, his father ran out to embrace his son and bring him back into his family. Like the dam holding back the flood of water, God’s heart patiently bears with our sins as a lovesick father, waiting for his beloved children to end their suffering and come home. We must give up the idea that we can be rulers over our own lives. We must exchange our idols for the one true God and give up our love of sin. We must not keep our Heavenly Father waiting a moment longer. God bless the broken road that leads us back to him.

**II. God’s righteous judgment (2:1-16)**

After hearing this explanation of the spiritual state of the world, some people may misinterpret Paul’s message thinking, “Wow, everyone else is so evil! I hope God destroys all of those wicked unbelievers!” To such people, Paul gives a scathing rebuke. Look at 2:1. ***“You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge another, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things.”*** Review once more the list of sins that Paul gave us in the last part. Can you not find yourself guilty of a number of these? This list is not exhaustive. Every one of us deserves God’s judgment. Rather than making us more critical of others, this should make us more understanding of others’ weaknesses and more willing to show them grace.

At this point, Paul’s teaching shifts from man’s reality as sinful and accountable to God’s reality as the righteous Judge. God has been waiting and waiting and waiting…but one day, when God decides he can tolerate the evil no longer, the dam will burst. What exactly will this look like? Paul explains several aspects of God’s righteous judgment in this section.

*First, God’s judgment is based on truth (v. 2).* Verse 2 reads, ***“Now we know that God’s judgment against those who do such things is based on truth.”*** Human judgments carry with them intrinsic biases because we ourselves are sinners. But God is perfectly holy and perfectly just. Everything that says and does is based on his nature of truth. Many people will be surprised at their fate at the Final Judgment when the truth is brought to light. Jesus said in Luke 8:17, *“For there is nothing hidden that will not be disclosed, and nothing concealed that will not be known or brought out into the open.”* No one can hide from God.

*Second, God’s judgment is based on the fruit of one’s life (vs. 6-10).* Look at verse 6. ***“God ‘will repay each person according to what they have done.’”*** At first glance, this might appear to sound like “salvation through works” rather than “salvation through faith”. But Paul’s intention is clear: every person will be judged by God based on their belief system, which then bore fruit in their lifestyle. A person’s life’s purpose, words and actions are the objective evidence of the kind of person they are. No one can claim to live a God-fearing, God-loving lifestyle if their deeds do not support this. Paul explains that there are only two lifestyles. ***“To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life. But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger” (vs. 7-8).*** We must ask ourselves, “Am I living a lifestyle of gospel faith? Or is my heart and my life’s direction far from God?” There will be no room for excuses at the Final Judgment. We must examine our lives in the light of God’s truth because God’s judgment is perfectly fair

Verse 11 reads, ***“For God does not show favoritism.”*** Here, Paul is referring especially to differences between Jews and Gentiles, but the principle is true when it comes to any and all man-made standards. When judging each person, God does not see rich or poor, good-looking or not-so-good-looking, family background, ethnicity or any other such thing. He bases his judgment solely on the fruit of one’s life. This is the way God has always dealt with mankind. When Peter was sent by God to Cornelius’ house to share the gospel with Gentiles, he was amazed and said, *“I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right” (Act 10:34-35).*

*Third, God’s judgment is based on the “light” that he has made available to each person (vs. 12-15).* Since God judges people based on the fruit of their life, without favoritism, this brings up a seemingly difficult issue. Some people in the world have received a greater revelation about God and his will than others. Therefore, it seems unfair for God to judge all people by the same standard, without favoritism. This is a good theological question to ask; the problem is that many try to use it as an excuse to disprove God’s right to judge all people so that they can weasel out of their own accountability. But Paul addresses this question very matter-of-factly in verses 12-13. ***“All who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who sin under the law will be judged by the law. For it is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God’s sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous.”*** This clearly teaches us that God’s judgment is in some way relative to the knowledge that God himself has made known to them. For a Jew that grew up under the standards of Jewish law, God expects that person to know and obey his will based on what they have been taught. But this does not let Gentiles off the hook; they too are without excuse for knowing that God exists and has righteous standards that must be adhered to. Paul uses verses 14-15 to explain that one’s conscience is evidence that God’s law is written on the heart of every human being. So regardless of whether the standard is more specific or less specific, God has an expectation for all people to live up to. To reject one’s responsibility is to invite judgment upon oneself.

So, in light of these truths, what should we say? Since God’s righteous judgment is real, how should we respond? This brings us now to our key verses, 4-5. ***“Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, forbearance and patience, not realizing that God’s kindness is intended to lead you to repentance? But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God’s wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed.”*** There are two ways we can respond to God’s long-suffering love for us. We could misunderstand it as approval for our sinful habits and continue to live our lives in rebellion against God. This might not see any noticeable effects in the short-term, but in reality, we will only be storing up greater wrath that will one day be poured out on us. The other option is to see and appreciate God’s grace for sinners like us. We can turn away from our idols and our self-seeking lifestyle and run back to our Heavenly Father’s arms. We can persist in living with a gospel faith that renders glory to God and bears much wonderful fruit for God’s eternal kingdom.

The only question left to ask is, “How can we be saved if we are all guilty sinners? How do we know if our life meets God’s standards or not?” The answer, of course, is found in the good news about Jesus Christ. In the deluge of God’s judgment, Jesus is our life preserver. To put on this life preserver, one must personally accept Jesus’ sacrifice for their sins on the cross through faith. Then they will be clothed with the perfect righteousness of Christ himself. When the dam eventually breaks and God’s wrath pours out on all mankind at Jesus’ Second Coming as people’s Judge (16), God’s people will instantly float to the top! They will survive the Day of Judgment through their relationship with Jesus alone. We must then ask ourselves, are we strapped in tightly with Jesus’ righteousness? Are we living lives of gospel faith through sincere repentance? I pray that we may all respond to God’s grace and love with humble gratitude.

The lessons we learned today are very counter-cultural. We must not let ourselves be influenced by the godless atmosphere that surrounds us. Jesus warned us in Luke 17:26-27, *“Just as it was in the days of Noah, so also will it be in the days of the Son of Man. People were eating, drinking, marrying and being given in marriage up to the day Noah entered the ark. Then the flood came and destroyed them all.”* We have been warned. We must not be caught off guard. Lord Jesus, help us to live by faith as we await your coming.