



JUDGING THE JUDGMENTAL

SERIES: GUILT, GRACE, AND GLORY

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Romans 2:1-16

Fourth Message

Gary Vanderet

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In our weekly home fellowship meetings we are studying Philip Yancey's wonderful book, *What's So Amazing About Grace?* We have had some interesting discussions about forgiveness, and the difficulty many of us have in this area.

In his book, Yancey raises the matter of Jeffrey Dahmer's conversion. Dahmer, the mass murderer, abused and murdered 17 young men. He cannibalized them and stored body parts in his refrigerator. Eleven corpses were found in his apartment. He was the epitome of the word vile. During his trial he sat serenely in court, showing no signs of remorse. In November of 1994, Dahmer was beaten to death in prison by a fellow prisoner. Television news reports included interviews with relatives of Dahmer's victims. They said their only regret about his killing was that it had ended his life too soon. They wanted him to suffer more.

Yancey writes,

One network showed a program taped a few weeks before Dahmer's murder. The interviewer asked him how he could possibly commit the crimes he was convicted of. Dahmer said that these things happened before he believed in God, when he wasn't accountable to anybody. He said it all began with petty crimes and small acts of cruelty, and he just kept going, further and further. Nothing restrained him. Dahmer then told of his recent religious conversion. He was baptized in the prison whirlpool and spent all of his time now reading his Bible and Christian literature.¹

The prison chaplain affirmed Dahmer's conversion, saying that his repentance was sincere and that he was one of his most faithful worshipers.

Some find reports like this troubling. Grace for a cannibal? Our natural response is to fold our arms and say, "No, it's not that easy. God isn't going to let you off just like that, not after what you did. God is forgiving, but he is no milquetoast. Grace is for average sinners like us, not deviants like you." When we read chapter 1 of Romans, many of us think, "Go get 'em, Paul. It's about time someone stood up and spoke the truth. We decent, law abiding people are behind you."

This is the attitude that the apostle addresses in the opening verses of Romans 2, to which we now come. Here he speaks to the self-righteous, judgmental moralist who views God's grace through the lens of his own prejudice. The moralist is an outwardly decent, good-living person. The problem with such people, however,

is that they delude themselves. They think that because they have maintained a certain respectable facade that God will overlook their inner sins; that there will be no judgment for them because everything appears fine on the outside.

Remember the apostle's purpose in these opening chapters of Romans is to confront this mistaken faith we have in the goodness of man. Somehow we cling to that notion even though we know it doesn't correlate to the world we live in. We want to believe that we're doing fine. But Paul says we are not. All kinds of things are wrong with us.

To convince his readers Paul uses a literary device, common in the Greek world of his day, called a diatribe. Today, of course, a diatribe means a harsh and bitter harangue, but in Paul's day, it was a method of learned discussion. An individual would take the place of his opponent and actually state and respond to the questions that arose in his mind. That is what Paul is doing here. He is anticipating the questions that a reader would raise regarding what he had said in chapter 1. The "you" in the verses is singular. Paul is thinking of one person, a man or woman who, after reading chapter 1, would say, "Wait a minute. I'm not like that. I'm not perverted. I don't read pornography. I don't cheat on my spouse."

It is to these self-righteous moralists that Paul addresses these words now, beginning at 2:1:

Therefore you are without excuse, every man of you who passes judgment, for in that you judge another, you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things. And we know that the judgment of God rightly falls upon those who practice such things. And do you suppose this, O man, when you pass judgment upon those who practice such things and do the same yourself, that you will escape the judgment of God? Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance?

The apostle reveals a human frailty that many can identify with: the tendency to be critical of everyone but ourselves; to be self-righteously indignant over other people's mistakes while at the same time overlooking our own.

The apostle points out some interesting things in this paragraph. First, man's universal tendency to judge as-

sumes an understanding of right and wrong. Everyone is aware of a standard. Every society has rules that are based on a common understanding of right and wrong. People know the difference.

Sociologists have demonstrated that every society, every tribe and culture has rules. These standards may not always be exactly the same, but they are much more in agreement than we might imagine. For example, no culture honors cowardice. All societies recognize that bravery, courage and fortitude are good traits. Paul says that everyone has a standard. We don't need a rule book entitled, "The Rules Of Life." If you drive out of the parking lot today and someone cuts into line ahead of you, you will respond verbally, or in your mind, "Hey, what are you doing? That's not right. I was here first." Where did that notion of rightness come from? Paul will tell us later that it is inscribed on our hearts. We know the difference between right and wrong.

The second thing the apostle points out is that even though we all know the standard, and we enforce it with others, we don't keep it ourselves. Paul writes, "Therefore you are without excuse, every man of you who passes judgment, for in that you judge another, you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things." We do the very things we tell others not to do. We tell our children that patience is an admirable virtue, and then we lose our temper. We tell them not to speed, but we exceed the speed limit. We tell them not to lie, but we lie. A few years ago I was skiing in Squaw Valley with my son Stephen (he had just celebrated his thirteenth birthday a week earlier). I noticed that the sign for the lifts said, "Adults, \$40; children 0 to 12, \$5." I said to Steve, "Why don't you go over there for a minute." Then I bought two tickets, one adult and one child. Later that day he asked me, "Why do I have a child's ticket?" He has never let me live that down.

Paul hits his target. We do the very things we tell others not to do. We are hypocrites.

Why do we do this? It is because we think that the judgment of God somehow doesn't apply to us; to everyone else yes, but not us. We don't understand the nature and extent of our own sins. Others lie, but we simply are "stretching the truth." Others steal, we "borrow." Others are prejudiced, we have "convictions." If we are the one who cuts into line, when challenged we generally will not question the standard but, rather, hasten to explain why it is all right for us to violate it, because "we were in a hurry." We don't say, "It's all right to cut into lines." We think we are an exception.

Not only do we fail to understand the nature of our own sin, but our blindness extends to our view of God: we confuse his patience with indifference. That is what Paul means, in verse 4, "Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance?"

God is very patient. He does not immediately judge acts of sin, he waits. And at times we misinterpret his patience. We think he is much too kind to punish anybody. Forgiveness is his job, we say. We think he's like Santa Claus, who isn't supposed to give presents to boys and girls who are naughty, only to those who are nice. But we know Santa Claus would bring us presents even though we weren't good. We think God's attitude is the same. But when we do that we are misinterpreting God's patience. God does care about sin. The reason he is waiting is that he is calling us to himself.

However, interpreting God's kindness as an excuse to continue sinning is a sure sign of a stubborn and unrepentant heart, according to Paul. Verse 5:

But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God,

When hogs are placed in a pen all they do is eat. They don't go anywhere; they just eat and get bigger and bigger. The more they eat, however, the sooner and more inevitable their "judgment" comes. That is what Paul is saying. We are merely "storing up wrath." The word is "treasures," the same word that Jesus used when he said, "Lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven" (Matt. 6:20). Those who are unrepentant are making deposits into a bank account from which, one of these days, they are going to collect.

The apostle continues. Verses 6-11:

who WILL RENDER TO EVERY MAN ACCORDING TO HIS DEEDS: to those who by perseverance in doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, eternal life; but to those who are selfishly ambitious and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, wrath and indignation. There will be tribulation and distress for every soul of man who does evil, of the Jew first and also of the Greek, but glory and honor and peace to every man who does good, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For there is no partiality with God.

At first glance it appears that Paul is teaching a doctrine of salvation by works, but let me explain what I think he is saying.

A day is coming when the divine judgment which is now going on in secret will be made public; and on that day, the evidence for that public judgment, namely, our lives, will be visible. John Stott put it this way, "The presence or absence of our faith in Christ will be evident by the presence or absence of love and good works in our lives." There are only two types of people in the world: those who are inclined toward God and those who are inclined away from him; those who are growing more alive every day, and those who are dying. And the person who yearns for God, who longs to do what is right, will find God, or, to put it as Paul does, God will find him.

And if we choose God, then God will come and meet us. I think he gives us more truth. He will give us the knowledge of the Savior. And when we hear about the Savior, if our hearts are inclined to him, we will believe.

C.S. Lewis put it this way:

People often think of Christian morality as a kind of bargain, in which God says that if you keep a lot of rules I will reward you, and if you don't I will do the other thing. I do not think that is the best way of looking at it. I would much rather say that every time you make a choice you are turning the central part of you, the part that chooses, into something different than it was before. And taking your life as a whole, with all your innumerable choices all your life long, you are slowly turning this central thing either into a heavenly creature or into a hellish creature; either a creature that is in harmony with God, and with other creatures and with itself, or else into one that is in a state of war with God and his fellow creatures and with himself. To be the one kind of creature is heavenly, that is joy and peace and knowledge and power; to be the other means madness, horror, idiocy, rage, impotence, and eternal loneliness. Each of us at each moment is progressing to the one state or the other.²

The righteous God judges evil and assesses wrath against it. God cannot be fooled. He is absolutely impartial. It doesn't matter whether we belong to a church or were raised in a Christian home. God is no respecter of persons. Such defenses will never meet the righteous standards of a holy God.

And God's judgment is completely impartial: He judges everyone with faultless discrimination. Verses 12-16:

For all who have sinned without the Law will also perish without the Law; and all who have sinned under the Law will be judged by the Law; for not the hearers of the Law are just before God, but the doers of the Law will be justified. For when Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves, in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness, and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them, on the day when, according to my gospel, God will judge the secrets of men through Christ Jesus.

This is the clearest answer to the question we hear asked all the time, "What about the people who have never heard of Jesus Christ?" Paul's answer is that they will be judged by their own standards. God judges men not according to what they do not know, but according to what they know. His judgment will be based on the truth that we know. God chose to give the law and his revelation to the Jews. They had truth, they had light,

and they were held responsible for that revelation. But Gentiles have a law too, even though they don't have the Torah. They have a law in their hearts. Paul says that God holds us responsible only for the truth we have. He doesn't judge us because of our ignorance. And the way we know that we have this law within us is that we have a conscience which reminds us.

Paul is saying that even those who don't know God's standard still have a standard, but they don't keep it. Our conscience operates off the standard that we have and reminds us when we fall short. It keeps nagging us, like the little red light on the dashboard that tells us something is wrong inside. We know it, it nags us, and it's always there. And Paul says that the conscience that bothers us now is going to speak to us when we stand before God. He won't even have to tell us we are sinful; we will know it. That is what Paul means when he says, "they [the Gentiles] show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness, and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them."

That is happening now: our conscience nags us about our failure to live up to the standard that we have. And it will also take place on the day when God will "judge the secrets of men." God knows our secrets. He knows about the lust, all the garbage that is in our minds and all that has occurred in our past. Like Adam and Eve, we want to cover it up and hide it. But they couldn't keep their secret from God, and neither can we. God knows my secrets and he knows your secrets. He knows what is going on inside your mind right now, and he still loves you.

And we know that God loves us because, as Paul will say, in chapter 5, verse 8, "For while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." And when we know that God sees us and loves us, then we don't have anything else to hide. We can come to him and say, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." One of these days we are going to stand before him and it's all going to come out anyway. Then it will be too late to accept salvation. The day of judgment is coming. It would be wise to "settle out of court." Now is the time to accept salvation. Peter wrote, "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed" (1 Peter 2:24).

God does not force us. His relentless love will track us down, but he will not force us. The choice is ours.

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¹ Philip Yancey, *What's So Amazing About Grace?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997).

² C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Collier Books, 1952) 86.