

Sermon Title: A Warning for Deceived Moralists

Sermon Text: Romans 2:1-16

Rom. 2:1 ¶ Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things.

Rom. 2:2 We know that the judgment of God rightly falls on those who practice such things.

Rom. 2:3 Do you suppose, O man—you who judge those who practice such things and yet do them yourself—that you will escape the judgment of God?

Rom. 2:4 Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?

Rom. 2:5 But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed.

Rom. 2:6 ¶ He will render to each one according to his works:

Rom. 2:7 to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life;

Rom. 2:8 but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury.

Rom. 2:9 There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek,

Rom. 2:10 but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek.

Rom. 2:11 For God shows no partiality.

Rom. 2:12 ¶ 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.

Rom. 2:13 For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified.

Rom. 2:14 For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law.

Rom. 2:15 They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them

Rom. 2:16 on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus.

Main Point: One of the hardest individuals to convince of their need of the Gospel is the deceived moralist who believes that he/she is good, and that it is really only others who need the Gospel.

Outline:

1. The Hypocrisy of the Moralist (2:1-5)
2. The Honesty of God's Judgment (2:6-11)
3. The Certainty of God's Judgment (2:12-16)

Father, today's passage is once again an opportunity for you to confront us with the truth about ourselves and the inadequacy of our own works and security and peace. So would you help us not to rely on or live on shallow peace, but instead use your word to make us see that we need Christ. Help us, we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

Introduction

I want you to see how helpful our practice of including the surrounding verses in the bulletin happens to be this morning. Because just looking at the text **you can see the difference between what Paul was doing chapter 1** and what he's doing here in chapter 2.

Particularly, **notice the turn in Paul's address from "they" → "you"**. Before, Paul was getting his readers to think about just how bad the sin we see *around* us is.

Everything in his argument of chapter 1 has been, “they” do this, “they” are foolish, “they” have been given over, “they” approve of sin.

Now, that way of talking is **catnip** for a preacher. I know this very well, that if you talk about “other people” “those people,” “our society” or “the culture” and criticize it, **nearly everybody is excited** to hear it. “Yes, tell me how bad the world has gotten. I’m ready to hear it.” Well Paul has been probably finding a receptive audience so far through chapter 1 from most reader. The Romans hear it and you can imagine the amens, the groans of approval, maybe a raised hand here and there. **If you’re in Rome and reading this, you’re probably feeling a bit safe from this sermon.** Your neighbors? Not so much. They’re living like pagans. But not you. You’re a good Christian person.

But then here he comes in chapter 2, and he says, “Yes, ‘they’ are bad, and you can see it.” ... “Therefore **you** have no excuse.” Oh no. It’s the gut-punch. Because here’s the turn, someone who is doing the things Paul talks about in chapter 1 isn’t going to be thrilled by what he said. You probably could hear how I was very focused on in a sense offering an apologetic for the sins Paul identified in the previous weeks.

But this is what Paul does here: **he puts the wild Gentiles** with their insane parties and lifestyles **on the same level here as the clean-nosed**, law-abiding **citizens** with their **stable homes** and all that. Why does he do that? He was a good rhetorician. He had just won his audience over – he’d won the “good people” over. And **now he turns on us. Why?**

Well the answer is, **he has to**. He has a duty to the truth. And the truth he’s about to show us is that even the clean-nosed folks also need to see our sin.

Is there **anyone** among us who is **more in danger** and deceived than the **person** who **sees everyone else’s problems and sins**, but will never admit that they may have an issue themselves?

If you try to get to the gospel destination without even having a need for the gospel, you remove the very reason the gospel in the first place.

You see, some modern Christians and ministers want the gospel without sin. They **want to talk about the good news of Jesus, but truly to avoid** or even deny the

topic of sin. There's a preacher out there whose name I won't mention from the pulpit, but I would argue he's very representative of this approach. Here's a quote from him:

“You don't have to tell people what they're doing wrong. They already know. Your job is to love them.”

In another interview he was **asked if he felt he was cheating people by not talking about sin** and God's wrath, and his response was:

“No, I really don't, because it's a different approach... most people are beaten down enough by life. They already feel guilty enough... So I want them to come to [our church] meetings and be lifted up.”

On the one hand, you have folks who don't want to do what Paul is doing here, because they think you'd just be “beating people down.”

But let me just tell you, **Paul is not just beating people down for the sake of beating people down.** He doesn't want to clobber people needlessly. He loves people!

The **first two chapters of Romans** exist, not because of some perverse cruelty. They are **written because we are in denial about our sin!** How do you get someone in denial to see what they're denying? It's not easy.

But you don't just have a **tendency** by some to try to **avoid the topic of sin** even though they think is real. You also have **something even more common** in our own day, which is to think, “Well look... on the balance I've done more good than evil. Yes, I've done bad things, but I've done more good than bad, so when you put my bad up on the scale, the good will weigh more, and God will let me into heaven.”

Not only does **this approach** think that the whole goal here is just to “get into heaven,” but it also **says** that really we can get there **if we work hard enough** and try hard enough. And both of these couldn't be further from how Paul addresses the subject of sin.

We **have to see and acknowledge our sin.** This is what the first two chapters of Romans are there for. We *have* to see it about ourselves.

If we will not hear the bad news, then we don't need the good news.

So Paul see, **he *has* to turn on everyone who reads this letter**, because it turns out every reader needs to see this, whether they like it or not. Nobody was ever going to be exempt from where he was going with this.

And today I want you to see that **he's turning on you here, too**. Not because he hates or wants to hurt us, but because **Paul is like the physician here**. In the first chapter it's like we brought our friend in because he's sick, and now it's like **Paul turns to us** and says, **"You have a fever too. You're both sick."** That's not very flattering, to be told that the good moralistic clean nosed people are on the same level as rebels and coveters, and homosexuals and thieves, but it's where he's always been going with this.

So today Paul's going to make us see that we are sick and need the medicine. And here's how he's going to do it. **Three points: first, he shows the hypocrisy of the moralist. Second, he reminds us of the honesty of God's judgment. And then third, he takes us to the certainty of God's judgment.**

Paul is all about **removing paths of escape** here. He knows where we will want to run so that we can avoid the gospel. The gospel doesn't flatter us, it humbles us. The gospel doesn't set us loose to live life our way, it **means coming to God in humility, which we naturally resist**. You may love the gospel, but if you love the gospel it is because you've seen how sinful you are and how much you need God's grace. People naturally do *not* love the gospel, though, because it **strips us of our bragging rights** and means resting in God and his grace.

We naturally really do want to find a way out of this on our own without needing the gospel, and **Paul is committed to cutting off every attempt we might make as we try** to get away from this conclusion.

1. The Hypocrisy of the Moralist (2:1-5)

First, Paul exposes the hypocrisy of the Moralist.

In verse 1 the turn happens immediately: **"Therefore you have no excuse, O man, everyone one of you who judges. For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things."**

Paul's issue here is *not* with moral judgments, period. **Moral judgments are good and right.** Paul doesn't want less moral judgments. His goal here is not to make people less judgmental. What he **wants** is for them to see that **in their moral instinct is something that applies equally to them**, and not just to their neighbor.

A while ago, a car swerved around me, stomped on the gas, and blew through the speed limit and I said out loud, **"What a maniac!"** And this is the problem with having teenagers: they are observant, and ready to pounce. **"You're not such a good driver yourself."** In my judgment of this other driver, I also condemned myself.

The **point** is not that we shouldn't make moral judgments, but that **we see what those moral judgments say about us!** Paul asks the question in verse 3, **"Do you suppose, O man – you who judge those who practice such things and yet do them yourself – that you will escape the judgment of God?"**

Our own sense of self-righteousness is so invincible that **it takes a real gut-punch to break through.**

In 2 Samuel 12, after **David steals Uriah's wife**, and then has Uriah killed, you may remember how the prophet Nathan comes to David and tells him the parable about the rich man who steals a poor man's only lamb. The story royally ticks David off and **David himself says that the man who stole that lamb deserves to die.** That's chapter 1 for us, right? We read chapter 1 and all the harsh things Paul says and we agree with him. We're on board. "People who do these things do deserve to die!"

Well what did **Nathan** do next once he got David to agree that this was a serious sin? He said to him, **"You yourself are the rich man in this parable who stole the lamb! You stole this man's wife!"** David knows he's guilty, he knows what he deserves. He's opened himself to the accusation. He's **pronounced his own verdict.** That's a gut punch, and it's what it may take for us to see these for ourselves.

That's **what Paul does here** now. He says, **"Stop being so excited about everyone else's sin. It's time that we address yours."**

There was this famous moment in a sermon by **Paul Washer** years and years ago now, but in his sermon he was preaching and talking about people who think they

can come to Christ and keep on sinning. And when he says this, the **crowd erupts in applause**. The crowd loves it. And I've never seen a preacher more eager to throw a wet blanket on the crowd. They're all clapping and he just looks at them all dead serious and says, "I don't know why you're clapping. I'm talking about you."

After chapter 1, **Paul doesn't know why you're clapping, either**. He's talking about you. He's talking about me. Paul says, the fact that you are clapping about seeing other peoples' sin being confronted is proof that you know better. You are the man.

It is **in seeing our hypocrisy that the confrontation stings so much** and strikes us so deeply. Have you had your humbling by God yet? Has God confronted you with the realization: "yes, I'm surrounded by flawed, sinful, even hypocritical people, and I fit in with them more than I'd ever like to admit"?

[Paul is confronting us with our own hypocrisy here.](#)

2. The Honesty of God's Judgment (2:6-11)

[Second, Paul reminds us of the honesty of God's judgment.](#)

You and I, if we're honest, **play favorites**. Maybe not with our kids, but with other people. **We have a way of excusing things that other people do** when we have a good relationship with them, right?

In the town where I grew up, there was **one police chief**, and there was one officer that worked under him. And if you were **friends with the police**, you could do anything. And you could get other people in trouble if you felt like it.

Once I was **driving through the middle of town** on a summer day and there wasn't a soul in sight. I pulled up to the main intersection in my junky old Ford Ranger pickup. I **didn't completely stop**. It was a rolling stop. The only person around was a city worker who was repairing something nearby. About 20 minutes later, I got **pulled over** by our only police officer in town, who said that he had an eyewitness who would testify in court that I ran the

stop sign. Well the **eyewitness had something against my father**, and this was a chance to get my father back through me. In this instance, I had done something wrong and deserved what I got, and I **did have to pay the ticket**. But the one who caught me was also playing favorites. This guy who was his friend could run stop signs all day, but not me.

It's not just the police in my town. **We all tend to play favorites**. We excuse people we are close to, and we are hard on people we don't know very well. And yes, we may notice that the law is not always applied evenly.

Paul here, however, says, “[God] will render to each one according to his works.” His point here is not that you can ultimately be good enough so that the good and bad in your life balance out. He's going to explain in the next chapter why that's not possible. The **point here** is, **God is the fairest, straightest-shooting lawmaker**, lawgiver, and law enforcer that there is in all the world. You can't impress him, trick him, you can't buy him off or manipulate him. You have no power over him, and He will never show favoritism. He **doesn't pick the winners**. He sees everything, knows everything, and is totally fair, across the board.

Whatever God knows about you is true and accurate.

He is just as harsh on lawbreaking Gentiles as he is on clean-nosed but ultimately law-breaking Jews. Everybody gets the truth told on them.

God's judgment is not based on appearances. It **isn't partial**, and it displays no favoritism. It is only **according to what is really true**. This is why Paul says in verse 9, “There will be tribulation and distress for **every** human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek.” And then he goes further in verse 11, “For God shows no partiality.”

So what we're dealing with here in the confrontation is a **good, fair, truthful knowledge by God of what we've done**. There's nothing slanted or preferential here. God is truthful. In the next chapter Paul will say, “Let God be true though everyone were a liar” (3:2).

We are dealing, not with a hypothetical or imaginary judgment by God, but a good, true, and accurate judgment. This is **one of the first things people try to do when they are caught. They plead innocent**. Either they'll say they didn't do it, or that

there are extenuating circumstances. They'll say that the real knowledge or information hasn't come out.

No one can say that with God. You cannot argue to God, "What you know about me isn't accurate. What you saw me do, or know that I thought isn't actually what happened."

Paul has confronted us now with the honesty of God's judgment.

3. The Certainty of God's Judgment (2:12-16)

Third, Paul reminds us of the certainty of God's judgment.

In verse 12 Paul says, "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."

What does that mean? It means that **whether you are a Jew or a Gentile, you don't get to scoot out from under the knowledge and gaze of the Lord.** If you are a Jew, you will be judged under the law. If you are a Gentile, you will be judged by the light of nature.

The law of nature is what **Gentiles know, even if they have never read the ten commandments** before. But deep down they know these truths, as we've seen already. They know they should worship no other gods. They know they should not covet. I would argue that **they even know they should rest one day in seven.** They know **not to steal or commit adultery.** But this law of nature is the standard against which the Gentiles will be judged, and that's what chapter 1 was all about. This is **what Paul means when he says, "When Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law"** (Rom. 2:14).

The law of nature, however, is summarized by the ten commandments. That is the standard by which a Jew who knows the Ten commandments will be judged by. And Paul is saying, it's **not enough if you are a Jew to just hear the law and nod your head.** But just like the **Gentiles don't get a wink and a nod** when they sin, **neither does a Jew** simply because he's been circumcised or observed the feasts and so on. Listen to Leon Morris:

“The Gentile, it is true, cannot be accused of breaking the law, for he does not have the law. But when he does the right, as he sometimes does, this shows that he in fact knows what right is. He may not have the law, but his conduct shows that what the law requires is written in his heart. He is guilty when he does wrong. The Jew cannot claim that he will automatically be saved because God has given him the law: he has not kept it! Nor can the Gentile automatically be saved because he never had the law and so did not break it: he sinned against the light he had. People are judged according to the light they have, not according to the light they do not have. So all are caught up in final condemnation” (Morris, Romans, 121).

It's very common for interpreters to see this section in chapter 2 as speaking to Jewish readers. I'm convinced that **this section absolutely includes a message that applies to Jews** (in fact, perhaps primarily to Jews), but it **also applies to any of us who refuse to see our own sin** or their own need for Jesus. For any of us who resist the guilty verdict because we grade ourselves on the curve and think, “I'm not as bad as everyone else.” Here **Paul is breaking through that personal barrier**: “Yes, you too.”

Paul is confronting all of us, whichever group we're in. We **might be moral and clean-nosed**. Or we might be **obviously sinful** in a way that's just plain hard to ignore. Which group are you in? Between the wild and sinful Gentiles and the well-behaved moralists, I **wonder who those of you in this room feel like you relate to most**.

I can't know each of your hearts. I do know that **some of us have incredibly sensitive consciences**, and have a tender and even broken heart toward our own sin. But more often than we'd like to admit **it's easy to be short and self-righteous toward others**. And yes, if that's us we do need to have our self-righteous attitudes interrupted.

Here's the thing: everyone he's confronting has the same problem in the end, and that is sin.

Conclusion

The good news is coming. In the text, I mean. We are getting closer to it in Paul's argument. But the truth about each of us has to speak loud and clear first. Here's my question:

Are you willing to let God speak to you today like the prophet Nathan? "You are the man. You are the woman. You are the bad guy in this story." Has that struck you yet? Have you let yourself be bowled over by your need for the grace of God?

That's really what's happening here: **Paul is showing** you and me and all of us that **we are helpless.** That there's not a "move" here that we can make. There is no "play" that if we just do it, we'll escape from Paul's conclusion.

Here's **the real question** I have for you: There are **two kinds of security: false security,** and **real security.** What kind of security do you have?

False security is where we try to excuse ourselves or declare ourselves innocent.

We do this when we **grade ourselves on the curve,** comparing ourselves to others but not to God's perfect standard.

We can do this if we just tell ourselves that **maybe God will never judge us.** He has delayed punishment and so we just start to believe that maybe he never will.

We can also do this when we **keep focusing on ourselves,** on our good, on anything about us. We obsess over ourselves, and keep looking inside here to see some good, or something that will please God. That's false security. False security is when we **base our security on us.** Or even when we base our security in Jesus PLUS something about us. I trusted in Jesus, AND I go to church. I trusted in Jesus, AND I did this or that, or got baptized or took the Lord's Supper.

Those things are good when done in faith, but **when we think that Christ is not enough** – that he is not sufficient – that we **need to supplement him** with our own works – then we are settling for shallow answers.

And when we do that, we're **settling for false security.**

Here is what I want you to know, though: **What God is offering to you is deep security.** What we need most is lasting security that isn't shallow or based in ourselves, or in ignoring the reality of our past or of our own hearts.

Paul's whole project here is to **take away anything you might hang your life, hope, and security on that is not Jesus Christ.** Are you willing to see the fleeting, shallow, hopeless dead-end that is you and your own heart? **What a flimsy place to build.** Paul is offering an alternative.

In 1 Cor. 3:11 Paul says, "No one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ."

He elaborates in Philippians 3:8: "...not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith."

And this is where we're going, and it is the good news that we're being led toward: **Paul's leading us away from a righteousness of our own.** He's leading us to a righteousness that's Christ's, that's based on **His lawkeeping imputed to us** as we receive Christ by faith.

You see, while we do not perfectly keep the law, Jesus Christ has.

"He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth" (Is. 53:9).

"For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor. 5:21).

He is the one who came not to abolish the law and the prophets, but to fulfill them (Matt. 5:17).

He has **fully kept and fulfilled the law**, and it is by his obedience that we will be made righteous.

If you live in Christ and dwell in Christ, instead of a house built on sand... instead of a righteousness that is fleeting and momentary... when we receive Christ Jesus the Lord, we will be **built up in him and established in the faith** (Col. 2:6-7).

This is **so much better, so much safer, so much more secure.** Why? Well the Psalmist tells us that if we live in Christ, we will live in a house built by the Lord and

not by ourselves. “Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain” (Ps. 127:1).

Let's pray.

Lord, it is not an easy or pleasant thing to be confronted with our sin. But in the realism of being confronted by our own hearts, it is so beautiful and refreshing to see your son, Jesus Christ, in whom we have life. I pray for all of us, that we would not settle for cheap and fleeting substitutes, but instead that we would fully rest in and trust in Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.