

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, November 1, 2015**

## **MORE BAD NEWS**

**Romans 2:1-16**

### **SOUL SAVING TIME**

Before we turn to our Scripture reading, let me ask you if you managed to turn all your clocks – the ones that aren't programmed to change themselves – back one hour last night. If you didn't, I imagine you got to church earlier than you expected this morning! I wish we could turn the clock back one hour *every* Saturday night. Not so it will get dark earlier and earlier. That's not what I want. I just wouldn't mind having an extra hour for rest or, in a pinch, for Sunday preparation every Saturday night.

This whole thing of switching from Standard Time to Daylight Saving Time and back again every year can be confusing. My mother just moved two weeks ago from Pennsylvania to Arizona to live with my brother Mark and sister-in-law Nancy. In Arizona they don't participate in the time-change ritual. They don't have to worry about remembering to turn their clocks ahead an hour in the spring and back in the fall. They don't have any reason to get stressed out about forgetting to change their clocks and showing up for church an hour late or an hour early, as a result. But for us, the time difference between the Eastern time zone and Arizona time changes. When we're on Standard Time, we're two hours ahead of Arizona. When we're on Daylight Saving Time, the difference is three hours.

Is there some deep spiritual truth in this? Maybe not. Or maybe so. I'll just say that it is important, from a spiritual perspective, to know what time it is. And, whether you're young or not-so-young anymore (like me), whether your time remaining here on earth is long or short (and nobody knows how long or short it may turn out to be), it is of absolute importance to know where you stand with God and where you will spend eternity after you die.

Mary Sue and I once knew a man named Robert Holland, who was the pastor of one of the largest and most influential churches in Pittsburgh. The last sermon he ever preached was on the Sunday morning after the Saturday night on which clocks were turned back an hour in the fall of 1983. The title of his sermon that morning was "Soul Saving Time," which ended with an appeal to give yourself to Jesus, to let Jesus have your life, to let Jesus change you and use you to change the world, right where you are. It is always the right time for a preacher to make an appeal like this, and it is always the right time to respond to it, because you never know how much time, or how many more opportunities, you may have left. Dr. Holland didn't know how much time (or how little) he had left. Three days after preaching this sermon, he died of a massive heart attack at the age of 55.

As Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation" (2 Corinthians 6:2). Standard Time, Daylight Saving Time, it really doesn't matter. What matters is making sure you are right with God. What matters is making sure you are "in the right" with God. What matters is putting your trust in Jesus for your salvation. What

matters is living your life for Him, through the power of His Spirit at work in you. What matters is following Him. If you have never done so, now is the time to open your heart to Him. Right now. Right where you are. In the quiet of your heart, ask Him to come into your heart, to save you from your sins, and to take charge of your life from this moment on. If you are running from Him, if you have drifted away from Him, now is the time to come back to Him.

Now is the time. I don't know when, but someday it will be too late. Don't wait until it is too late.

Now, let's turn to Romans 2:1-16 and give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God's Word.

When his letter was read to the church in Rome, I can imagine the Romans nodding their heads in agreement as Paul presented the case against unbelieving Gentiles who, as we saw last week in 1:18-32, had exchanged the worship of God for idols, the truth of God for a lie, and natural sexual relations for unnatural ones, and who, though they knew the difference between right and wrong, good and evil, not only persisted in doing wrong, but approved, applauded, and even celebrated the willful rebellion of others against God and His ways. No doubt the believers in Rome agreed with Paul's pronouncement of God's righteous judgment against all who live in such rebellion against God and make a god of their own desires and the pursuit of personal fulfillment. I can imagine some hearty Amens as Paul laid out what I call "the bad news of the gospel."

But then we turn to Romans 2 and discover that Paul isn't finished yet. There is still more bad news – bad news it is essential for us, like the 1<sup>st</sup> century church in Rome, to come to grips with if we are to understand how truly and transformingly good the good news of the gospel really is.

In the passage we looked at last Sunday, in talking about "the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness" (1:18), Paul consistently uses the pronouns "they" and "them." That changes suddenly in chapter 2. It is no longer "they" and "them." It is "you" and "your." That makes it personal. Not only for the believers in Rome, but for us as well.

Listen to the first few verses of Romans 2 from *The Message* paraphrase:

**Those people** (the ones described in 1:18-32) **are on a dark spiral downward. But if you think that leaves you on high ground where you can point your finger at others, think again. Every time you criticize someone, you condemn yourself. It takes one to know one. Judgmental criticism of others is a well-known way of escaping detection in your own crimes and misdemeanors. But God isn't so easily diverted. He sees right through all such smoke screens and holds you to what you've done.**

**You didn't think, did you, that just by pointing your finger at others you would distract God from seeing all your misdoings and from coming down on you hard? Or did you think that**

**because He's such a nice God, He'd let you off the hook? Better think this one through from the beginning. God is kind, but He's not soft. In kindness He takes us firmly by the hand and leads us into a radical life change. (Romans 2:1-4, MSG)**

The point here is not that God judges us simply because we judge others and seek to hold them accountable for their behavior. There is a time and a place for that. Rather, the point is that God sees through our smoke screen when we point fingers at others but do the same kinds of things ourselves that we denounce in them. The point is that we are just as guilty before God as those we condemn. We may not be guilty of exactly the same sins, but we are guilty nonetheless. We are more than willing to point out and condemn the sins we see in others, but not so eager to judge ourselves. In fact, we often judge others by a different standard – a higher standard – than we use to judge ourselves. As a result, because it makes us feel better about ourselves, we try to persuade ourselves, and anyone else who can be persuaded, that other people are worse than we are and are, therefore, more deserving of judgment.

What does Paul say? He says: “Get off your high horse and face the fact that, like those you judge, you, too, are guilty and without excuse before God.” We are all without excuse, because we are all sinners. We are *all* sinners who are desperately in need of a Savior, because we are all “in the wrong” with God and there is nothing we can do to make ourselves “in the right” with Him.

Consider for a moment who it is that Paul is speaking to in these verses. It is clear in 1:18-32 that he is talking about Gentiles who have rejected the truth of God. What he says here in Romans 2 seems to be directed to moralists, whether Jews or God-fearing Gentiles, people who take pride in their virtue, who view themselves as being morally and spiritually superior to the kinds of people Paul describes in Romans 1. They find plenty of things wrong with others and don't hesitate to judge, but they are blind to their own faults. Like the self-righteous Pharisee in Jesus' parable, who took great pride in his superiority to the tax-collector, who knew himself to be a miserable sinner in need of God's mercy (Luke 18:9-14). Or, like the Laodiceans in Revelation 3 to whom the Lord Jesus said: “You say, ‘I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.’ But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked” (Revelation 3:17).

The bad news is: This is the way it is for all of us apart from Jesus and His power to rescue, redeem, and transform us in His saving love. The bad news is: We are no better than the people whose sins are obvious to us. Apart from Jesus and His love, there is no hope for any of us. We are all lost and without excuse.

The overarching theme of today's Bible passage is God's righteous judgment. We will come back and look at it in more depth next Sunday. What I've said today just scratches the surface. But there are two things about God that I want you to see before I close.

First, God is *just*. Always just. Unlike us, God is always perfectly just and righteous in His judgment of individuals, peoples, and nations. Justice matters to God. He is always just in His judgment of you and me. Were it not for what Jesus did to take upon Himself the punishment we justly deserve, the prospect of facing God's judgment would be unbearable.

The good news is that the justice of God has been satisfied completely by the love of God demonstrated in the incarnation, life, suffering, and death of Jesus on the cross for us.

Second, God is *kind*. And more than just a little bit. In verse 4, Paul speaks of “the riches of (God’s) kindness.” He is rich in kindness. His kindness leads Him to be patient and longsuffering with us. He is just *and* He is kind. That is really good news, isn’t it? God’s kindness, Paul says, is intended to lead us – *all* of us, regardless of the particular sins we love or hate but commit anyway – to repentance. True repentance means having a profound change of mind and heart so that you hate sin and self-righteousness, especially your own, and you turn to Jesus in humility and trusting faith.

Do not presume upon the kindness of God. Do not “show contempt for the riches of His kindness” (2:4) by thinking God doesn’t take your sin (or mine) seriously. He does. But He remains “merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in love” (Psalm 103:8).

One last thing. I may have shared this with you before. It is worth sharing again. In his book *Unapologetic*, British author Francis Spufford writes that “of all things, Christianity isn’t supposed to be about gathering up the good people (shiny! happy! squeaky clean!) and excluding the bad people (frightening! alien! repulsive!) for the very simple reason that *there aren’t any good people* ... This goes flat contrary to the predominant image of (Christianity) existing in prissy, fastidious little enclaves, far from life’s messier zones and inclined to get all “judgmental” about them. Of course there are Christians like that ... The (church) certainly can slip into being a club or cozy affinity group or a wall against the world. But it isn’t supposed to be. What it’s supposed to be is *a league of the guilty*” (Spufford, 45-48).

“A league of the guilty.” Yes indeed. That is the bad news. It is what we are. All of us. But it is not all that we are. We are also a league of the *forgiven*.

Let us live like it this week.

Lord, let it be so in us, to the glory of Your name. Amen.