

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, November 8, 2015**

THE MERCIFUL JUDGE

Romans 2:1-16

I speak to you this morning and every Sunday as one who, like each one of you, belongs to what Francis Spufford terms “the league of the guilty” – but also, like each of you who has come to Jesus in true repentance and trusting faith for your salvation, as a member of the fellowship of the forgiven. As we sang just moments ago:

My sin, O the bliss of this glorious thought,
my sin, not in part but the whole,
is nailed to the cross and I bear it no more,
praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!
(Horatio Spafford, *It Is Well with My Soul*)

Because of what Jesus my Redeemer has done for me, my name is written in the roster of the redeemed in the Lamb’s book of life. What Jesus has done for me, He has done for you as well, and for all who will receive Him and the gift of eternal life He offers. So, we can sing:

Redeemed, how I love to proclaim it!
Redeemed by the blood of the Lamb;
Redeemed through His infinite mercy,
His child, and forever I am.
(Fanny Crosby, *Redeemed*)

That my name is included in the roster of the redeemed is not due to some virtue I possess. It is not because there is something – *anything* – deserving in me. There is not. It is grace pure and simple, grace that comes free of charge from God to people who don’t deserve it and never will. People like me. And you.

Trouble comes when we twist this good news of God’s saving grace, of His redeeming love, into something that makes *us* look good, something that makes us think we are better than other people, because we don’t do the same sinful things they do. And we make sure it is known that we don’t approve of what they do. When we think we can get away with it, we feel free to get all judgmental in criticizing others for their sins without acknowledging the sin in our own lives.

While he doesn’t use the word here, Paul basically says that when we condemn the sins we see in other people but downplay or deny our own sins, we are hypocrites. A hypocrite is a person who says one thing but lives another. A hypocrite is a person who pretends to be something she is not. A hypocrite is a person who thinks he is better than other people, even though he is not. We are hypocrites when we sit in judgment on the particular sins of other people but soft pedal our own, when we rationalize or excuse our particular sins while

condemning the sins we see in others. Paul says we won't get away with it. God won't let us get away with it.

The truth, says Paul, is that you and I are no better than the people whose sins are obvious and egregious to us, whose transgressions of God's moral law we are quick to judge and condemn. God sees through our posturing when we think we are better than this or that person, this or that group or church or denomination or political party. The way God sees it, the way God sees *us*, we are no better off than those we love to criticize. Apart from Jesus and the application of His saving work in our lives, we are all in the same unenviable, helpless condition. *All of us*.

GOD'S RIGHTEOUS JUDGMENT

The main theme of this passage in Romans 2 is the righteous judgment of God, its application to and implications for the life of every person – Jew, Gentile, young, old, male, female, rich, poor, educated or not. God's judgment of individuals, cultures, peoples, and nations is always and everywhere just and righteous because God is a just and righteous God. It may not always appear that way to us. We may wonder sometimes if God really is just. But that is because God does not carry out His justice according to our timetable. He doesn't zap our enemies when we want or the way we want. In His kindness, Paul says, God delays His judgment, in order to give us time to repent (2:4). It is not hard to fall into the trap of misinterpreting God's patience with approval of the way we or other people are living, just as it is a mistake to think, as the friends of Job did, that suffering or misfortune in this life is always a punishment from God for wrongdoing. That is not usually the way God rolls.

There is also the problem that we don't see the fullness or finality of God's judgment against sinful humanity in this life. For that, we must await the final judgment.

The final judgment, when each of us will stand before God to give an account of our lives, will be a terrible and terrifying occasion for the kinds of people Paul has described in Romans 1, and for the self-righteous moralists he describes here in Romans 2, who pride themselves in their moral and spiritual superiority to others. As the Bible warns us in Hebrews 10: "If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God For we know Him who said: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' and again, 'The Lord will judge His people.' It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (10:26-27, 30-31). A dreadful thing. A frightening thing. A scary thing.

But for all of us who truly trust in Christ for our salvation, the judgment of God should hold no terror. It is not something you need to fear. Why? Because we are better than everybody else? Not in the least. Because, unlike others, we do not sin? No, of course not. Why then? Because Jesus has endured the judgment of God and satisfied the justice of God on our behalf by taking the punishment we deserve upon Himself in His vicarious, sacrificial, atoning death on the cross for us. Because of Jesus and what He has done for us, we need not be afraid of God's judgment. God is a righteous Judge, to be sure. But He is also, for all who come to

Him in humility and faith, a merciful Judge. And mercy, as it says in James 2:13, triumphs over judgment.

Understanding the justness and righteousness and dreadfulness of God's judgment is critically important to grasping how astonishingly good and how totally undeserved the good news of the gospel really is, how liberating and life-giving the mercy and grace of God really are. This is what Paul wants the Romans – and us – to “get.”

BASED ON TRUTH

He tells us in verse 2 that God's judgment is always based on truth. God knows the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth about you and me. He sees things as they really are. He sees *us* as we really are. Which can be a terribly frightening thing unless you remember that He loves you and showed His love by sending His Son into the world to be your Savior.

ON THE BASIS OF OUR WORKS

Next, in verses 6-8, Paul says that God judges us according to our works. According to our deeds. In support, the apostle quotes from Psalm 62:12, which says that God “will give to each person” – or, will reward each person – “according to what he [or she] has done.” There is also this affirmation in the form of a question in Proverbs 24:12, which says: “Will (the Lord) not repay each person according to what he [or she] has done?”

What is this all about? I thought salvation is by grace, not by works. Isn't that the message Paul trumpets so clearly in Ephesians 2? “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship” – His masterpiece – “created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (Ephesians 2:8-9). Yes, we are saved by grace – by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone. We are not saved by virtue of our good works, or some combination of faith and works. But good works are the fruit of faith. The operation of God's saving grace in our lives produces the fruit of good works.

What Paul is saying is essentially what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount: “By their fruit you will know them” (Matthew 7:16, 20). In other words, a person's deeds or manner of life will reveal what is in his or her heart. There is more to being a follower of Jesus than words. It is a life to be lived. Paul is not preaching salvation by works. He is saying that if you live for yourself, the evidence in your manner of life will be obvious and overwhelming. And if you live for God and His glory, if you value what God values, if you love what God loves, if you follow Jesus in all of your ways, the fruit of your life will confirm the faith in Christ you profess. Those who sincerely seek to honor God will persevere in doing good. It is not by doing good that you inherit eternal life. But a life of doing good as a follower of Jesus reveals the genuineness of your faith. It is the fruit of God's grace in your life.

NO PARTIALITY

Third, in verses 9-11, Paul declares that God judges without partiality. He does not show favoritism (2:9). His judgment is impartial. He is always just and fair. With everyone. It doesn't matter if you're Jewish or Presbyterian or both. It doesn't matter how rich or smart you are. It doesn't matter where you work or who you work for. It doesn't matter if your ancestors came over on the Mayflower, or if they met the Mayflower when it arrived (Ray Stedman sermon, *The Secrets of Men*). It doesn't matter who you know.

I heard about a police officer who pulled a car over to the side of the road and asked the driver for his license. When the driver showed him his license, the officer said: "This license says you have to wear glasses when you are driving. Where are your glasses?" The driver said: "I have contacts." To which the police officer said: "I don't care who you know, I'm still going to give you a ticket." ☺

God doesn't care who your contacts are. Nor does it matter if your sins are the kind respectable people commit, or otherwise. His judgment is impartial. Which is something for which to be thankful.

ACCORDING TO THE LIGHT WE ARE GIVEN

Fourth, God judges according to the opportunity each of us is given to know Him, to know the gospel and respond to it (2:12-15). God's judgment, you see, is based on what a person knows, not on what that person doesn't know. God judges us on the basis of the light that is available to us – in creation, in the Bible, and in the law God has written into our hearts – not on the basis of the light we cannot see because God has not made it known to us.

Peterson says it this way in *The Message*:

If you sin without knowing what you're doing, God takes that into account. But if you sin full well knowing what you're doing, that's a different story entirely. Merely hearing God's law is a waste of time if you don't do what He commands. Doing, not hearing, is what makes the difference with God.

Here Paul is echoing James 1:22, which says: "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says." God wants us to be doers of the Word, and not hearers only. Hearing and knowing God's Word are essential for living the life God desires each of us to live. But hearing and knowing are not enough. Doing what God calls you to do matters. Your faith in Christ is a life to be lived.

Peterson continues in his paraphrase of Paul:

When outsiders who have never heard of God's law follow it more or less by instinct, they confirm its truth by their obedience. They show that God's law is not something alien, imposed on us from without, but woven into the very fabric of our creation. There is something deep within them that echoes God's yes and no, right and wrong. Their response to God's yes and no

will become public knowledge on the day God makes His final decision about every man and woman. (Romans 2:12-16a, *The Message*).

Paul is saying that God has stamped on the human heart the basic principles of His law, including such things as respect for life, respect for personal property, fidelity, and truth-telling. These are universal human values, even where God's Word and the gospel are not explicitly known.

Do you wonder how God will judge the person who has never heard the gospel, never heard of Jesus and His saving love? Paul gives us at least a partial answer. God will judge each person (including us) according to the opportunity that person has been given, according to the light each person has received and what that person does with the light he or she is given. Not according to the light or opportunity they have not been given.

THE SECRETS OF OUR HEARTS

Finally, in verse 16, Paul says that God's judgment will include the secrets of our hearts. That really shouldn't surprise us, since God knows all our secrets. He knows everything there is to know about you and me, both good and bad. He sees it all. Hebrews 4:13 says: "Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of Him to whom we must give account."

This could be – *would be* – a terrifying prospect were it not for the truth and assurance of the gospel. Paul does not tell us that God knows all the secrets of our hearts to frighten us or to leave us in a pit of hopeless despair. No. He tells us that bad news so that we will come to see and appreciate how amazingly good the good news is. Do you see that?

He wants us to see that it is not just despicable people whose sins are obvious and repulsive to us who need the gospel. "Good" people need the gospel, too. The best people. Moral people. Church people. All people. We all need the gospel.

The gospel tells us that, while God is a perfectly righteous Judge whose judgment is always just, He is also a merciful Judge. He is and will always be compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in love.

May you know and understand both the bad news and the good news of the gospel. And may you know the wonder of His boundless mercy, grace and love in your live.

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.