

The Failure of Religion

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristChurchEastBay.org. This is a reading from the letter of Paul to the Romans.

Chapter 1, verses 16 to 18, and chapter 2, verses 1 to 16, as printed in your liturgy. For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes, first to the Jew, then to the Gentile.

For in the gospel, the righteousness of God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written, the righteous will live by faith. The wrath of God is being revealed, from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness.

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.

[1 : 1 9] Now we know that God's judgment against those who do such things is based on truth. So when you, a mere human being, pass judgment on them, and yet do the same things, do you think you will escape God's judgment?

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.

God will repay each person according to what they have done. 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. There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil, first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.

But glory, honor, and peace for everyone who does good, first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For God does not show favoritism. 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.

[2 : 3 5] 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. Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law.

They show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts. Their conscience is also bearing witness, and their thoughts sometimes accusing them, and at other times even defending them. This will take place on the day when God judges people's secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Good morning, Christ Church. I do want to, like Andrew, just take a brief moment to honor Reverend Tim Keller, who departed this life on Friday and is now with his Savior at home in heaven.

Tim planted Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City in 1989, and by the time I graduated from Reform Theological Seminary in 2005 and accepted this call to come and plant a church in Berkeley, an Urban University church with my brother-in-law, the whole reason we did that was because we had accepted Tim Keller into our hearts.

And we are here. I'm grateful for his model, his voice. I'm grateful for the money that Redeemer invested into Christ Church, the training Tim gave to us in those early days, the wisdom and resources that he's left behind.

[4 : 09] Tim loved Lord of the Rings, and in many ways he was like Gandalf in the Shire. You know, on the surface of things, you just thought he was there to set off fireworks at the birthday party, but really he was out in the world slaying dragons and fighting evil wizards.

You know, and when you read the things that he wrote, especially in these last few years, you can see that he's doing very, very deep work. So we're super grateful for that, and I think Tim would be pleased that we are studying today the epistle to the Romans.

So that's what we're going to keep doing. We're trying to get through the end of Romans chapter 8, by the end of the summer, Lord willing. And we've done a slow burn here in Romans 1, and now we're going to go at a bit of a faster clip.

So buckle up, because the Apostle Paul is taking us through these great doctrines, these great truths of the Christian faith, God's creation, the fall and depravity of human beings, the wrath and the righteousness of God, the atonement, justification, and all these wonderful truths.

But so far, the Apostle Paul has told us that there are two ages, two realms that are being revealed. In verse 17 it says, in the gospel, the righteousness of God is revealed.

[5 : 24] And in verse 17 it says that the wrath of God is being revealed. And so there's this old age, this old realm of God's wrath, and there's this new age, this new realm of God's righteousness in the gospel of his Son.

And Romans chapters 1 through 3 is showing us what it means to be under God's wrath, so that we will see the necessity of and the power of the gospel to bring us out from under his wrath and to bring us up under the righteousness of God.

Now, I know some of you weren't here last week, so let me repeat a few things that we said. We don't like to talk about wrath and condemnation and judgment, because it's super uncomfortable. But Jesus talked about it all the time, in fact, more than anybody else in the Bible.

This is one of the greatest known texts in the Scriptures, John 3, 16. It says, God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son. Why? That whoever believes in him should not perish, should not perish spiritually and eternally under the condemnation and judgment of God.

That text goes on and it says, whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on them. That's from John, the apostle of love. Right? Jesus goes on in John 5.

[6 : 38] He says, The Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son. Whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged, but is crossed over from death to life.

And Jesus' assumption and implication there is that until we've crossed over, we're still in death and we're still in judgment. So what is this wrath of God that Jesus insists upon over and over?

We defined it last week as God's holy hatred of evil, his settled righteous opposition to the darkness, his uncompromising hostility against sin.

And if we see love in God, we also need to see hatred in God because God hates whatever opposes that which is true and good and beautiful. God hates whatever defaces and damages and destroys his creation and his creatures.

And if he didn't hate these things, he wouldn't be a God of love. He wouldn't necessarily be even God at all, a God worthy to be worshipped. And so Paul is laying out this argument for us that on the one hand, God's wrath, even now in human history, is being revealed as we give God up so God gives us up to our own self-centeredness.

[7 : 51] But he says there's coming a day when God's wrath will be revealed finally and fully on the final day of judgment. And this judgment of God is not peripheral to the story of Scripture.

It's absolutely central to the Bible. And in this chapter, more than anywhere else, Paul outlines his picture of the final day of judgment. The word judge or judgment comes up nine times and he's saying that everybody is going to be judged by God separately, individually, and distinctly.

And again, that's super uncomfortable for us, but the secular alternative of just getting rid of God and therefore getting rid of the wrath of God and substituting in the place of this doctrine a doctrine of materialism and nihilism, that actually creates way more problems than it solves.

And so I'd like for you to just at least consider what Paul is saying here in Romans chapter two. And the gist is this, that God's judgment is universal, works righteousness is inconceivable, and gospel repentance is essential.

God's judgment is universal, works righteousness is inconceivable, and gospel repentance is essential. First of all, God's judgment is universal.

[9 : 08] Verse one says, 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 very same things.

Paul turns his attention from these pagan Gentiles in Romans one to now talk about these Jews and moralists in Romans two. All these people who are ready to agree that yes, Paul, all these people in Romans one you just described who are vile and violent and vicious, all of those people deserve the wrath of God.

They deserve to be judged. But their objection is that not everybody's like that. And some people have wonderful ideas about morality, and God has been very kind and good to give us these insights, and so surely we are not going to be judged and condemned by God.

Because after all, we go to church, and we're good people, and we believe the Bible, and we offer prayers, and we have this religious and moral life, and surely we are living up to the God's standards of godliness and righteousness.

Yes, the rest of humanity should be judged by God, but we over here ought to be protected and delivered. And Paul's dealing with people who have a false sense of assurance and a false sense of confidence before God.

[10 : 31] People who are smug, have a smug self-satisfaction and self-contentment, thinking that we're over here in this special category, and because we're special, we're therefore superior to other people.

And how does Paul respond to this group? He says to them in verse one, he says, you have no excuse. Paul's setting out to prove in these three chapters that there's not one righteous person, not even one.

There's no exception to that rule. And he wants to convince and convict these religious moralists of their own sinfulness, and that they too are going to be judged by the wrath of God, unless God acts, unless God intervenes.

And so he says in verse three, so when you, a mere human, pass judgment on them, and yet do the same things, do you think you will escape God's judgment?

Two times Paul's been talking about, you do the same things. You do the very same things. What is that? Well, the thesis of this entire section of this letter says that God is revealing his wrath against all godlessness and wickedness, all ungodliness and all unrighteousness.

[11 : 47] And we saw last week how that unfolds into deceitful idols and degraded bodies and depraved minds and decaying societies. And Paul's saying, you Jews, you religious and moral people, you do the very same things.

If you just read the Old Testament, you'll see that the people of God sank down into these very same things. Prophet after prophet had to come to the people of God and list off their deplorable sins to these people who were claiming to have a special relationship with God, these people who were claiming to be utterly different than all the Gentile nations.

God says, you're no different, you're doing the same things. And people would object to Paul and say, but Paul, that was then and that was their exceptions to that rule.

And we are, we're not guilty of all those things. And Paul is at pains to say in this text that it's possible to be highly respectable people morally and yet to be ungodly.

It's possible to be highly respectable people morally and yet to be ungodly. For as we saw last week, ungodliness is a failure to make God supreme in our lives and in the lives of other people.

[13 : 08] And there's no greater instance of ungodliness than the failure to see your need for a righteousness that comes not from you but from outside of yourself from God.

The height of ungodliness is to think that you and your religious practices and you and your morality are enough to satisfy the demands of God. And so Paul says be very, very careful that you don't rely on your external and visible expressions of godliness and righteousness when internally and invisibly you church people, you Bible believing, praying people, you're doing the same things.

And what are those same things? If you open your Bible and you turn back to Romans 1.29, Paul says they have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed, and depravity.

They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant, and boastful. They invent ways of doing evil. They disobey their parents.

They have no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy. Paul is saying look inside of your own heart. You may not actually murder your neighbor, but look at the things in your heart that diminish other people and kill relationships with other people.

[14 : 38] Do you see inside of your own heart the things that Paul lists where he talks about greed, envy, deceit, and malice? Do you ever argue or gossip or slander?

Do you ever feel a prideful sense of superiority to other people? You know, Paul is doing the exact same thing that Jesus does in the Sermon on the Mount when he talks about murder.

Right? Jesus says in Matthew chapter 5, he says, if you say to your brother or your sister, rakah, or you fool, you are in danger of the fire of hell, Jesus says.

To say to another person, rakah, means you're a nobody. You're a nothing. And if you look at other people and you say you're not important and you look down your nose at them and you hold them in contempt and you're indifferent toward them, Jesus is saying you have the seed of murder in your heart.

You have the spirit and the attitude of murder in your heart and that contempt, that disdain that calls other people nothings and nobodies, that little acorn can very easily grow into an oak tree of murder.

[15 : 46] And so he's calling us to look inside our hearts. I was reminded this week of C.S. Lewis. He wrote a great book called Mere Christianity and if you've not read it, I encourage you to read it.

He's an Oxford professor and he said this. He said, though I've had to speak at some length about sex, I want to make it as clear as I possibly can that the center of Christian morality is not here.

The sins of the flesh are bad but they are the least bad of all sins. All the worst pleasures are purely spiritual. The pleasure of putting other people in the wrong, of bossing and patronizing and spoiling sport and backbiting, the pleasures of power, of hatred.

For there are two things inside me competing with the human self which I must try to become. They are the animal self and the diabolical self.

And the diabolical self is the worst of the two. That is why a cold, self-righteous prig who regularly goes to church may be far nearer to hell than a prostitute.

[16 : 58] But of course, it is better to be neither. A cold, self-righteous prig who regularly goes to church may be far nearer to hell than a prostitute.

This is what Jesus is saying in Luke chapter 15 when he tells that great story about the father and his two sons. Right? And there's that elder brother who's kind of the religious and the moral one and he condemns his younger brother who's the irreligious and the immoral one.

And yet Jesus says both of these sons are equally alienated from their father. The father needs to go out to both of these sons and invite them into his feast.

And what happens? Jesus says the bad, irreligious, immoral son enters in and the good, religious, or the good, religious, immoral son does not.

The son of moral rectitude stays outside and the rebel goes inside. And that's what Paul is talking to here. He's talking to elder brothers who condemn their younger brothers.

[18 : 01] And he says in verse 1 you therefore have no excuse you who pass judgment on someone else for at whatever point you judge another you are condemning yourself.

I was thinking this week too about Alexander Solzhenitsyn. He was a Russian novelist and historian and he wrote The Gulag Archipelago and he said this.

You may have heard this. He says the line separating good and evil passes not through states nor between classes nor between political parties either but right through every human heart and through all human hearts.

If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them.

But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being and who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart. See Solzhenitsyn and Lewis and the Apostle Paul and the Lord Jesus Christ they're all saying the same thing that the religious people and the irreligious people the moral people and the immoral people were all in the same boat.

[19 : 12] And God's judgment is universal for all of us. And some people would object to that and say well wait a minute if God's good and if God is a God of love how can he judge us?

How can he judge me? And that's what Paul is getting at in verse 4 where he says 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.

You know some people will do that will appeal to the riches of the kindness of God. this great treasury of the endless inexhaustible wealth of God's tolerance and his long suffering all of his goodness and say God is love and therefore he cannot judge me.

And Paul would say yes it's true that the kindness and the forbearance and the patience of God are the reason that the world even still exists today. But to use the kindness of God as an appeal to excuse my sin or to escape his judgment Paul says that's to hold the kindness of God in contempt.

That's to despise the goodness of God to regard all the attributes of God as quite cheap. And he says yes God is kind but his kindness will not cancel out his judgment because he's also a God of righteousness and justice.

[20 : 38] So God's judgment is universal. You tracking with me? This is a hard passage. Okay? I'm trying my hardest up here. God's judgment is universal.

Works righteousness is inconceivable. And I gotta work even harder now because Romans 2 particularly verses 7 through 10 seems to say that it's possible to be righteous by the works that we do.

And it's possible to be saved by the righteous actions that we produce and achieve. If you just look at verse 7 it says seek glory do good and you'll be rewarded with eternal life.

And verse 8 says seek yourself do evil you'll be rewarded with eternal wrath. Verse 9 says do evil and the result will be unending trouble and distress. Verse 10 says do good and the result will be glory honor and peace forever.

And then verse 13 says if you obey the law God will declare you righteous. And it's so easy to misinterpret this if you're not careful. To say okay I get you in verses 1 to 4 that I do the very same things that other quote unquote evil people are doing but this seems to say if I just try a little harder and if I just work a little bit I can maybe balance the scales I can tip the scales and if I just seek God a little bit more than I seek myself and if I just do a little bit more good so that my good outweighs my bad and if I just try to obey the law of God maybe then I can cancel out this judgment of God.

[22 : 15] And that I understand how you might get there but that would completely contradict Paul's entire letter. So let me explain. Paul says on judgment day there's going to be two groups of people the righteous and the unrighteous.

And he says in verse 6 that God is going to repay every person according to what they have done. And so you're going to be able to tell the righteous and the unrighteous apart by their general attitude toward God their tenor of life their actual conduct and behavior and this is what Paul describes in verse 7 he says the righteous to those who by persistence in doing good seek glory honor and immortality he will give eternal life.

Right? The righteous person seeks God. the righteous person desires to be with God the righteous person wants to behold these glorious attributes of God to spend eternity in the presence of God adoring the majesty of God.

The righteous person seeks from God honor he seeks God to confer honor and blessing and dignity upon him the righteous person seeks immortality the state of incorruptibility glory they want to be pure and holy and to be above and beyond sin and eternally perfect in the presence of God that's the righteous person's attitude toward God and what then is the righteous person's tenor of life?

Paul says they persist in doing good they patiently persevere in reading their Bible and praying and wanting to know the will of God and walk with God and fight the good fight of the faith that's their attitude toward God that's their tenor of life and what about their actual conduct and behavior?

[24 : 04] Paul says they persist in doing good they work good they keep all the commandments of God they love God with all their heart soul mind and strength and they love their neighbor as they love themselves that's the righteous and Paul then goes on in verse 8 and he describes the unrighteous as the exact opposite of this an unrighteous person does not seek God and his glory but they rather seek themselves the unrighteous person does not seek the honor that comes from God they in fact turn away from the truth of God and he says the unrighteous person doesn't seek immortality and purity in God they rather follow evil instead and so Paul is putting this question before us he says which group or which camp are you going to be in on judgment day?

if you think you're going to be in the righteous group that means that you trust that your life and everything that you've done and do and will do is able to meet God's very very high standards but Paul's argument from Romans 1 18 and onward says that all of us are godless and wicked all of us are ungodly and unrighteous there is no one righteous it doesn't matter how much you go to church it doesn't matter how much you pray yes if the gospel of God enters in and the grace of God comes and justifies you and declares you righteous and new life comes into you through Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit comes over you you will begin to experience the Christian life which is being described in verse 7 and this attitude toward God and your tenor of life and your actual conduct will begin to look like verse 7 but unless and until

God gives us his own righteousness all of us Paul says are going to enter into judgment day in a state of unrighteousness now why is that why is that it's because the control center of our lives are completely jacked up he says in verse 5 but because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart literally the word there for stubbornness in the Greek is because of your sclerosis because you have a sclerotic and a hard heart modern people say that we're really alright in our heart it's just that we go wrong from time to time here and there on the surface of things but Paul is saying the exact opposite he says we're wrong in our heart and our lives only go right in patches on the surface and what he's saying is that the kindness of God our experience of the forbearance of God and the patience of God these experiences in our lives are meant to soften our hearts and melt our hearts and cause us to have repentant hearts but what actually happens in our lives is that we hold the kindness and the goodness of God and contempt with hard and impenitent hearts and so he says 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 we're meant to store up as treasure the kindness of God the riches of God the forbearance of God the patience of God but what do we do instead we store up wrath against ourselves and this is truly alarming to me because it says that it's not God storing up wrath against us it's we ourselves who are storing up wrath against ourselves and he says this day is going to come when all of this wrath that we've been storing up against ourselves is going to be produced in evidence against us and what in the world does that mean well imagine an invisible recorder and imagine from the time you're a baby this invisible recorder has been hung around your neck and you get to judgment day and you appear before God and you don't even know this recorder ever even existed and you're tempted to say to God hey God you can't hold me responsible for all the stuff

I didn't know and you can't judge me for something that I never really believed in and God will say okay well let's play back this recorder and he'll play it back for you as the fairest judge you could possibly imagine right verse 2 says that we know that God's judgment is based on truth he's not going to judge people according to the Bible they didn't know he's not going to judge people according to the Christ they didn't know he's just going to judge us by our own words and he's going to play back this recording of whenever you bound other people by your own moral judgments whenever you said to someone else you should do this or you ought to do that or whenever those thoughts ran through your mind and God's just going to play that back for us isn't that going to be fun for some of us that recorder is going to be playing back for years and years on end thousands and thousands and thousands of moral judgments that we made against other people and God's going to say okay your standards for other people are going to be the standard by which you're you are storing up wrath against yourselves for the day of God's wrath if God judges us by our own standards no one's going to think that's unfair and he says that when God judges us on judgment day none of us are going to stand all of us are going to be judged and found wanting even according to our own words and our own standards much less

[30 : 11] God's words and God's standards all of us are going to stand there just hopeless and helpless and utterly condemned even the works righteousness that we thought we could achieve on that day is going to all the best stuff that we produced all of our goodness all of our righteousness even according to our own standards is going to appear as filthy rags isn't this great God's judgment is universal works righteousness is inconceivable but here comes the good news gospel repentance is possible and gospel repentance is essential right verse 16 says that this is all going to take place on the day when God judges everyone's secrets through Jesus Christ as my gospel declares all of our secrets all the hidden areas of our lives all of my motives all my thoughts all the facts are going to be known everything I thought everything I said everything I did everything I ought to have done but yet left undone do you see why Paul is so anxious for us to realize right now that we're under the wrath of

God because he wants us to hide ourselves right now under the righteousness that God has provided and that's the thesis of this whole letter that I'm not ashamed of the gospel because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes it first for the Jew then for the Gentile for in the gospel the righteousness of God has been revealed the righteousness that comes by faith and is by faith from first to last as it is written the righteous will live by faith brothers and sisters the bad news is that God's judgment is universal and works righteousness is inconceivable and impossible but the good news is that God has provided a righteousness for us in the life and death of his son Jesus Christ it's not a righteousness that we need to go and work out it's a righteousness that has already been worked out for us by God God the gospel says that yes this resurrected

Jesus who conquered death is going to be your judge on the last day but it's possible to get there and to look into your judge's face and to see your savior there to appear before him and say I'm already in the right God has already declared me to be righteous he's already given to me and imputed upon me the righteousness of Christ himself isn't that good news but what must we do to respond to this good news Paul says it's the kindness of God that's meant to lead us to repentance God's kindness is intended to lead us to repentance and repentance is that key word it's that crucial word what does it mean to repent well I'll end with a story from Jesus in Luke chapter 18 he talks about a Pharisee and a tax collector somebody who's very religious and moral and somebody who's very irreligious and immoral and he says that the

Pharisee goes and he prays to God and he says God I thank you that I'm not like all these other people because they do evil but I pray I fast I give all my money and he thinks he's completely satisfied the demands of God full of self satisfaction and self confidence he doesn't even ask God for any help he doesn't ask God for anything he just is there telling God how he is everything he needs to be and he's done everything he needs to do and that really isn't even praying Jesus says it's just kind of talking to yourself he says that kind of prayer doesn't get through but what kind of prayer does get through this tax collector comes and he knows all about the kindness of God and the forbearance of God and the patience of God and yet even still he knows he's not worthy of God he knows his whole life has been utterly corrupted by sin and so he stands far off and he doesn't even look up to heaven he just beats his breast he beats his heart and how does he pray he says

God have mercy on me a sinner can we say that together God have mercy on me a sinner in the Greek he says God have mercy on me the sinner which means he's blocked everybody else in the world out he's not focused on them and their sin he just says God have mercy on me the sinner and that's the prayer that gets through because that's the prayer of repentance God's kindness is meant to lead us into repentance and having repented having rejected all of our own self-righteousness and embraced this righteousness of God that he's provided for us in Jesus Christ now we can begin to live this new life now we can start to lean in to what verse 7 is all about to those who by persistence in doing good seek glory honor and immortality he will give eternal life those are not the works that save you but they are the necessary outcome and evidence of a saving faith so friends

[36 : 06] God's kindness is meant to lead us to repentance and we have every opportunity today to repent and to believe this glorious gospel of the righteousness of God in the name of the Father Son and Holy Spirit Amen Amen Amen .

Amen