

Who needs the Gospel?

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[0 : 00] Good morning everyone. We're going to be reading from Romans chapter 2 from verse 1 all the way through the end of the chapter and then we'll read Romans chapter 3 up to verse 8.

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

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? 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.

He will render to each one according to his works. To those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life.

[1 : 11] But for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury. There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek.

But glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. For God shows no partiality. 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 it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified.

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.

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

[2 : 18] But if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast in God and know his will and approve what is excellent, because you are instructed from the law, and if you are sure that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of children, having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth, you then who teach others, do you not teach yourself?

While you preach against stealing, do you steal? You who say that one must not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples?

You who boast in the law, dishonor God by breaking the law. For as it is written, the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you. For circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law, but if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision.

So if a man who is uncircumcised keeps the precepts of the law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? Then he who is physically uncircumcised but keeps the law will condemn you who have the written code and circumcision, but break the law.

For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the spirit, not by the letter.

[3 : 49] His praise is not from man, but from God. Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision? Much in every way.

To begin with, the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God. What if some were unfaithful? Does their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God? By no means. Let God be true, though everyone were a liar.

As it is written, that you may be justified in your words and prevail when you are judged. But if our unrighteousness serves to show the righteousness of God, what shall we say? That God is unrighteous to inflict wrath on us? I speak in a human way. By no means. For then how could God judge the world? But if through my lie, God's truth abounds to his glory, why am I still being condemned as a sinner?

And why not do evil that good may come? As some people slanderously charge us with saying, their condemnation is just. Well, my one-year-old boy, Samuel, he was starting to say his first words, mama, dada, blue-blue for blueberries.

[5 : 10] I probably shouldn't have said that. He's now going to be craving that. Last time I said cheese in a sermon, apparently the rest of the sermon he's just going, cheese. Enjoy that, Emma.

So I thought it's about time he learned some good solid doctrine. So he's already got one or two words. So as a bit of fun, I asked him the first question in the New City Catechism.

So here's the first question. I asked Samuel, what is our only hope in life and death? And I was shocked by the answer.

Me. Me. Once I got over the wave of fear that my boy had already determined that the rest of his life he would get rid of God, Emma and I thought, oh, that's kind of funny.

It's quite an ironic response. It's rather cute for a one-year-old to answer that way because he has no idea what I was saying. But it's a little less cute when a young person or adult who knows what that question means says, me.

[6 : 29] It's a bit less cute, isn't it? Considering yourself the absolute master of your life, my own wisdom in making choices, it's what I do, what I can achieve that will give me the good life, the blessed life now, and I'll handle the crisis of death later.

Me is the hope in life and death. That's declaring autonomy from God. God, you're not going to be God over my life. My hope is in me.

And we've already seen in Romans chapter 1 that such human autonomy that looks at all that God has made, don't you just get blown away by the stars every time you look up.

Every person who looks at that and goes, I'm not going to treat you as God. I can be master of my own life. That willful failing to thank God and treat him as God, God says there will be punishment for that.

He will hand that person over. You want to rule your own life? Okay, see how that goes for you. At the end of the chapter, just relationships are destroyed when we try and rule our own life.

[7 : 44] Look at the fruit of that. It doesn't work. And one day there will be a permanent cutting off from God's blessings. So at this point, some of us might be cheering Paul on.

Preach it, brother. Yeah, those immoral people, preach it. They deserve what's coming to them. But the question we need to be asking, and it's the question that Paul is answering in these chapters, one to three, who needs the gospel to be saved?

Who's in danger of experiencing the anger of God on that final day of judgment? And why? Is the gospel only for those who are flagrantly immoral?

Just obviously everyone counts them as immoral, even themselves. What about the morally sensitive person? What about the religiously privileged person?

Surely they're safe. Surely we are safe. Surely we deserve life now and any afterlife to come. How could we be in danger of the wrath of God?

[8 : 53] And besides, isn't holding yourself morally accountable a good thing? I am in charge of my life and my choices. I'm responsible. I'm a morally responsible person.

Isn't that attitude a good thing? Isn't that what produces a good life and makes you a good person? What's wrong with that sort of autonomy? I think Paul in chapter two and three doesn't just say, well, that's the way it is, accept it.

I think he actually meets us in our thinking. He comes to us, both the morally sensitive person and the religiously privileged person and goes, okay, well, let's see how you go with that.

He doesn't just say, accept it. He says, okay, let's take a look at how you live. So we're about to jump into the detail.

So I hope you got your Bibles open to Romans two and three. Feel free to listen and check it later. But I just want to start, if you hear nothing else today, I just want to give you the overall main point of these chapters.

[10:04] Here's the main point of what God's saying through Paul here. Who needs the gospel to be saved? The answer is in chapter three, verse 23. This is where he's leading to. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

Everyone needs the gospel. Everyone is in danger of God's righteous judgment. But no one will be held accountable for what they don't know.

You will only be held accountable for what you do know. But equally true, whatever you know, whatever degree of knowledge of what is right you do know, none of us live up to what we know. So God's righteous judgment is just. It's deserved. Okay, so let's take a look at it.

Moral person. So chapter two. There's two views of who Paul is talking to here. Either he's talking to the Jewish person, so he's jumping straight to the religious, or he's talking to the average Roman of the day who felt morally superior to everyone who's not a Roman.

[11:21] I've got a conscience. I'm a good person. I don't think it really matters too much. There's a slight nuance in argument there. The main point is the same.

Okay, morally sensitive person. You who have been sitting in the jury, looking at immoral people, going, yeah, I agree, Paul. Those people do deserve what's coming to them. They deserve the fruit of their deeds.

You've been sitting in the jury. Okay, hop up. Come sit in the dock. You think your internal moral compass means you will escape God's righteous judgment.

That's not so, because God is righteous in his judgment. Because first, look at verses one to five, the first paragraph there. You do the same things as you condemn others for.

Chapter two, verse one. Therefore, you have no excuse, O person. Every one of you who judges, for in passing judgment on another, you condemn yourself.

[12:27] Because the judge, you the judge, practice the very same things. You claim to know what is right and what is wrong, but do you live according to what you say is right and wrong?

That's what matters. Just think of the past week. Have you cast someone in a negative light as you've spoken about them to someone else?

If someone did that to you, wouldn't you be outraged by that? Did you keep your word and were you honest? Or did you fail that other person because it was just more convenient to not keep your word?

Are there secrets in your life that you really hope that it never come to the light of day? That's true for all of us, isn't it? Whatever you're condemning in others, do you do the same things?

You hear what Paul's saying? Your own voice is like an advanced echo of what God's voice will be on that final day. Your own voice is condemning you as you condemn others for doing the very same things.

[13:42] It's a pre-warning of God's judgment. God is righteous in his judgment. So why do we often not feel like a bad person if we can't even live up to our own standards?

I think maybe that's what verses four and five are about. Verse four, we look at the good circumstances in our life and we conclude that we deserve them.

Things are going well, reasonably, at least some of the things. So what do you think? When do people say life isn't fair?

This isn't fair. Is it when things are going well or when things are going badly? I'm not sure I've heard many people go, I'm having a really good day. I don't deserve this.

I haven't heard that too often. I don't think that way too often. Even though we condemn others to reap the fruit of their ways, we fail to see what we deserve.

[14:46] Our condemnation of others when we do the very same thing tells us we don't deserve the blessings we have today or tomorrow and yet we take the riches of God's forgiveness, not forgiveness but his kindness, his patience, his forbearance and we confuse that for approval.

I deserve this. So sometimes I'm in the park or by the lake at Lake Macquarie and there's just so much bustling life and people enjoying life. Sometimes I'm just blown away.

Look how much kindness God gives people. He gives me so much like I know there's hard things in our lives but there's just so much good he gives people.

But that's not evidence of his approval. That's evidence of his kindness wanting you to turn to him. He's giving you time to turn.

He's righteous. He's giving you time. In verse 5 we think all this way because we willfully just push death out of our minds in our culture.

[15 : 59] We try and hide it. We all know one day our bodies will die. We have to face death. Each one of us. We know it and yet we just push it out of our minds.

Death is just this loud alarm that something is not right. that we all must face death and we all must face the consequences of our wrongdoing.

We will face God one day. God is so righteous. He is patient and forbearing giving us time to turn towards him but we confuse that patience with us deserving it and that we must be a good person. We deserve this. The third reason God is righteous in his judgment is because we see in verses 6 to 11. He is righteous because he has one standard for all people.

All of us there is one standard. What you actually do. It is based on truth. What you do. That is the one standard. I think we can think in terms of how school assessments work where there is the bell curve and we think we as long as we are in the majority bit of the bell curve.

[17 : 17] We are not at the tail end. We are okay. We may not be at the upper end. The really high moral achievers. As long as we are in the main pack we are okay.

That is comparative assessment. Some medical exams for instance have a percentage cut off. It does really matter how well you do as long as you do better than others.

God won't do that. He is righteous. He will judge you according to what you do. You alone. He is not like the classroom teacher who keeps the whole year in because of a few bad eggs.

He is righteous. He looks at your deeds alone, my deeds alone. Verse 6, he will render to each one according to his works. So here is the one standard for all people, verses 7 to 11.

To those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honour and immortality, he will give eternal life. But for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury.

[18 : 27] Verse 11, God is righteous, he shows no favouritism, no nepotism, no discrimination. He is so righteous, he looks at your life alone.

So if you're a good person who always seeks to do what is right, if you don't settle for short-term gain but you're always seeking that eternal glory and reward, if you're not motivated by selfishness, God will give you the blessings of eternal life.

This begs the question, doesn't it? Who's Paul thinking of here? Who fits this category? Some take this, there's lots of different ideas but if I just can summarise it quickly, some take this as saying that some people will be rewarded by being Christian, by faith in Jesus and then others, if they don't know about Jesus, if they're sincere in doing good, then they will live.

But it doesn't fit with the flow of Paul's argument like we've seen in Romans 3.23 already. The point of his argument is that all of us are in need of the gospel.

He says very clear in the rest of the letter, no one is saved by their works. So, let's assume that Paul doesn't totally contradict himself here.

[19 : 50] What's he doing? Who's he thinking of? I think he's saying God is just.

He certainly would reward those who are always seeking good. He will. That is true. The question is, is that you? Is that me?

Is that anyone? Like, I'm sick of the phrase, to be honest. I'm not perfect. I'm sick of it because people use it as an excuse not to own what they've done.

But we all admit no one's perfect and yet somehow we think we fit this category. It is true that God will reward someone who's totally righteous.

The problem is, who is that? There is one standard. He is so righteous. He doesn't show favouritism.

[20 : 55] God is righteous in his judgment. judgment. And the fourth reason God is righteous in his judgment, which we see in 12 to 16, verses 12 to 16, is that he's given you a conscience.

You do know what is right and wrong. But if you're a religious person right now, if you know what the Bible says fairly well, don't think that somehow that gives you an advantage because, to some degree, God's law is also written on every person's heart.

We all have a conscience. To some degree, God has given his idea of what is right and wrong to every single person.

And he will assess each person according to what they know. If you just have a moral compass, God will assess you according to how you live up to that. If you have God's law and you know it very well, he will assess you according to how you live up to that.

I think verse 15 is really key here. So have a look at verse 15 with me. They show that, this is the morally sensitive person, 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.

[22 : 26] So if you've seen the movie Inside Out, where you got these emotions in your mind, metaphorical, I think picture a courtroom in our mind, we each have a conscience, and we've got a little lawyer in there trying to get us off the hook all the time.

That lawyer is pretty effective, but we've also got a judge, and that judge can be pretty harsh sometimes, can't it? Even in our society at the moment that is so adamant that each person can decide what is right and wrong for themselves, we still have this conscience.

We can't escape our inner judge. In fact, if you want a life of loving relationships, then that places a moral demand on you.

If you want loving relationships in your life, that places a moral demand on you. I'm going to quote Jordan Peterson here, a behavioural, he's quite popular, I'm not sure if you've heard of him before, Canadian behavioural psychologist.

He said this really well, and I'm not sure if I've thought of it this way before, so here's what he said.

If you view someone with love, then it's incumbent upon you to treat them as if they're valuable.

[23 : 49] And then the more you treat other people as valuable, the better person you are. That just comes along for the ride. So the more love you view other people with, the higher the moral demand that's placed on you.

It requires you to treat them as valuable. Then I'd say too, well, there's another reason why it's so important to be truthful and in some sense to be good, because it isn't obvious to me that you can withstand that moral load if you're compromised by too much sin.

It's just too much. So he's not a Christian. He's sympathetic to Christianity, but he's not a Christian.

If I can try and reword what he's saying here, or just summarise, the more you love someone, you've got to treat them as valuable.

And if you treat them as valuable, that places a moral obligation to do that. And the question is, do we treat people as valuable? You can't have love in your life and no moral accountability.

They go hand in hand. So the question is, what does your conscience tell you? When our inner judge approves of what we do, it shows that we have a moral compass.

[25 : 12] It says, you are right in doing that. But even there, there's a problem. It shows we have a moral compass, but we don't always do that right every single time.

God is righteous, he gives you his moral compass, and he is aware of your secret thoughts. He knows each of our conscience.

And again, our conscience is the voice that is an echo of what God will say on that final day to each one of us. It's a warning.

So after looking at those paragraphs, I wanted to speak to Christians for a moment. Do you see the principle Paul is using here?

I think we can sometimes condemn unbelievers for the law. It's because they don't live up to what we know is right, but if we know the Bible, that standard is for us.

[26 : 24] I don't think it's always appropriate to demand of unbelievers, family or friends, what they don't yet know. But they still need the gospel.

Just ask them, do they live up to what they do know, their moral compass, what they condemn others for? And if they don't live up to that, how do they reconcile that?

Okay, so Christian, religious person, religiously privileged person, claiming you have more knowledge of God, of God's law, God's ways, it gives you an advantage, doesn't it?

Well, it doesn't, actually. And Paul's about to explain why. So the Jew or the person who grows up in the church, who knows their Bible, they do know more.

There are real privileges that come along with that. But you too, me too, I am in danger of the wrath of God. Pre-Jesus.

[27 : 37] We can often think that the privilege means advantage, like the child of a rich and powerful parent who, they're just accepted into university by virtue of who their dad is, who their parent is, who their mum is, or they get the job just because of that privilege.

We can think that privilege means advantage, but that's not the case with God because he is righteous. God is righteous, he has one standard, what you actually do in light of the knowledge you have.

God is a religious person. If you count yourself as a religious person, hop out of the jury box, it's your turn to be in the dock.

Let's have a look. Why is there no advantage? Why are you in danger of the wrath of God? So verse 17 and following. So Paul's speaking to the Jewish people, but I think there's a lot of parallels for Christians today.

If you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast in God and know his will, that boasting is good by the way, and approve what is excellent, how could God's people, God's special chosen people experience God's wrath?

[28 : 57] Surely we're safe, says the Jew. But God is righteous in his judgment because firstly, you don't practice what you preach.

I don't think the criticism is in verses 19 and 20, claiming to be a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness. I don't think it's wrong to think of yourself that way, that you have more knowledge of God's ways than others.

If that's true, that's okay. I don't think the criticism is there. The criticism comes in verse 21. You then who teach others, do not teach yourself, while you preach against stealing, do you steal? You who say that one must not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? So these three examples, they confuse me a bit because it's not clear how every Jew would be convicted of this.

So either we've got to take these three accusations that you've committed adultery, either we've got to take them a bit less literally as lust, that everyone's committed lust.

[30 : 18] So that's one option that's possible. I slightly prefer a second option, which is that Paul is establishing the point that it's not by virtue of being one of God's people that guarantees that you're saved.

And he points out a few people that that's not true for, and if it's not true for a few, then it's not true for all. So I think it works like this.

In our day, if we consider the royal commission into the sex scandals and the cover-ups, and from leadership in the church, no less, hasn't that blasphemed the name of Jesus?

In our society. So on the one hand, these leaders are boasting in knowing God, and then by their behaviour, they've just, the reputation of God is in the mud now, isn't it, in society?

I think Paul's point here is that clearly for some Jewish people back then, and the principle still applies today, that they might claim it all they want, but clearly they're showing by their behaviour, they don't actually believe it, and they're under the condemnation of God, they're in danger of the wrath of God.

[31 : 43] I think he's just making the simple point, by virtue of being a Jew, that doesn't mean you're safe. God is righteous, he will judge you according to what you do.

And then in verses 25 to 29, he goes broader to challenge every Jew. Everyone who claims to be one of God's people and therefore automatically safe from God's wrath.

Talking about circumcision and having the law. Those were the two marks of being a Jew. Do you belong to God's people? Then you've got the law and you're circumcised if you're a male.

They were the two marks of belonging to God's people. But as God has always said, even in his law, Deuteronomy 10, says, circumcise the foreskin of your heart and be no longer stubborn.

Fear the Lord your God, walk in all his ways, love him and serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and keep the commandments. It's what's on the inside that matters.

[32 : 51] The external marks of circumcision and the law are just meant to be symbolic of what's true on the inside. So much so that even if you don't have those marks, so if you're not a Jew but you keep the law and you confess your sin to God, God will count you as the true Jew.

You are really part of God's people. It's what's on the inside that matters is the point. So Christians in the room on Zoom, what external marks of being a Christian, of being one of God's people are you relying on to be sure that you are saved?

It could be as simple as owning a Bible or the number of Christian books in your library. It could be as your general knowledge of the Bible.

You take pride in knowing which chapter and verse a quote is from. It could be the badge that you identify as. I'm Catholic, I'm Anglican, I'm Baptist, or maybe it's I'm not just a Christian, I'm Reformed.

Is it the badge that you're relying on? Do you put store in your baptism? I was baptized or I prayed that prayer.

[34 : 18] I must be born again because of those things. Is it some spiritual mystical encounter with God? I had a spiritual experience with God surely.

I'm one of his people. Is it the role or status that you have in this church? I teach at Fresh. I teach Grace Kids.

I'm a small group leader. I'm a preacher. Do you think by virtue of preaching this sermon that makes me acceptable to God? Is it the role or status you have?

Is it the Christian upbringing you've had? your parents cannot answer for you when you face God in judgment?

There's probably more marks that we can rely on but if we rely on any of these things to have confidence that we are safe from the wrath of God, Paul's point is it's what's on the inside that counts.

[35 : 27] Do you have love for God? God's wrath will land on you if there's no love on the inside. And verse 29 gives us a hint for what we need to get our inside in order.

We don't need laws to obey, we need the spirit. Okay, we have one more paragraph. Chapter 3, 1 to 8.

And I was kind of comforted to read in a commentary that this is one of the most perplexing paragraphs in the book because... but I can't skip it.

And I often find the harder bits in a text often serve to make the point clearer if you wrestle with it. So let's wrestle with it.

If what I say isn't satisfying, there's a good chance of that, that's probably because Romans chapter 9 to 11 unpacks it even more.

[36 : 35] So feel free to go read that later. So, Paul anticipates the objection from the Jew, from the religious person. What advantage is there then?

There's no advantage if you're right, Paul. Put as simply as I can, I think there's two final attempts from the religious person to claim that I'm safe from the wrath of God.

Verses 1 to 4. If what you're saying is right, Paul, if we, along with Gentile sinners, are equally guilty before God, then you're saying there's no advantage to being a Jew, which can't be right because we are God's special people.

To which Paul responds, I'm not saying there's no Jewish privileges. You have all the privileges. You have the word of God to know him and love him and obey him.

You have all the privileges. But I am saying that privilege doesn't automatically mean you're accepted by God. You don't live up to what you know is right.

[37 : 53] The second and last ditch effort to avoid the wrath of God on your life is in verses 5 to 8.

And it's last ditch. It is twisted thinking. It is distorted thinking. It's so foolish that Paul, the response is really simple.

But here's the thinking for the Jew back then and I think it still exists among Christians today. The Jew might understand God's word so well, claiming the promises of God on themselves and therefore thinking that their sin even highlights the faithfulness of God.

My wrongdoing shows how patient God is and forgiving and committed to his promises God is. My sin brings him glory. And here's the twisted thinking of it.

There's some truth to it. Here's where it goes wrong. The implication is therefore my sin doesn't matter. I can't be judged for it.

[39 : 04] Because it shows how good God is. My sin doesn't matter. It's just stupid thinking. Paul's simple response is where is it?

Verse 6 By no means for then how could God judge the world? If what you're saying is right that you are safe because your sin just shows how great God is God couldn't judge anyone.

You're clearly wrong in your thinking. because God will judge the world. The presumption fails to appreciate the seriousness of sin.

It just fails to appreciate that because you're a Jew, because you've grown up in the church, that you have the promises of salvation. You're claiming that but you're missing the fact that God will also keep his word to judge those who don't obey his word.

You're picking and choosing what God has said. He will be faithful. He'll be faithful to everything he says. Feel free to come talk to me later if that's not clear.

