

Judge of the Heart

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Date: 12 July 2020

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[0 : 00] In year six, I was on a school excursion to Canberra. All the kids were sitting on a hill next to Lake Burley Griffin, eating lunch.

We had sandwiches and oranges. After most people had eaten their sandwich, some thought it would be fun to start throwing their oranges at the ducks.

I thought this was hilarious and obviously wanted to be involved. But it was really just the naughty kids who were doing it. And I didn't really consider myself to be a naughty kid.

So I came up with a plan for how I could fool everyone that I wasn't really that bad. Instead of throwing my orange at ducks, which is downright evil, I rolled my orange down the hill and off the edge where the ducks were sitting.

Hilarious. At least until some killjoy went and told the teacher. And you should have seen him. He marched down the hill with that your busted look on his face and I was packing it.

[1 : 15] How am I going to escape this? Well, lucky for me, that teacher was a fool. Instead of asking who did it.

Sorry. Yeah. Instead of asking someone who did it. He told everyone who threw it orange they had to own up themselves. I was safe.

I'm not going to stand up. I'm not a naughty kid like them. But all the while, there was this uncomfortable churning in my gut.

My mind was telling me I'm not like them. I can't stand up with them. But my gut was disagreeing with me. Over the last two weeks, the scene for Romans has been set.

Paul began very deliberately with the gospel and with his desire to see the Christians in Rome and encourage them in their faith. He challenges all Christians to not be ashamed of the gospel because it is God's power to save by faith from first to last.

[2 : 32] And last week, he followed up with a strong and honest explanation of the terrible consequences for all people because of our suppression of the truth, which God has made plain to all.

There's much about those verses that are hard to accept. It's a real eye opener about the reality of our attitude toward God. And I imagine that a lot of people would find it difficult to hear.

So why am I reminding you of it? Because chapter two is usually a little bit less memorable than chapter one. But there are many reasons why tonight's passage will be even harder for many of us to hear.

And the reason for that is Paul's target. In chapter one, Paul's speaking broadly about the depravity of all people who suppress the truth and deserve God's judgment.

But in chapter two and following, he narrows in and takes aim. No longer speaking generally, but specifically to you.

[3 : 47] That is the Christians he's writing to. Now it's time for those who claim to know God to listen. And what we hear is not praise, but strong and explicit rebuke.

11 times in the first five verses, Paul takes aim and says, you. Having not said it once since his greeting in chapter one.

Paul takes aim and speaks into the heart of the believer. And this is what he says. Despite what you may have claimed about your relationship with God.

Despite your good works or religiosity. It's what's in your heart that matters. And our God who made it.

He knows what's in there. Paul's readers have begun to take their position in God's family for granted.

[4 : 50] So he makes perfectly clear that God's judgment is completely unbiased. Look from verse one in your Bibles.

You, therefore, have no excuse. You who pass judgment on someone else. For whatever point you judge another, you are condemning yourself because you who pass judgment do the same things. We know that God's judgment against those who do such things is based on truth. So when you, a mere human, pass judgment on them, yet do the same things, do you think you will escape God's judgment?

I find it very easy to read these verses and think, adoy. Of course, we shouldn't judge people. Isn't that sort of like a morality that is baked into our conscience? Surely anyone who's gone through primary school will know this. Just because you're the king in four square, it doesn't mean you're above the rules.

[5 : 53] Even in our society, a person in power of some kind, let's say a judge, if they do something criminal, we would expect them to stand under the same law as the people they sentence.

This is a moral truth we expect. I wonder why that is. Well, if we expect this, how much more will God, who created our minds, hold to account those to whom he's shown kindness, but are unwilling to show it to others?

Do you think you will escape God's judgment? Or verse four, 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?

God treats us, both Jews and Gentiles, with kindness in order to lead us to repentance and live by faith. Living by faith is a key topic in this letter.

It means living now according to the life that Jesus saved us for, the life that he lived. Beginning a life by faith, it isn't like stepping through a doorway with everything the same on the other side.

[7 : 19] Living by faith is like a hallway which we step into when God leads us to repentance, but then continue to walk along by faith.

It's a hallway which is shaped by the life of Christ. So walking along it means we walk like him. This means that those to whom God showed patience and kindness, leading them to repentance, they are expected to pay it forward, to use a modern phrase, rather than withhold it.

Walking by faith will mean many things. One of the key ones is remembering that we are in there by invitation. We don't decide who is and isn't in.

If you haven't thought about this much, it's important to do so now. If God has been so kind as to lead you to repentance and freedom and life, and then you decide who else should and shouldn't receive it, haven't you placed yourself in God's judgment seat?

Haven't you done exactly what the first humans did in response to God's kindness? Saying, I want to play God. I want to make the rules. I want to decide what's right and wrong.

[8 : 45] If that's you, remember the kindness he's shown you. Remember that what you do matters. Because, verse 6, God will repay each person according to what they have done.

First for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For God does not show favoritism. No person is exempt. No person is free to do as they please.

God is not blind. If your heart at one time took you through that doorway in faith, but then you decided to turn back, then you're not living by faith.

But instead, verse 5, because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath for yourself for the day of God's wrath when God's judgment will be revealed.

Now I hear one of you respond in your heart, but we aren't saved by what we do. We're saved by what Christ has done. And we're free in Christ. Those who put their faith in him are protected by him.

[9 : 59] I hear you say this because I heard my own heart say this as I was working through this passage. But this is the great comfort and challenge in faith from first to last, in chapter 1, verse 17.

Living by faith is both taking that first step into that hallway and finishing it. Trusting in Jesus is a decision that we make every day.

You might remember the first time you put your faith in Jesus and the angels in heaven celebrated because a lost sheep was found.

But living by faith is exactly that. Living. Walking. Meaning those who, verse 8, are self-seeking, who reject the truth and follow evil.

Why would you expect your outcome to be any different than those who suppress the truth by their wickedness? But those living by faith, who, verse 7, by persistence in doing good, seek glory, honour and immortality, God will give eternal life.

[11 : 18] Now, while living by faith does expect a Christ-shaped life, on top of this, Paul is alluding here to a specific issue in the lives of these people.

The Jewish law had many restrictions around approaching a holy God. And over the years, they had forgotten that God was gracious in inviting them near.

They had begun to take their position for granted. But before Paul explains how the Christians in Rome were doing this, he makes clear that judgment isn't only coming to Jews, but to everyone who sins against God.

In verses 12 to 16, before we hear how the Roman Christians were withholding the kindness of God, Paul builds on what he said so far about God's impartial judgment.

He explains again that God's judgment isn't only reserved for Jews who heard and disobeyed the law, but for everyone who disobeyed.

[12 : 26] Now, a non-Jew might say, I never heard the law. How could I know right from wrong? Because it's not about hearing.

It's about obeying. And Gentiles, like all people, know the requirements of the law by nature. And so will be judged according to that nature.

Have a look at verse 12, point 2. All who sin apart from the law will perish apart from the law. All who sin under the law will be judged by the law.

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. Paul makes clear that both Jews and Gentiles, two Jews and Gentiles, that hearing or having the law doesn't give you any special position before God.

It's obeying the law that matters. Once my friends and I spent an afternoon jumping off a rock cliff into water.

[13 : 34] Now, let's just say there was a fence around the cliff. With a sign saying, do not jump into water from rock cliff. High risk danger.

If we jumped and got hurt, it will be bad, but the blame would be ours, wouldn't it? The warning was clear. We were told not to, but we did.

Our judgment would be obvious, right? But does this mean a person who hasn't had the rules explained to them isn't at fault when they break them?

Not necessarily. This is what Paul is arguing in these verses. All who sin apart from the law will perish apart from the law. Gentiles, it turns out, are as culpable as those who hear and disobey the law.

Because we learn in verse 14 that 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.

[14 : 41] Meaning the Gentiles, Gentiles who haven't heard the law, are able to obey the law by nature, rather than by special revelation.

What this doesn't mean is that the Gentiles are able to fulfill the righteous requirement of the law by nature, because by works of the law, no one will be declared righteous.

But what it does mean is that what is required by the law, that is to love God and our neighbour, is in a sense built in to the Gentiles.

This is Paul's meaning in verse 15, that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts sometimes accusing them, and at other times even defending them.

Meaning that what is right by God's determination is naturally in their hearts, and their own consciences will bear witness or testify both for and against them, since they know right from wrong.

[15 : 57] And we shouldn't be shocked to hear this. We already heard last week that what may be known about God is plain to them because God made it plain.

Therefore, those who haven't been explicitly told by Moses under a mountain of fire what God does and doesn't expect are still responsible for the self-seeking, truth-rejecting, evil-following behaviour, first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.

It's a bit, just a bit, like common sense. Like for instance, if I hurt myself jumping off that rock ledge and there was no sign warning me not to do it, it would still be my fault, my responsibility.

And on the day when God reveals the secrets of our hearts, even Gentiles who never heard the law but sinned will perish.

So to avoid that judgment, should the Roman Christians lean toward Jewish practices in order to know what to do?

[17 : 24] Well, no, because they're Christians. They know Jesus and his power that brings salvation to everyone who believes. But among first century Christians, there was a great deal of Jewish influence.

You only have to read Acts and Paul's letters to see how deep the hooks of Judaism were in the practices of the early Christians. And that was no less true with this church.

Paul has explained that God shows no partiality in judgment and that it doesn't matter about your background. And this is the trap they were falling into. Allowing Jewish cultural influence to add a human physical element to what only God can give.

Paul argues that it's not about your body or what you do to it, in this case circumcision, but about your heart and what God's spirit has done to it because it's according to the work of the spirit in your heart that you will be judged.

Paul says a lot here, but the main issue he's addressing is circumcision and the hypocrites who thought that it was the mark of the true believer and that God gave you a free pass.

[18 : 48] This is what verses 17 to 24 are about. They're hypocrisy. You claim to be a Jew, meaning one of the people of God. You claim to lead people to God, but by your actions you actually lead people away from him.

Instead of people praising God because of you, his name is trashed. Their problem is that they misunderstand circumcision.

Just as physical signs cause stumbling in all Christian cultures, so circumcision was a big deal here. Even the apostles were occasionally pressured into old, un-Christlike habits.

these Romans thought it was equal to righteousness, but in actual fact it meant the opposite. Verse 25. Circumcision has value if you observe the law, but if you break the law, you have become as though you had not been circumcised.

So then, if those who are not circumcised keep the law's requirement, will they not be regarded as though they were circumcised? The one who is not circumcised physically, yet obeys the law, will condemn you, who, even though you have the written code and circumcision, are a lawbreaker.

[20 : 15] The Jews' influence on these Christians had so damaged them that they had totally misunderstood the purpose of the law and circumcision. circumcision.

They thought circumcision was the sign of righteousness, but in truth, from a Jewish point of view, if it wasn't complemented by the law, kept perfectly, then it was useless.

It's a little bit like petrol, without a car and without a match. You've got no transport and you've got no fire, just a pile of toxic liquid that does you more harm than good.

If you can keep the law, get circumcised because they complement each other. But if you can't keep the law, then circumcision is useless.

Worse, it actually becomes a barrier between you and God. Can you see how damaging this Jewish Christian culture can be? Adding circumcision or any physical sign as a must to the gospel, it actually prevents a person from continuing with God, from walking by faith.

[21 : 29] In the old covenant, circumcision was a sign for someone who was already included in God's covenant community. In Christ, believers are not included by physical signs, but by spiritual.

a sign on the heart given by God when you recognise that salvation doesn't come from human signs or effort, but from God. Verse 28 says, A person is not a Jew who is one only outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical.

No, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly. Circumcision is circumcision of the heart by the spirit, not by the written code. Such a person's praise is not from other people, but from God.

The issue with circumcision is that salvation through believing the gospel of Jesus is not about outward signs or words or claims, but about what's in your heart.

Your heart will reveal what you truly believe and it will determine what you do and how you will be judged, just like with King David, though he repented.

[22 : 48] We may claim to believe something to what's in our, something contrary to what's in our heart, but the truth will be revealed on the day when God will judge your secrets.

On my school excursion, I sat there wrestling with the reality of my heart and to make matters worse, everyone around knew what I had done.

I wasn't just one of the naughty kids, I was worse. I was so distraught by my lie and my shame and with the scoffing from all the kids who knew the truth, I couldn't handle it and so I just walked off. I didn't care about missing the bus, getting lost in a strange city, I just had to escape. Imagine facing the righteous judgment of God.

Imagine the desperate desire to get away. But when you pass judgment on him and do the same things, do you think you will escape God's judgment?

[24 : 10] Despite that lesson, I think it's still easy to trash the idiots who thought circumcision was still a thing because we know now that we're saved by faith, not works.

But everyone has their cultural blind spots, don't they? Paul is rebuking the Christians in Rome for the same double-minded hypocrisy as Jesus did the Pharisees, pristine on the outside and dead inside.

This issue was alive and well all throughout Israel's history and is still around today among the religious elite of the 21st century.

We could call them the reformed evangelical who wears that title with pride. Friends, we are in great danger of falling into the same trap.

Do we call ourselves Christian who know God's will, a guide to the blind, a teacher, leader, discipler, who teaches and preaches, who models against all kinds of evil behaviors, but do it ourselves?

[25 : 24] In our day, outward signs like circumcision can come in all shapes and sizes. It's terribly easy to allow our reformed, evangelical, complementarian Christian culture to have its own version of circumcision and therefore the metric by which we decide or judge whether a person is a true believer or not.

Are they a genuine evangelical? Like circumcision, those labels have value, but not if they are what we're hanging on to, not if they are the most important thing.

If we think the label is what gives us God's approval rather than faith, well then it will become the opposite of what we expect.

A barrier between us and God because if the label or the sign is what matters, there will be a new set of rules or expectations that will determine whether a person is in or out and when that happens, you've become the judge.

Visible signs and actions Christians say and do are not necessarily bad. The labels, the ceremonial washing, the shared meal and plenty more things, giving money to church and other, caring, serving, cleaning, disinfecting, leading, teaching, training.

[27 : 11] and usually, at least from a human perspective, your actions tend to reveal what's in your heart. But don't be fooled.

God knows your heart better than you know your heart. I can show you what I want you to see. I can give you reason to think that I care.

Honestly, I do care, but you can't see my heart. I don't want you to think you can never truly know a person. Over time, we reveal our true affections, but God knows your heart better than anyone, even you.

I know people who have even fooled themselves about their relationship with God. Only after serious consideration, which took years, did they realize that what was in their heart was buried under layers of outward physical signs.

Don't be fooled. You can very easily take a bath in this special pool, but not take a bath in here. The pool is outward circumcision.

[28 : 31] This is inward. Don't be fooled. To finish, I'd like to read verses 17 to 24 as a Christian in a modern culture with modern challenges.

Now, you, if you call yourself a Christian, if you rely on the power of the gospel and boast in God, if you know his will and approve what is superior because you are instructed by the apostles, if you are convinced that you're a guide for the blind, a light for those who are in dark, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of little children because you have in the scriptures the embodiment of knowledge and truth.

You then who teach others, do you not teach yourself? You who preach against stealing, do you steal? You who say that people should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery, keeping in

mind how Jesus defines adultery?

you who abhor idols, is your life a shrine to you? You who boast in Christ, do you dishonor God by ignoring him?

Is God's name blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you? let me finish by praying.

[30 : 12] Heavenly Father, thank you for the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, which is the power of God for everyone who believes. Father, help us who believe in you to continue to live by faith, remembering that you saved us by faith alone.

Give us the strength of your spirit to search our hearts, that we may live our lives completely devoted to you. Amen.