

The Great Effort of Trying to Fool God

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 31 October 2010

Preacher: The Venerable Daniel Gifford

[0 : 01] Well, we're continuing on with our sermon series on the book of Romans. We're on chapter 2, verse 12, and it's on page 940. If you would like to follow along, this is an extraordinary passage because as the verse that Eric read at the beginning of the sermon service says, God exalts us as he humbles us in this.

We can know God's praise for us and his loving care for us only as we humble ourselves before the mighty hand of God and under it. Peter said, humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that the proper time he may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on him, for he cares for you.

And this passage does this for us. It humbles us in the most profound way because it clearly tells us that there is a day when God will judge every person's thoughts and their actions.

Paul has called this in verse 5, the day of wrath. It's a day of perfect justice where God will reveal his anger against all sin and against all evil.

And we as humans will all face this day. Now, what we as human beings do with this truth reveals our spiritual condition.

[1 : 30] And it also reveals the hold that pride may have over us because our great tendency is to doubt God's judgment or to dismiss it.

And this is why I think that the Anglican Church, one of the gifts of it is that we go through the church year and Advent that's coming up in a month's time is focused on the judgment of Christ, that he will come again to judge the living and the dead.

And so every year we're reminded of this ultimate reality of the judgment of God. And it is very, very good for us. It brings us the humility through which God can actually lift us up.

But we see this this sin, this tendency to doubt the judgment of God right from the very beginning.

Eric was teaching the children at the Children's Talk about the fall in Genesis 3.

And do you remember the words that Satan first said when evil first comes on the scene in the world? It is to doubt God's word. Did God really say there was going to be judgment?

[2 : 37] And the woman said, well, God said we may eat of any of the trees of the fruit of the garden, but you shall not eat the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden or you will die.

But the serpent said to the woman again, you will not die. In other words, there will not be a judgment. It's just a threat. For God knows that when you eat it, your eyes will be open and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.

So he's casting doubt on the judgment and saying God's intentions for even bringing this up is to limit your freedom and your power to make your own decisions. God's judgment is not right and just.

He has an agenda for it. God's judgment is not right and you see what is happening here is that the serpent is appealing to Eve's pride. It's her pride that would make her believe that judgment of God was not true.

Pride made her dismiss it and act as though it wasn't real. And this human pride has infected every human generation since then.

[3 : 45] And our generation is no exception. The attitude in our society is that we have become educated and knowledgeable. We have moved beyond belief in a day of judgment.

And that actually God's judgment has been used to manipulate and control people. Thankfully, we know better as a society now. Now, as with most powerful lies, there is an element of truth in that.

The judgment of God has been used to manipulate and to control people. But as Paul has been laying out in the gospel for us in Romans from chapter 1, verse 18, right until now through our passage, we see that judgment is the great reality we all face.

And that judgment explains to us and makes clear what the gospel of Jesus Christ saves us from. It gives us light to what the gospel is.

We can understand God's love and his mercy in ways that we never could unless we know that there is a day of judgment. Two weeks ago, Jim was preaching on the nature of God's judgment, that it is perfect, that the wrath and fury of God is against all human evil and sin.

[5 : 02] But God gives glory and honor and peace for those who repent and do good, whether they are Jews or Gentiles. Now, in our passage today, we see that that judgment is for everyone.

And nothing can exempt a person from that judgment. Nobody is off the hook. Paul is very inclusive in verse 12. Let's look at this. He says, For all who have sinned without the law, that's the Gentiles, will also perish without the law.

And all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law. And that is the great equalizer.

God is going to judge on the basis, if you look down at 14, of what God, in verse 13, upon what we have done with God's law, with the law that is in our hearts.

For it's not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified. And this is the theme that will run throughout this passage, is that the problem that human beings have is what we do with what we know.

It's a problem of disobedience that makes us susceptible to the judgment day, that makes us vulnerable to encounter the wrath of God.

[6 : 25] Now, the law, we should understand here, was given by Moses at Mount Sinai. And it's not just the Ten Commandments, but all of the law in the first books of the Bible.

This is God's teaching on his will for his people that gave Israel its unique identity as people who are set apart by God for God.

Every Jew knew that law. And Paul says the day of judgment requires that they are doers of it. But he doesn't let Gentiles off the hook here.

He says, what about the Gentiles who haven't heard the law of Moses? Paul writes in verse 14, when Gentiles do by nature what the law requires, they are a law to themselves.

And he's saying there that when Gentiles do what the law requires, they have an innate awareness of what God has in mind.

[7 : 25] They have an understanding of God's moral law. It's a natural law. It's something that is implanted in all of created people. And Paul saw this in the Roman world as he traveled, that the Romans were noted for their interest in law and how it governed society.

And there was a sense of a general morality that the Greeks and the Romans understood. And we see this today. There is a moral outrage at wrongdoing and abuse that Christians completely share in.

There's also a general approval of goodness and self-giving that we as Christians also cherish. And those values are for us really very good avenues into relationships with people in our city and in our neighborhood who don't know the Lord Jesus.

They are ways for us to be part of their lives and to be a light to our community. But Paul says here the Jews have the law of Moses. The Gentiles have moral law.

But there is a problem that he outlines in the rest of the passage. Every Jew and Gentile fails in doing what they know is right. And that's what Paul will continue to do in the rest of our passage.

[8 : 43] He's going to show us three ways that humanity has tried but failed to get exemption by their own power from the day of judgment.

And it's a common theme of humanity. First, the first way is through self-righteousness. And I want you to look at the end of verse 15. You can see that even as Gentiles try very hard to do what is right, according to the law written on their hearts, their conscience speaks, as it says.

And their conflicting thoughts accuse or even, and what he means by that is on occasion, once in a while, excuse them on the day of judgment. And what Paul is saying here is that without the grace of Jesus, on that day of judgment, their own thoughts will accuse.

And those accusing thoughts will dominate. They will know they are guilty. And their conscience, he very vividly says, will bear witness to it. It will actually witness against them.

It's a sobering picture because this is the experience of every person who has tried hard to live with all sincerity up to the highest moral standard that they know.

[9 : 58] And that is the problem. It is that standard because their conscience will know that they have fallen short of it. Paul says literally they will testify against themselves.

And this is the picture of humanity that is trying to be moral and to do what they believe is right. And I want you to notice something very important about the day of the Lord.

Because in verse 16, it says that these conflicting thoughts will accuse or excuse on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus.

That's a picture of the day of the Lord. And it's striking because Jesus has not been mentioned as Paul preaches and outlines the need for the gospel.

From verse 18 in chapter 1 till now. God is mentioned a number of times in that section. But no mention of Christ Jesus. Here is the first time that Paul preaches Christ.

[11:03] And when he first preaches Christ, how does he describe him? He is the one that will judge the secrets of humanity. The secrets that is inside every person.

And, you know, this is the pattern of the disciples who preached Jesus in Acts in the early church. They would focus on and begin with the reality of the day of judgment.

That Jesus is judge. I want to show you an example of that. Let's go to Acts 10 on 919. This is the passage that was read earlier in our service that Martin was reading.

And I want you to look at Acts 10 on page 19, verse 42. And what has happened here is that Peter has been preaching about the good news of Jesus Christ.

About his life, his death, his resurrection. And here he says that after his resurrection, he appeared to a number of people, especially the disciples.

[12:04] And here is what he commanded them to preach. Verse 42. Jesus commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that Jesus is the one appointed by God to be the judge of the living and the dead.

To him, all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name. And this is a this is very instructive for us.

Dick Lucas is helpful for us here. He said Peter and his and the apostles preaching the gospel right at the beginning of the church didn't first preach.

You are sinners and you need a savior, which is what we are very familiar with. They preached instead. You are sinners and you will meet a judge.

That was the pattern that Jesus taught them to teach about the reality of the day of the Lord and to say Jesus has been appointed to be that judge.

[13:09] And you see, this is what Jesus is teaching to start with that reality, that there will be a day when God judges people's hearts. And and so when they preached that everyone who believes in Jesus, the judge of the living and the dead, people would understand that truth.

And then they said that that they will receive forgiveness of their sins from that judge. And this is the astounding provision of God.

It is it is his love and his commitment to humanity that the one whom God ordained to be judge has by sent has been sent by God beforehand to prepare us for the day of judgment.

The one who knows what the last day will mean better than anyone. And he is the one who forgives your sin. The judge of the world is the one who dies for the world.

And we can only be humbled by this awesome love. When we hear and believe that good news, we can see how completely inadequate our good behavior is to somehow avoid that day of judgment.

[14:16] But, you know, that kind of avoidance is West Coast thinking. It says we're a well-ordered society. We have things under control. We have it figured out and we've moved beyond and past any belief in judgment.

And that's why in this mission field of Vancouver that is around us, there is such a great need for the gospel, an understanding of the power of the gospel to save and to transform and to give truth to us.

And this is the condition. This first way of trying to be exempt from the wrath of God is the condition of our world around us. But Paul says the second way humanity attempts to avoid being judged is religious practice.

And this one comes home to us as well. He speaks about it in terms of relying on the law, verses 17 through 24. Paul affirms here that the law is very good.

It is a treasure of God's people. It's wonderful how he writes about it. He says, 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.

[15 : 31] This is true and this is good. And not only that, but verse 19 goes on to say, through it, you are sure that you yourselves are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of children.

And having in the law, the embodiment and knowledge of truth. This is a beautiful account of the blessing, a list of the blessing that Jews experienced in Paul's time.

They knew the blessing of having God's word in a Gentile world. And in fact, they saw themselves often as missionaries to that world. They would welcome searchers to the synagogue to hear the law.

And today at St. John's, we could use those same words of blessing to describe the treasure that we have in God's word as well.

But Paul then asked some penetrating questions. He suddenly turns it onto their hearts and their minds. And he says, now, do you yourselves steal?

[16 : 37] Do you commit adultery? Do you rob temples? And finally, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? And the answer, if people are searching their hearts, is yes.

There are times when this happens. And that those things that Paul describes that happen from time to time in the Jewish world, happens in many other ways in the lives of the people that are listening.

There is the problem of hypocrisy. In everyone's life who strives to keep the law, there is this problem again of disobedience. And so Paul teaches that even though you boast of God in your religious life by keeping the law, you dishonor him by breaking it.

And so he's saying your exemption from God's judgment expires over and over again as you disobey. Paul is saying here that religious activity, even though it is very good and biblically faithful, that is not something that you can rely on.

That cannot shield you from the day of judgment. And he is giving this as a message to the Jews in a radical sense. And as we hear it, we must know too that it cannot shield us either, religious activity, because we also will disobey.

[17 : 57] Our serving of God in the various places that we have in our lives and in the church can never deal with God's wrath against our sin. We can never rely on it.

Only the good news of Jesus, being our judge and our savior, can help us on that day. And Paul drives that point home in the third way that humanity tries for exemption as well.

And that third way is by belonging to God's people. And so he's saying, here's another way. The fact of your status and your entitlement makes you exempt from the day of salvation.

This is what you believe. And he says no. Here's how he does it. In verse 25, it says, for circumcision is indeed a value. But again, only if you obey the law.

If you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision. It's a shocking thing to say. I don't know if we can imagine what kind of explosive effect that had on the people, the Jews who were listening.

[19 : 08] Because he's saying that you can lose your covenant status. He is ripping away any kind of complacency that a Jewish believer might have regarding the day of judgment.

The thing that was their right, literally their birthright, Paul says, can be taken away. And he drives that home as well. And he says that, you know, anyone who, in verse 26, is uncircumcised and keeps the law, he will be regarded as being circumcised.

He will come into that exalted status that you hold so dear. And, you know, God is speaking here to us as well. Because our human nature tells us that it is because of membership in our congregation, the people of God, that we have nothing to fear about on the day of the Lord.

It's very easy for us to rely on that fact. And to say, God could never judge me. I've been baptized. I've worshipped here for years. The fact that I'm a member of this church and deeply committed to God's word, that fact can be a source of confidence as we think about the day of judgment.

But Paul says, no. Without Jesus, your own disobedience and the thoughts of your hearts would immediately disqualify you from the people of God on that day.

[20 : 30] You would be subject to the wrath of God. And so you see what Paul is doing in this passage. As we step back for a minute and see those three ways that humanity tries to exempt themselves from judgment.

He has taken away the safety net. He has taken away the safety net as this congregation of Jews and Gentiles hears this passage.

He describes the human activity or status that people would rely on most to shield them from God's wrath. The thing that we humans try in the most effective way that we can imagine to exempt ourselves from the day of judgment.

First, self-righteousness. Secondly, through the law, which is religion. And thirdly, through circumcision, which is about our religious status, our belonging.

And he says, it won't work. Nothing you do will prevent the day of judgment. This is the place of deep humility that this passage brings us into.

[21 : 37] We are humbled under the mighty hand of God. All our pride is shattered. And as Peter said, we must cast our anxieties on him, knowing that he cares for us, that he loves us in Jesus Christ.

Paul is driving us to Christ. He is saying, Christ alone is your salvation. The judge and the savior rely on him alone.

And he takes away the other things that we would rely on. This is the place of great blessing. Because it is through this that he will exalt us. And so I want you to look at the extraordinary way that this passage ends, verse 29.

Because he redefines what a Jew is. What the person of God is all about. He says this, but a Jew is one inwardly.

In the Greek, it's in the secret place. It's the same word that was used in verse 16 of Jesus judging the secrets of men. It says, a Jew is one inwardly. And circumcision is a matter of the heart by the spirit, not by the letter.

[22 : 47] His praise is not from man, but from God. This is wonderful. Paul is saying that we all need heart surgery. And through it, he exalts us.

He is saying we need the Holy Spirit that Jesus brings to us to change our heart before God. In the inward place, he unites us with Jesus by the Holy Spirit.

And the place that God will judge, that Jesus knows and sees on the day of judgment, that is the place where Jesus gives faith in him, unites us to him.

And we know the freedom from the tyranny of sin. We know freedom from the day of wrath. And amazingly, we will receive praise from God himself. It's an awesome thought.

This is the power of the gospel that Paul is preaching. And that's what Paul is going to say six chapters from now. And I want to end with this. It's in chapter 8, verse 1.

[23 : 49] He says this. He says, There is therefore no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

For the law of the Spirit, the Holy Spirit of life, has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. And he goes on to say in verse 14, For all who are led by that Spirit of God are sons of God.

For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the spirit of adoption as sons by whom we cry, Abba, Father.

There's the power of the gospel. Exalting us to the place of being God's daughters and his sons. In Jesus alone, God praises us in Jesus.

And we don't know for sure what that praise looks like, but we have a very good idea in that when God spoke before everybody about Jesus, the audible voice said about Jesus at his baptism, Here is my beloved son with whom I am well pleased.

[25 : 01] And in Christ, that praise is our praise as well. The wonderful news is that through faith in Jesus, the day of wrath becomes the day of God's praise, that we are reunited to his son, Jesus Christ.

This is the good news. This is the treasure that we have in the gospel. And may this passage humble us so that we can receive that blessing and that praise that God gives.

May he give us grace to rely on Jesus alone and not the things that we can do to avoid the day of judgment. Let's pray together.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for the good news.

We thank you for revealing the day of judgment to us and providing in such a powerful, loving way for that day in the judge, Jesus Christ, whom you have appointed.

[26 : 11] Help us to rely on Jesus alone, on his grace, on his mercy, on the forgiveness of our sins. May that be our only hope, our assurance, as we live our lives for you.

In him we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.