

A Powerful Gospel

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. Romans 1:16

In verses 16 and 17 of chapter 1, Paul puts forth his thesis for the Epistle. What follows is an in-depth exposition of the gospel of grace, which is the power of God, and the righteousness of God that is revealed and applied to believers through faith. First, we will deal with the powerful gospel and then move to the righteousness of God.

The Gospel

These two verses revolve around the life-giving concept of the gospel. Paul, along with the rest of the New Testament writers, uses a Greek word here for the gospel that originally referred to private, political, military, or religious messages that brought great joy to the recipient.¹ This is certainly the case for believers in Christ. The message of Christ's death and resurrection brings good news and great joy to all who believe. Jesus Christ died on the cross for your sins and gives you life through his grace received by faith. What better news is there?

In order to understand this most fully, let's examine how Paul defines the gospel. In his first letter to Timothy, Paul defines the truth (the gospel) in three God-directed phrases: 1. There is but one God. 2. There is but one mediator between God and man, the man Jesus Christ. 3. He gave himself as a ransom.

1. There is but one God. – There is perhaps no disagreement on this phrase. God exists in three persons, but as one being. “Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God, the Lord your God, is one.”² This is where the gospel begins with the one living God.
2. There is but one mediator between God and men. – God and man are separated as a result of man's disobedience. Men have sinned against God; they have not obeyed him and therefore are unholy. Because of this sinfulness God had to break communion (fellowship) with them in order to maintain his own holiness. He is perfectly holy and consequently cannot have ungodliness in his presence.³ However, he has come to the bargaining table in Jesus Christ who is fully God and fully man. Jesus mediates between the two opposing parties (God and man).
3. He gave himself as a ransom. – How did Jesus mediate between God and man? By giving himself as a ransom. In other words, he paid, with his life, a debt that he did not owe in order to purchase his elect from the clutches of sin.

This is the gospel. Could there be a more simple truth in all of life, or any greater news than the ransom of Christ given on the cross?

¹ Colin Brown, ed. *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 107-108.

² Deuteronomy 6:4

³ Over the first eight chapters, Paul explains the gospel in its entirety. As we continue our study, we will see this unfolding and will return to the essentials of the gospel frequently.

The Power of God for Salvation

Paul uses the Greek word for power from which we get our word dynamite. The gospel then is the explosive power of God. How is this the case? Well, it must be seen within the context of salvation. Biblically, salvation is two-fold. There is an eternal as well as a temporal meaning. Eternally, salvation refers to spiritual deliverance from the great judgment finalized on the last day. This eternal blessing of spiritual deliverance of which the Scriptures speak is enjoyed, in some degree, by the believer the moment he receives Jesus Christ as his personal Savior. Believers, then, experience the glorious, eternal grace of God in the present through their relationship with Jesus Christ. It is the message that brings about this relationship that is defined as the power of God.⁴

How do we know this message is God's power? Well, we simply appeal to personal experience in the long term. Paul, when defending the simplicity of the gospel to the church in Corinth, makes a similar statement, "The message of the cross is foolishness for those who are perishing, but for those of us who are being saved it is the power of God."⁵ While being questioned and challenged on the validity of the cross, Paul turns his focus and that of his readers to his and their own personal experience of salvation. It is they who are being saved, and it is those who question the cross who are perishing. How has God saved us? "Has God reconciled us to himself through Christ, forgiven our sins, made us his children, put his Spirit within us, begun to transform us, and introduced us into his new community?"⁶ The Holy Spirit with which we have been sealed bears witness to our lives that we have indeed been saved.⁷

First for the Jew and then the Gentile

The salvation which is freely offered in Christ is available to all who believe. Belief is essential to the salvation of sinners. John in his Gospel writing in reference to the Messiah, the Word that became flesh, states the following: "...to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God..."⁸ Belief here as well as in Paul's words to the Romans is an active trust in God. This belief is not merely some arbitrary acceptance of a theoretical truth; rather, it is an active, sustaining power in life much like our belief in the supports of a chair in which we are about to sit. Our trust in Christ propels us to live in faith.

Paul turns our attention and that of the Romans to a divine order in this salvific (salvation) belief in the power of God. The order makes perfect sense both theologically and historically. Salvation extended to Jews first because God initially chose them (theological) and established his covenant with them (historical) as his people. Rightly so then, Paul asserts, while in Antioch with Jews, "It was necessary that the word of God be spoken first to you."⁹ The Apostles by divine plan had to preach the gospel to the Jews

⁴ Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans, The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, ed. Gordon Fee (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 66-67.

⁵ 1 Corinthians 1:18

⁶ Stott, 60.

⁷ Ephesians 1:13; Hebrews 10:15

⁸ John 1:12

⁹ Acts 13:49

before they preached it to the Gentiles. This distinction between Jews and Gentiles ends here, however, with respect to salvation.¹⁰ Everyone who was, is, and will ever be saved will be saved in the same way, through faith in Christ. There is no distinction!

Humility and Equality

We have supremely established that there is no greater or more joyful message than the gospel. It is equally true that there is no more humbling and unifying truth than the gospel. Isn't this just the message a divided congregation needed? Isn't the gospel just the thing that all of us need? In the light of the gospel, egos are put to the side, and the light of faith shines forth uninhibited.

¹⁰ Stott, 61.

The Righteousness of God

For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith.” Romans 1:17

The theme of Romans is two-fold. First, as we said last week, the gospel is central to all of life. The power of God is revealed in this gospel which is for the salvation of all people. Salvation is through the gospel only. Second, in this gospel the righteousness of God is revealed. What is this righteousness of God?

The Righteousness of God

Here Paul uses a Greek phrase that is specific to Romans with the only exception being 2 Corinthians 5:21. In each of his eight references, he strategically gives the phrase prominence in passages that are particularly concerned with stating the central theme of the letter (1:16-17; 3:21-25). Because of the in-depth nature in which we will deal with this phrase when we consider chapters 3-8, we will simply endeavor to survey the three generally accepted understandings of the phrase.

An Attribute of God

The first interpretation is that which defines the righteousness of God as one of his divine attributes. According to this view, which was the Church Fathers’ consensus, “righteousness” is God’s justice as it is distributed consistently with his gracious character to the world over which he rules and governs. This interpretation resulted primarily from the fact that the Greek word used by Paul is a derivative of the root word for justice. A compelling argument can be made for this interpretation within the context of chapter 3 as Paul discusses the righteousness of God in connection with the wrath of God. However, verses 16-17 do not lend themselves well to this sort of interpretation as they are concerned with the positive blessing of God’s righteousness.

Similarly, some contemporary scholars have attached their understanding of the righteousness of God to the historical context of God’s faithfulness to his people. In the Old Testament, God’s righteousness often referred to his covenant faithfulness. God made a covenant with his people which he maintained through his own divine faithfulness. A translation in step with such an interpretation would read, “...in it the faithfulness of God [to his promises of salvation] is revealed...”¹¹

A Status Given by God

Martin Luther championed this second widely accepted interpretation of the phrase. His much discussed spiritual struggle ended with the realization that the righteousness by which he was righteous was not in himself, but rather the righteousness by which he was made righteous by God. In other words, we are made righteous by the righteousness of God. Therefore, we are declared righteous and given the status of righteous by the grace of God. This righteousness has its primary emphasis and strength in

¹¹ Douglas Moo, *Romans*, NICNT, 70.

legal terms, a view which has been the hallmark of the Protestant Church. One is declared legally righteous as he stands guilty before a fair, loving, and vengeful Judge. The cross, of course is the remedy for the guilty verdict that will be pronounced. This view asserts that Paul maintains that the righteous status that is from God is revealed in the gospel.¹²

An Activity of God

The third interpretation tends to stress that the “righteousness of God” is a divine activity of God, namely his intervention on behalf of his people which brought them to salvation (i.e. the cross of Christ). Evidence for this view is found in the Old Testament poetic function of parallelism, predominately found in the Psalms and the latter half of Isaiah (40-66). Often we find God’s righteousness couple with his salvation. This indicates that God’s righteousness and salvation are extremely closely related though not interchangeable.¹³ These Old Testament references certainly bring to mind God’s intervention in the salvation of his people to whom he has pledged his faithfulness (i.e. the Exodus). Dynamically speaking, we can refer to “God’s righteousness” in the sense of his “establishing right.” If Paul is referring to the divine activity of God, then we could translate the passage in the following manner, “...in it the saving action of God is revealed...”¹⁴

The Verdict

As we have seen the righteousness of God can be understood as a divine attribute (God is righteous), or a status given by God (God declares us righteous), or a divine activity (God’s saving work). All three are equally true and have been held by various scholars throughout church history. Paul certainly conveys that the righteousness of God is a divine attribute in 1:18-3:20. He also, in 3:21-8:17, speaks in great detail about the declaration of sinners as righteous in the grace of Christ and the manner in which he declares us righteous through the cross (God’s saving activity). In light of this, I find it hard to see why we must choose between the three. As we have already seen all three are true. It seems to me that the best understanding of the righteousness of God is a combination of these three interpretations. Our definition would read something like this:

The righteousness of God is a righteous God faithfully intervening in the lives of his covenant people to save them through the declaring of them as righteous on account of his perfect righteousness through the gracious cross of Christ and their faith in him.

¹² Ibid, 71.

¹³ John Stott, *The Message to the Romans*, 62.

¹⁴ Douglas Moo, *Romans*, NICNT, 71.

Universal Sin

Doesn't verse eighteen stand in stark contrast to verse seventeen? In seventeen, the glorious "righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith." Now, in eighteen joy is interrupted as the wrath of God is revealed against "all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men." Why such a transition? Well, Paul has to answer the implicit question of "why" that is found in verses sixteen and seventeen. Paul is not ashamed of the gospel. Why? Because, it is the power of God for salvation. How so? Because, in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed by faith for faith. But why is this necessary? Because "the wrath of God is poured out upon all the unrighteousness and ungodliness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth? How is the truth suppressed? By their refusal to acknowledge the truth of God. How do they know the truth of God? "Because all that can be known about God is plain to them, because he has shown it to them."¹⁵

The Wrath of God

Initially, the wrath of God is difficult. Primarily because of two reasons. First, it is extremely difficult for us to fathom the vengeance of God as a result of our skewed understanding of God. Modern evangelicals like us have been conditioned to think of God only as a loving God. There is nothing necessarily wrong with this viewpoint given that we understand God's wrath as an expression of his loving, holy character. However, we often fail to achieve this and therefore think of God's wrath as a solely abstract quality which can be described "as sin working itself out in history."¹⁶ This, of course, is a terribly wrong and unbiblical viewpoint of the wrath of God. God does, in fact, avenge ungodliness and unrighteousness.¹⁷ Second, we struggle with God's wrath because we tend to project our human notion of vengeance or anger onto God. We know there is something inherently evil and problematic with our personal feeling and expression of wrath. Therefore, we can't imagine God dealing with humanity in the same manner, especially given that he is wholly perfect and good. Of course, the problem here is that God is not human. His expression of wrath is not at all sinful or evil. His wrath is his total hostility to evil, his holy refusal to compromise with it, his righteous and just judgment of it. Or, to put it in the language of Paul, God's wrath is his just judgment of "all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men." Thus, God's wrath is poured out against sin and the sinfulness of men, not men themselves.

When and Upon What?

When?

As has been mentioned earlier, Paul has what theologians often refer to as a "now-not yet" perspective on the spiritual truths of salvation and judgment. Also, as we have previously seen, the verb "to reveal" means, most probably, "to come into a

¹⁵ John Stott, *Romans*, 69.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 70.

¹⁷ For more biblical explanation of God's wrath being actively poured out, please see the old Testament prophets, especially Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel.

historical reality.”¹⁸ What, then, does this mean for the revelation of the wrath of God? The revelation of God’s wrath certainly has eternal and final significance in the last judgment of Christ. Unbelievers will be finally judged for their “ungodliness and unrighteousness,” which is resultant of their unbelief. On this judgment day, they will be cast aside into the lake of fire where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Also, the revelation of the wrath of God has present significance. In verses 24, 26 and 28 of chapter one, Paul uses a phrase that speaks to the immediate importance of the revelation of God’s wrath: “God gave them up.”

The logical question that comes to mind here is “to what did God give them up?” The first thing to which God gave them is the lust of their hearts. As Paul continues, he explains that the lusts of their hearts are “impurity and the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves.” The second thing to which God gave them is dishonorable passions. Further explained, these dishonorable passions are the exchange of natural relations in both men and women as each sex was consumed with passions for other members of the same sex. These shameless acts have their own due reward. Third, God gave them over to a debased mind that allows them to do what ought not be done. “They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil covetousness, malice...envy, strife, deceit, maliciousness...gossip, slander, hatred for God, insolence, haughty boasting, inventions of evil, disobedience of parents, foolishness, faithlessness, heartlessness and ruthlessness.” All of these things lead to certain death.

Therefore, the revelation of God’s wrath is seen in the temporary “handing over” men to their chosen ways of sin and its consequences. For more clarity, let’s look to the words of Douglas Moo:

...It is [the] judgment of the world that the present infliction of God’s wrath is intended to reveal. For the present experience of God’s wrath is merely a foretaste of what will come on the day of judgment. Furthermore, what both the warning of ‘wrath to come’ and the present experience of wrath demonstrate is the sentence of condemnation under which all people outside of Christ stand. It is this reality that Paul wants to get across to his readers here.”¹⁹

Upon What?

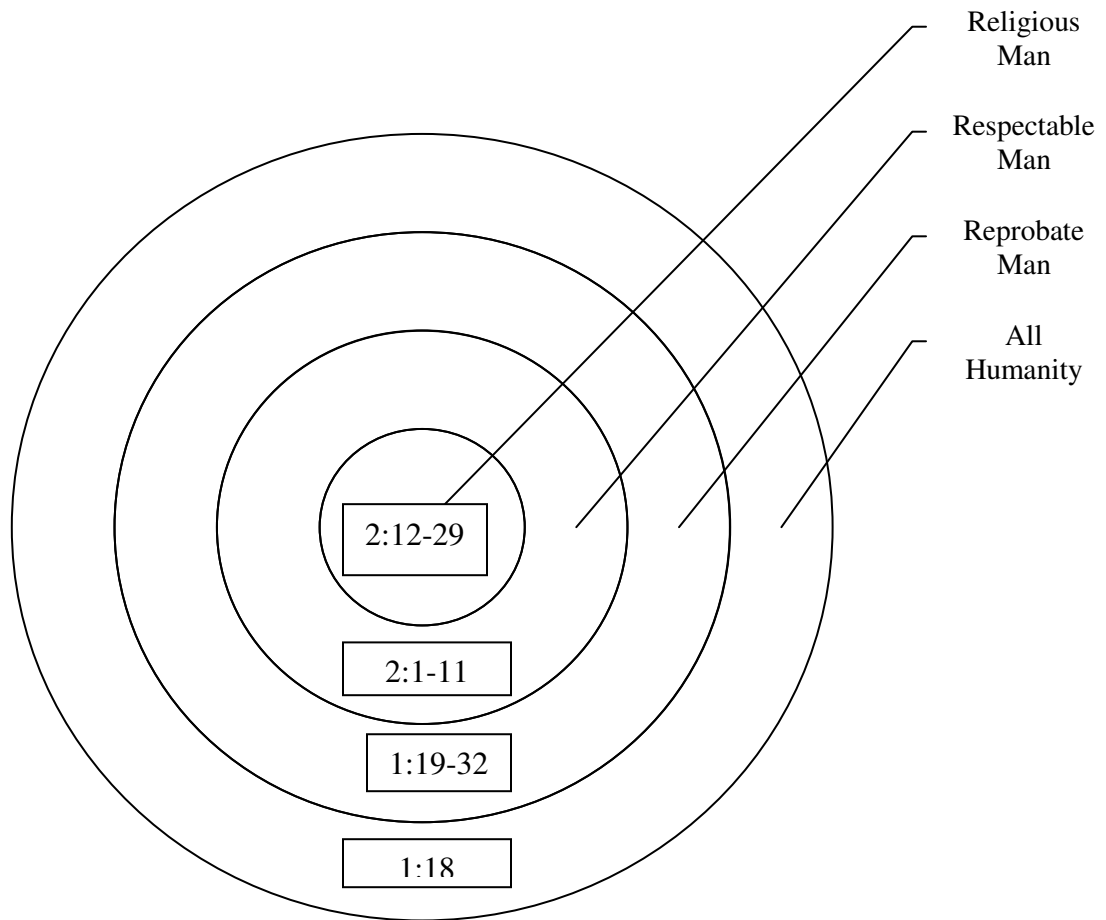
To answer this question concisely, we can simply say, “sin.” So that we will not get too far into the why (to which we will return later), we look briefly at verse eighteen. Here, Paul maintains that the unrighteousness and ungodliness of men is derivative of their suppression of the truth. What truth did they suppress? The knowledge of God. All men, as a result of being created in God’s image (Genesis 1:27-28) know about God, especially his “invisible attributes, namely his eternal power and divine nature.” Their sin, then, is a refusal to believe in him, or to put it differently, the exchange of the truth about God for a lie. Of course, in good Pauline fashion, he goes on to apply this exchange of the truth of God for a lie to all men whether reprobate heathens (1:18-32), good respectable men (2:1-11), or cold religious elitist (2:12-29). (Please see diagram below entitled “Sequence of Paul’s Logic on Mankind’s Sinfulness.”)

¹⁸ Moo, *Romans*, NICNT, 101.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 101. Bracketed words added for clarification.

Therefore, God's wrath is revealed upon sin directly and men indirectly. What does this mean? God hates sin, not sinners. We see this clearly in the fact that Christ came and sacrificed himself for the redemption of those whom he has chosen for himself. If God had not loved the sinner, then he would not have redeemed any. He simply would have destroyed mankind. Further, let's look to the example of Christ. Christ died on the cross for sin. In his death, he bore the wrath of God for sin. But we are frequently told that the Father loved the Son. The Father loves men, particularly his chosen ones (the elect), but despises their sin. Therefore, out of his love he is motivated to redeem them from the clutches of sin through the finished work of Christ and their faith in him. Man is separated and under the wrath of God not because of God's hatred for him, but rather because of God's detestation and judgment of man's sin and man's totally depraved sinfulness.²⁰

Sequence of Paul's Logic on Mankind's Sinfulness



²⁰ WCF 6.6; 7.1-3 found in Phillip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, vol. 3, 6th ed., *The Evangelical Protestant Creeds* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 615-617. See also Ephesians 2:3; Galatians 3:10.

Image-Bearing Men Suppressing the Truth

God Generally Revealed

Prior to his special revelation (Jesus and the Bible), God chose to reveal himself, not in words, but through all that was made in the created order.²¹ This revelation is displayed in the laws of nature, the faculties of the human mind and body, and the experience of history. As we are told in Genesis, God created “something” out of “nothing”. Creation was done in a specific order so that his glory would be declared in the heavens and his handiwork displayed in the skies. The manner in which this was completed affords those who revel at the majesty of creation, a glimpse into the complexity and completeness of God. For this reason Einstein, although not a fan of organized religion, was a very religious man. He saw the magnificence of the “design of the universe; and thus, concluded that it shouldn’t be taken for granted.”²² Thus, when man opens his eyes he is immediately aware of God’s greatness however incomprehensible that may be.²³

Creation, the Bible, and Common Grace

General revelation serves as a background to God’s special revelation, inasmuch as, God’s delivering of the Word cannot be fully understood without it. The Bible benefits from both science and history, as they illuminate its pages. God’s grace is demonstrated throughout history, which God, through his providence, shapes according to his purposes. Various scientific ventures in the study of nature, but most importantly man, provide great insight into the mind of the creator.²⁴ General revelation affords all men, not just the elect, the opportunity to experience some sense of God’s amazing grace. They, in turn, are held responsible to the Law of God. It is this common grace that allowed Gentiles to feel that they were God’s offspring and to naturally seek God with the law written on their hearts.²⁵

It All has Limits

Although general revelation has benefits and serves multiple purposes in the knowledge of God, it has limitations. It is skewed by the sin of man. According to this depravity, we will not come to God through this form of revelation. Only through the work of further revelation will we see the fullness of God in Creation.²⁶ The sin that exists in man serves as a clouding agent that skews God’s reflection through his handiwork. Also, God’s purpose in revealing himself in this manner was not to be

²¹ French Confession 2, Shaff, 360.

²² John Piper, *Let the Nations be Glad: The Supremacy of God in Missions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993), 12.

²³ John Calvin, *ICR*, 1.5.1.

²⁴ Calvin, *ICR*, 1.5.2,3.

²⁵ WCF 4,2. See also, Louis Berkhof, *Summary of Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: WB Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1938), 10.

²⁶ Calvin, *ICR*, 1.5.11.14.

complete in and of itself nor was it intended to offer the way to salvation. For this reason, it is not complete and cannot form an adequate basis for religion.²⁷

The Image as Crowning Achievement

As mentioned earlier, much can be determined about the complexity and nature of God through gaining understanding into our nature. We were created in the very image of God, to whom God gave the fullness of wisdom, justice, free will, and clear knowledge of himself.²⁸ When discussing the image of God, distinction must be made between the natural and moral. The natural image is a broad category and consists of the rational, spiritual, and immortal soul of man. This particular aspect of the image of God is maintained although severely skewed by the effects of sin. The moral sense of man is more clearly defined and consists of the true knowledge, righteousness, and holiness that Adam possessed before the fall, and that he lost once sin entered his being. However, this moral aspect of the image of God is restored in the work of Christ through regeneration, sanctification, and glorification. Though distorted by sin, we, especially Christians, remain the image-bearer of God.²⁹

²⁷ R.J. Gore, *Outline of Systematic Theology*, 5th ed. (Erskine Theological Seminary, 2002), 89.

²⁸ Scots Confession, 2, Shaff, 440; Irish Articles, 21, Shaff, 530.

²⁹ Louis Berkhof, *Summary of Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: WB Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1938), 10.

Respectable Men (Secularly Moral Men)

Paul shifts his attention in the beginning of Chapter two away from the reprobate, immoral pagan society to the respectable, secularly moral society. The logical question for us that follows is, “Who is included in this respectable classification?” The answer is quite simply stated, “all those, whether Gentile or Jew, who practice self-conscious moralism.”³⁰ The problem with such a lifestyle is that it is hypocritical to its very core and produces a false sense of security and hope. We turn no farther than Paul’s own words in verse 1 of chapter 2 to see this explicitly stated. “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.” In this clear and concise statement and following verses, Paul compares the respectable man to the reprobate, pronounces the indictment against the moralizer, and forcefully articulates the due reward for the moralizing lifestyle, which may or may not consist of a judgmental attitude.

A Brief Comparison

When finishing the later half of chapter one, we breathe a small sigh of relief. We can all stand behind Paul and his pronouncement of God’s judgment on the pagan reprobates.³¹ After all, most of us are not really that bad. It isn’t difficult for us to understand why the idolaters, sexually immoral, murderers, evil doers, coveters, proud, gossips, ruthless, heartless, and the like are condemned to eternal separation from God. They deserve God’s wrath because they “not only practice” these things, but also “give approval of those who practice them.” If anyone deserves it, they do.

But Paul doesn’t leave us in our relief long. He immediately refocuses our attention on the sinful heart’s depravity as he introduces us to the hypocritical self-conscious moralizers. His comparison is quite vivid and is seen clearly in a comparison view of 1:32 and 2:1.

- 1:32 – Though they know God’s decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.
 - Here, the reprobate man not only practices the ungodly and unrighteous things, but he also approves of those who do them. At least he is consistent. His life is one of apostasy in both word and deed.
- 2:1 – 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.
 - Here, the respectable man practices ungodliness, but condemns those who practice the same ungodliness. His life is unbelievably inconsistent and tremendously hypocritical.

³⁰ Moralism, as used above, is defined as an unwavering emphasis on morality as the manner of earning salvation’s blessings. Moralism, thus, is closely akin to religious legalism.

³¹ Reprobates are those persons who are wholly unacceptable, unworthy, and even evil.

The contrast, thus, is one of consistency. As we shall see, the respectable man has no more to stand on than the reprobate in the eyes of the Lord.

The Indictment

Paul is known for his straight-forward no nonsense way of communicating. After exposing the hypocrisy of these moralizers, he jumps straight in with the pronouncement of God's judgment. Divine judgment is upon the people in this segment of society because of two comparative attitudes, assumption and presumption. First, the moralizing lifestyle is based on the assumption that public denunciation of "immoral" behaviors is pleasing in Almighty God's eyes. The mentality often is, "If I denounce them, then I will be okay. If I do them privately, I'm still okay, because God understands that I am not perfect. What really matters is my public defense of righteousness." This, of course, is not acceptable and tremendously foolish. In verse 6, Paul adamantly states, "He will render to each one according to his works..." God is concerned with matters of the heart. Jesus spoke numerous times about the heart's corruption and the corruptive impact that depraved hearts have on the lifestyles of men. Our actions are extensions of our hearts. Isn't this the great irony for the moralizer? Their significance, merit, and condemnation is found in their external, public actions. They have been fooled into believing their visible "goodness" is their claim to righteousness, and therefore are to be greatly pitied.

Second, they presume that God's grace, patience, forbearance and kindness is there to excuse their behavior without effecting any change. This presumption, of course, cheapens God's amazing grace. The unbelievable nature of God's grace is found in its transforming power that discards the old man and establishes the new. Redemption, as we shall see later, is at its very heart a transformation at the hands of an exceptionally gracious God by his divine prerogative and through his charitable power. Paul boldly asserts that God's grace and kindness are meant to lead sinners to repentance. He is divinely inspired in his assertion which is in step with our Lord Jesus. Matthew, Mark and Luke all inform us that the introductory announcement of the Kingdom of God included a charge of repentance either through John the Baptist or Jesus himself. (Repent for the Kingdom of God is at hand (Mark 1:15).) Repentance is an essential response to the saving work of Jesus Christ, a work that credits us with his righteousness, therefore leaving us new men clothed in the righteous robes of our Lord. Again, the moralizers are to be pitied because of their presumptuous attitude toward the grace and work of God.

The Due Reward

With regard to the due reward of the moralizer, we will simply let Paul speak for himself: "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..." (Romans 2:8-9). The due reward, then, is wrath, fury, tribulation and distress. This, in essence, is eternal separation from God, which is the same for the reprobate pagan.

Righteousness, Judgment, and Grace
Romans 2:1-16
Part 1

“God’s judgments are according to the truth or real state of the case...the ground of the judgment is the works, not the external relations or professions of men.” – Charles Hodge

The first sixteen verses of chapter two are difficult. If we are not careful, we may fall into the trap of one of several prevalent intellectual errors as we attempt to reconcile God’s righteous judgment with his mercy and grace. The first error we may be tempted to embrace is that which is commonly referred to as Evangelical Universalism. Evangelical Universalists hold “that somehow in the end, those who have not embraced Christ in this life, will be in God’s mercy embraced by Him at the judgment. That is, sooner or later, most if not all, will be redeemed. They will not undergo the punishment of God’s just sentence.”³² At the root of this fallacy is one’s inability to reconcile God’s grace and judgment, a struggle which often leads to the rejection of God’s justice in favor of a universal grace. The second error is that God justifies sinners solely on the basis their good or bad works. In other words, salvation is up to the individual as God weighs his good works over and against his bad works. If his good works outweigh his bad, then he is okay or saved. Similarly, a third error into which we may fall is to believe that good works are of absolutely no value with regards to one’s relationship with God. Essentially, this belief leads to an attitude of apathy manifested primarily in a contradiction between the mouth’s profession of faith and the life’s expression of that faith. Or, to put it more plainly, the professing Christian’s life doesn’t add up to the professed claims of faith. There is no continuity or consistency between words and deeds.

Paul defeats each of these errors in the verses that lie ahead. In our discussion, we will deal with them systematically. While acknowledging the space limitations of our present study, we will examine the first, Evangelical Universalism, presently, leaving the second and third for the second installment.

Evangelical Universalism

Evangelical Universalism, as previously stated, attempts to reconcile God’s mercy and justice in a secularly (non-Christian) humanistic (man-centered) manner. Because of the philosophical undertones of man’s supremacy and his inherently deserved reward, men cannot be eternally punished by God. If they were, it would mean that God is unjust and ungracious. The apparent contradiction between justice and grace is reconciled in one of two ways: either through a universal reward for all men (salvation for all humanity on the basis of Christ’s universal and unlimited atonement; salvation is through Christ³³) or through an instantaneous annihilation which eternally destroys the soul of all those who

³² Ligon Duncan, Senior Pastor, First Presbyterian Church, Jackson, MS, sermon on Romans 2:12-16 entitled, “God’s Righteous Judgment on All.”

³³ Those who adhere to such a view are different than generic Universalists, in that they do affirm that reconciliation is through Jesus Christ, though beginning with the same preconceived notions. This affirmation of reconciliation through Christ is what makes them evangelical. The issue arises over the role of faith in salvation.

are outside of the realm of God's eternal glory. Thus, the biblical doctrine of an eternal torment of wrath and fury for all those who reject Christ in this life is denied.

When the doctrine is explicitly laid out in this manner, it is easy to reject. But as we read the Scriptures in the context of our every day lives, especially as we think of friends and family members who may not, or most likely do not, know the Lord, holding such a view of Universalism is a real temptation. Our hearts ache at the thought of those whom we love spending eternity in Hell because they do not possess faith in Jesus Christ. Our hearts are torn for those we love, and therefore, we are tempted to ignore, if not reject, God's justice in favor of his grace and love, holding out hope for an eternal salvation of our loved ones. We, then, lose the divine tension between God's grace and justice, leading to an overemphasis on his grace and love and an under-emphasis on his justice. God becomes an overly accepting and tolerant grandfather instead of a righteous, good and just father.

Though Paul does not deal specifically with the claims of Evangelical Universalism, he does deal with the fundamental issue of it, the problem of God's judgment. Is it just, and is it righteous? Paul answers both questions affirmatively by arguing that the basis of God's judgment is the works of men and the standard of his judgment is his righteous law (Romans 2:12-16).

We will begin by observing a categorical statement made by Paul, which is found in verse six: "He will render to each one according to his works..." Verses seven through nine describe the two parallel segments of the population into which all of humanity falls, those who do good and those who do bad. To define these two groups and their motivation clearly, Paul appeals to the objects of their affection. Those who patiently persevere in well-doing seek after glory, honor, and immortality. Their reward is eternal life, which Jesus described as a living and working knowledge of him and his Father (John 17:3). Those who do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteous, that is do evil, seek after themselves. Their reward for their pursuit of "vain glory"³⁴ or selfish ambition (Phil. 2:3) is wrath and fury leading to tribulation and distress. We endeavor to examine each of these categories separately.

Those Who Do Good

Paul continues a theme, here, found woven through the full testimony of Scripture. The righteous seek after the Lord. Consider briefly the Lord's words to his disciples recorded in Matthew 6:33: "But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness all these things shall be added to you." Elsewhere, he teaches in a similar vein, "No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money" (Matthew 6:24). In both of these passages, Jesus addresses the heart and its affections as the root of the matter. In both cases, one explicit and the other implicit, the issue pivots on things or objects which are sought, material provision versus the kingdom of God. Which will it be? The condition of the heart determines the object of the affection. A softened and humbled heart seeks after God and his kingdom so as to glorify God, trusting in his promises of provision, while a hardened and prideful heart pines after the immediate things of this world (the products of shifting sand) in order to satisfy the self.

³⁴ Hodge, *Romans*, 51.

Paul expands this principle and deals with it more abstractly as he names three things for which the godly seek. First, there is glory. Given the context, the glory for which the godly seek has to be the glory of God. Biblically, the glory of God is “the manifestation of God himself.”³⁵ Moses, when standing on the mountain, asks God to show him his glory. The Lord’s response to Moses was, “I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name ‘The Lord.’ . . . But you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live. Behold, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock, and while my *glory* passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back, but my face shall not be seen” (Exodus 33:19-23, italics added). God’s glory is his manifestation. Second, there is honor. The honor for which the godly seek is literally understood as “God’s approval.”³⁶ Conceptually, this makes sense, but practically it is a little hard to comprehend. On several occasions in chapter one, Paul writes of the “dishonorable passions” to which the Lord gave the reprobates. These passions are sexual immorality, homosexuality, and a litany of sins that flow from the debased mind. Consequently, then, the honorable things of God have to be the opposite these dishonorable passions. A quick glance at Philippians chapter four verse eight sheds light on the nature of the honor for which the godly seek: “Finally, brothers, whatever is *true*, whatever is *honorable*, whatever is *just*, whatever is *pure*, whatever is *lovely*, whatever is *commendable*, if there is any *excellence*, if there is anything *worthy of praise*, think about these things.” Writing to the Philippians, Paul describes the things of God in detail. They are anything that is pure, lovely, true, commendable, just, and worthy of praise. The godly ones seek after these things. Third, there is immortality. Immortality is the “unfading (and abundant) joy of his [God’s] presence.”³⁷ Jesus said, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die” (John 11:26). And elsewhere to the thief on the cross he says, “Today you will be with me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43). The immortality for which the godly seek is an unbroken and never-ending fellowship with God. A life which seeks after such things is a self-sacrificing life devoted to the worship and service of God and others. In reward for such a life, God gives the gift of eternal life.³⁸

Those Who Do Evil

A return to the Lord’s words in Matthew six gives the proper perspective on Paul’s words concerning those who practice evil. Those who seek after the things of this world are characterized simultaneously with a lack of faith (trust in the Lord) and a dependence upon themselves, satisfying their great need of self-reliance. As a result of this selfish pursuit, their minds and hearts are impeded from attaining the value of the Lord and his provision. In serving themselves, they turn their self-seeking hearts from the

³⁵ Stott, *Romans*, 84.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 84.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 84. Parentheses added for emphasis. Brackets added for clarification.

³⁸ Notice here that Paul uses the word gift in reference to the reward of eternal life. It is not earned, but rather given at the prerogative of God, who reserves the right to have mercy on whom he will have mercy and be gracious to whom he will be gracious (Exodus 33:19). His unending promise is that he will shower those who seek after him with grace and mercy.

Lord unto themselves through a rejection of Christ himself. Pride and selfish ambition control their hearts leaving no other choice than self-gratification and self-glorification, which is the heart of sin (disobedience of God's commands). In essence, the wicked worship themselves rather than Almighty God.

In verse eight, Paul argues that self-satisfaction leads to a rejection of the truth and obedience to unrighteousness. Here, Paul revisits a fundamental principle discussed in verse eighteen of chapter one, where he states, "...they suppress the truth by their unrighteousness." In both cases, the word truth (*alathia*) refers to the divine truth; that is "what is true and right as to faith and practice."³⁹ Again, an appeal to the words of the Lord as recorded in John will aid in the comprehension of Paul's language. In the Lord's most familiar discussion with Nicodemus, he contrasts the lifestyles of the wicked with that of the righteous in the memorable image of light and darkness. "For everyone who does *wicked* things *hates* the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But whoever does what is *true comes* to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his deeds have been carried out in God" (John 3:20-21). Here, as in Romans two, truth is used in contrast with wickedness. The ones who are wicked hate the light, but those who are true love the light, the expression of true religion. To understand this fully, one must realize that light, for John, is truth as he equates light with the Lord Jesus Christ: "The true light which enlightens everyone was coming into the world" (John 1:9). Therefore, Jesus, in the context of John's Gospel, joins Paul by making the categorical statement: The righteous love the truth, and the wicked hate the truth. Or perhaps, this can be understood better within an historical theological context in what is essentially the Westminster Divine's commentary on this truth principle found in Scripture. In answer to the second question of the Shorter Catechism, "What rule hath God given to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy him?" the Divine's wrote, "The Word of God, which is contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, is the only rule to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy Him."⁴⁰ Truth is the governor of behavior, not the self, and therefore, not wickedness or unrighteousness.

Thus, Paul asserts that the wicked deserve and are rightfully paid with wrath and fury. The dual concepts of wrath and fury can be best understood through their derivatives found in verse ten, tribulation and distress. Tribulation is suffering that results from oppression and persecution, and distress is a pain or suffering that affects the body, particularly the mind. Hence, God's wrath and fury is an eternal, horrendous combination of physical persecution and mental anguish complete with separation from God.

A Righteous Judgment?

And so, the questions remain, "Does Evangelical Universalism have a point? Is God contradicting himself by judging men?" The answer to both is a resounding no! God's judgment is not based on something inherent in the man, but rather on the nature of the man's works which expose the condition of his heart, the object(s) of his affections. God's question is, "Do these works measure up to the standard of my righteous law?" "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

³⁹ Hodge, *Romans*, 51.

⁴⁰ <http://www.arpsynod.org/shortcat.html>.

Righteousness, Judgment and Grace
Romans 2:1-16
Part 2

“God’s judgments are according to the truth or real state of the case...the ground of the judgment is the works, not the external relations or professions of men.” – Charles Hodge

In our first installment, we dealt with the issue of Evangelical Universalism, a view that maintains God’s judgment will not happen or will be carried out by the annihilation of those who reject Christ. Thus, those who hold this brand of Universalism do not believe in the righteous judgment of God, per se, and the physical reality of Hell. But, as we saw last week, Paul adamantly defends God’s righteous and impartial judgment as well as exposes the horrors of eternal damnation in these power-packed verses. God certainly will judge man with righteousness as he judges him as a result of his works, which will inevitably fall short of God’s divine standard (the Law). And for him who is under just condemnation, there will be “an eternal, horrendous combination of physical persecution and mental anguish complete with separation from God.”⁴¹

Presently, we focus our attention on another possible intellectual error into which we are tempted to fall while studying these sixteen verses. The error is that God justifies sinners solely on the basis their good or bad works. In other words, salvation is up to the individual as God weighs his good works over and against his bad works. If his good works outweigh his bad, then he is okay or saved.

May God bless us as we undertake this awesome task of dealing with these matters of life and death!

Works Righteousness

It is imperative to begin by defining the concept of “works righteousness.” In order to produce a working definition, the concept should be broken down into its two parts. Comprehensively, righteousness is a combination of the Hebrew word *saddiq* (צַדִּיק), which the Old Testament uses in passages that convey “straightness” or “rightness” and the Greek word *dikaios* (δικαιος), which the New Testament uses in reference “to that which is accordance with law or social norms.”⁴² Works connotes human activity, which can either be good or bad. In the present case, the activity is good. Thus, theologically, works righteousness is a total dependence upon man’s good activity to establish him as right, straight, and in accordance with the Law of God.

Again, as was seen with regards to Evangelical Universalism, when explicitly stated, a sole dependence upon the good works of men for righteousness is foreign to us, especially as most of us have been raised in the church and have had salvation by grace firmly implanted into our hearts and minds. However, what is true in theory often gets confused in practice as we continually revert to our works as a basis for salvation and question the salvation of others who don’t work as we do, or as we think they should. A

⁴¹ See “Righteousness, Judgment and Grace, Part 1” for a more comprehensive treatment of Evangelical Universalism, the way Paul deals with the reality of God’s righteous judgment, and Hell.

⁴² Walter A. Elwell, ed. *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2001), 1033.

common refrain of our lives is: “Well, I do this, and this, and this. Therefore, I am saved.’ Or perhaps, our refrain is more like this: “I have done this, this, and this, and I will do this, this, and this in the future. Therefore, if do this, which is contrary to God’s will, then I will be okay because I have stored up resources on my behalf that will cancel out my wrong with good.” Isn’t this a tremendous struggle? By living our lives in just this manner, we deny our need for Christ and his atoning work for our salvation. In this way, we are no different than the Jews to whom Paul speaks in our verses, specifically verses twelve through sixteen.

The Roman Jews pompously thought that their national election and mere possession of God’s Law secured their place of acceptance, and even honor, before the throne of Almighty God. In their discussions with Paul about the gospel, they could almost be heard saying, “Look here Paul, that’s all well and good for those pagan Gentiles, but we have the Law of God, we have the Law of God. So, just save yourself the trouble and time, we do not need your gospel.”⁴³ Paul graciously responds to them in two ways: 1. You do not understand the Law (Romans 2:1-5), and 2. You do not do the Law (Romans 2:12-16). We have dealt with Paul’s first response previously as we discussed the parallel sins of assumption (Jews assumed outward and public righteousness demonstrated their compliance with the Law.) and presumption (Jewish presumption lead to a perverted view of God’s goodness, which is to produce repentance rather than to be licentious.).⁴⁴ Paul’s second response is an indictment against the Jews who rest their hope and salvation on the Law in that they do not keep (do) it. In other words, Paul says, “Though you have the Law, you do not do the Law.”

Doers Not Hearers

“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” (Romans 2:12-13). Paul responds to these misguided Jews by making two categorical statements. In the first, verse twelve, Paul stresses that everyone, both Jew and Gentile, will be judged according to the standard of God’s holy law. The Gentiles, those who have sinned with the law, will certainly perish without the law. In other words, they will not be held accountable to a written standard which they did not possess. This truth, however, does not contradict God’s impartial and righteous judgment, for he later writes, “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 the day of judgment)” (Romans 2:15). The law of God is written on Gentile hearts, giving them a knowledge of the truth (Romans 1:19). Jews, on the other hand, will be judged according to the law because they have been given the law directly. Jewish custom and belief adamantly maintained that the first five books of the Old Testament, the Torah, contained the Law of God. This is the authority to which they appealed for matters of salvation.

However reliant upon this Law the Jews were, Paul steadfastly maintains and

⁴³ Ligon Duncan, Senior Pastor, First Presbyterian Church, Jackson, MS, sermon on Romans 2:12-16 entitled, “God’s Righteous Judgment on All.”

⁴⁴ For more on Jewish misunderstanding, please see previous handout entitled, “The Good Men of the Earth.”

accuses them of their ineffective adherence to its commands. Accordingly, in verse thirteen, he challenges the Jews' confidence in their 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." Is Paul, then, affirming a form of works righteousness? Is he saying to them, "If you simply do all these things, then you will be saved?" Is this a motivation for a dependence upon their individual works for salvation? No, in fact, it is the opposite. Paul's words here serve to discourage his readers from attempting to follow the Law as he strongly asserts that God will in no way justify a sinner, one who fails to keep the Law perfectly. In other words, he informs them that no one who does not keep the Law will be justified; the unrighteous ones will not be saved. Paul's basic argument here, when fleshed out, is quite simple. He basically says:

"Don't get caught up in this contemporary idea floating about that asserts a very generic weighing of an individual's good and bad works on the scales of justice. All that a person has done in his life will be compiled and separated into masses, one good and one bad. These two masses will then be weighed, and man's fate is dependent upon which mass is heavier. This is wrong. Nowhere does the Bible say that God is going to weigh out our good and bad deeds. Rather, it continually asserts that the Law, as revealed to Moses and found in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, must be perfectly followed. Thus, if you decide to rest upon your works for salvation, you had better be prepared to do all the Law says and do it perfectly. It is not enough to simply have the Law (and hear it occasionally at church or from a family member). If you aren't prepared to do this or can't complete the Law fully, then you better try another way, which is the gospel of grace."

It is not man's works that justifies him; rather, it is his works that condemn him. It is the work of Jesus Christ, who fulfilled the Law perfectly and offered himself up as a sacrifice to satisfy divine justice, applied to man by the Holy Spirit and received by faith that justifies him (See Romans 3-5).