

Romans: The Good News of God

No Excuse

Romans 2:1

Rev. Freddy Fritz

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No Excuse

Scripture

Let's read Romans 2:1:

You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge the other, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things. (Romans 2:1)

Introduction

In Romans 1:24-32 Paul describes God's severe judgment upon those that have rejected God's natural revelation of himself and plunged themselves into idolatry.

One wonders how God deals with the more upright, moral, and religious person who has a sense of right and wrong, and leads an outwardly virtuous life.

Many ethically upright people would heartily concur with Paul's assessment of the flagrantly immoral people he has just described in Romans 1:24-32. They obviously deserve God's judgment. Throughout history many non-Christians have held high standards of conduct. As F. F. Bruce points out, the Roman philosopher Seneca, a contemporary of the apostle Paul,

might have listened to Paul's indictment and said, "Yes, that is perfectly true of great masses of mankind, and I concur in the judgment which you pass on them—but there are others, of course, like myself, who deplore these tendencies as much as you do."

Paul imagines someone intervening in terms like these, and he addresses the supposed objector How apt this reply would have been to a man like Seneca! For Seneca could write so effectively on the good life that Christian writers of later days were prone to call him "our own Seneca." Not only did he exalt the great moral virtues; he exposed hypocrisy, he preached the equality of

all men, he acknowledged the pervasive character of evil, . . . he practiced and inculcated daily self-examination, he ridiculed vulgar idolatry, he assumed the role of a moral guide. But too often he tolerated in himself vices not so different from those which he condemned in others—the most flagrant instance being his connivance at Nero’s murder of his mother Agrippina.¹

Most Jews of Paul’s day believed in the idea that performing certain moral and religious works produced righteousness. Specifically, they believed that they could earn God’s favor—and therefore eternal life—by keeping the Mosaic Law and the traditions of the Rabbis. Many believed that even if they failed in their works-righteousness effort they might forfeit some earthly reward but were still exempt from God’s judgment simply because they were Jews, God’s chosen people.

The Jews were firmly convinced that God would condemn Gentiles because of their idolatry and immorality but that no Jew would ever experience such condemnation. They loved to repeat such sayings as, “God loves Israel alone of all the nations,” and, “God will judge the Gentiles with one measure and the Jews with another.” Some even taught that Abraham sat outside the gates of hell in order to prevent the most wicked Jew from entering hell.

In his *Dialogue with Trypho*, the 2nd century Christian Justin Martyr reports his Jewish opponent as saying, “They who are the seed of Abraham according to the flesh shall in any case, even if they be sinners and unbelieving and disobedient towards God, share in the eternal kingdom.”

And so Jews had a tremendous confidence that they were right with God, regardless of what they believed or how they lived.

Today, even non-Christians have some knowledge of good and evil built into them. Consequently, some people today recognize and seek to uphold the moral standards of Scripture and profess to be right with God. But, like Seneca, because they are not true Christians, they lack the indwelling Holy Spirit who enables

¹ F. F. Bruce, *Romans* (London: Tyndale Publishing House, 1967), 86-87.

them to resist sin and live godly lives. They trust in their baptism, in their church membership, in their being born into a Christian family, in the sacraments, in high ethical standards, in orthodox doctrine, or in any number of other outward ideas, relationships, or ceremonies for spiritual and even eternal safety.

But no one can understand or receive salvation apart from recognizing that he stands guilty and condemned before God, totally unable to bring himself up to God's perfect standard of righteousness. And no person is exempt. The outwardly moral person who is friendly and charitable but self-satisfied is, in fact, usually harder to reach with the gospel than the reprobate who has hit bottom, recognized his sin, and is deeply convicted about his sin.

Therefore, after showing the immoral Gentile his lostness apart from Christ, Paul proceeds to show the Jewish moralist that, before God, he is equally guilty and condemned.

Lesson

Today, I want to show you how the moralist has no excuse before God.

I. What's Wrong with Morality?

First, I want to begin by asking what's wrong with morality?

Paul's **therefore** refers to the previous section, in which he has described the entire race as being under the wrath of God, and he has shown the depths to which our rebellion against God has led.

He has not minced his words. He has described people as being "filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity . . . full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice . . . gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless" (Romans 1:29-31).

This is a dreadful denunciation and at this point someone,

perhaps everyone, reacts by saying that although that description of vice may fit other individuals, it certainly does not fit him.

“I am not like this,” he protests.

It would be perfectly proper if Paul had answered such an objector by pointing out that the important question is not whether he has done the specific blameworthy things mentioned in Romans 1:29-31, but whether he measures up to the perfect standard of God. God, being perfect, cannot be satisfied with anything less than perfection. That important point, which Paul is also quite capable of making, means that he falls short of God’s divine standard and is therefore deserving of judgment, however good he may be.

But that is not the way Paul answers. Paul does not let the objecting person off the hook by acknowledging, somewhat reluctantly, that he may indeed be innocent of the vices mentioned, but that he nevertheless falls short of God’s righteous, higher standard.

On the contrary, Paul argues that the objector is guilty of these very things—perhaps even guiltier than the Gentile pagans to whom he feels superior. The very fact that this supposedly moral person is objecting shows that he has some kind of moral conscience. He passes **judgment on someone else** in declaring the other person’s actions as bad, as distinct from his own actions, which he believes are good.

But this does not mean that he is innocent of what he sees and condemns in others. On the contrary, he is guilty of these very actions because, as Paul says, “. . . **for at whatever point you judge the other, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things.**”

Paul is not appealing to God’s standard as that by which self-styled moral individuals will be judged, though he has every right to do so. Rather, Paul is appealing to the moralist’s own standard, whatever that standard is.

II. Condemned by Any Standard

Now, this is worth thinking through carefully. What are the

standards by which one might be judged?

A. *The Ten Commandments*

The most widely acknowledged standard of morality, at least in the western world, is the Decalogue, containing what most of us call the Ten Commandments, as recorded in Exodus 20:1-17 (cf. Deuteronomy 5:6-21). Much of Western Civil Law is based upon the Decalogue.

For example, when we pass laws recognizing the responsibility of children to obey their parents up to a certain age, we are affirming the fifth of the Ten Commandments, which says, “Honor you father and your mother” (Exodus 20:12).

When we pass laws against killing, even by such things as excessive speed on the highways, we are affirming the sixth commandment, which says, “You shall not murder” (Exodus 20:13).

We have laws protecting marriages and against adultery, laws against stealing other people’s property, laws against perjury, and so on. These laws grow out of a common recognition of the moral principles embodied in the Ten Commandments.

“Well, that is what I am talking about,” says someone. “Paul’s condemnation of sin in Romans 1 might have been proper in that far-off heathen context. But it does not apply to me. I have the Ten Commandments and I don’t do that for which the pagans are condemned.”

Don’t you?

You appeal to the fifth commandment, which requires you to honor your father and your mother. But have you never dishonored your parents? Have you never spoken to them in a dishonoring way? Acted in a dishonoring way? Have you always been properly thankful, respectful, and obedient to them?

You appeal to the sixth commandment, which forbids murder, and you feel good about this commandment because you have never actually murdered anybody. But have you forgotten that God looks on the heart and judges by the thoughts and wishes as well as

by actions? Have you never been angry enough with somebody to want to murder that person? Jesus said in Matthew 5:21-22: “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, ‘Raca,’ is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell.” In other words, even speaking a defamatory word is sufficient to incur God’s wrath for breaking the sixth commandment.

You appeal to the seventh commandment, but are you guiltless here? This commandment forbids adultery. Many have physically committed adultery. Others have desired and contemplated it in their minds. Jesus said in Matthew 5:28: “But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” You are guilty of breaking the seventh commandment even if you only lust after another person.

Have you never stolen? Never shaded the figures on your income tax in order to pay less than you actually owed? Never kept the change when you were given more than you should have received? Never borrowed something and then failed to return it, even though you remembered it later?

Have you never lied? Never misrepresented the truth?

And what about the commandments I did not even mention the first time around? What about the tenth of the commandments, which says that you must not covet? To covet means to want something that someone else has just because he or she has it and you do not. There is no one in our society who is innocent of this, because our entire advertising and marketing industry is based on appealing to the covetous nature in all people.

And then there are also the four commandments that make up the first table of the Decalogue. Those commandments deal with God and your responsibility to worship him. Who has never placed another god before God? Who has never made an idol of something? Who has not misused God’s name? Who has remembered

always to keep the Sabbath day holy?

If you say, “My standard is the morality of the Ten Commandments,” you are condemned by this standard.

B. The Sermon on the Mount

But there may be people who have followed my argument to this point, but are still not convinced how useless it is to make excuses. They might admit the force of judgments based on the Ten Commandments.

“But,” they might say, “That was another age and a particularly difficult set of standards. We live in the ‘Christian’ era now, and I go by the teachings of the gentle Jesus. My standard is the Sermon on the Mount.”

If anybody thinks this way, that person’s thinking proves how little he really understands Christ’s sermon. For the Sermon on the Mount does not weaken the Old Testament standards; it rescues them. I have already made that clear in using Matthew 5 to interpret murder and adultery properly. The Sermon on the Mount shows that God is not satisfied with mere external adherence to his laws but requires an inner conformity as well. Our hearts and minds also must be purified.

However, I suppose that what most people have in mind if they appeal to the Sermon on the Mount, are the Beatitudes, with which the Sermon on the Mount begins. Jesus said in Matthew 5:3-10:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are those who mourn,
for they will be comforted.
Blessed are the meek,
for they will inherit the earth.
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
for they will be filled.
Blessed are the merciful,

for they will be shown mercy.
Blessed are the pure in heart,
for they will see God.
Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they will be called sons of God.
Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteous-
ness,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

Most moral people see themselves in this description. They think of themselves as meek, merciful, peacemakers, and so on. They imagine that they actually thirst for righteousness and are even sometimes persecuted because of it.

But who really embodies these characteristics? Is it anyone you know? Hardly! The only person who has ever fully and completely embodied them is the One who spoke them—Jesus Christ of Nazareth. He was poor in spirit. He mourned over sin. He was meek. He was merciful. He was pure. He alone embodied righteousness—and suffered for it.

You see my point. If Jesus has shown what it means to keep the standards of the Sermon on the Mount, then none of us has done it.

And so, if we appeal to the Sermon on the Mount as the standard by which we judge others and put ourselves above them, we condemn ourselves, as Paul indicates.

C. The Golden Rule

“But wait a minute,” someone says. “You have referred to the Beatitudes as an important part of Jesus’ teaching, and that is right. But it is not all he taught, even in this sermon. What about the ‘heart’ of the sermon: the Golden Rule. What is wrong with the part that goes: ‘So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets’ (Matthew 7:12)?”

Is that the standard by which you judge others and by which

you want to be judged?

Have you always treated others exactly as you have wanted them to treat you? Have you never been impatient with them? Have you never got angry with them unjustly? Have you never accused them falsely? Have you never taken advantage of another's weakness?

The Golden Rule accuses you, as it must if it is truly the summation of the law, as Jesus teaches.

D. Fair Play

Finally, let me try one more standard. What about the "Englishman's virtue," as some have called it. What about the simple, rock bottom standard of fair play?

One difficulty with fair play has to do with who sets the rules for fair play. Will we play according to my rules? Or, will we play according to your rules? Even if we should agree on the rules by which we will conduct ourselves, who will judge between us when there is a dispute? What if I disagree with that judge's decision?

The point should be obvious by now. There is no one who is ever completely fair at all times to everyone.

And so even by this standard we find ourselves condemned.

Conclusion

Some time ago Thomas A. Harris wrote a book of pop psychology called *I'm O. K.—You're O. K.* About that time the Philadelphia Conference on Reformed Theology was holding its annual meeting on the depravity of man. One of the speakers was theologian Dr. John Gerstner, at that time a professor at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. He used the book as a jumping-off point for the following story.

Dr. Gerstner and his wife, Edna, had been in Kashmir, and they were returning from a shopping expedition in a little boat that had just pulled up beside a larger junk near the shore. There was a

bump, and some water splashed on them. The owner of the boat got very agitated and gestured for them to get out.

Dr. Gerstner told how he remembered saying to Edna, “See how excitable this fellow is. We get a little water splashed on us, and you would think it was a catastrophe of the first order.”

But the man got more and more agitated.

“It’s okay, Kusra,” Dr. Gerstner said, “It’s okay.”

Finally, the owner of the boat got so excited that he broke out of the dialect he had been using, that the Gerstners had been unable to understand, and shouted, “It’s no okay!”

At this they got the message and climbed onto the shore. The owner of the boat then threw his young grandchild up to them and quickly jumped up on to the shore himself.

When the Gerstners turned around, the boat was gone.

You see, apparently the hull had been punctured and the undertow had swallowed their craft. It was eventually tossed up about six boats further on. If the Gerstners had delayed a moment longer, they would have been swallowed up with it.²

That is the message of these early chapters of Romans: “I am not O. K. You are not O. K. No one is O. K.”

And the sooner we admit that we are not okay and turn to the One who knows that we are not, but who offers us a way of salvation anyway, the better off we will be.

Jesus does not excuse us; he forgives us. He calls us sinners. Yet he says, “I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance” (Luke 5:32).

The most important thing in life is to know that Jesus is able to save you from your sin.

The second most important thing is to know that you require salvation.

Today, recognize that you have no excuse before God. Repent of your sin, trust in Jesus, and receive God’s grace. Amen.

² Dr. Gerstner tells the story in “Man the Sinner” in James Montgomery Boice, ed. *Our Savior God: Studies on Man, Christ and the Atonement* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1980), 56-57.

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develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church (PCA)

Answers for Life!

Address: 19911 Bruce B. Downs Blvd., Tampa, FL 33647

Telephone: (813) 973-2484

Fax: (813) 973-4673

Email: Office@TampaBayPresbyterian.org

Web site: www.TampaBayPresbyterian.org

PRAAYER:

O Lord Our God, by any standard we use, we fall short of your glory. No matter what standard we may try to use to make ourselves acceptable to you, we don't measure up.

Your Law is the only standard you acknowledge and recognize. Help us to realize that each one of us has broken your Law. Each one of us deserves to be sent to hell for all eternity for breaking your Law.

That is why we so desperately need your grace. Help us to acknowledge our sin, to confess it to you, and to repent of it.

Will you grant us the gift of faith so that we might trust in Jesus Christ alone for the gift of eternal life? Enable us to believe that he has paid the penalty for our sin, and that you will cover us with his righteousness.

And all of this we pray in your wonderful name. Amen.

CHARGE:

Go and glorify God in all that you think, do, and say! And as you do, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.