

Romans: The Good News of God

Which Path Are You On?

Romans 2:6-11

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Which Path Are You On?

Scripture

A pastor of a small church once received the following letter signed by “A Faithful Member”:

Dear Pastor:

You often stress attendance at worship as being very important for a Christian, but I think a person has a right to miss Sunday worship now and then. I think every person ought to be excused for the following reasons and the number of times indicated:

- Christmas (Sunday before or after)
- New Year (Party lasted too long)
- Easter (Get away for holidays)
- July 4 (National holiday)
- Labor Day (Need to get away)
- Memorial Day (Visit hometown)
- School Closing (Kids need break)
- School Opens (One last fling)
- Family Reunions (Mine & wife’s)
- Sleep late (Saturday night activities)
- Deaths in Family (Average two per year)
- Anniversary (Second honeymoon)
- Sickness (One per family member)
- Business Trips (A must)
- Vacation (Three weeks)
- Bad Weather (Ice, snow, rain, clouds)
- Ball games (Six per season)
- Unexpected Company (Can’t walk out)
- Time changes (Spring ahead; fall back)
- Special on TV (Super Bowl, etc.)

Pastor, that leaves only two Sundays per year. So, you can count on us to be in church on the fourth Sunday in February and

the third Sunday in August—unless providentially hindered.

Sincerely,

A Faithful Member

We smile at a letter like this because we recognize it for what it is. It is merely an excuse for not attending worship.

We are all guilty of making excuses for one thing or another. Generally, however, our excuses are exactly that—excuses! And they need to be seen for what they really are.

This is particularly true in our relationship to God. In Romans God accuses us of repressing the truth about himself and of violating his moral law even while we pass judgment on others for doing the same things. But as soon as we hear God's accusations against us, we begin to make excuses. We claim that we did not know what was required of us, that we did not do what we are accused of doing, or that our motives were actually good. Whenever we find ourselves doing this, we need to remember the principles of God's just judgment, which Romans 2 explains.

Our text today, Romans 2:6-11, teaches us that *God's judgment is according to our deeds*. We cannot plead extenuating circumstances with God, because it is what we do that counts. This principle is unfolded in Romans 2:6-11 and is developed further in Romans 2:12-15. Let's read Romans 2:6-11:

⁶ God “will give to each person according to what he has done.” ⁷ To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life. ⁸ But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger. ⁹ There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile; ¹⁰ but glory, honor and peace for everyone who does good: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. ¹¹ For God does not show favoritism. (Romans 2:6-11)

Introduction

Romans 2:6-11 speaks of two very different paths. One is the path of good deeds, the end of which is glory, honor, immortality and peace. The other is the path of evil, the end of which is wrath, anger, trouble and distress. These verses teach us that a person is either on one path or the other.

Lesson

Today, I want to examine the two paths.

I. The Path of the Righteous (2:7, 10-11)

The first path is that of the person who does good. In our text Paul speaks of such people in two places. Putting these verses together, we have the following: **“To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he [God] will give eternal life. . . . There will be . . . glory, honor and peace for everyone who does good: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile”** (Romans 2:7, 9-10).

There are two things that such a person is described here as doing: (1) he or she **does good** and (2) he or she persists **in doing good**.

There are three things that are highlighted as his or her essential motivation: (1) **glory**, (2) **honor**, and (3) **immortality**. Elsewhere in Paul’s writings, these terms are used of the Christian’s ultimate expectations.

“Glory” refers to the transformation of the Christian into the image of God’s Son, by which the glory of God will be reflected in that person. Romans 8:18 says, “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us” (cf. Romans 5:2; 8:30; 9:23; 1 Corinthians 2:7; 15:43; 2 Corinthians 3:12-18; 4:17).

“Honor” refers to God’s approval of Christians, in contrast

to the dishonor accorded to them by the world. First Peter 1:7 says, “These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed” (cf. Hebrews 2:7).

“**Immortality**” refers to the resurrection hope of Christians. First Corinthians 15:54 says, “When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: ‘Death has been swallowed up in victory’” (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:42, 50, 52-54).

Likewise, there are four things that God is said to give to people as rewards for their aspirations: (1) **eternal life**, (2) **glory**, (3) **honor**, and (4) **peace**.

“**Eternal life**” refers to salvation—life in heaven with God rather than damnation.

“**Glory**” and “**honor**” are two of the goals the people described are striving for.

The last term, “**peace**,” seems to parallel “**immortality**” and therefore points, not to peace *with* God, which we enjoy now as the result of Christ’s death for us and our resulting justification, or even to that supernatural peace *of* God, which “transcends all understanding” (Philippians 4:7), but to the peace of heaven. It is deliverance from sin and its conflicts.

But here comes the big question. Has anyone ever chosen this path by his or her own will and then walked along it by his or her own strength? Does anyone of himself or herself actually do good and persist in it apart from the gospel?

I have spoken of the aspirations of the one who walks this path as being “Christian” aspirations. Therefore, it is a path walked by Christians. But the question I am asking is whether any of us actually chooses this path and then persists in it *of ourselves*, that is, unaided by the work of the Holy Spirit in turning us from sin to faith in Christ and by joining us to him.

I hope that by this time you know the answer to that question. It is *No!* No one by himself or herself chooses to do good (as God

defines it) or seeks **glory, honor and immortality** by the path of religious morality.

In fact, as we shall see when we get to Paul's summary of the human condition in Romans 3:10-12: "There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one."

This first path would be a wonderful option if anyone could choose—unaided by the work of the Holy Spirit—to walk along it. But no one can! And no one does! Therefore, when God judges men and women by an accurate and comprehensive examination of their deeds, as he says he will do, all will be condemned. "**For,**" as Paul says in Romans 2:11, "**God does not show favoritism.**"

II. The Path of the Unrighteous (2:8-9)

The second path is the one *all* people naturally take, apart from the intervention of God. It is the way of destruction. Again, Paul speaks of it in two verses in our text. Paul says: "**But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger. There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile**" (Romans 2:8-9).

In these two verses there are four things that unbelievers are said to be or do, which reveals their sinfulness.

First, they are "**self-seeking.**" This is the opposite of the first and second "greatest" commandments, which say, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind . . . [and] your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:37, 39). Self-seeking is the sin of Satan, who said, "I will make myself like the Most High" (Isaiah 14:14b).

Second, they "**reject the truth.**" In the context of these early chapters of Romans, this refers to the rejection of the truth of God revealed in nature and, of course, all other rejections of truth that flow from it.

Third, such a person **“does evil.”** Romans 1:29-31 was an exposition of what this means, and there are other similar passages later on (cf. Romans 3:13-18).

And fourth, they **“follow evil.”** This could mean simply that they *do* evil, but this would be redundant in light of verse 9. Here it probably refers to the continuing downward path of evil described in Romans 1:18-32.

What is the result of these choices? Again, there are four items: **“wrath and anger”** and **“trouble and distress.”** **“Wrath and anger”** both concern God’s fierce and absolute opposition to all evil. **“Trouble and distress”** refer to the effect of God’s resulting judgment upon evildoers. The words are frequently used of the sufferings of the wicked in the life to come (cf. Isaiah 8:22; Zephaniah 1:15, 17).

This is what awaits unbelievers apart from the good news of God.

III. The Two Paths in Scripture

Many people find this section of Romans to be extremely difficult, because it seems to be saying that salvation is by good works. If you do good and persist in it, you will be saved. If you do evil, you will be lost. But this is not what Romans 2:6-11 is saying, of course.

No one is saved other than by the work of Jesus Christ and by faith in him.

Nevertheless, it is significant that the inspired apostle does speak of two paths. And what he teaches is that if a person receives eternal life he or she will then be on the path of righteousness.

Should this surprise us? Hardly!

This is the message of Psalm 1, which speaks of the righteous man “who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers,” but rather delights “in the law of the LORD,” and speaks also of the wicked man who is “like chaff that the wind blows away” (Psalm 1:1, 2, 4). This has

present implications. But, like Paul's parallel thought in Romans, it has eternal implications as well. "Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous" (1:5) and "the wicked will perish" (1:6).

Matthew 19:16-21 records that the Lord Jesus Christ replied in similar terms to the rich young man who asked him, "Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?"

We might expect Jesus to reply that the man should have faith in him. But instead Jesus said to obey the commandments: "Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, honor your father and mother,' and 'love your neighbor as yourself.'"

The young man thought he had already done this. "All these I have kept," he said.

Again, instead of telling him to have faith in himself or even pointing out that he had not actually kept these commandments as God intended he should, Jesus merely brought to mind the young man's debilitating love of possessions: "If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."

The introduction to the parable of the Good Samaritan is along the same lines. An expert in the law tried to test Jesus by asking the same question posed by the rich young ruler: "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" (Luke 10:25).

Jesus pointed him to the law: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind'; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself'" (10:27). The parable that followed was given to show who one's neighbor is and what it means to love him.

I do not want anyone thinking that I am substituting good works for faith as a means of salvation. I am not.

If good works are even added to faith—not to mention being substituted for faith—as grounds of salvation, this becomes a false gospel and deserves the anathema Paul pronounces on such error (cf. Galatians 1:8-9).

Salvation is achieved by Christ for all who are to be saved, and it becomes theirs by simple faith in him and in his work.

But we must not mock God either! It is an equal error, as Paul also shows, to think that one can be saved by faith and then continue down the same path he or she has been treading, doing no good works at all. A person doing that is not saved, regardless of his or her profession.

Here is the wonder of the Christian gospel. On the one hand, salvation is utterly by grace received through faith—and even that faith is by grace (cf. Ephesians 2:8). No one who is saved can possibly boast of anything. We are saved on the sole grounds of Jesus' death in our place.

But, at the same time and on the other hand, those who are saved by grace alone through faith alone are placed on a path of righteousness where they do indeed perform such good works as the world about them cannot even begin to dream.

That is why Jesus could say, "For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:20). "Righteousness" in this verse means "good deeds." So the teaching is that the people of God will—if they truly are the people of God—do good works surpassing even the best of the "righteous" (but unsaved) people of Christ's day.

Conclusion

What can you do if you are on the wrong path? How do you get out of the company of the unbelievers—who are rejecting the truth, pursuing evil, and thereby storing up God's wrath for the day of judgment—and into the company of those who are doing good deeds and who seek glory, honor and immortality? Let me ask that twofold question again more clearly: what do you do if you are on the wrong path in order to get off the wrong path and onto the right one? Here are some specific answers:

First, recognize that you are on the wrong path. Nobody is

ever going to get off the wrong path and onto the right one as long as he or she entertains some hope that the present path will eventually lead to where he or she wants to go. So as long as you think the way of your own self-seeking and of the rejection of the biblical truth about God is going to get you to happiness or fulfillment or salvation in the life to come (or whatever), you are never going to take even the first small step toward being saved. You must begin by recognizing that you are on the wrong path and that the end of that path is eternal destruction.

Second, turn around and face the opposite direction. This is a way of speaking about what the Bible calls “repentance.” Repentance means to have a change of mind, to think differently and therefore act differently as a result.

Third, commit yourself to the Lord Jesus Christ, trusting in his death on your behalf. This is the meaning of faith, which does not stop merely with an intellectual assent to certain truths about God or Jesus but involves a commitment to Jesus as one’s personal Lord and Savior. You must be able to say, as Thomas did when Jesus appeared to him a week after his resurrection, “My Lord and my God!” (John 20:28).

And fourth, keep on following Jesus and obeying his commands. When you are wandering down the path of your own self-seeking and finally being to realize what you are doing, you sense that you are hopelessly far from the true path—and in a sense you are. As long as you continue as you are going, you will always be far from it. God seems infinitely removed. The return to God seems hopeless.

But when you stop and turn around, begin to seek God rather than your own will and pleasure, you will find (much to your surprise) that Jesus is not far away at all. In fact, you find him right there beside you. It was because he was with you and was calling you that you even turned around. That is why in the Bible repentance and faith always go together, so closely together that it is often impossible to say which comes first and which comes second. To believe in Jesus is to turn from sin—and *vice versa*.

And there is something else too. In the same instant you turn from sin and believe in Jesus, you find that you are instantly on the right path. You do not have to seek it, because the first step on that road *is* believing in Jesus. It is being where he is. He starts with you at that precise point. Therefore, as you step forward you find the darkness dispel, the light break through, and a glimpse of glory, honor and immortality, and eternal life rise up before you as your present possession, goal and destiny. Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
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.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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PRAYER:

[The following prayer is adapted from “The Savior” in *The Valley of Vision: A Collection of Puritan Prayers and Devotions*, p. 44]:

O God of all grace, you have given me a savior. Produce in me a faith to live by him, to make him all my desire, all my hope, and all my glory.

May I enter him as my refuges, build on him as my foundation, walk in him as my way, follow him as my guide, conform to him as my example, receive his instructions as my prophet, rely on his intercession as my high priest, and obey him as my king.

May I never be ashamed of him or his words, but joyfully bear his reproach, never displease him by unholy or imprudent conduct, never count it a glory if I take it patiently when buffeted for a fault, never make the multitude my mode, and never delay when your Word invites me to advance.

May your dear Son preserve me from this present evil world, so that its smiles never allure, nor its frowns terrify, nor its vices defile, nor its errors delude me.

May I feel that I am a stranger and a pilgrim on earth, declaring plainly that I seek a country, my title to it becoming daily more clear, my fitness for it more perfect, my foretaste of it more abundant; and whatsoever I do may it be done in the Savior’s 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.