

Romans: The Good News of God

Three Attributes of God

Romans 2:2-4

Rev. Freddy Fritz

May 6, 2007

Three Attributes of God

Scripture

Let's read Romans 2:2-4:

² Now we know that God's judgment against those who do such things is based on truth. ³ So when you, a mere man, pass judgment on them and yet do the same things, do you think you will escape God's judgment? ⁴ **Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness leads you toward repentance?** (Romans 2:2-4)

Introduction

Today I would like to study three attributes of God. Specifically, I would like to examine the attributes of **kindness, tolerance and patience.**

I have a number of books in my library that deal with the attributes of God. However, as I look at my books I notice that there is little in them concerning two of the three attributes we are going to study today: **tolerance** and **patience.** Why is this?

Author A. W. Pink calls attention to this, saying, "It is not easy to suggest a reason . . . for surely the (patience) of God is as much one of the divine perfections as is his wisdom, power or holiness, and as much to be admired and revered by us."¹

The reason many of us ignore these attributes may be precisely what Paul suggests when he asks, "**Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness leads you toward repentance?**" The reason we do not think often of God's **tolerance** and **patience** is perhaps our insensitivity to sin and our reluctance to turn from it.

¹ Arthur W. Pink, *The Attributes of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1975), 61.

Lesson

Today, I want to study the three attributes mentioned in Romans 2:4, namely God's **kindness, tolerance and patience**.

I. The Kindness of God

First, the kindness of God.

I have said that two of the three attributes mentioned in our text are frequently neglected: **tolerance** and **patience**.

But the first of the three attributes—**kindness**—is not usually ignored, although it is often translated as “goodness.”

Why is this word often translated as “goodness”? The word *God* gives us a clue. The word *God* comes from Anglo-Saxon speech, where “God” originally meant “The Good.” In the minds of the Anglo-Saxons, God was not only “the Greatest” of all beings but he was also “the best.” All the goodness there is originates in God. That is why the apostle James could write, “Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows” (James 1:17). In the language of philosophy, the simplest of all definitions of God is *summum bonum*, the chief good.

Yet, when Paul speaks of the goodness (or **kindness**) of God in Romans 2:4, he is not thinking of this as having to do primarily with what God is in himself, but as having to do with God's actions toward us. This may be why the *New International Version* renders the Greek term *chrestotetos* as **kindness** rather than “goodness,” as it is in the *King James Version*.

A. Creation

The first place at which the goodness of God is seen is in creation. Remember that on each of the successive days of creation, after God had made the heavens and the earth, the sea and the

land, and all the creatures that live in the sea, inhabit the land, and fly in the air, God said, “It is good.” And it really was good—and continues to be, in spite of the increasing spoilage of creation that has come to it because of human sin.

The world about us is good, and this is a great proof of God’s goodness. Every time we breathe God’s good air, we demonstrate how indebted we are to this goodness. Every time we use the resources of the world to make homes and clothes and to grow food, we show that God is kind toward us. And what about our bodies? How suited are our hands to perform useful work! How valuable are our arms and legs! How amazing are our eyes! How marvelous our minds! Paul Brand’s study of the wonders of the human body – cells, bones, skin, and motion—*Fearfully and Wonderfully Made*,² highlights some of this goodness.

B. Providence

God’s goodness is also revealed in providence, that is, by his continual ordering of the world and world events for good. Providence is seen in what theologians call “common grace.” Jesus spoke of this when he observed that God “causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous” (Matthew 5:45b).

C. The Gospel Call

But **God’s kindness** toward us is seen not only in the physical creation and providence. It is also seen in many spiritual matters. Above all, it is seen in the widespread proclamation of the gospel. To be sure, the gospel has not yet penetrated everywhere. There are still many millions of people who have not heard that God has provided a Savior in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ. But *you* have! You at least know God’s kindness in the gospel.

² Paul Brand and Philip Yancey, *Fearfully and Wonderfully Made* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing Co., 1980).

Charles Haddon Spurgeon, the great Baptist preacher of the nineteenth century, wrote on Romans 2:4:

Myriads of our fellow men have never had an opportunity of knowing Christ. The missionary's foot has never trodden the cities wherein they dwell, and so they die in the dark. Multitudes are going downward, downward; but they do not know the upward road. Their minds have never been enlightened by the teachings of God's word, and hence they sin with less grievousness of fault. You are placed in the very focus of Christian light, and yet you follow evil! Will you not think of this? Time was when a man would have to work for years to earn enough money to buy a Bible. There were times when he could not have earned one even with that toil. Now the word of God lies upon your table, and you have a copy of it in almost every room of your house. Is not this a boon from God? This is the land of the open Bible, and the land of the preached word of God. In this you proved the richness of God's goodness. Do you despise the wealth of mercy? . . . Is this a small thing?³

The kindness of God is no small thing. We dare not show contempt for the riches of it, as the apostle Paul tells us.

II. The Tolerance of God

The second attribute of God in our text is **tolerance**, and this, as I said earlier, *is* frequently neglected. The Greek word is *anoches*, and is translated as "tolerance, forbearance, holding back, delay, pause, or clemency."

The new idea introduced by this term is that of human offense to God's kindness, offense that should evoke an immediate outpouring of fierce judgment but which God actually endures.

We see this quality at the beginning of the Bible. God had warned Adam that on the day he ate from the forbidden tree he would die (Genesis 1:17). But when God came to Adam and Eve

³ Charles Haddon Spurgeon, "Earnest Expostulation" in *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, vol. 29 (Edinburgh and Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1971), 196. (Originally published in 1884.)

in the garden to confront our first parents with the fact of their disobedience, he did not actually execute the sentence. Someone has pointed out that Adam and Eve did die in their spirits, which they proved by running away from God when he came calling. That is true. But they did not die physically, at least not immediately. And they never did die eternally, because God came with an offer of salvation through a future deliverer who would defeat Satan, whom they then believed and trusted. This first great outcropping of sin and God's dealings with it show God's **tolerance**.

So it is with us all. We sin, but God does not immediately carry out the judgment we deserve. He bears with us, enduring the affront to his great majesty and holiness. And he offers us salvation!

The irony is that we do not appreciate this and instead actually turn God's temporary tolerance of some sin into an accusation against him. Do you remember the question raised by those who had witnessed a few instances of evil in the days of Jesus Christ? Apparently some Galileans had been visiting Jerusalem and had been worshipping at the temple. While they were in the midst of their pious acts, soldiers from Pilate came upon them and killed some of them.

Again, about this same time a tower fell over and killed eighteen persons who were standing beside it. Jesus was asked how it was possible that something like this could happen in a world ruled by a just yet merciful God. Was it because these people were worse sinners than others were? Or was it because God was either too weak to avert the tragedies or just didn't care?

Jesus answered, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish" (Luke 13:2-5).

Jesus' point was that our way of asking that question is en-

tirely wrong. The question is not why God somehow allows some to perish, but rather why he has spared us, we being the sinners we are. If we could understand how sinful we are, we could understand that the soldiers should have killed us, or the tower should have fallen on us. We should be dead and in hell this very instant. That we are not in hell is an evidence of God's **tolerance**. He has not yet confined us to the punishment we deserve.

God's **tolerance** should lead us to repentance, before it is too late.

III. The Patience of God

Finally, the patience of God.

The last of these three attributes is the greatest from the point of view of our text, for it is linked to the call for repentance in that God spares us for a very long time that we might do so.

The Greek word *makrothumias* is interesting, because the first half of it, *makro*, emphasizes how great God's patience is.

Here is a good place to put these three terms together and compare them. Robert Haldane says: "Kindness suggests the benefits which God has bestowed on the Jews. Tolerance denotes God's bearing with them without immediately executing vengeance—his delaying to punish them. . . . Patience signifies the extent of his tolerance during many ages."⁴

I would define each of these three terms as aspects of God's kindness: the first as kindness to man without any specific relationship to sin; the second as kindness in relation to sin's magnitude; the third as kindness in relation to sin's endurance or continuation.

Spurgeon was thinking along these lines when he wrote: "Tolerance has to do with the magnitude of sin; patience with the multiplicity of it."⁵

Patience means that God bears with sin for a long time. Here

⁴ Robert Haldane, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Romans* (MacDill AFB: MacDonald Publishing, 1958), 77.

⁵ Spurgeon, "Earnest Expostulation," 197.

are some examples.

A. Early Ancestors

First, God was patient with our early ancestors in the early ages of humanity before the great flood. This was a particularly evil time. Some of the evil is described in Genesis 4, which begins with Cain's murder of his brother Abel and ends with Lamech's boast about having killed a man just for wounding him. This evil is summarized in Genesis 6:5, where we are told, "The LORD saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time." What a devastating statement—"only evil all the time"! This was a dreadful age.

Yet, in spite of this great evil, God was patient with that antediluvian generation. He spared it for 120 years while Noah was in the process of constructing and outfitting the ark. It was only at the end of that period, after ample warnings from Noah and other pre-flood preachers, like Enoch, that the flood came.

B. Israel

Second, God was patient with Israel. He was patient with the Jews for forty years in the wilderness, as Paul reminds us in a sermon to Gentiles and Jews at Antioch: "He endured their conduct for about forty years in the desert" (Acts 13:18).

Later, when the Israelites entered the Promised Land and were soon found following the debased customs and worship of the nations around them, God did not immediately chastise his people but instead sent a long line of deliverers.

Even when their sin was so great that a judgment by invasion and deportment was inevitable, God still sent generations of prophets to warn both Israel and Judah and turn them from sin.

C. Ourselves

And third, what about ourselves? A. W. Pink writes:

How wondrous is God's patience with the world today. On every side people are sinning with a high hand. The divine law is trampled under foot and God himself openly despised. It is truly amazing that he does not instantly strike dead those who so brazenly defy him. Why does he not suddenly cut off the haughty infidel and blatant blasphemer, as he did Ananias and Sapphira? Why does he not cause the earth to open its mouth and devour the persecutors of his people, so that, like Dathan and Abiram, they shall go down alive into the Pit? And what of apostate Christendom, where every possible form of sin is now tolerated and practiced under cover of the holy name of Christ? Why does not the righteous wrath of heaven make an end of such abominations? Only one answer is possible: because God bears with "*much* patience the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction."⁶

Conclusion

Yet, much as I appreciate A. W. Pink and value his description of God's patience toward those of our own time, I do not think his statement that "only one answer is possible" is correct. Pink asks, in effect, "Why does God not immediately destroy all wrong doers?" He answers, "Because God bears with much patience the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction." That means: simply because God *is* patient. Sinners will perish eventually anyway, but God is nevertheless willing to endure them for a very long time.

Well, that is part of the answer. God does endure for a long time those who eventually will perish. But if our text—which speaks so eloquently of the kindness, tolerance, and patience of God—means anything, it certainly means that God also has quite another purpose in his patience. Paul says that it is to lead us to repentance.

There are two ways we can go, of course. Paul is clear about

⁶ Pink, *The Attributes of God*, 64.

them. One way is repentance, the way Scripture urges. The other is defiance, or spite toward God's kindness.

Which will it be for you? You can defy God. You can set yourself against his kindness, tolerance, and patience—as well as against his other attributes like sovereignty, holiness, omniscience, and immutability, which you may also despise. But why should you do that? I have previously pointed out that it is quite understandable how a sinner who does not wish to leave his or her sin must hate God's holiness. It is obvious that a rebellious subject will resent God's sovereignty. But why should you “show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience”? These are winsome qualities. A kind, tolerant, and patient God is a good God. Why should you fail to realize that God's exercise of these attributes toward you is for a good end?

I want to give you three reasons why you should allow these attributes to lead you to repentance and no longer despise the kindness of God.

First, if God is a good God, then whatever you may think to the contrary in your fallen state, to find this good God will mean finding all good for yourself. You do not normally think this way. You think that your own will is the good. You think that if you have to turn from what you think you want—and desperately do want—you will be miserable. Can you not see that it is your own sinful way, and the ways of millions of other people just like you, that is the cause of your miseries? God is not the cause. God is good. God is the source of all good. If you want to find good for yourself as well as others, the way to find it is to turn from whatever is holding you back and find God. God has provided the way for you to turn to him through the death of his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. He died for your sin to open the door to God's presence.

Second, if God is tolerant of you, it is because he has a will to save you. If he wanted to condemn you outright, he could have done it long ago. If he is tolerant, you will find that if you come to him he will not cast you out.

One commentator wrote, “If God is good even to the unkind

and the unthankful, surely the door of entrance to the divine favor is open to the penitent.”⁷

And third, if God is patient with you in spite of your many follies, it is because he is giving you an opportunity to be saved. The apostle Peter wrote, “The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9).

If God were not good, you might have room to doubt this. You might think of God as a cat playing with a mouse. You might think of him as being patient with you only for his own amusement.

But this is not the case at all. If God is good in his patience, his reason for being so must be to do good. His patience must be to give you opportunity to turn to him.

Do not make the mistake of thinking that because God is tolerant he will not judge sin. God will judge it. He is just, as well as patient.

But now he is patient, and if he has allowed you to live twenty, forty, or even eighty years, it is so that you might come to him now—before you die and the opportunity for salvation is gone forever.

Paul says that God’s kindness “leads” you to repentance. If he is leading, he will not turn you away if you follow him. If he bids you to repent, he will not spurn your repentance. Amen.

⁷ William S. Plumer, *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1979), 86. (Original edition, 1870.)

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

This sermon, and other sermons, by the Rev. Freddy Fritz can be found at:

1. www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/Sermons
2. www.sermoncentral.com/contributor_profile.asp?ContributorID=11181
3. www.sermonaudio.com/search.asp?SpeakerOnly=true&currSection=sermonsspeaker&keyword=Freddy%5EFritz

Please give your input and leave your feedback at websites 2 and 3 when requested to do so. This helps with evaluation and planning of sermons.

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 God, we thank you for your kindness, tolerance and patience. Although we may not reflect much upon these attributes of yours, we do so today.

Help us to realize that your kindness leads us toward repentance. O Lord, we have sinned against you in thought, word and deed. We deserve your wrath and condemnation. But, in your kindness, tolerance and patience you have offered us salvation. The Lord Jesus Christ has taken upon himself the punishment that our sin deserves.

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.