

Two Ways

Romans 2:1-16

February 6, 2011

We have seen that Paul bases his life and his message on the gospel of Jesus Christ, because it is the gospel, and the gospel alone, that is the power of God unto salvation for all who believe. We saw last week that Paul pointed out that we are all without excuse because we have all seen that there is a God and that He is powerful. This week, Paul narrows this message down a little.

Paul also switches to a form of argument called “diatribe.” The word can have a negative connotation, but what it means is that Paul is arguing against an imaginary opponent. He addresses this individual, asking questions and answering his imaginary opponent’s questions. It was an established way of addressing the most important objections and questions of the hearers in ancient rhetoric and is also used in other places in scripture.

Addressing his partner in the argument, Paul moves from the third person plural, which he has used in his argument up to this point, to the second person singular. Speaking to this person, Paul wrote, “*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.*” (v.1) This is in keeping with Jesus’ teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. “*Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.*” (Matthew

7:1,2) Even those who believe themselves to be morally superior have no excuse before God, because they are guilty of the same kinds of sins as everybody else. Only Jesus was truly pure and righteous and without sin.

In order to remind us of the sins we are talking about here, look with me again at a few verses from the end of chapter 1. “*They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are 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) Often we focus on the sexual sins, or the sins that seem worse to us, but Paul is not limiting sin or the wrath of God to the things that seem worst to us. God’s wrath rests on all who do any of these things. Greed, seeking another’s harm, arrogance, causing strife, lying, slander, gossip, all of these things and more incur God’s wrath, and we are all guilty of them in one way or another.

Paul’s point is that this was true of those who sought to judge the world around them. He then asks his opponent, “*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?*” (v.3) His argument is against one who would judge the world from a position of his own moral superiority. From the previous chapter, we need to recognize that nobody except God Himself occupies that position. We are all alike under God’s sentence of **wrath** and condemnation. Paul reminds his opponent of this in the very next verse. “*Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance*

and patience, not realizing that God's kindness leads you toward repentance?" (v.4) God's kindness and mercy are not given to us so that we might go on living the lives our **sinful** natures want to live. To believe that is to show contempt for God. His tolerance and patience are given so that we might come to repentance. If God treated us the way our actions deserve, that is out of His wrath, we would not live long enough to repent. God withholds His wrath for a time, however, so that we might forsake our sinful ways and come to Him for forgiveness.

But so many will not repent before God and seek His face. They continue in their sin, and so Paul points this out in his opponent. *"But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed."* (v.5) While Paul began this diatribe opposing all who would judge others even while they fell under God's judgement, here he identifies his opponent as someone who is stubborn and has an unrepentant heart. God judges with righteousness, and if we are unrepentant, and especially if we then stand in judgement over others, all we are doing is storing up God's wrath against us. In this case, what the Psalmist said, and Jesus repeated, reveals the condemnation to come, *"One thing God has spoken, two things have I heard: that you, O God, are strong, and that you, O Lord, are loving. Surely you will reward each person according to what he has done."* (Psalm 62:11,12) Paul's complaint is against those who would seek to make themselves righteous before God rather than admit they can't and fall on God's **mercy**.

With that in mind, he presented the other side. *"To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life."* (v.7) This does not mean that we earn eternal life. It means that God takes note of the desire of our hearts and rewards those who earnestly seek Him.

This is all done without partiality. As Paul wrote in verse 11, *"For God does not show favoritism."* Our ethnicity or station in life do not matter before Him. God will judge us based on what we have done with **Him** and with the knowledge we had. Did we recognize our sinfulness and that we are morally destitute before a holy and righteous God? Or did we seek to justify ourselves even though we are guilty of the same sins with which we find fault in others? God didn't favor the Jews over the Gentiles, and He doesn't play favorites today.

Paul continues his point with verse 12: *"All who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who sin under the law will be judged by the law."* Note that whether or not we have the law does not change our **status**. With or without the law, all are judged and will perish. Having the law only changes the criteria on which God's righteous judgement is passed. Knowing what to do does no good if you do not do it. God told the Jews what He expected of them, and they didn't do it. They brought God's judgement on themselves as the result. Yet, those who are outside of the Jewish community hardly fare better. God placed a version of the law in them as shown by their consciences. They may not have had God's written righteous decree, but everyone has done something their

conscience has told them is wrong. We have all rebelled against what we knew we should do and done what we wanted instead. Whether we have been accused by the law or our conscience, we stand guilty before God.

In case we have forgotten that Paul's overarching theme is the gospel, he reminds us of it here. This judgement by God of our actions, this righteous condemnation of sin and rewarding of obedience, is not opposed to the gospel, it is part and parcel with it. Paul reminds us, *"This will take place on the day when God will judge men's secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares."* (v.16) As we said last week, the gospel is only good news because there is bad news to which it speaks. All of us are judged according to our actions, and all of us are condemned by them. It is only through the **gospel** that God's righteousness is applied to us and it is only once we are righteous that what obedience we do muster counts for anything.

Through this passage Paul outlined two ways people thought they could come to God. He began with the division that existed in his world as the Jews separated themselves from the world around them based on the law God had given them.

The Jews thought there were two ways to live—in the Law or out of it. They thought that, because they were in the Law, they were in a position to judge those who did not have the Law as inferior and not worthy of God's grace. The Jews knew more clearly than anybody else what God expects and how He wants us to live. Paul's point is that the Jews ended up with the wrong distinction. The law is important as a guide for how we

are to live, but it does not determine who is right with God. It only makes clear the reason for our guilt.

Paul points out that the two ways to **live** are in obedience to God or disobedience. People without the Law can still obey it as well as those who have it (though nobody obeys it completely). Those with the Law are actually more likely to be intentionally disobedient. Having the Law didn't make things better for the Jews as they thought. It only made them more guilty for their sin. It is not enough to know right from wrong. If we are going to be saved by our actions, we must always choose right. So a better understanding of the two ways is obedience versus disobedience, and yet the end result of this is also God's wrath. If we are to be saved, there must be yet another way.

Before we explore that way, one thing needs to be pointed out. We are not Jews, but the church, yet we often fall into the same trap. We believe that because we have our name on a church roll someplace or we repeated a prayer after someone a couple decades ago we are righteous before God. We have replaced having the law with church membership or hearing the **gospel**. If it is the case, however, that it is not hearers of the law but doers of it that are righteous, it then is true that it is not people who have their names on a church's roll who are righteous, but those who actually engage in the mission and ministry of the church. If having the law but not obeying it made things worse for the Jews, then hearing the gospel or being members of a church but not doing ministry and mission make things worse today.

We said, however, that there is still another division of two ways because there must be another way

to be saved. Having the law or having our names on the membership roll of a church will not save us. Obedience does not save us because nobody, except Jesus, has actually been obedient. The only thing that does save us is the **grace** of God. The key to understanding this in this morning's text is found back in verse 5. It is worth looking at one more time. *"But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed."* Paul did not mention disobedience here. Disobedience is the issue, but salvation comes through submission to God and repentance. Disobedience, stubbornness, and unrepentance are all related and keep us from God. If we want to be obedient, it begins with submitting to Him, seeking His forgiveness for our sin, and turning away from it. It continues by living out the new life He creates in us through the Holy Spirit..

The two ways are then stubbornness and disobedience leading to the wrath of God, or **repentance** and its resulting obedience leading to righteousness and eternal life. If God is calling you, submit to His call and follow Jesus. Allow Him to change you. Obey what He calls you to do. Work hard to be who He created you to be. Rejoice that your final destiny is in His hands and His strength will bring you safely through.