

'Religion Saves' and Other Misconceptions

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[0 : 00] This morning's reading is from Romans chapter 2, which you'll find on page 1129 of the Bibles in front of you.

Romans chapter 2, verses 1 to 16. You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else.

For at whatever point you judge another, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things. Now we know that God's judgment against those who do such things is based on truth.

So when you, a mere human being, pass judgment on them and yet do the same things, do you think you will escape God's judgment? Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, forbearance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness is intended to lead you to repentance? 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.

[1 : 10] God will repay each person according to what they have done. To those who, by persistence in doing good, seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life.

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.

But glory, honor and peace for everyone who does good, first for the Jew, then for the Gentile, for God does not show favoritism. 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.

For it is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God's sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous. Indeed, when Gentiles who do not have the law do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts sometimes accusing them and at other times even defending them.

[2 : 23] This will take place on the day when God judges people's secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks, Katrina, for reading.

So my name is Martin Ayres. If you're here as a visitor, I'm the senior pastor here at St. Silas. And it would be a great help to me if you could keep your Bible open at Romans chapter 2. We'll be looking at that together.

And let's, if you'd find it helpful, there's an outline inside the notice sheet so that you can see where we're heading as we look at this chapter of the Bible. But let's pray.

Let's ask for God's help as we turn to his word. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing in your sight.

Oh, Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen. Well, this week in the news, we heard about the CV of a five-year-old boy in China that was widely shared online.

[3 : 26] It was 15 pages long, his CV, produced by his parents as part of his application to a private school in Shanghai. And among this little boy's achievements and boasts, it said he has a unique personality, rich hobbies, and colorful experiences.

It says that he has memorized 100 Chinese classic poems, that he reads 500 English books a year. He never cries when he gets medical injections, and he enjoys doing lab experiments.

He is well-traveled, competitive in sport, popular among friends, and caring to his two-year-old younger brother. Now, his parents wrote it, and there's this reaction across the world online, mainly from adults, saying, I can't compete with this boy.

But they want him to stand out from the competition. And Romans 2 gets us thinking about what might be on our moral CV. What might we want listed on our record of achievement, if you like, that could mark us out as different to other people?

And if we can find things that we could put on our moral CV, do they help us feel morally superior to others, to look down on others? If you can find yourself thinking like that, then it does make you look down on other people, and we lack compassion for other people.

[4 : 50] And even more seriously, when we hear about God providing a savior because we have a problem with God, when Jesus tells us that because of our behavior, we're not right with God, and we need a savior, that offends us enormously if we think that we are morally upstanding and superior.

Now, it's that sense of moral superiority that Romans chapter 2 is all about. We're in this series in Romans as a church family. In chapter 1, we saw that it's a letter written in the first century by a Christian leader called Paul.

He was writing to the church in Rome, which at the time was the center of the world. And in this letter, Paul is straightening out their understanding of the gospel, of the message at the heart of the Christian faith.

And he does that to protect them from kind of alternative things that other churches are believing at the time. Just like across Glasgow today, you'd find churches believing different things.

Paul writes to this church in Rome to straighten out their understanding of the gospel. To protect them, but also because he wants this church to be on board with his plan to get the gospel to the nations.

[6 : 02] So they need to, not just to believe, but to really own in their heart the reality that everyone needs to hear this gospel message. So Paul began with a headline in chapter 1, in verse 16, about how the gospel is God's power to save everyone who believes it.

And then he explained why everyone needs a saving message that's powerful to save them from God. And he said it's because the wrath of God is being revealed against all of mankind.

So we saw that in chapter 1. Paul's saying that we all reject God, and that provokes God's righteous wrath against mankind. And he responds to our rejection of him by handing us over to our own desires.

He gives us what we want and then sees the restraints taken off and humanity following our own sinful desires. So Paul listed at the end of chapter 1 a list of immoral behavior that you'd see characterizing a society that has rejected God, and he's taken off the restraints.

But there's a certain category of person who listens to Romans chapter 1, and they hear Paul's damning verdict on the whole of mankind, and they think to themselves, Paul, I'm so glad you're saying all this.

[7 : 23] Everything you're saying is true, but it doesn't apply to me. I hope you realize that. You're absolutely right, Paul. Preach it, brother. We're right with you. Thank God that I'm not like that.

That's the mentality. It's moralistic. It's religiosity. Thinking, I'm superior to those people you're describing who need help because God's angry with them.

And Paul crushes that in chapter 2. That's the big idea this morning. He tells us two wonderful things about God that are terrifying. The first one is the fairness of God's justice.

So if you have a look with me at verse 6 and verse 11 of chapter 2. In verse 6, he says, God will repair each person according to what they have done.

And then in verse 11, he says, For God does not show favoritism. Don't we long for a God like that?

If you just think about the Me Too campaign this year, the pain and anger around the world, when it's been more and more disclosed that women, especially in the film industry, but in other industries, have been abused sexually, manipulated.

[8 : 37] It's awful to hear about this injustice going on in the world. I was watching a movie this week, The Equalizer with Denzel Washington, and it was basically a very formulaic Hollywood thriller.

So what happens in these Hollywood thrillers is that you have a good guy who's usually played by Denzel Washington, and you have an injustice that needs putting right. Now, about half an hour into this film, there was a really violent scene where the character Denzel Washington's playing, Robert, brutally killed six men in a bar.

But in the narrative of the movie, you were on his side. How did I get there? After half an hour, to want that to happen, because of horrible injustice in the film.

That this man, Robert, has a friend who's a young girl who's a prostitute, and he finds out that she's been very badly beaten up by these men, and they show no remorse when he goes to see them, and he realizes they're doing this to loads of women, and that they will never get caught.

And as you watch it, you're so angry, because you want there to be justice. We long for justice. And so in the film, that means there's a vigilante, and you're on his side. But we long for justice in our world.

[9 : 50] And wonderfully, we learn in Romans 2 that God sees all things, and he will judge perfectly fairly. And that is a wonderful thing if someone has done something terrible to you.

It's a wonderful thing to know. You can entrust justice to God, and he's seen what's happened to you, and he will put things right. There will be justice one day, even if nobody else knows how you've been treated.

It's a wonderful thing. But it's terrifying when you realize that it means we're going to be judged as well. And that's the main point that Paul's making here. So if you have a look at verse 1, just have a look there.

He says in verse 1, You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else. For at whatever point you judge another, you are condemning yourself, because you do the same things.

So he's not saying we shouldn't recognize behavior as wrong. We have to do that. We have to see behavior as right or wrong. But what's being described here is passing judgment on someone else.

[10 : 54] So you don't just see what they're doing as wrong, but more than that, you feel that you are superior to them because you don't do the things that they do. In chapter 1, he's talked about people who have sexual orgies, who murder other people, who go to pagan shrines and bow down to false gods.

And now he's addressing the people who say, Well, at least I don't do that. But the point is that we all do wrong things. We all have sinful hearts that are bent on rejecting God.

So in verse 5, he says this, Because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath. Now those words, stubbornness and unrepentant heart, they're words that the Old Testament uses about idolatry.

The idea is that everybody worships something other than God. We build our lives on something else instead of God. But we don't think like that because some idols are a lot more respectable than other ones.

So if you make your career into your personal saviour, if you think that your career is what will give you your identity and your meaning and your value in life, then in our culture, you can look down on somebody who has made alcohol their personal saviour.

[12 : 13] You think, well, at least I don't do that. Or if you make family into your idol and you'll give anything for your own nuclear family, then in our culture, you can look down on someone who has made sexual pleasure into their idol and is promiscuous and sleeps around and never commits.

But any idol that you choose, however respectable it might be to the people around us, fundamentally, it's replacing God, who deserves all of our praise, with something else.

And that skews our behaviour so that we don't love Him as we should and we don't love other people as we should. But what about all the people out there on Gibson Street this morning or out in Kelvin Grove Park this morning who don't know the Bible, so they haven't heard in the Bible that God wants us to build our lives on Him?

Can God still blame them if they're seeking to live a good life on their terms, how they've chosen to live? Well, just have a look with me at verse 14. When he says Gentiles, he just means the nations, the non-Jews, in verse 14.

Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves. Even though they do not have the law, by that he means the Bible, they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts.

[13 : 36] So when he talks about the law, he means the Jewish law, the Old Testament law.

What's going on here? Well, the writer Francis Schaeffer, Christian writer, described it like this. He talked about the invisible tape recorder that we all have.

So if you're under 30, tapes were basically small plastic boxes that had moving parts in them and we used to have to rewind the tape in them so that we could play music.

That's how they worked. So if you think about an invisible MP3 recorder, he says, just imagine there's a recorder attached to you and it's recording everything you ever say in your whole life. And among all of that, it records the standards by which you judge other people's behavior around you. So every time you've criticized somebody else, they shouldn't have done that, or you've told someone what they should have done or what they should do, it gets recorded.

And when you meet God, he says to you, let's just get that recorder off because it reveals the law that was on your own conscience. And let's judge your life, your whole life, everything you've said and thought and done by the standards you've used in your life to judge other people.

[14:47] That's going to be devastating, isn't it? We all fall short of our own standards. So what does that look like in our culture? Well, Scotland prides itself on being a secular liberal culture, a tolerance culture.

So you might think, well, in some ways, maybe we don't have standards. We say, well, everyone can do what they like. But the truth is that a secular liberal culture all around us is a deeply moralistic culture.

If you're together with a crowd of friends in the West End of Glasgow, how easy would it be for somebody in that crowd to say, it was children in need last week, wasn't it?

You know, I really hate all this sponsorship stuff. You know, these people who want, if you want to run a marathon or you want to grow a moustache, go on and do it. But don't ask me for money for it. I pay my taxes. I don't, why should I have to give to charity? What would people think of you if you said that? Or what would people think if you said, you know what, in our family, we've given up on the recycling bins.

[15:49] It's just become a bit of a hassle. All these different bins for different things. We're just going to use the one bin for everything. And if future generations want to sort out the landfill problem, they'll just have to work out a way to deal with it.

We're deeply moralistic. We won't stand for that kind of behavior. And it's not just about what you do or what you don't do. It's about what we say. So presumably lots of us have had the feeling before of being with friends and thinking, I can't say what I really think here because my view is not acceptable socially.

Just imagine you're out with friends and somebody said, they think Theresa May's Brexit deal is a good deal. You know, at the moment. People think that's morally wrong in Scotland to think that's a good idea.

So we have this enormous social pressure to think the right things and do the right things in terms of what people accept around us. So that when you do conform, you feel good about yourself.

You think, I'm accepted. I'm superior. We feel self-righteous. And we look down on other people. And Paul says here, you've got no right to do that because everyone does the same kinds of things.

[17:03] We all do things that God doesn't approve of. So we might think to ourselves, as you look at someone else who you look down on, well, this won't be true of everyone, by the way, but you might think to yourself, at least I don't smoke.

At least I care about the environment. I've got an energy package that's 100% renewable energy now in my home. We don't let the taps run when we're brushing our teeth.

I'm saving up for an electric car. We've gone vegan in our house. And then we get on a long-haul flight for our holiday. Or we buy luxury food from the supermarket that's been flown thousands of miles so that we can have it all year round.

So that we live in decadence that 100 years ago, people in Glasgow would have thought was unimaginable. But we feel good about ourselves because we've ticked the right green boxes or whatever it might be.

Or we look down on people in our country who are addicted to heroin. And we ignore our own addictions that mean that we, in lots of ways, are just as bad.

[18:06] We do the same things. We're addicted. In Romans 1, when Paul was listing the behavior, he mentioned being a gossip. How many of us never gossip?

He mentions being boastful. How many of us never want people to know about the good things that we've done? And Paul says, verse 6, God will repay each person according to what they have done.

Verse 1, You therefore have no excuse because you who pass judgment do the same things. Then he tells us the second wonderful thing about God that's very terrifying.

The beauty of God's law. Paul here is thinking about his Jewish audience. They were the Bible people at the time. But we can apply the same pitfalls to Christians today. If you look down at how he describes the Jew in verses 17 to 20, just think, who might this describe today?

He says in verse 17, You, if you call yourself a Jew, if you rely on the law and boast in God, if you know his will and approve of what is superior because you're instructed by the law, if you are convinced that you are a guide for the blind, a light for those who are in the dark, an instructor of the foolish, and so on.

[19 : 23] Isn't that the church in Scotland today? We're the light for the blind, aren't we? We're the ones who instruct the foolish. We're the ones who can approve of what's superior because we've got the truth of the Bible.

And what he exposes in them that we have to watch for in us is hypocrisy. Verse 21, You then who teach others, do you not teach yourself? You who preach against stealing, do you steal?

You who say that people should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? That's probably just a figurative way of describing that they have idols in their hearts.

So what's he saying? Well, we all care about external appearances, don't we? It was in the news this week that the army has banned their soldiers from going to Greggs.

I don't know whether you saw that. The British army said soldiers can't go to Greggs anymore because it's embarrassing for the army if soldiers are seen outside Greggs eating Greggs food. They're worried about the appearance that it leaves.

[20 : 27] External impressions really matter to us. And we bring that with us into religion. We long to reduce God's law to a set of basic, simpler commands, external commands, so that we can tick off the law and feel we are morally right.

and feel superior by keeping the commands we've set. But Jesus clearly showed us that the commands of God are internal. They're about the heart. The Sermon on the Mount is a devastating thing if you're somebody who's trying to feel right with God by your own merit.

Jesus said, the command, you shall not murder. He said, if any of you says to a brother or sister, raka, then you've committed murder in your heart. Well, what does raka mean? It just means empty-headed.

It just means you feel superior to them. You think they're a bit daft. They're a bit of a fool. By feeling superior to them, that's where murder starts in the heart. Jesus internalized God's law.

He said, if you look at a woman or a man lustfully, you've committed adultery in your heart. If you look at what someone else has and you wish that you had it instead of them, then you've stolen from them in your heart.

[21 : 40] And the world sees straight through Christian hypocrisy, doesn't it? It hates hypocrisy. When we try and portray ourselves as better than we are, people discover the truth and they hate it.

So you get verse 24. Paul says of this Jewish audience in verse 24, as it is written, God's name is blasphemed among the nations because of you.

People see you and they criticize God. Folks, I wonder if that's the biggest barrier in Scotland today to people being interested in knowing God. Christians are meant to be a beautiful advert for God, that our lives are like a billboard attracting people to Him.

But when we are hypocrites, when we pretend that we're good and we're judgmental, our lives are like a giant keep clear sign for people when it comes to God.

And people in Scotland know that too well. I was watching Shetland and at the start of one of the murder mysteries, you met a teacher. She was an upstanding member of the community.

[22 : 52] She was judgmental. She was harsh, self-righteous, totally miserable. So of course, she's a pillar of the local church. And you know right from the start, she's done it, hasn't she?

Because that's how people view Christians. Claiming to be good, judging others, miserable, no joy, and actually, on the inside, hidden from others, they're just as bad as everyone else.

Think about Robbie Burns, his poem, Holy Willie's Prayer. We had to study it at Theological College. A brilliant satire about a man, Holy Willie, who thanks God that he's not like all those heathens out there, but admits in his prayer to God how rotten he is.

He's a total scoundrel. But he thinks he's all right because he ticks the religious boxes. Think of a friend who's a solicitor who says that when you're getting a witness statement from somebody accused of something, if early on in the witness statement they say that they are an upstanding member of their local church, all the lawyers just roll their eyes.

They think, oh, they must have done it. There we are. It's the giveaway. They're a Christian. And folks, it's such a difficult problem, isn't it, to get to grips with because doing good stuff for God is good.

[24 : 06] God wants us to do good stuff for him. He wants us to be distinctive from the world, to shine like stars in the world. So we want to be people who don't steal from others, who don't have an affair, who are faithful in our marriages.

We want to be in the world and not of the world, transformed by God's grace. But the problem is that when we make progress in that, what happens is our sinful hearts see the progress and use it to look down on others.

And most dangerously of all, we stop relying on God's Savior, Jesus, for our right standing before him. So we think, God will accept me because I'm on the coffee rota at St. Silas.

I'm on the welcoming team. I was on the vestry. I served two terms on vestry. I went to seminary. I've never missed the central prayer meeting. I host a horn group.

I've been at St. Silas 17 years and four months. We take the things we should be doing, but we use them and depend on them to feel superior.

[25 : 11] And it's hard to spot in your own life, but some signs of that creeping into your life would be things like that you feel smug or you're very sensitive to criticism because we're finding our identity in our good works so we are very defensive when people criticize us or we are anxious because we're trying to justify ourselves all the time or when we come to church and we hear a sermon, we don't feel challenged ourselves.

We don't find the word of God to be living and active, sharper than a double-edged sword, penetrating us, crushing us, piercing us so that it can show us Christ, then point us to Him and give us relief and comfort.

Now instead, we kind of think, well, the challenge is for other people around here. I'm so glad that sermon today spoke like that because some people needed to hear it. Or we feel disappointed with God because we think that God owes us some stuff for the service we've given Him.

Well, we need to be reawakened to how terrifyingly beautiful God's law is. It's like Mount Everest and our good works in our lives. They're like little molehills before Mount Everest, miles short of where they need to be.

And yet we see someone else's molehill is a bit smaller than ours and we think, oh, I'm doing all right instead of seeing the standard that we need. We're completely silenced by God's law.

[26 : 36] So those are the wonderful but terrifying facts about God, the fairness of God's justice and the beauty of God's law. So where do we go from that? Well, our third point is the riches of God's kindness.

All across this pretty dark chapter, there are these shafts of light shining in. If we're trusting in our own good works for God's pleasure and God's acceptance, then we're meant to feel devastated by chapter 2 of Romans.

Paul wants us to feel as though we're hanging off a cliff edge and we're about to fall off. But he does that because God has provided the solution. So back in verse 4, he urges us, don't show contempt for the riches of God's kindness, forbearance and patience.

Not realizing that God's kindness is intended to lead you to repentance. Repentance is just a change of direction. It's just turning back to God in your heart and your mind.

And there's a promise in verse 7. In verse 7, to those who by persistence do good and seek glory, honor and immortality, God will give eternal life.

[27 : 49] The direction of their life has changed back to God. So how can any of us repent and change the direction of our lives? How can we turn from our idols and live? Well, only if God offers to give us a new heart.

At the end of the chapter, he talks about circumcision. Circumcision was the marker for Jews, that they were God's people, they were in the covenant that God had made, the agreement God had made with mankind, that you trusted God's promises, you were one of his people.

But look at verse 29. He says, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly and circumcision is circumcision of the heart by the spirit, not by the written code.

Such a person's praise is not from other people, but from God. So how do we get this circumcision of the heart that we need, this new heart from God? Well, circumcision, don't think about it too much, but it was God's sign to Abraham and his descendants that if they broke the covenant, if they turned away from God, they'd be cut off from the people.

It's a picture of being cut off from God. And in Colossians chapter 2, another New Testament letter, Paul says that Christians are circumcised in their hearts when Jesus died on the cross for us.

[29 : 10] Because at the cross, he was cut off from God so that he could bear the weight of all of our law-breaking, all the things that we do against God. And we can only accept that if the spirit is at work in us.

But when the spirit breathes new life into our hearts, we see Jesus' death differently and his resurrection and we see that it was for us and that that love for us displayed moves us to turn back to God.

Because we think to ourselves by the spirit in our hearts, if the Son of God could see me in my disgusting self-righteousness and yet still choose to set his love on me, that he would leave the comfort of heaven and come and die in my place, cut off from God for my superiority and my sin. How could I not turn back to God when I see a display of God's love like that? And when you do that, when you accept that, it is a wonderful thing. It means that you're completely liberated from having to prove yourself to be a good person.

It doesn't matter what people think of you anymore because God knows what you're really like, even on the inside, and he loves you anyway. We can let go of the anxiety of human religion that switches you in life between pride and despair.

[30 : 33] Pride, when you feel like you've had a good day and you've kept the commands you've set for yourself and you think, God must be really glad that I'm on his team. And then despair the next day when you do something against your own standards and you think, oh no, I'm back out of God's grace.

Now instead, we know that our status before God is nothing to do with our own performance, our own behavior. it affects us as a community.

It means that as a community of people, we can walk through life with a fresh humility. I remember having a conversation with a leader of a large church in Australia and he said to me that, he said 95, in his experience, he said 95% of the problems in a church are caused by two things.

One is problems within the staff team. That was his experience. The second thing was self-righteousness. He said it's a much bigger problem than sin.

It's self-righteousness because self-righteousness makes us unforgiving. It makes us resentful, pushy, we feel entitled, we think things have to go my way because I'm the righteous one.

[31 : 45] And Romans 2 invites us to be humble, just to be honest about how sinful we really are so that we can then turn to the riches of God's kindness and rely on him with complete confidence.

And it means that whatever we face this week, we can look at the cross and be thrilled by God's love for us. There was a Christian preacher, Charles Simeon, who said this.

He said, there are two objects that I have ever desired to behold. The one is my own vileness and the other is the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

And I've always thought they should be viewed together. The more I can see that I'm a great sinner, the more I see Christ as a great saviour. Let's pray together.

We'll have a moment of quiet and then there's a prayer inside the sheets underneath the questions for reflection. And I'll say that prayer after a minute just to lead us in it.

[32 : 46] But you can have a look at that prayer first. Let's have a moment of quiet to have a think about what God's been saying to us. Gracious Heavenly Father, I praise you for your justice, for the riches of your kindness, for your forbearance and patience to lead me to repentance.

I'm sorry that I have passed judgment on others but failed to live up to those standards myself. I'm sorry that I fall so short of your beautiful law.

You have given me the light of your commands and I've dishonoured you by being known as yours and yet breaking them in what I've done and should not have done, in what I should have done and have failed to do, in who I've pretended to be and have not been.

Have mercy on me. Thank you that on the cross I see Jesus cut off from you for my sin so that by his death my debt is paid and in his resurrection I'm given new life.

Thank you for the gift of your spirit. May he continue to establish in me a pure heart an undivided heart that moved by your love I might seek glory, honour and life from you from now on to the glory of your name.

[34 : 28] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.