

God Doesn't Play Favorites

Romans 2:6-11

May 7, 2017

Introduction:

After I graduated from seminary, I ended up spending some time working as a substitute teacher during my extended pastoral job search. There was one teacher I substituted for a number of times who liked me enough that she offered to let me serve as her long-term substitute for three months while she was gone for maternity leave. Suddenly I went from random single-day jobs to being responsible for teaching the same 7th grade class from March through the end of the school year.

If nothing else, I learned that teaching is hard work! To all you teachers out there, I have the upmost respect for the difficult job you do every day. And if I might add another thing I learned, it's this: as a teacher, it's easy to play favorites. I had a class of about 25 seventh graders and I can assure you there were some kids I liked way more than others. Most of the boys in the class were fine, but there was this group of girls who made my time difficult. They were disrespectful and rude and were all attitude with me all the time. So when it came time to grading, I can't say I smiled as favorably on their work as I did other kids who behaved in class and treated me with respect. And if they wanted to use the bathroom or get a drink, I was far less willing to let them go than I was with other students. Maybe that made me a bad teacher, but I almost couldn't help but act more favorably towards the good students and be far harsher with the rude and disrespectful ones.

Well, while I certainly can't say I didn't play favorites, one thing I can say is that God does not share in my failures in that regard. Unlike me, God doesn't play favorites. When it comes to God's judgment, he doesn't have two different standards or give one group of people a pass on something that he refuses a different group of people to get away with. God will give to each of us in accordance with what we have or haven't done without grading a select few on a sliding scale.

So let's see what our text has to say about God's impartiality towards us by opening your Bible to the second chapter of Romans, which can be found on pg. 940 of the pew Bibles. This morning our focus is going to be on v. 6-11 of Romans 2. Paul has moved from condemnation of people in general for their failure to honor and give thanks to God for what they can know about him from creation in chapter 1 to now addressing primarily Jews in order to demonstrate that they have no right to look down their noses at the pagan Gentiles because they've engaged in the same sinful practices. Last week we saw Paul lumping them into the same boat as the pagans in terms of their deeds while today he reminds them that they're also in the same boat when it comes to God's judgment. So let's see what Paul says about this by following along as I read Romans 2:6-11. **“He will render to each one according to his works: to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury. There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. For God shows no partiality.”**

These verses are arranged in what is known as a chiasm. I've laid out the idea of what that looks like in the bulletin insert. Each statement has a parallel idea that re-emphasizes or restates the original statement. You can see what I mean if you look at how the passage is structured in the bulletin insert:

- A. God will judge everyone equitably (v.6)
- B. Those who do well will receive eternal life (v. 7)
- C. Those who are self-seeking will suffer wrath (v. 8)
- C'. Those who do evil will face tribulation (v. 9)
- B'. Those who do good will receive glory (v. 10)
- A'. God judges without partiality (v. 11)

So as we go through this passage, we're going to take these pairs together and work our way to the center of the chiasm. So let's begin with the outer two pair of statements which tells us that...

1. God is impartial in his judgment (v. 6 & 11)

Paul says in v. 6 that God **“will render to each one according to his works”** because in v. 11 he says, **“God shows no partiality.”** So why is Paul bringing this up? Well, it's because Paul knows his audience. The church in Rome was composed of both Jews and Gentiles and much of what he said in chapter 1 about God's wrath was especially applicable to the Gentiles. The Jews who were reading chapter one would have readily nodded their heads in agreement with Paul's assessment of the sins of the Gentile world. But Paul's point isn't to just to remind them of how bad those pagan Gentiles are. The goal of chapter 2 is for Paul to say in essence, “You Jews aren't any better! You do the same things they do.” That was the point of the message last week: we can't dare look down our noses at other people for their sin when in reality we don't fare any better.

But Paul also knows that a Jewish reader could respond with a “Yeah, but...” response. “Yeah, that's true, but here's why I'm an exception.” If you have kids, you might be familiar with the old, “Yeah, but...” response. “Yeah, I hit her, but she was being mean to me.” “Yeah, I took that toy from my brother, but I had it first.” “Yeah, I know I'm home past my curfew, but I really needed to go with my friend over to McDonalds.” You get the idea. Well, the Jews had their own “Yeah, but...” response. A Jewish person could say, “Yeah, I do those things too, but I'm a Jew, one of God's chosen people, so God won't judge me. All those animal sacrifices took care of those sins.”

You see, many Jews mistakenly thought their covenant status as Jews granted them immunity from God's wrath. They thought by virtue of their relationship to Abraham and the fact that they made grain offerings and animal sacrifices that God's judgment wasn't something they needed to concern themselves with. “Yeah, I sin sometimes, but I'm Jewish, so God won't hold it against me.”

Now we may not be Jewish, but that idea hasn't exactly disappeared has it? How often do professing Christians have a “Yeah, but...” response to their sin? I can readily recall my understanding of Christianity in high school as, “Jesus died for my sins so I can live

my life as I want since all my sins have been paid for already.” Maybe some of you here still operate that way. “Yeah, I sin sometimes, I admit it, but Jesus paid it all so I don’t need to worry about anything.” So as a result, you don’t take sin very seriously and don’t give yourself to the pursuit of holiness. You think to yourself, “If I’m really righteous or just kind of righteous it doesn’t really matter in the end because I’m a Christian and I’ll go to heaven either way.”

So if you’re thinking that way, then this passage is going to serve as a startling splash of cold water on your face. When Paul says in v. 6 that God “**will render to each one according to his works**” that applies to everyone, including you. God doesn’t show partiality in that he’s going to allow you to escape judgment. You don’t get a pass as a Christian any more than the Jews did. Scripture repeatedly mentions the final judgment when all people must stand before God. Jesus spoke of the final judgment in Matthew 25 where the sheep and the goats were judged on the basis of what they did or didn’t do. That is a reality for everyone. Christians won’t be standing off to the side watching as spectators while the wicked are judged; we have to stand before the same throne of God Almighty as they do. When it comes to God’s judgment, no one has a “Get out of Jail Free” card. God will judge everyone, equally, impartially, and render to each one according to his works. No one will say “Yeah, but…” because God doesn’t play favorites. Everyone must face the judgment throne of God.

Now how that will pan out is what is sandwiched between v. 6 & 11. There are only two options: either eternal life in heaven or the eternal wrath of God in hell. We’re going to talk about those two options shortly, but before we do, we need to pause a moment and grasp the seriousness of what this passage is saying. This passage is telling us clearly and unambiguously that everyone will face God for judgment upon death, and God will either give you eternal life or eternal wrath, either heaven or hell. Those are the only two options and no one is the exception to the rule. So if this is true, and it is, then there isn’t any matter more pressing in your life than the question of whether you will be the recipient of eternal joy or eternal misery

So before we go on, let me first say to you older folks in our congregation, you need to recognize that this day is rapidly approaching. Your life may only be measured in the few years or months you have left. Let the urgency of the hour drive you to be sure that eternal life awaits you rather than God’s wrath.

For you younger adults, life can be pretty busy with work and raising kids and home projects and sports and all the other things that make us wish we had 30 hours in our days. But I say to you, don’t become easily distracted. Beware of being so invested in the here and now that you forget to store up treasures for eternity. Don’t wait for later to pursue God when you ought to be doing so right now.

Teenagers, don’t just live for today. I know it seems you have your whole life ahead of you, and there will be time to pursue God later, when you’re older, but that day may not come. Teenagers die in auto accidents just as easily as the elderly, perhaps more so in light of you being distracted by texting and friends. God’s judgment may seem to be a far-off future, but it may not be. Even if you live a long life, it goes fast and don’t think

you will suddenly develop a desire to seek God in your old age when you've spent your youth hardening your heart towards him. Be serious about it now.

Children, I want you to listen to me carefully right now. This isn't a sermon just for grown-ups; it's for you because one day you too will die. I hope it's not for a long time from now but it will happen. And when you die, you will either go to heaven to be with God forever or you will go to hell and face his anger. Maybe some of you have thought about this and it makes you scared. I know the thought of it frightened me when I was a young boy. But I want you to know you don't need to be scared because God gave you Jesus to save you from hell if you believe in him. So listen to this sermon because it applies to you as well and make sure you talk to your mom or dad to help you know for certain how you can go to heaven.

So then, we need to talk about the two possible options that can result in God's judgment on our lives, and the first one is found in v. 7 & 10, which is that...

2. **God will grant eternal life to those who seek God (v. 7 & 10)**

Look back in your Bible now at v. 7. Here's option one: **"To those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life."** And then dropping down to the parallel statement in v. 10, **"But glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek."**

There are a couple of ways to understand this: either Paul is talking about something that is only a hypothetical possibility or something that is an actual possibility. The first way, and the way I think contextually makes the most sense to me, is that Paul is describing a way to gain eternal life through works that is theoretically possible but practically impossible. He's saying that should someone spend their life always doing good, obeying God perfectly, honoring God and seeking his glory in every thought, word, and deed, such a person would earn eternal life. In other words, eternal life could be earned, provided one lived righteously without sin throughout his entire life.

Now this is certainly theoretically possible. Eternal life is available to those who never sin, who obey God without fail from cradle to the grave. But the problem is of course that none of us do so. We all sin. We can't meet these conditions. Plus, the whole point of this section of Romans is to demonstrate that we haven't given God the glory, honor, and thanks he deserves and instead we're guilty of no shortage of unrighteous deeds. So when Paul says this, he knows that none of his readers have qualified. Any hopes of earning eternal life by means of our own unblemished righteousness is dashed as soon as we sin, which we've all done, many times over.

So on the one hand, there isn't hope to be found here. You aren't supposed to look into the mirror of God's Word in v. 7 & 10 and see yourself there and imagine that you can qualify. This isn't meant to serve as an alternative possibility of gaining eternal life through good works. While it is theoretically possible, in reality we are all sinners who have long ago failed to live in a manner that would earn for us God's good pleasure.

But there is another possibility that Paul may be insinuating here - and some Bible scholars take it this way - and that is these conditions can actually be fulfilled, but only by Christians. They see it as Paul describing here not what an unregenerate person must do in order to gain salvation but rather what it characterizes a person who has been saved by grace. It is those people who've been saved by faith in Christ who then in turn strive to do good and seek to honor God and bring him glory that God will judge as being truly his children by faith in Christ.

Let me explain a bit. Remember, we're saved by faith alone, but if faith is alone without works, then it shows you never had real faith to begin with. So at the final judgment, the way God determines who is saved and who isn't is by examining the evidence of faith as expressed by our works, or as Jesus once put it, "You'll know a tree by its fruits." If God examines your life and he sees that you're characterized by being a person who sought out God's glory, who wanted to be honored by God by hearing him say to you, "Well done, good and faithful servant," if you were pursuing immortality by storing up treasures in heaven in obedience to Christ, then those fruits will serve as evidence that you had genuine faith.

So Paul may be talking about more than just a theoretical person who earns heaven by his perfect righteousness; he may have in mind here a believer who shows by his fruit that the faith that saves really does reside in him. If you're this kind of person, then it means you have genuine faith and therefore that faith will save you, but the way God determines that is by judging your works.

If that is part of Paul's intention here, then there is an implicit challenge to us to ask ourselves if this is true of us: Are you one who is seeking the glory of God in your life? Are you striving both to honor Christ in your life and to receive the honor he will give to those who faithfully served him? Is the pursuit of good works done for the glory of God the driving passion of your heart? When you stand before God, he will look for such things as proof of your faith; will he find them?

It reminds me of a question I heard long ago that asks: if you were to be put on trial for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you? Could a jury be presented with such clear and undeniable evidence about you that they would have no question that you were a follower of Christ? It's a thought-provoking question, but there's more truth to it than we might care to admit. I doubt you will ever be put on trial in any human court to see if you're guilty of being a Christian, but you will face just that question before the heavenly court of God. The evidence of your thoughts, words, and deeds is how God will judge whether you had faith in him or whether your religion was nothing more than a flimsy shell that was hollow inside.

So then, what we do matters. Even if this second understanding of the passage isn't what Paul is insinuating, the reality of God's judgment of our works as evidence of our faith still stands. God will judge us all, and he will know whether our faith was real by our deeds. Well, there's another option that can result from God's impartial judgment which is brought out in v. 8 & 9 and that brings us now to our third point which is...

3. God will grant eternal death to those who pursue evil (v. 8 & 9)

Look back in your Bibles at v. 8-9 with me. **“But for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury. There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek...”**

Paul utilizes multiple descriptions of the kind of person who will be condemned and what that condemnation will be like. First, he describes them as **“self-seeking.”** A person who isn't seeking after God is striving for his own glory and honor. Rather than giving God thanks and praise, such a person looks out only for number 1: himself. All of his life is oriented upon gaining respect, honor, power, prestige, status, and pleasure all for his or her own benefit. Everything is calculated in terms of how it can benefit me.

Furthermore, Paul says such an individual does not **“obey the truth, but obey(s) unrighteousness.”** There is an echo of what Paul said back in chapter 1 about how people exchanged the truth of God for a lie. Rather than strive to obey the truth of God's Word, they give themselves over to unrighteousness, to behavior that is sinful because it violates God's Word and takes no regard of God's glory.

Then in verse 9 he simply calls what they do **“evil.”** Anything we do without regard for God is ultimately evil. Paul said anything not done in faith is sin and therefore evil, even if to our eyes it may look like a good thing. Men can do acts of kindness towards others that are done for self-seeking purposes, without the goal of pleasing God, and so such deeds are evil. Even our good works are like filthy rags in God's sight if they are not done out of faith and love for him.

The result of such a self-seeking, disobedient, godless life is then described with four words: **“wrath and fury”** in v. 8 and **“tribulation and distress.”** The first two terms describe God's side of the equation. God's righteous wrath against our sin will be fully revealed. God will no longer tolerate our sin. Though for a time he left our sins unpunished, no longer will he hold back his hand. The wrath of God will bring about the final just punishment we deserve for our sin and he will do so with **“fury.”** This word was used to describe how Pharaoh raged against Moses in Hebrews 11 or how the Jews rushed at Jesus in order to throw him off a cliff in Luke 4. The wrath of God will come with great fury against sinners who repeatedly rejected him and indulged in lifetime of sinful rebellion.

And the result on the human side of the equation is **“tribulation and distress.”** But this is no mere bad day; Scripture speaks of the final result of God's wrath as being cast into the Lake of Fire, a place of outer darkness, forever separated from God's presence, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. It is described as eternal punishment, where the fire never goes out, as the second death. In short, the wrath of God will lead to eternal distress as those who have rejected him will spend eternity suffering the just and unrelenting punishment of God for their sins in hell. At that point, there will be no opportunity for repentance, no second chances, and no reprise from the dreadful and furious wrath of God poured out upon the wicked forever and ever.

Now notice again what Paul says at the end of v. 9. He says this is true **“for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek...”** Are you a human being? Then this applies to you. It doesn't matter if you're Jewish or Greek or German or Mexican or American: God's wrath will be poured out upon every human being who does evil and every single one of us is guilty of doing just that. Paul later in Romans says that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” Young or old, men or women, Republican or Democrat, rich or poor, there are two options and two options only that await us in the near future: either eternal life or eternal death, heaven for those who have lived righteously and hell for those who have sinned and the troubling truth is all of us have sinned. Hell is the just punishment of God we have all earned for our sin and it is what awaits everyone at death for God doesn't play favorites.

Conclusion

But thankfully this does not need to be our final end. Paul is reminding us of God's wrath against sin so that he can help us see why the gospel is such gloriously good news. Yes, we've all sinned and the furious wrath of God is what we justly deserve, but God is more than merely just. He is far more than a judge who coldly sentences those guilty of sin to hell. God is both just and merciful, full of wrath yet also full of grace. Knowing our helpless sinful condition, knowing we have not honored nor loved him nor obeyed him as we ought, he did for us what we could not do for ourselves. He sent his Son, the Lord Jesus, to live the righteous life we should have lived. Jesus is the only one who actually met the requirements for eternal life mentioned in v. 7 & 10.

Then Jesus did something amazing: even though he did not deserve to suffer God's wrath since he did not sin, Jesus took our sin upon himself. He chose to suffer in our place, to receive God's furious wrath on the cross as our substitute. As a result, God's wrath against our sin was poured out on the cross instead of being something that awaits us when we die. As a result, we need not fear hell because Jesus paid it all for us already. The cross took care of God's wrath against our sin provided we simply believe it. The good news of the gospel is that God has provided a way to avoid his wrath by believing in Jesus, that he is God and Savior, that his death purchased the pardon for our sin by him suffering the punishment we deserve.

So as we close, we must bear in mind two things: first, hell is the just punishment for our sins which we, one and all, are guilty of. There is no prospect more dreadful that we face than the certainty of God's furious wrath against our sin. But second, there is no promise more glorious than the certainty that Jesus paid it all, that for all those who turn from their self-seeking sinful ways and trust in Christ, God's wrath against them has been satisfied in Christ. Fear hell - it is right that you do so - but let fear be driven out by faith in Christ. He faced the hell of God's wrath so you wouldn't have to. Let's go to him now in prayer.

This sermon was addressed originally to the people at Grace Fellowship of Waterloo, IA by Pastor Rob Borkowitz. Copyright 2017.