

Romans 2:1-11 - Three Hard Truths

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Preacher: Steve Palframan

- [0 : 0 0] Good morning, church. Good morning. I'm going to be reading Romans 2 verses 1 to 11. 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. God will repay each person according to what they have done. God will repay each other.
- [1 : 4 5] But glory, honour and peace for everyone who does good. First for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For God does not show favouritism. Thank you. Amen.
- Well, do keep the passage open in front of you. Let's pray. Ask for the Lord's help as we come to his word. Let's pray together. Heavenly Father, as we've listened to your word read, we realise that our territory this morning is difficult.
- Perhaps not always difficult to understand, but certainly difficult to accept. Give us tender hearts, we pray. Pray, please, that the words that I say, the way that we all listen, might bring glory to you, might do us good. Speak by your spirit through your word, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.
- Amen. And answer them before they have a chance to say, you know, I know what you're thinking.
- Let me deal with that before you even have a chance to express it. And notice with me, that's exactly how chapter 2 starts. Take a look at verse 1. He says, you therefore have no excuse, you who pass judgment, on someone else.
- [3 : 3 0] Now, that means that Paul thinks here that the likely reaction that's going on in our minds or the minds of his first readers is that they will listen to what he has said in chapter 1 and they will pass judgment on somebody else.
- In other words, they'll hear what Paul has been saying and think, well, that's all very well, Paul, but I'm better than that. Thank you very much. Not me. Now, I know that you might have forgotten what we looked at a couple of weeks ago in chapter 1.
- But if you glance back there, you'll see, if you look at chapter 1, verse 18, that God's wrath, his anger at sin, says Paul, is visible in the world. It has been expressed. It's been revealed.
- It's been shown against the wickedness of people who suppress the truth by their wickedness. Now, Paul says, listen, some people will hear that and go, well, that's all very well, Paul, but I'm better than that.

But that's not me, they say. Imagine it like this. I don't know whether you can remember being back at school. Maybe some of you are at school and this is a live issue for you.

[4 : 34] But imagine that the school teacher is holding up a piece of homework, yeah? So that they hold it up in the front of class and it's not yours, it's someone else's, and it's really bad.

And so the teacher is laying into it. Look at this. It's a terrible mess. It's got coffee stains on it. It looks like they've written, you know, the pen that's broken.

It's terrible and messy. The answers are all incorrect. It was handed in late again. It's not even the right subject. And as you listen, you go, well, that's all very well, isn't it?

That's not actually my piece of homework. So go on, teacher. Give it to them. Sock it to them. What a loser. Now, that's the dynamic here in chapter two.

Paul thinks that as he articulates the mess in the world, there will be, as he does that, a bunch of people who listen to what he's saying and go, well, that's not me. I'm better than that.

[5 : 33] You go, Paul. You tell them, rotten world. You tell them. Now, it's worth saying, isn't it, that Paul is absolutely right to anticipate that because that happens an awful lot.

Maybe especially in churches. Churches are brilliant at condemning the wickedness of everybody else by wrongly assuming that they're better. They look down on others.

They moan about the violence of youth culture or the deterioration of society from the safety of their pew. In fact, we're all drawn, I think, to that response in one way or another. And Paul, this morning, anticipates that we might have a judgmental response.

And he takes what essentially is a preemptive strike at it. And he does that with three hard truths. Let me show them to you this morning. Hard truth, number one, for people who are judgmental, which really is all of us.

Hard truth, number one, you do the same things. You do the same things. Notice he says that twice in the passage. Look again at verse one. You, therefore, have no excuse.

[6 : 38] You who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge another, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment, what? Do the same things.

Again in verse three. See, when you, a mere human being, pass judgment on them and yet do the same things. In other words, the basic problem, says Paul, with this judgmentalism, which we all are tempted towards and we see particularly in religious groups, it seems, is it's hypocritical.

Because the difficult truth acknowledged only by the humble is that the problem in the world is not actually just a problem with everyone else. It's also a problem with me. Envy, murderous anger, strife, deceit, malice.

They aren't just everyone else's problems, are they? They're our problems too. Honestly, the trouble in our marriages, the trouble in my marriage is not a difficult wife.

You knew that anyway, didn't you? It's a difficult me. You know, the problem at work is not simply an unreasonable boss. It's an unreasonable me. The problem in our family is not that our parents are so strict, but that we're so unruly.

[7 : 53] But we can be really specific here, can't we? Because if you look down, it says these things, which I think is a direct reference back to chapter one, verse 29. Look back at what Paul has said in chapter one, verse 29.

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 have no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy.

Now, Paul, as he writes that list, thinks, well, that includes everybody. That's all of us. To one degree or another, we are all guilty in part or in full of the things that are on that list. But the religious person, the judger of others, thinks that their lives are not as bad as the people outside.

That means they're okay. But they're wrong. You do the same things, says Paul. But there's something else here, too. You see, it's possible that in some ways we might actually be slightly better than the world around us, right?

[9 : 00] It might be that you have been faithful to your marriage vows. It might be that you haven't murdered anyone. It might be that you try really hard to fight envy.

It might be that your life is not as chaotic and as messy as it might be. And Paul's point then is that even that is an experience of the kindness of God.

He's not giving you fully over to your desires. He has held you back. He's not let you be as bad as you might be. He's perhaps put someone in your life who gave you good advice at a crucial point. Perhaps he's given you access to a good education, a stable home, solid mental health.

He might have put someone in your life who gave you a strong moral framework. But, says Paul, that doesn't make you better. All of that is just a sign of God's kindness to you.

And we are wrong to assume that our experience of God's kindness, tolerance and patience is evidence that we're better than the world. Instead, that very kindness was intended to give you room to acknowledge your sin.

[10 : 00] Look at verse 4. What does he say? 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?

Well, this is the dynamic that we're talking about with the kids, isn't it? You've been given time to repent. You're sent to the room. You know, my mum used to say to me, I don't know whether one of your parents used to say this to you, she'd say, you just wait until your dad gets home, right?

And her point was not, listen, I've cancelled justice. You know, you just go off and do what you like. Don't worry about it. No, she was postponing justice.

And her hope in postponing justice was that I might come to my senses. But you knew, didn't you, at 6pm when your dad came home from work, justice would be served.

It's the same, isn't it? You see it all around. Wait until I get you home. It's a suspension, postponement of justice, not a cancelling. And the point of the delay is not so that you can carry on doing whatever it was you were doing in the first place.

[11 : 09] The point is that you might come to your senses. And that's it here. Final justice delayed by God. So that we might come to our senses. You know, our story might not quite be the chaos of Romans 1.

It might be. I know it is for some. But perhaps in God's kindness you've been given many blessings in life. Perhaps you were raised in a Christian home. Perhaps you had a youth leader who kept you on the straight and narrow.

Perhaps a sharp wit kept you from a bad crowd at school. Well, none of those things mean you're any better than anyone else. But God has been kind to you. And he has been kind to you not to make you proud.

But to bring you to repentance. To say to the Lord, Lord, without your kindness, I would be as lost as anybody. I'm sorry that the things I see going wrong in the world are there in my heart too.

I get angry with others when they cross me or disrespect me or rude to me. I look down on the violence of others but know that that's in my own heart too.

[12 : 09] Please forgive me, Lord. Hard truth number one is we do the same things. Hard truth number two is that we have the same heart.

You have the same heart. You might remember from a couple of weeks ago that the sins of wickedness listed at the end of chapter one are really the symptoms of a deeper problem.

They're the fruit of judgment on the state of people's hearts. The heart that rejects God is the fruit of that is immorality. You know, in our hearts we don't want God's moral rule.

So God removes his moral restraint. And then we see the wildness of everybody living for their desires. And Paul's second truth here is that for the person who is judgmental, especially in the context for the Jewish judgmental person, the religious person, their problem is exactly the same in their heart.

So it's not just that they do the same things, but their heart is the same. Verse five, because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart. Think about it like this.

[13 : 14] Imagine that for dinner tonight you have some friends around and you serve for them a delightful chicken dish. But what you don't realize as you serve this chicken dish to your friends who you've gathered for the evening is that the chicken is bad and the chicken is undercooked.

And so what happens a few hours later is that one of the parties starts vomiting all over the floor. Sorry to be so graphic, right? Another one develops a terrible headache.

Another one is in a crumpled heap on the floor making some inhuman noises. Another one has gone to the bathroom and you don't even want to know what's going on in the bathroom. Now imagine that someone walked into that scene.

Well, they might assume, mightn't they, that there are four different diseases in the room, right? There's one that makes you throw up. There's one that gives you a headache. There's one that curls you up in a ball on the floor.

And there's one that sends you to the bathroom to do who knows what, but it smells bad, right? You might assume that. The reality is, though, there is only one cause, but there are lots of different symptoms.

[14 : 23] And that's the same as this experience of the wrath of God in Romans 1, with wickedness piling up in the chaos of the broken world, right? So some people, they develop certain symptoms.

Other people develop others. You know, maybe with strong constitutions, they keep their sin down with religious rules and self-discipline, like the friend who's got a headache and isn't throwing up.

But actually, they're no better off because inside, the same trouble is there. They have exactly the same issue, but different presenting symptoms. Verse 8 describes the heart disease, if you like, in more detail.

It says we are self-seeking and reject the truth and follow evil. I wonder if we could press this home. I know it's difficult, but we must examine this, right?

Paul is saying that the problem in the world is the same as the problem in the church. That out there and in here is the same issue, which is that all of us, without exception, are self-seeking, not God-seeking.

[15 : 27] We are, if you like, turned in on ourselves. You know, we were made and created by God to be turned outwards, to live for him and his glory. But sin has turned us in on ourselves, so we look downwards to ourselves.

We are literally obsessed with our own plans, our own projects, our own aspirations and our own desires. Now, some people display that heart in immoral ways. They reject all the rules.

Well, I'm turned in on myself, so God's not there. I'm going to live for myself. I'm going to do whatever I please. And there's a trail of brokenness and heartache behind them. But others with the same self-obsession think, well, what's the best way for me to get what I want for my life?

Well, I know that God's there, so the best way is for me to be good so that God gives me what I want. So we pray. We attend church.

We serve in church. Not because actually we care about God. We want God to care about us. I don't care about God's desires. I care about my desires, and I want him to care about my desires.

[16 : 35] So we say things like, you know, God, you know that I've been going to church for a number of years now. I've served on rotas. I've prayed.

I even did that Bible in a year thing. But you know, God, I've been looking for a job, don't you? It's your time to deliver on that now. You know, God, I've been looking for a husband or a wife.

How about it, Lord? Have I done enough now? Or I said that conversion prayer. You know, don't you, when I was a child, I now take my own children to church.

It's now your turn to heal my mother. And Paul's point is that is exactly the same heart. It's a heart that's turned in on itself. It's self-seeking.

It's not God-seeking. And it means we're no better than the world. You know, don't you, Jesus' illustration of this is the parable of the lost son. Perhaps you know the story, right?

[17 : 36] The lost son, he runs away. He asks his father for his inheritance. He says, give it me now. It's kind of almost wishing his father dead, saying, can I have my money that I'm going to have when you die? I want it now.

So he takes the money and he runs off and he lives a wild life. He's partying and it's terrible and it's immoral. He comes to his senses. And he comes back to his father and he pleads for mercy from his father.

And his father welcomes him back into the home. He kills the fattened calf. They have a great party. And then you meet the older brother. Who's outside the party.

And complaining to his father. You've welcomed this guy back. He took all your money and he used it on wild living. Why don't I get a party?

I've obeyed you. I've done what you've said. I've always been here. And yet you've never thrown me a party like this. Why is that? And you realize, don't you, that the lost son in the story is not just the younger brother.

[18 : 36] It's the older brother too. The older brother isn't interested in the father either. The older brother is only interested in what he can get from the father.

He just assumes that he'll get it by obedience, not disobedience. And that's it here. Let me ask you, if I can say it gently this morning.

Might it be that we have some older brothers in the room? Maybe you look at the world of younger brothers and you say, I'm so grateful I'm not like that.

Maybe you assume that because you're not as bad as the younger brothers, you must be okay. God must be on my side.

Let me give you some diagnostic questions to see whether you might be an older brother this morning. You'll know that you're like an older brother because, well, basically your fervor for the Christian life will be directly related to your desire for things to go well, right?

[19 : 39] So if things are good, you won't pray much. But if things are bad, you'll be praying lots. When things are really bad, you will stop praying and be angry with God for not delivering on the things that you thought he should deliver.

Another, I think, diagnostic is not only that, but you'll be crushed by your mistakes or by people pointing out things that you do wrong. Particularly things that you do wrong which disobey God's words.

You'll be utterly defeated by that. Why will you be defeated by that? Well, because in doing that, you're not turning me back to Savior Jesus. You are destroying the thing I'm relying on to deliver me the life I want.

Let me say, if that's you, and in a sense, we're all a bit like that, aren't we? If that's you this morning, please don't stay there. It's a dangerous place to be. Instead, come to the Lord and say, listen, Lord, I know.

Not only do I do the same things, but I think the same way. My heart is the same. My desires have only really been for myself. Please, Lord, have mercy on me.

[20 : 50] Please liberate me from this sort of prison of my own desires. Liberate me to live for you. You know, hard truth number one, we do the same things. Hard truth number two, we have the same heart.

Hard truth number three, which I think is the most difficult, is you face the same judgment. Verse five that we looked at with the children. 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.

God will repay each person according to what they have done. I think in isolation, I think that must be just one of the most shocking and terrifying verses in the Bible, right?

People get really bent out of shape by some of the stuff in chapter one. I think this is really difficult. Paul here articulates exactly what Jesus taught to, that there is a day of judgment to come.

There is a day coming when everybody in this room, each of us will stand before the Lord Jesus. All of us without exception, before God the holy judge and have to give an account for our lives.

[22 : 03] And justice will be done. Verse 11 tells you there will be no favoritism on that day. No one will be getting a free pass because they attended church or came from a good home.

In fact, that kind of judgmental, I'm better than the rest of you, is really just making it worse. We are storing up wrath, not dealing with it. Now, our passage here is really clear that on that day, everyone will be judged by the same criteria.

Repaid according to what they have done. Justice proportional to wickedness. Look at verse 7. Now, I grant you these verses.

These verses are confusing. They seem maybe at first to be contradicting what he's been saying before, that we're all in the same boat. He does now seem to be introducing a group of good people who are safe in judgment.

Who are there? Well, just keep your eyes down on the passage and work through it with me. Let me try and show this to you. Notice the contrast from verse 7 and verse 8. Verse 8 describes sin as self-seeking rejection of the truth.

[23 : 27] The same sin as is the problem in the world that we were seeing in chapter 1. And verse 7 says, safety on the day of judgment comes from the opposite of verse 8. Not self-seeking, but glory-seeking.

Literally seeking after the glorious one. Seeking his honor and the immortal life that comes only from him. And if you do that, says Paul, then you will, verse 7, receive eternal life.

And verse 10, receive glory, honor, and peace. Whether you're from a Jewish background or a Gentile background from the nations. Now, let's be clear. Paul is not teaching that you're saved by good works.

You know, it's not that when we face God on judgment day, he will weigh good works against bad works. And if your good works win over your bad works, then, you know, you're let into glory. It's not that.

That would be a contradiction of everything else that Paul says in Romans. And Paul is not an idiot. And he's writing under the inspiration of the Spirit. And the Spirit is not an idiot. He knows what he's writing. He's being consistent.

[24 : 30] So it's not that. And actually, we're told that we are all alike. We are all wicked. So if you look at verse 4, it's repentance that Paul says God is trying to lead people to.

And that repentance is literally a change of heart. It is instead of being turned in on ourselves, it is a turning back from that to be turned out from ourselves. To be towards God.

To look for his glory, his honor, and life in him. And if that's not there, if that desire for glory and honor and immortal life, well, if that's not there, neither is repentance.

Let me try and illustrate this for a moment so that you can have a few moments to think about it. Imagine that you're a PE teacher. PE teaching is the easiest job in the world, right, I believe.

Basically, you just get to run around and you call it work, right? So you're a PE teacher and you're taking a bunch of children to Paddington Rec for a running race.

[25 : 33] So you get down to Paddington Rec and you say, right, listen, kids. It's a race and we're all running. And if you cross this line, you win the prize. So what you have to do is you have to run clockwise around the track, get back to here, cross the line, you win a prize.

It's really simple. I'm a PE teacher. I can't make it complicated even if I wanted to, right? It's dead simple. So the kids, they're all there at the line. And you get on your marks, get set, go.

And all the children, without exception, turn around and run the opposite way around the track. Right? Some of them run in great style. Yeah, you know, it's incredible.

Their knees are up, heads back, running. Others of them are vaping. They're in groups. They're kind of muttering along and walking around. Right? But all of them are going in the wrong direction.

So none of them will receive the prize. Now that's it here. Without repentance, without turning back to God, it is impossible to do the glory, honor, seeking words of verse 7.

[26 : 45] No. Because we are running in the wrong direction. Because we are in it for ourselves. We're seeking our own glory. Our own honor. Our own lives.

We're only in it for ourselves. Now it might be this morning that you're running in the wrong direction in a really stylish way. Well, well done you. But you're going in the wrong direction faster than anybody else is.

This is the shocking truth of Romans chapter 2. Let me try and summarize it as bluntly as I can. Hell will be full of religious people. That's what Paul is saying.

Hell will be full of religious people. People who thought they were safe because they weren't as bad as the world around them. People who thought they were safe, thought they were Christians because they prayed a prayer when they were a child and then just lived for themselves like everybody else did.

Surely God owed them salvation, but he never did. Maybe they attended church a few times. They took the Lord's Supper. God will cut them a deal on judgment day, won't he? No, because they were running in the wrong direction.

[27 : 50] Running towards self, but with a kind of Christian style. When their lives are basically indistinguishable from everyone else around them. They prayed for success. They thought that if they received it, then everything was good.

And the shock on judgment day will be that God shows no favoritism. Judgment is the same for everyone. And self-seeking good works will be exposed as being as unworthy as self-seeking wickedness.

We're going to skip over the rest of chapter 2. We're trying to get our way through Romans reasonably quickly so that we aren't still in Romans in 15 years time. But let me jump to the end and show you just something from the last couple of verses.

Here you need to note that Paul is using the word Jew slightly differently at the end of the chapter. So his reference here is not to ethnic Jews as a nation or a group, but to mean the people of God.

People who belong to God and who will receive eternal life from God on judgment day. And his question at the end is, how can you tell who God's people are? How can you know? Well, if you ask someone at the synagogue, they would tell you, oh, it's easy.

[28 : 59] You can tell who God's people are because God's people are circumcised, he says. You can tell, it's obvious. But what does Paul say? Verse 28.

A person is not a member of God's people who is one only outwardly. Nor is circumcision merely outward and physical.

No, a person is a Jew, a person is a member of God's people 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. Here's the point. God's people are those who are changed from the inside out. It's their hearts that are changed first.

Now, the fact that it's our hearts that need to be changed, what does that mean? It's impossible for us, yeah? Circumcision is enough to make you wince, right?

[29 : 58] Circumcision of the heart, that's impossible. We can't do that, can we? We can't remove our hearts to circumcise them. How could we do that? Well, only God can change our hearts.

Circumcision of the heart is done, what does he say, verse 29? By the spirit. That's the way it's done. Only God can change us. And if God so changes our hearts, what will pour out of us?

Well, we'll be liberated from having to earn salvation by our works. And our good works can be genuinely good, because we're doing them not so that we can get our own way, but so that God might be glorified.

God, you've saved me. You've changed my heart. I love you. I want to live for your praise and glory. Lord, I know I'm weak and I'm stumbling, and my good works are flawed in so many ways, but I'm doing this for you and your praise and your glory.

Grace-fueled obedience. I was listening to an interview this week on a podcast with a couple of guys who do prison ministry.

[31 : 01] They're in America, and they're sharing the gospel with guys who have very messy lives, and lots of them become Christians in prison. And then they are released, and they find their way to local churches. And the interviewer at this stage in the podcast asked them the question.

He said, well, how does that go? How good are churches at receiving these men? It was men in that instance who have been converted in prison and then come to church.

And there was pause, and the guy said, not well. Churches find it difficult to welcome them. Why? Well, because Romans 2. They think they're better than them.

But Romans 2 actually says we're all the same. We do the same things. We have the same heart. We face the same judgment. And on that day, face to face with the Lord Jesus, our only hope is a transformation of our lives that only he is able to do.

So maybe this morning you've been a Christian for a long time. Let me encourage you. Don't forget that God did it for you, not the other way around.

[32 : 08] Don't forget that he circumcised your heart. You could never do it for yourself. And if you're not a Christian this morning, if you know that you're a sinner, if you know that you've lived a life that's been turned in on itself, that you've been living for your own desires, whatever they might be, as if your life was your own and independence was your dream, let me say to you this morning, welcome.

We're all like that by nature. But we found that Jesus can change us. He can liberate us from the terrible prison of our own desires, to live for him and his glory, to the praise of his name, that when we face him on that day, we can have hope that he will enter us into glory because of what he has done for us.

Praise his name. Let me pray. Heavenly Father, we want to confess before you that we find it very easy to pass judgment on others.

and very difficult to consider the state of our own hearts and our own lives. Please, we pray, forgive us that we do the same things as everybody does.

We know what it is to envy, to be greedy, to deceive, to fight with others. We know what it is to be arrogant and boastful.

[33 : 54] And Lord, we know that those things come from the same heart, which is turned in on itself. And that for that, we face the same judgment as all the world.

So please, we pray, circumcise our hearts, change us from the inside out. And Lord, for those of us who have experienced that, we praise your name, that we see ourselves living lives that we cannot explain other than your goodness and your kindness.

The fact that we love you, that we want to live for you, that we want to praise your name, that we desire to be with you, it's not because we're better than anyone, but because in your kindness, you have turned us to repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus.

And we praise his name. Amen.