THE SELF-RIGHTEOUS

Romans 2:1–16

Key Verse: 2:4

“Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?”

Have you ever thought you deserved something? You might have worked hard and felt like you deserved your paycheck. Or you might have done your best to help somebody and felt like you deserved a little appreciation. In their advertising, companies often tell us we “deserve” whatever it is they’re trying to sell us. Sometimes, deserving something can be a matter of fairness, but this can easily morph into a sense of entitlement. Frankly, this sense of entitlement can make people obnoxious; what’s worse, it can alter our perception of reality. Paul could see that this sense of entitlement was hindering many of his fellow Jews from accepting the gospel message.

In the last 15 verses of chapter 1 Paul writes of the Gentiles’ sins, which are obvious. But in the 29 verses of chapter 2 (twice as long) he writes of the Jews’ sins, which are not-so-obvious. And in the first half of the chapter he gets into the nature of God’s judgment. He’s trying to help the Jews get out of their sense of entitlement, which was making them blind to their own sins and judgmental toward outsiders. But this isn’t just the Jews’ story. The Gentiles in Paul’s day had their own kind of self-righteous people, called “Stoics.” In fact, in every time and culture and ethnicity there are always self-righteous people who feel that they’re right, that they’re special. So the question is, how can we get out of our own sense of entitlement? How can we overcome our own bad habit of judging others? And how can this help us become more genuinely open to the gospel? May God open our hearts and speak to us through his words today.

Read verse 1. When Paul’s audience heard about the sins of the Gentiles mentioned in chapter 1, they were probably thinking, “Aren’t those people *terrible*?!?” But here, they themselves are suddenly rebuked. Paul had said in 1:20 that the Gentiles are “without excuse,” but in 2:1 he adds that these people “have no excuse,” either. Who’s he talking about? He specifies in verse 1, “O man, every one of you who judges,” and he adds the phrases “passing judgment on another” and “you, the judge.” He’s talking to people who judge others. As we read on, he’s addressing Jews in the Christian community (2:13,17,27). Why were they so eager to judge others? Paul’s going to explain more about this later (18–20). But basically, these people felt it was their duty to point out any and all wrongdoing. To be sure, we all need to be clear about what’s right and wrong. But this can easily transform into becoming legalistic, self-righteous, judgmental, and intensely critical.

What’s so wrong with judging others? Paul explains in verses 1–3. First of all, he repeats the expression “O man” twice here. He’s reminding them that they are nothing but men, just like everyone else, and indirectly, he’s contrasting them with God. When we judge, it’s like we’re trying to take God’s place. God alone has the right to judge. Why is that? It’s because he alone is God. He’s the One who created everything and everyone. He’s the One who knows everything there is to know about everyone, and especially about what’s right and wrong. Also, God alone is righteous. God alone is holy. God alone is good.

Secondly, Paul repeats here that “you practice the same things” (1,3). What’s he saying? He’s talking about all the sins he just mentioned in 1:29–31: the coveting, the hatred, the strife, the deceit, the hurtfulness, the gossiping and slandering, all the pride and heartlessness and ruthlessness. The Jews may not have done all the gross sins of the Gentiles outwardly, but they surely did these. When they practiced the same sins, it shows they were no better than the people they were judging. And by judging them, it shows they were actually worse, because now they were being hypocrites. Paul says that those who “judge those who practice such things and yet do them” themselves will not escape the judgment of God (3b). He’s getting at the heart of what’s wrong. The Jews thought they were “in good with God” no matter what they did. They thought God *had to* accept and bless them because they were his people. They thought their being Abraham’s descendants made them superior to everybody. Paul confronts them with the truth: their hypocrisy in judging others meant they themselves were going to face God’s judgment. Paul’s going to say more about this later (6–11).

But here he focuses on their wrong attitude toward God. Read verse 4. Until now Paul’s been describing the wrath and judgment of God (1:18; 2:2,3). But in verse 4 he writes: “the riches of [God’s] kindness and forbearance and patience,” and he mentions God’s “kindness” twice. God is not only God Almighty, the God of holy wrath and anger and fury, but also he’s the God who’s “rich” in kindness, forbearance and patience. In his rich kindness, God withholds the wrath and judgment we deserve, which is what his “forbearance” and “patience” mean. That he’s “rich” in forbearance and patience means he can wait a really long time without giving up. Our Lord Jesus said that the Most High God is “kind to the ungrateful and the evil” (Lk 6:35). In fact, God has expressed his kindness to us all in Christ Jesus (Eph 2:7; Ti 3:4). Human beings can be so quick to judge, and so cruel and harsh, but God is so kind.

In verse 4 Paul asks if the Jews were “presuming on” God’s kindness. What does he mean? In the New Testament this Greek word is often translated as “despise” (Mt 6:24; 18:10; Lk 16:13; 1Co 11:22; 2 Pt 2:10). To sinful people, kindness can look weak, or foolish. So, kindness is often taken for granted, or taken advantage of. The people who are most kind to us tend to be our parents or grandparents, our siblings or spouse or our close friends. Their kindness is quiet and often goes unnoticed. No matter how bad we’ve been, they’re still kind to us, and so we so easily abuse it. But Paul’s not talking about people; in verse 4 he’s trying to help us become more aware of our wrong attitude toward God. God is so rich in kindness, forbearance and patience for us, and we so easily take it for granted, as if we can keep doing whatever we want and God will still accept us. At its core, such a sense of entitlement is pride. We all need to reflect seriously on Paul’s question, “Am I presuming on God’s kindness?”

Paul also mentions the purpose of God’s kindness. Look at verse 4b: “…not knowing that God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance.” The Apostle Peter wrote the same thing. He said that in his kindness God is patient, “not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance” (2 Pt 3:9). God’s kindness is not for just a few, but for “all.” And it’s not meant to be used and abused; it’s meant to bring about our change. On *The Dodo* video channel there are many stories of abused or abandoned animals who are brought into the homes of kind people. In the warmth of all that love, the animals that were formerly traumatized and scared gradually change into trusting and happy creatures. It’s just a picture of what God hopes his kindness will bring about in our lives. God isn’t just angry, wanting to hurt or punish or destroy us; God wants to give us a future and a hope (Jer 29:11). All we have to do is come to him “just as I am,” and let his kindness to us in Jesus change our hearts.

The word “repentance” is very important. It’s just the opposite of being proud, self-righteous and critical of others. Jesus once told a parable to people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt. In the temple, a Pharisee, standing by himself, told God: “God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all I get.” But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” (Lk 18:9–14). What an unforgettable scene! Repentance starts not with what we do, but with our attitude toward God, who we really are before him. David described it as “a broken and contrite heart” (Ps 51:17). It’s to become aware of how wrong we are before God. Elsewhere Paul calls it “godly grief” (2 Cor 7:9–11). It’s to grieve over our own sins. It makes us more earnest, more eager to get right with God, more genuinely reverent toward him. It’s why Jesus said, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted” (Mt 5:4). Only when we’re repentant can we truly come to Jesus and hold onto his grace as the only thing that can save us.

Repentance isn’t something we do only at the beginning of our Christian lives; repentance is actually part of our daily walk with God. We need the Holy Spirit’s help each day to see our sin, to grieve over it, to deal with it seriously, to put it to death (Ro 8:13; Gal 5:24,25). Each day we repent by coming into the light of Jesus, confessing our sins and putting our faith in his blood to cleanse us (1Jn 1:7–9). It’s sad but true that Christians are known to be some of the most judgmental people. But if we’re really walking in the light of Jesus, we’d be known as the most humble and contrite, the most repentant, the most kind people.

To self-righteous people Paul gives the strongest warning. Read verse 5. Self-righteous people think they’re storing up God’s blessings for themselves by all their hard work and good deeds. But if they’re self-righteous about it, they’re going to be shocked to find out that they were in fact storing up God’s wrath for themselves. Though God is rich in kindness, one day there really will be “the day of wrath when God’s righteous judgment will be revealed” (5b).

In verses 6–11 Paul goes on to tell the Jews more about the nature of God’s judgment. God judges people according to their works. Most Jews would agree with that. But God also judges according to people’s motives—what they are seeking. If we really think about it, how can we always have perfect good deeds and perfect motives in doing them? By setting the bar so high, Paul is trying to help the most self-righteous people come to realize that they in fact are under God’s judgment. He also emphasizes that, in passing God’s judgment, how important it is to “obey the truth” (8). In the context of Romans, he probably means obeying the truth of the gospel of Jesus, learning the obedience of faith, submitting to God’s righteousness (1:5; 10:3; 16:24; cf. 2Th1:8). He stresses that God’s principles in judgment are “for the Jew first and also for the Greek.” And he finishes by saying, “For God shows no partiality.” Paul is really trying to eradicate the false sense of entitlement the Jews had developed over many years.

In verses 12–16 he continues to explain how God’s judgment will work. Those who sinned without the law will perish without the law; those who sinned under the law will be judged by the law (12). Read verse 13. Part of the Jews’ false perception was that, because they heard the Scriptures read in the synagogue every Sabbath, they were right with God. Today, too, there are many people who just hear the word of God. They go to church or Bible study faithfully. But they don’t really make any effort to put into practice what they heard. Over time it’s nothing but self-deception (Jas 1:22). Verses 14,15 are the first time in this letter that Paul helps the Jews have more respect for the Gentiles. There are times when Gentiles do by nature what is required by God’s law. In their souls they have innate knowledge of God (1:19,20), they have a God-given sense of right and wrong, and a conscience (15). Paul doesn’t think Gentiles can be saved only by following their conscience, because sometimes they don’t even follow that. Paul concludes by pointing everyone to the day when God will judge the secrets of men by Christ Jesus (16).

Today we thought about God’s righteous judgment, and about the sins of self-righteousness and presuming on God’s kindness. In light of this, may God grant us the spirit of repentance in our daily lives, so that we can really live by faith only in the grace of Jesus. May he help us not only hear his word but struggle by faith to obey it. And may God help us grow in his kindness, forbearance and patience so that we can be a spiritual help to those who really need it.