

Does God Punish People?

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Preacher: Paul Barker

- [0 : 0 0] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 1st of July 2001. The preacher is Paul Barker.
- His sermon is entitled, Does God Punish People? and is from Romans 2, verses 1-16.
- Romans 2, page 914. Some of you apparently have heard of somebody who's just broken the world record for the longest sermon of 28 hours in Lancashire in England.
- I hope you're comfortable. Let's pray. God, we thank you that you do indeed speak to us through your scriptures which are powerful to make us wise for salvation.
- We pray that you may speak to our hearts, that not only may we hear your word, but that we may be doers of it also, for the glory of Jesus Christ. Amen.
- [1 : 0 9] It's one of our favourite pastimes. Such an arrogant person, we say arrogantly. Oh, such a greedy man, we say enviously.
- They shouldn't spend their money on such expensive clothes and cars, we say covetously. She's such a gossip, we whisper behind her back.
- And so we indulge our favourite pastime. Casting stones. We want Christopher Skace brought to justice, but have we never cheated somebody?
- We want a child's murderer punished, but have we never hated? There's the homophobic person who attacks gays. There's the pro-life protester who resorts to violence.
- There are the angry Englishmen who vow to kill the murderers of Jamie Bulger, the two-year-old killed a few years ago in Liverpool. And so we indulge in our favourite pastime.
- [2 : 1 4] Casting stones. You see it practised in the age. Not in the sports pages. What we might call the stone age. It's the opinion page.
- The letters and the access age. Where people criticise and condemn different groups of society. The young people, the old people, the immigrants, the white people, the Aboriginal people, the politicians, the rich or the poor.
- We see it in the game played in talkback radio with indignant callers voicing their opinions about this, that or the other. We see it played by the media commentators.
- Channel 7 fronted the tribunal this week. John Laws last year. Self-righteous stone casting is big business and a favourite pastime for many people.
- You see we're happy to see God's wrath vented against those described in chapter 1. We're happy to see that God's wrath comes against the sexually immoral. Against the homosexuals.
- [3 : 1 4] Against those who are described at the end of chapter 1. Those who are wicked and evil and covetous. Those who are malicious. We're happy to see God's wrath against those who are full of envy and murder and strife and deceit and craftiness.

Against those who are gossips and slanderers and God haters. The insolent, the haughty, the boastful. We're happy to see God angry at those who invent evil and are rebellious towards their parents. We're happy to see God's wrath vented against those who are foolish, faithless, heartless and ruthless.

And we know that God is right to be angry at them. And we say amen to Paul's conclusion of chapter 1. That such people deserve to die. But in haste to pick up stones.

We fail to see the rock in our own eye. If you excuse the mixture of metaphors. Therefore you have no excuse. Whoever you are. When you judge others.

For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself. Because you the judge are doing the very same thing. But that can't be.

[4 : 21] We're not like that. We know that God's judgment on those who do such things is in accordance with truth. But that's not a description of us. Our mistakes are mere peccadilloes by comparison.

We're justified. There are some excuses that we can make for the little sins and failures that we have made in our lives. And certainly our bad deeds are far outweighed by our good deeds.

This doesn't apply to us. We're happy to see God angry against such people of chapter 1. But that's not us. How can Paul say that we do the same things?

The wrath and judgment of God surely is not being vented against us. I see that sort of attitude often in preparation for funerals. Oh, he was a good chap.

He'd do anything for everyone. Always willing to lend a helping hand. Well, she was a lovely lady. The epitome of human kindness. No harsh words would ever be heard from her mouth.

[5 : 20] If anyone's going to be in heaven, surely she will or he will. Or maybe even the words of a person who's dying. I have no regrets. I've lived a good life.

Well, even Frank Sinatra had a few regrets. You see, we may not be murderers. We may not be homosexuals or malicious gossips.

We may not be the inventors of evil or the wicked people described in that chapter 1. But when we set ourselves up as judges of such people, we play God.

And we are precisely like them. For the root of their sin, as we saw last week, is that they've exchanged the glory of God for idolatry.

They've shoved God aside. And instead of seeking his glory, they seek their own glory. And when we cast judgment on such people, we play God just like they do.

[6 : 18] We've exchanged the glory of the real God for the glory of ourselves as God and not honoured him as God. And so, as Paul says, it's true. We do the same thing.

We put ourselves in the place of God and we put God outside. Paul's not saying here that we should never exercise critical faculties.

That we should never say what is wrong and what is right. Of course, Paul does that in several places. He'd be a complete hypocrite if that's what he meant here. But what Paul does mean here is when we set ourselves up as judge and condemn others failing to recognise our own sins and failures.

Then we exchange the glory of the living God for self-righteous glory. And so he says in verse 3, Do you imagine whoever you are that when you judge those who do such things and yet do them yourself you, even you, will escape the judgement of God?

Paul is condemning here the self-righteous person. And God is not looking for self-righteousness. He's a righteous God and he looks for righteousness but he doesn't look for self-righteousness.

[7 : 34] But rather he looks for repentance. The turning away from sin and turning to God. Turning away from self-seeking to seeking the glory of God.

And Paul says that the delay in Jesus' return if that's the right word, the reason why Jesus is yet to return even though 2,000 years ago he was promised and he would come very soon, the reason why he's yet to come is that this has given us time in God's patience and forbearance time to repent of our sins so that we may be ready when he returns.

You see, God wants men and women everywhere to turn from their sin and live. He wants people, human beings, young and old to turn from seeking their own glory and to seeking the glory of God.

God wants young and old, rich and poor, male and female, all sorts of people to turn from self-righteousness to turn to the righteousness of God. He wants people to turn from wickedness and disobedience to obedience of faith.

And that's what repentance is. It's more than remorse, it's more than a feeling of guilt or more than a feeling of being sorry for something that we might have slipped up on once. Repentance literally means to turn.

[8 : 54] And time and again in the Old Testament where the idea of repentance occurs, the word that's used is simply the word to turn. Like you might turn the car when you turn left or right. Or you turn around when you change direction.

That's all the word means in effect. Turn. Turn from your life headed in that direction which is seeking your glory and is wicked and has shoved aside God and is in idolatrous worship of other things.

Turn from that to this direction which seeks the glory of God and his approval discerning his good and perfect will. That's what repentance is. So Paul says in verse 4, Do you despise the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience?

Do you not realise that God's kindness is meant to lead you, indeed plead with you and beg with you to come to repentance? You see, too many of us think that the reason why God has not done anything and he hasn't come down in some obvious intervention of wrath and why Jesus is yet to return is because somehow God must be happy with us.

And so we continue in naive self-righteous complacency. But Paul says that's despising God's patience. God is patient to give us time to repent. So repent, he says.

[10 : 06] Turn from your sin. God is in effect begging with us and pleading with us to turn away from ourself and to put him back on the throne as God.

But the reality is so many people refuse to repent. Instead of penitence, God finds hard hearts and stubbornness. So he says in verse 5, but by your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed.

The hard heart is one that suffers from sclerosis. That's the original Greek word. It's as though the spiritual arteries have somehow been blocked up and the work of God's truth is unable to flow through them.

And the self-righteous person who thinks they're okay, who thinks that if anybody's going to be in heaven they will, that God is surely going to welcome such a good and decent and upright citizen into heaven, is in fact not storing up treasure in heaven, but storing up wrath.

The word's ironic because the word for storing up is when you put aside something of great value and treasure. They think they're storing up a place in heaven, but the self-righteous person is in fact just storing up God's wrath for that final day.

[11 : 24] Last week we saw that God's wrath is present reality. God is wrathful now, today, each day, by not intervening in people's lives and giving them up to their sin.

But that's not the sum total of God's wrath because there's coming a day, a final day, when history, as we know it, will be brought to an end, when God will judge the world, every person who's ever lived, and then his wrath will be finally and totally vented against all wickedness and evil and self-seeking.

You see, we're not good at owning up to our failures and mistakes. We fall all the time into self-righteousness where we blame others or make excuses for the things that we do wrong.

We're not new in doing that. Adam and Eve, the first person people were like that. When God questioned them about what they'd done, Eve blamed Adam, Adam blamed the serpent, or Adam blamed Eve, Eve blamed the serpent, they weren't prepared to own up to their mistakes.

And time and again in the stories of the Bible, we see human beings making the same self-righteous mistakes. It's not really my fault, it's somebody else's fault. And we see it all the time. We see it with our politicians who are so reluctant to own up to their mistakes and blame the opposition or the previous government or somebody else.

[12 : 40] We see it in domestic arguments. When a husband and a wife back themselves into corner, neither is prepared to own up to the mistakes they've made. They blame the other or a third party. We see it in workplace relationships as well.

Where an employer and employee back themselves into corners and they refuse to own up to their mistakes. And we do it ourselves all the time. And when we're so reluctant to own up to our mistakes with each other, it spills over into how we relate to God.

Our words of confession are often, too often, empty words. A little bit of remorse or regret, perhaps. But not quite repentance as God pleads for us to do.

We tend to blame our sins on other people, our environment, our upbringing, or our government, or our church, or just being tired, or whatever. But God wants us to be honest with Him, to repent of our sin, to turn away from self-righteousness and put our hands into His righteousness.

Later on in this letter when He exhorts the Roman church to be what they're meant to be, He says to them, For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you, not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment.

[13 : 57] In effect, that's the cure for self-righteousness. That we don't think of ourselves too highly, but think of ourselves as God sees us. On that final day, the day of God's judgment and wrath, the day when Jesus returns and all people who've ever lived front up before the judgment throne of God, God, we're told in verse 6, will repay according to each one's deeds.

First thing about this judgment, it is according to what we've done, according to our deeds. It's not according to race or religion. Jews are not exempt from this, nor are Christians exempt from this.

But God will judge each one of us according to what we have done. He'll assess our lives. It means that our lives matter. What we do matters to God. That's a positive thing.

Secondly, judgment is personal. Paul goes on in verse 7 to say, literally, that to the person who by patiently doing good seeks for glory and honor and immortality, he'll give eternal life.

And then in verse 8, on the other hand, to the person who's self-seeking and does not obey the truth but is wicked, then there will be wrath and fury for them. That is, to the individual, Paul says, will come one outcome or the other.

[15 : 14] That is, judgment's personal. God just doesn't look on the mass of humanity and say, what a hopeless lot, out with you all. But he looks on each individual because the judgment of God on us is personal.

The third thing about judgment is that God's judgment divides people into two groups. And for many of his original readers, this would have been a shock. Not that there's a division into two, but where the dividing line falls.

Verse 7 describes those who pass the test. To those who by patiently doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, he'll give eternal life. That is, people who persevere with doing good.

They seek glory, that is, the glory of God, not their self-glory, so they're different from those described in chapter 1. They seek honor, not their own honor and pride, but rather God's approval for them as they seek God's will, what he wants of their life.

They seek immortality, that is, to be in God's presence forever. And to such people, God gives eternal life. That's one group. The other group and the only other group, he describes in verse 8.

[16 : 26] While for those who are self-seeking, they seek their own honor and glory rather than God's, and who obey not the truth but wickedness, there will be wrath and fury, not eternal life as a result, but rather the wrath and fury of God.

The descriptions follow in verses 9 and 10 in reverse order this time. Those who fail the test in verse 9, there will be anguish and distress for everyone who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, but then those who pass the test, like in verse 7, there will be glory, honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek.

You see where the dividing line falls. For the Jews, they would have thought that it fell between Jew and Greek. Jews would be accepted and the Gentiles or Greeks, the non-Jews that is, they're out, they fail.

Well, Paul says, no, that's not how God judges. Because he judges according to our deeds, the line does not fall between Jew and Greek, but it falls between those who seek God's glory and those who seek their own glory.

That's the distinction. They're the two groups, there are no fence-sitters, there's no third party, two groups, two alone, those who pass, those who fail. Seek God's glory or seek their own glory.

[17 : 40] The fourth thing about judgment is that it's fair. God shows no partiality, verse 11 tells us. Verse 12 goes on to explain that a bit, but we've already seen that.

God, by judging us according to our deeds, is fair. Each of us stands equally before God. But he elaborates on that in verses 12 and 13.

All who've sinned apart from the law, that is, the people who didn't have the law of God in the Old Testament, that is, basically the Gentiles or the non-Jews, they will perish apart from the law.

And all who have sinned under the law, that is, the Jews who've received God's law, they'll be judged by the law. And the reason why God's judgment then is fair is because it's not the hearers of the law who are righteous in God's sight, but the doers of the law who'll be justified.

You see, if it was the hearers of the law who are justified, God is partial. He's saying to the Jews, you're in because you've heard the law. What you do doesn't matter, but the fact that you've been given the law means you've got a privilege to get into heaven.

[18 : 45] But that's not how it will be, Paul says. It is the doers of the law. And God judges fairly. Whether they've received the law or not, he judges them according to what they have known.

Now for the Jews, that's an unnerving thing for Paul to say. They thought that having the privilege of God's law granted them some sort of immunity from judgment and some sort of safety ticket into heaven.

But Paul is saying that the privilege of hearing God's law, which applied to Jews in the Old Testament, leads not to complacency and safety and immunity, but rather to greater responsibility to do God's law, to obey what God commands.

Now time and again in the Old Testament, the prophets chastised Israel for their false reliance on the privileges that God had given them. They relied on the law, the land, the temple, the fact that there was a king, and so on.

They thought that having all these things from God meant that they were certainly safe forever. But time and again, the prophets chastised them, not because they've got privileges, but because they failed to do what the law requires.

[20 : 03] Paul's no different here. In effect, he's fitting into the end of a long line of Old Testament prophets saying to self-righteous Jews in part, you must be doers of the law.

The privileges that God has given to you are not a guarantee of immunity. But Paul's not only speaking to Jews here, even to Christians we fall into the same mistake.

We think somehow because we've got our Bibles or we've been baptised or we take communion or we go to church or because we're religious people that somehow we are exempt or immune from the judgement and wrath of God.

No, Paul says. Don't fall into that trap. Privileges have been given to you as Christians. You've heard the gospel and responded in faithhood, but don't fall into complacency and think that thereby you are safe.

The same obligation to repent is placed upon us as Christians and the same logic of privilege to Christians leading to responsibility also applies. To those to whom much is given, much is expected.

[21 : 05] To those to whom little is given, little is expected. God judges us fairly and to us as Christians much has been given because we are the recipients of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Therefore much is expected of us in our Christian lives and God will judge us accordingly.

Where then does that leave the person who's not heard the gospel? The person who's never heard of God or Jesus Christ. The person who hasn't received the law of God in the Old Testament. Is ignorance an excuse?

Well, no, it's not. We saw that last week. We saw that in creation there is enough evidence playing for everybody to see that God has eternal power and a divine nature. We are without excuse.

Ignorance is no excuse as we saw last week. But Paul makes the same point here in a slightly different way in verses 14 and 15. when Gentiles, that is non-Jews, who do not possess the law, that's the Old Testament, but nonetheless do instinctively what the law requires, these, though not having the law, are a law to themselves.

They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts to which their own conscience also bears witness. Now, Paul is not arguing here that Gentiles don't sin. He's not saying that they are perfect in fulfilling the law.

[22 : 19] But what he is saying is that there are people who are not Jews or not Christians who do from time to time do what God wants. There are people who are good and generous and hospitable and loving who are not Christians and not Jews.

But the very fact that they do such good and moral things from time to time is evidence that they have a conscience that gives them some basic understanding of morality of what is good or wrong.

But on the other hand, Paul is not saying, like Jeremy Cricket, that our conscience must be our guide. Our conscience might be over-sensitive or under-sensitive. It is not perfect.

God's word is our guide, not our conscience. But the existence of a conscience in a person who's not a Jew or Christian is evidence that there is something about God and his standards that is there for every person in this world.

And Paul is saying here, God will judge people according to what they know. If they know little about God, then the standard may be low. If they know lots about God, like Jews and even beyond that, Christians, the standard will be high and God will judge us accordingly.

[23 : 27] But, he says, no matter whether you've got the law, whether you're a Christian or a Jew or a pagan, you will fall short of the standard, even your own standard. After all, how many of us ever do everything that we want to do?

How many of us ever keep our New Year's resolutions? We always fall short of our own low standards, let alone God's high standard. This is illustrated in the Old Testament, in the prophets, but for example, Amos, a prophet.

In Amos chapter 1 and into chapter 2, Amos chastises, or God really chastises, all sorts of pagan nations for basic crimes against humanity. But when he comes to the people of God, to them has the law of God been given, so the standard is raised.

And God judges Israel and Judah there by a higher standard. But the pagan nations fall beneath the lower standard, and God's own people fall beneath that higher standard.

And that's in effect what Paul's argument is here as well. All of us fall short of the glory of God. And even if God judges us according to slightly different standards because of what we do or don't know, in the end, ignorance is no excuse.

[24 : 42] we all fall short of God's standard and glory. So then, what we found about God's judgment is that it's according to what we do.

It is personal. God's judgment divides people into two groups. God's judgment is fair. Fifthly, God's judgment is true and right.

So this passage ends in verse 16, speaking about the day of judgment when Jesus returns, that on that day, God through Jesus Christ will judge the secret thoughts of all.

God's judgment will be true and right because he judges to the hearts to the secret things. He knows our hearts, our stubbornness, our weakness, our hardness, and he judges them.

He knows our thoughts and our desires and God will judge them. He knows our weakness and our strength and God will judge them. You see, there won't be any miscarriage of judgment on that final day. We won't be able to pull the wool over God's eyes and say, look, it was really somebody else's fault that I did that and God be deceived by us.

[25 : 54] We won't be able to plead ignorance and God be fooled by us. We won't be able to plead self-righteousness and God to be convinced by us. There'll be no miscarriage of justice then.

No debates and controversies about whether somebody's being treated fairly by the law. There won't be any dilemmas on that judgment day about issues like Kerry and Kay Daines whether rightly they've gone to prison or not in Laos or whether the murderers of Jamie Bulger should or should not have been let free or whether John Marston is guilty or not of pedophilia.

On that day, God's judgment will be true and right. He knows everything there is to know. And that ought to give us confidence. So finally, in effect, God's judgment is inescapable.

There's no exemption for the self-righteous. There's no exemption for the Jew. No exemption for the Christian. No exemption for the ignorant. All of us, whatever our backgrounds, will stand before the judgment throne of God on that final day.

And all of us will be found lacking. And all of us need the mercy of God. That's why Paul wrote this letter.

[27 : 08] That's why Jesus came. That's why we have the gospel of Christ. And that's why Paul is not ashamed of the gospel because it's the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith.

To the Jew first and also to the Greek. Let's pray. Our Heavenly Father, we thank you that you are the righteous judge.

We thank you that your wrath is vented against wickedness and evil in our world. And we confess that we too fall short of your glory as we seek our own glory and self-righteousness.

we pray Father that we may not abuse your patience but use this time to repent.

May we turn from seeking our own glory to seeking your glory and honour and our immortality. Amen.

[28 : 18] Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen.