

## Romans, Part 8 6-5-22

### Well, Excuse Me!

Romans 2:1-4 *Therefore you have no excuse, everyone of you who passes judgment, for in that which you judge another, you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things. <sup>2</sup>And we know that the judgment of God rightly falls upon those who practice such things. <sup>3</sup>But do you suppose this, O man, when you pass judgment on those who practice such things and do the same yourself, that you will escape the judgment of God? <sup>4</sup>Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and tolerance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance?* Back in my college days I was a fan of the comedian, Steve Martin. One line of his that became popular and was often quoted was his exaggerated and exasperated, *Well, excuse me!* I thought of that often as I worked through this text about human excuses for ourselves and our sins. We saw in the last chapter that our creation in God's image and the witness of creation to the reality of God eliminates all grounds for excuse-making. But, as we experience life among the fallen, we see excuse-making from every direction. Part of the history of the COVID virus has been the incredible excuses which some of our political leaders made when caught violating the rules they put on everyone else. The mayor of Chicago justified her going to a hair salon when that was outlawed by saying that her job requires her to look good. The mayor of San Francisco was caught maskless at a concert when that was prohibited for everyone and said that it was okay because the music was really great and she felt the spirit. Of course, the speaker of the house was caught breaking the law by getting her hair done and claimed that she was "set up." No apologies, just excuses. I mean, really, hearing the excuses was one of the few fun parts of the COVID experience. But, for those on a mental diet of Pauline theology we know we actually have no valid excuses.

Let's dig deeper as we get into the second chapter of Romans. We ended chapter one with an account of thorough-going human depravity. Humans rejected God, lost our minds, abandoned ourselves to our baser appetites and then sought to establish justification for ourselves and for those who participated with us in our debauchery. Many there are who reject all the rules and insist there aren't any and that we should all just follow our hearts, do our own thing. But, within the human family, there are some who are different. Many of Paul's fellow-Jews were among the different. Some of us are principled people, with standards of behavior. Right?

Often such folks are religious and therefore, the group gathered here before me would likely contain plenty of these types. As we come to Romans two, the apostle turns his attention more from the libertine to the legalist, more from the prodigals to the older brothers, more from the free-spirits to the self-righteous. Pre-Christian Paul would have put himself in that latter category. He was an uptight, religious dude with lots of rules that he insisted everyone must follow. I think he includes himself in this group because in verse two he refers to a we - a we who know about the judgment of God that is bound to come upon lawbreakers. So, what is the problem with this crowd? These folks are principled. They don't approve godless conduct. Where are they going astray? Well, the apostle indicates that the problem here is that they have standards but don't live by them. They condemn sin, but not when it applies to themselves. Ohhh! Maybe you have seen this done. Maybe you know family members or political leaders who operate this way. Very clear about what others are doing wrong, but unable to identify anything negative in themselves. This is just a symptom of what we might call spiritual pride. It is the sin of the older brother, the self-righteous. Jonathan Edwards wrote that *spiritual pride is the main door by which the devil comes into the hearts of those who are zealous for the advancement of religion. It is the chief inlet of smoke from the bottomless pit, to darken the mind and mislead the judgment. This is the main handle by which the devil has hold of religious persons.* Interesting.

There are a couple of angles our pride will take in misleading us. Few of us would make the mistake of suggesting that we don't continue to sin, but so often we truly think that *my sins are not as bad as your sins*. You know what I mean here? I may be short-tempered but you are a lazy good-for-nothing and that is much worse. In other words, your expressions of depravity are way worse than mine. This is subtly deceiving because it is true that certain sins cause more chaos than others, but even when our sins differ, our sinfulness is the same. It all comes from an essentially self-centered heart that is lacking in love and humility. So, where is there room for superiority and pride? We are so inclined by nature to think better of ourselves and worse of others, to give ourselves the benefit of the doubt but not others. But then too, we seem to seek out opportunities to compare ourselves favorably. Part of why we are drawn to gossip is that it allows us to feel superior to the scandalous persons we whisper about. Why do folks like to watch Dr. Phil or Jerry Springer? Could it be that seeing others in their hot mess helps us maintain self-respect in our own luke-warm mess? We hope God grades on the curve and sees how much worse others are than us --- *Hey, God, did you see what Pastor X did? Huh? See that? Really terrible. Now, see me? Different? Better yea?*

But, Paul lets us know that God doesn't grade on the curve and we are foolish to think that we will get a passing grade on judgment day when we stand before a holy, perfect God. He says, *don't kid yourself*.

Another way this sinful self-righteousness leads us astray is via the double standard. Very principled people have standards, some even double standards. We have rules for others, but don't think to apply them to ourselves. *Did you know that Pastor Ben is a terrible gossip? I'm just saying, so you can pray about it.* Certain characters in history, distant and recent, serve as wonderful models of the double standard. David was caught by Nathan in this way. Remember how that went down? King David had used his power to take advantage of someone weaker, but then, when the prophet Nathan presented a parallel story, David was enraged at the abuse of power until Nathan said, *thou art the man*. It is so easy for parents to see the double-standard at work among children. They don't disguise it very well. *Brother taking my toy is very bad, but I was just borrowing his for a few minutes. He wasn't using it anyway.* Do we ever see double standards at work in the political sphere? Oh my! Candidates and voters get outraged at the misbehavior of those in the opposing party, but those in our party or on our side really had no other choice, or they were slandered by the media. Double standards are everywhere it seems and very easy to detect except, except, except, when we are the ones with the double-standard. To our own faults we are blind. By the way, this is why you need brothers and sisters around you – to help you see what your pride blocks you from seeing. Isolated persons, even Christians, tend to grow self-righteous. Marriage, close friends, accountability – these can keep you more honest. Don't run from them. Welcome them as one who desires to live in the light and be more like Jesus.

Other persons, especially Christian persons, will help us evaluate ourselves more accurately and they will also help us maintain a standard for conduct that is according to Scripture, not according to our own preferences, biases, and convenience. Engaging with other believers means that I am challenged to ensure that what I believe and teach is from God and not from my own prejudices. We can't get away from those entirely, but we can put up guards against them. How can someone avoid a self-seeking subjectivity that evaluates everything by how I feel about it? Intentionally orient yourself to something beyond yourself, to something fixed and proven. The best the world can do is say, *follow your heart*, but our God provides us something so much better and something fixed toward which we can align our values and conduct.

Look again with me at verse 3 *But do you suppose this, O man, when you pass judgment on those who practice such things and do the same yourself, that you will escape the judgment of God?* Oh yes, they did. Oh yes. Paul's words are for any principled, religious person, but certainly applied to the pious Jews of his day. They did believe they would escape God's judgment. They operated in a false security. Plenty of that still around today and Paul is out to demolish that. And we see him pointing out the two pillars of a false security – a wrong view of self, and/or a wrong view of God.

First, many have a false security rooted in a mistaken self-concept. Why, they think they are good and wonderful. *Judgment is only for the sinners and that is not my crowd.* We have already spoken to this some, but consider with me how so many false religious systems serve to promote this self-righteous delusion. They do it by substituting religious rituals or community standards for the law of God. They teach that you are okay if you are baptized, say a prayer, join our team. Or, they promote certain values that allow for a righteousness that is external and skin-deep. This can happen in secular cultures like Japan that are all about family-honor. Misbehavior is only a problem if you get caught and disgrace us. Avoid that and you are accepted. Then there are the more Christian versions – such as we see in Utah with the Mormons. There is a lot to like in Mormon values, as in other cults, but the false religion can only restrain. It will never transform. Still, it can be powerful in that it promotes the idol of community or family approval. A desire to belong can keep us from the full expressions of our depravity, but it is just another enslaving idol. But sadly, it deludes us into thinking that we have passed the test, that God is happy with who we are. This is what Jesus tackles in the sermon on the mount when he teaches that a hateful heart is still vile, even if it doesn't manifest in violence. Adultery – infidelity to my spouse – can happen without touching. Right? This was revolutionary thinking – So much deeper than moralizers, whether secular or religious, tend to go. You see, the self-righteous deal only on the surface, they don't look deeply at God's law or at their own hearts. If they did, their delusions would be shattered and they would lose their hard-won comfort. What happened to the one who demolished their delusions? Oh yea – that cross business. Jesus was cancelled. Had to be to protect our false view of self.

Then I noted the deluded self-righteous have a distorted view of God. It's not wrong so much as incomplete. It is the grandpa-in-the-sky notion. God is just so very nice. And, being nice, of course he is going to accept me, like me, want me in his kingdom. In verse 3 Paul suggests that many wrongly believe they will escape judgment and in verse 4 he suggests that many believe in God's kindness and

patience but think “lightly” of it. The NIV uses the word “contempt.” They believe in God’s kindness and patience, but how do they apply it to their lives? It becomes their basis for sin. They can trample on God’s law because, well, *he is so nice, so patient*. The thought of his judgment is never entertained. Matthew Henry wrote: *there is in every willful sin a contempt for the goodness of God*. John Stott writes: *God’s goodness is intended to give space for repentance, not to give an excuse for sinning*. But, that is how many treat it. *Oh, God is so good and loving, so I will despise his word and flaunt his commands when they cross my desires*. Oh yea! This is what we do; and it is vile. John Newton wrote: *The exceeding sinfulness of sin is manifested, not so much by its breaking through the restraint of threatenings and commands, as by its being capable of acting against light and love*. Indeed, turning God’s love into a support of our cosmic treason.

The apostle warns us against such thinking and then he tells us what a true appreciation of the love of God will do. *The kindness of God leads to repentance*. He says some don’t seem to know this. But, you and I are reading Romans 2 and so we do. All this talk in church about God’s goodness, his patience, his kindness, his grace – what is the end game for all that? How do we display our faith in all that? Not by self-indulgent, carefree living, with no thought of the consequences, but by repentance, the turning from and renouncing of sin. Anything else is contempt for God’s grace and there is plenty of that going on in Jesus’ name.

So then, how does the kindness of God lead us to repentance? Glad you asked. I have two answers. One, it convicts our hearts. Two stories—one you know as *Les Mis*. Victor Hugo writes about a criminal named Jean Valjean. He is released and finds gracious lodging in the home of a bishop. But he repays the clergyman’s kindness by stealing from him. He takes his silver, but later is apprehended by police with the goods. When the police take Jean and the silver back to the scene of his crime, the bishop tells the police that the silver was a gift. And then, he gives him even more, offering these parting words to the ungrateful thief, who is now a pardoned thief. *“Jean Valjean, you no longer belong to evil, but to good. It is your soul that I buy from you; I withdraw it from black thoughts and the spirit of perdition, and I give it to God.”* The man went from there to live an upright and charitable life, bringing forth the fruits of repentance, a repentance won by the kindness of God shown to him by a man of God. Jean Valjean could have once again despised this extraordinary mercy – but he was so shocked by it that it sobered his soul and converted him. Some of us maybe – we can reflect on the stubborn indifference in which we have lived despite the enormous, undeniable and manifold expressions of God’s goodness that have been ours. From the place

of our birth, to our parents, our mentors, our friends, the vast favors bestowed upon us, all of which were undeserved. The kindness of God, so great, when we see it, our hearts melt and our sin becomes to us odious and grievous.

The second story is my own. The gospel became real and saving for me on a Sunday near my tenth birthday, when I heard a sermon on the theme of honor. The pastor had a point for each of the letters of that word – h-o-n-o-r. He spoke of honoring our parents and my heart was smitten by that. I had a true affection for my mother but I realized that I often did not treat her with honor as I should. Such a failure seemed odd to me, inexplicable except that surely something was foul in my soul. The kindness of God that came to me via my mother convicted me of sin. I saw I was sinning against love - and repented. Over the years I saw God do this again and again. In his kindness he led me to David Poole who confronted me over sin that no one else had ever pointed out. Thank God he did. God led me to Jimmy Young who was willing to tell me when I was being faithless. Thank God he did. He led me to my wife, whose patient and challenging love has brought me many things, but frequent repentance has been one of the most wonderful side-effects of our marriage. And, I am sincere when I say that this has been and is the goodness of God in my life. His kindness doesn't leave me in my sin, but convicts me of it.

Then finally, the kindness of God changes our hearts. Changes our hearts, because ours is a powerful Savior. You and I love lots of folks who continue in self-destructive habits. We wish we could change them, but God's love truly can and truly does. He sets the captives free. You see in verse four that the gospel end-game is repentance, conversion, a changed life. Some will say it cannot be. You are what you are and there is no changing you. But Jesus comes along and puts the lie to all that. He turns idolaters into worshipers, by his grace and for his glory. Repentance, conversion, renovation. 2 Corinthians 5:17 (NLT) *Anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!* Here you are on June 5, 2022 and you have made a mess of things up till now, but that can all change. Yes, you could have died. You deserved to die, but the Lord has spared you and here you are in church listening to the invitation of the gospel. That invitation is to contemplate the patience and the kindness of God and respond to it by saying, *Lord, the good Lord, I make you my Lord, and I renounce my self-righteousness and all my filthy idols in order to walk in your love, your purity, your peace, your life and the wisdom of your word. Visit me now with a true, full and lasting repentance. So, I ask in Jesus' name. Amen*