

Without Excuse

Preached by Sinclair B. Ferguson on September 21, 2008

Text: Romans 2:1-5

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OPENING PRAYER:

Gracious God and Heavenly Father, come as we have prayed in song this evening, "Make thee Word of God a living book to us." And come to us individually, we pray, as we study it together. We pray afresh that our Lord Jesus Christ will move among the pews and the seats in this room. And that he will take this precious gift of his own word to one and another of us, unwrap it and say to us, and this my child is for you, and this is for you, and this for you. And so, our prayer afresh is, speak Lord, for your servants are listening. And we pray this in Jesus' name, Amen. Please be seated.

SCRIPTURE READING:

Well we're turning again, in these evening studies to Paul's letter to the Romans. And we come, as I mentioned this morning to one of the many hinge sections in Paul's letter to the Romans where he begins to develop his thinking and his argument more fully, as he is moving, as we've already seen to a preliminary conclusion, in chapter three, verses 19 and 20. In chapter one, he has, of course, verse 24, verse 26, verse 28, been emphasizing the way in which the judgment of God has been revealed. And now in chapter two, verse one, page 940, in the pew Bible.

Therefore, you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things. We know that the judgment of God rightly falls on those who do such things. Do you suppose, oh man -- you who judge those who do such things and yet you do them yourself -- that you will escape the judgment of God? 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? But because of 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.

SERMON:

The very first time I read Martin Luther's words about Paul's letter to the Romans, written as an introduction to his own study of the book of Romans, I was astonished by the particular expressions he used. Paul's letter to the Romans, he said, "is the clearest gospel of them all." The clearest gospel of them all. And the very language makes you want to get back in a space capsule and be able to meet Martin Luther and say to him, Don't you mean that Paul's letter to the Romans is the clearest epistle of them all? Didn't they teach you anything in that Augustinian monk, monk-erry, in which you spent so much of your life? But Luther really did mean what he said. That Paul's letter to the Romans is the clearest gospel of them all.

That was confirmed to me in an article that one of our members passed on to me in the course of this past week, from the July August 2008 edition of Mission Frontiers, authored by a missiologist by the name of Rick Brown. He recounts a recent conversation. One well educated Muslim woman said to me recently, it was not until I had read Romans that I understood the significance of the Gospels. In other words, she was saying, and Luther himself was saying, we can't grasp the significance of the gospels until we see why we need a gospel. The gospels in many ways, tell us about Jesus Christ who is the heart and center of the good news of the gospel. But Luther had discovered, this Muslim woman had discovered, and many of us have discovered, that until we have read why we need a gospel the gospels mean relatively little to us.

And this, of course, is what Paul is helping us to do in these early chapters of Romans. He has told us in verses 16 and 17 of chapter one, that he's "not ashamed of the gospel, because it's the saving power of God." But the very first thing that he has to do in the world in which he lived and in the world in which we live, is to show why we need such good news. And to show why that good news needs to be powerful. And why that good news needs to be nothing less than saving. And what he has been arguing, as we've seen in chapter one, and as he continues to do to chapter three, verse 20, is to tell us the chief reason we need a gospel, and the reason the gospel is such good news, is because by nature we all stand under the judgment and the wrath of God. The very point that he makes elsewhere in Ephesians, chapter two, when he says, speaking about Himself as a Jew, and others who are Gentiles, we were all by nature, children of wrath.

Now, often, as you know, when Paul speaks about the wrath of God, as for example, in this passage, chapter two, and verse five, when he speaks about the day of wrath, often Paul thinks about a cataclysmic cosmic judgment that will take place at the end of time, when the wrath of God will be visited on all unrighteousness and ungodliness. But what he's been emphasizing for us, in chapter one, verse 18, to chapter three, to chapter to the end of chapter one, verse 32, is that God's wrath is not simply a future cosmic cataclysmic event. But in order to demonstrate in the present time, the reality of that future judgment God already expresses His wrath and His judgment against the sins of men and women.

And he does this, and this is the key point of that earlier passage, he does this by giving us over to our own desires. Paul's point, of course, is an insight of immense importance to us, in a world where people live as they please, and despise the judgment of God. They say, "Where is God's judgment? I am flouting His laws, I'm flouting His commandments, I'm floating the Christian gospel, there isn't a single sign of God's wrath upon me." Paul is saying, my dear friend, that is the sign of God's judgment. That God has given you over to your own devices and to your own desires. And the fruition of that is that

when you seriously refuse to worship the Creator, you then begin to destroy his creation, and yourself. And Paul has spoken about this in various ways about the unnatural style of life that is effected by this.

But while this may be the first time the Apostle Paul has dictated the teaching he's giving here, and I'm in no doubt that it was, it was surely not the first time the Apostle Paul had ever given this teaching. Yes, for the first time, he was sitting down and dictating it to his secretary in order that the Roman Christians might understand what he calls "my gospel." But precisely because it was "my gospel", we can assume the Apostle Paul had taught this in various parts of the ancient world and therefore he probably knew -- some of you who are teachers who teach the same lesson again and again to children or in college. You know, the points at which puzzlement will come over your pupils faces or anger may appear in their countenance or hands will go up. They think they're the very first people ever to think of these problems and objections, but you see it year after year after year. And here I think as we turn to chapter two, we are we are to imagine the apostle Paul in full flight as he expounds these things. And just as he does, he sees somebody in the congregation, as you do when you're preaching. You see people responding. You see people nodding vigorously or shaking their heads vigorously. You see people's faces sometimes breaking out in the release of the forgiveness of sins. And sometimes you see the very reverse. And just at this point, Paul seems to espy somebody in the back of the congregation. And he knows what this man is thinking. And he interjects, you sir! He says, Yes, you in the third back row -- three people from the left you sir, you sir -- you too have no excuse!

Now, who is Paul addressing here? Well it's obvious, isn't it? He's addressing somebody who heartily agrees with what he's been saying. Perhaps the person has been nodding. Perhaps there has been a little, "amen" that has appeared as Paul has been speaking. And as Paul has been showing how God judges the sinfulness of men and women, there is this person as it were in the congregation. His identity will become clearer later on in Romans. But first of all Paul wants to point out his disposition.

What is His disposition? His disposition is thoroughly to agree with everything the Apostle Paul has said, and to agree with the condemnation. And to agree with the condemnation. You are right, this person is saying to Paul, blast them to hell, that's what they need to hear for their ungodliness for their sinfulness for their moral degradation. For the moral chaos that may have caused. You are right, they are condemned, condemned, condemned, condemned, and you are right to have condemned them. But you see, Paul has said nothing about his own condemnation of them. Paul has spoken about this awful sense he has of the, of the way in which God is, is giving people over in his judgment, but he has not stood at the sidelines and said, as this person appears to be saying, so blast you to hell. Because the very reason he is an evangelist and an apostle of Jesus Christ is because his ministry is not to condemn. His ministry is to save. And so he stands back a little and you'll notice what his response is. He says, "Who do you think you are, oh man? Whoever you are who judge? For in passing judgment, that is to say, for issuing your condemnation of another, you condemn yourself!" Because he says, "You the judge, practice the same thing." Practice the same things? As these abominable people you've been describing Apostle Paul? This unnatural business, you've been describing! Me like that?

But you notice what Paul is saying, look back to chapter one and verse 29. "They are full of envy and strife and deceit and maliciousness. They are gossips and slanderers, They are haughty. They are boastful. They are foolish. They are faithless. They are heartless. They are ruthless." And you see the man has given himself away. And Paul is going on to say the man has given away the fact that he doesn't begin to understand the gospel. Why? Because he stands there and he condemns other

sinners, without their sin and its manifestation causing him to call out to God and to say O God, be merciful to me, a sinner.

And you see begins to speak about this. He says, You said, did you not my friend, that they were under the judgment of God, and they were condemned because they did these things. And I heard your Amen. But you see that amen is rebounding upon yourself. It's a condemnation of yourself. Because these very things of which I've just been speaking, the malicious heart, the hardness of heart, the ruthlessness towards fellow sinners, the bitterness towards them -- these are the very things that indicate that you too my friend are in danger of being handed over by God to the result of your own sinful heart.

Now you know we've had two sermons already in this series on man's sinfulness. And if I'm not mistaken, we're probably in for another half dozen sermons on man's sinfulness. And you might want to go and say to Paul, Paul, can you not just give me your, your argument in a verse? Why do we have to spend all this time thinking about our sinfulness? And the answer actually is a very obvious one. It's because until we've plummeted something of the depths, and twistedness and subtlety of our own sinfulness, we may sing about Amazing Grace but we will never feel that grace is amazing. And that's what Paul is concerned to do here in Romans. He's taking us down into the depths of our own sinfulness and twistedness, so that as we begin to cry out for mercy we will then be in a position to savor and taste and to rejoice in the sheer blessedness and relief of the gospel of Jesus Christ. And this is why Paul is determined that we will be left nowhere to hide. Because it's only when we find that there is nowhere to hide from God's judgment on our twistedness and sinfulness and pride and selfishness, and harshness, that we cry out to God, "Oh God be merciful to me a sinner."

But you see the great thing -- And I hope this is what we have and what we will experience as we study these awful passages together. The great thing is that when we hear about this in the context of God's grace, when we are brought down to have our consciences ripped apart as the old people used to say, there is a blessedness in that. You see, in a way, that's really the great sign of a work of grace in us that we sense the blessedness of becoming conscious of our sinfulness.

Some of you remember that picture in CS Lewis' The Voyage of the Dawn Treader where the boy turns into a dragon because of his waywardness. And Aslan appears. And the boy tries to clean himself up. He scratches off the scales, for the scales keep growing. And Aslan says to him, I will need to do it. And he rehearses what that experience was like as he tells the story to his friends? Was it was it sore? Was it pleasant? Oh no, no, no, it was an agony! I felt his claws were going through me. But oh the blessedness of feeling that you are being made clean again.

And you see my friends, that's what we are in such need of all the way through our Christian lives. God is always going to be showing us the depths of our sin in order that we may see and taste and feel and savor the heights of His grace. There is no other way. Paul is resolutely determined to bring these Roman Christians there. And that is why when he points out to the man in the third back row, with apologies to all the men who are sitting in the third back rows of the church this evening, He does it because he wants to save that man. But that man can never be saved until he sees how desperately he needs God's salvation. And so he begins to speak to him about this judgment. "You have no excuse" verse one, Sir, every one of you "who judges, who condemns, for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself because you the judge practice the very same things." And now he begins, as it were, to go for the jugular.

And he says four things here about the judgment of God. Number one is this - verse two. The judgment of God always reflects the reality of the situation. We know he says, verse two, that the judgment of God rightly falls on those who do such things. Now, that adverb in our English translation rightly, is literally according to the truth, according to the reality of the situation. In other words, he's saying, God sees beyond your appearance. God hears beneath your words, and he judges your life, not on externals, not on appearances, but on the heart. On the reality of the situation. Just as, for example, our Lord Jesus had taught as the prophets had taught. Yes, you may never have committed adultery. But says the Lord Jesus, just a moment of lust in your heart towards a woman -- that is adultery. The rest is where that lust leads to, but that's the essence of the sin. I've never committed murder. But how many people have I blasted their reputation by an idle word, or by a vicious attack? By a subtle way of destroying their reputation? Says the Lord Jesus, that's exactly the same thing as murder. God, he is saying, judges the heart. And so when we begin to taste the analysis of scripture of our lives we find ourselves saying what the Psalmist, don't we, in Psalm 130, "Lord, if you were to mark my iniquity, I wouldn't be able to stand." I often think that. That's Psalm 130, isn't it? I often think what would happen if as God's word was preached to us, if your sins and my sins that God's word was finding in our hearts, what would happen if if they were projected up onto huge screens at the back of the church? You might think that's a very good reason for not having huge screens in a Christian church. But what if that happened? What if the truth about you was projected onto the back wall of the church? How long would you be able to stay in the building? If the secrets of your heart -- the sinister workings of your heart's depravity were made known. That you've kept in? That I've kept in? Lord, who could stand? And you see we want to get out of that as quickly as we possibly can. But Paul is saying, wait a minute, wait a minute, wait a minute, feel the judgment of God as He exposes the reality of your sinfulness. Now, this man, and the third back row is probably moved to the second back row by now I'm sure. This man in the third back row says, well, that's all very well, Paul, but there are exceptions. And of course, I happen to be one of them. There are exceptions. You've been speaking about those people out there, but I'm one of these people in here.

And as this passage goes on, it becomes very clear. I think that Paul has been addressing a Jewish person here. He's been concerned to uncover the man's disposition before he uncovers the man's religious convictions. But it does very much look as though he's speaking about a Jew because a Gentile would never think about God's kindness in verse four. And it's certainly true that a Gentile would never think as Paul later on says about the judgment of God. And he makes it very explicit later on in verse 17. Doesn't he? "If you call yourself a Jew", ahh you see, there it is -- I'm a Jew. I belong to God's privileged people. I am among the exceptions. "We are God's people, the Chosen of the Lord", we actually sing those words in this church frequently enough.

But you notice what Paul's second point is? He says, the judgment of God reflects the reality of my heart situation. Secondly, it allows for no exceptions. We know that the judgment of God rightly falls on those who do such things. "Do you suppose or man, you judge those who do such things and yet do them yourself, that you will escape the judgment of God?" You see? And even when I'm saying, but God, I'm a Jew, but God I am this. God, I've done this. God, I belong to this church. The Apostle Paul's whole argument here, chapter three, verse 20, is there are absolutely no exceptions. And you notice the point that he will make in chapter three, verse 10, "None is righteous no not one". And chapter three, verse 20, "By works of the law, no human being will be justified in God's sight." Because through the law, through the privilege of having had the law of God. All that emerges is the knowledge of my own sin.

Now, he takes that point one step further in verse four. God's judgment reflects the reality of the situation. God's judgment allows no exception. Now, isn't that conviction the deepest conviction of the human heart, there may be very few exceptions, but if there are any exceptions, I'm one of them. I am one of them. Don't we think that way naturally? The evidence we think that we naturally is we always can find somebody who's worse than we are. You see? And the moment I think that way, I've fallen into this ungodly trap of saying, I am an exception. And so long as I think I am an exception, I can never ever, ever, ever, ever come to Jesus Christ as my Savior. Why would I need to?

Now he takes this one step further. God's judgment reflects the reality of the situation. It allows no exception. And thirdly, now in verse four, God's judgment unmasks all presumption. And you find that presumption, in verse four. Do you presume on the riches of His kindness and forbearance and patience? And now there's the point. I wonder if you've ever been in some kind of group fellowship. I've seen many group fellowships and studies and conversations where there will often be somebody who appears usually a rather pious person. And there may be somebody in the group who says, you know, I've been struggling with my sin. I'm so convicted of my sin. Alas that pious person may masquerade as a minister of the gospel, tragically. And that person will just say, don't you worry about that? God just forgives your sin, and everything is fine. And you see what Paul is saying. Paul is saying that can so easily be presumptuous? Do you presume upon the riches of God's kindness? It's his business to forgive me? He will forgive me because, of course, I'm me. It sometimes appears in a tragic form. I've seen it appear in this tragic form more than once. Somebody will come. like a relative perhaps, who for 10, or 20, or 30 or 40 years, has been a million miles away from the gospel, and they will pull out their decision card and say, but he is all right, isn't he? He is all right, isn't he? He prayed the prayer. He made the decision. No, says Paul, the kindness of God is meant to lead - you - to - repentance. And repentance for Paul, it's not just the awful conviction of a moment or the decision of a moment, it's the radical turning round of our lives to embrace and live for the glory of Jesus Christ. And so the awful tragedy about this situation, Paul is saying, and it really is a tragedy, that somebody could presume on the riches of God's kindness and never really be a believer at all. Because they don't know.

Now notice those words, "Not - knowing - that the kindness of God has meant to lead you to repentance." Dear ones, a decision for the Lord Jesus that isn't wholly characterized by repentance from sin -- that's not conversion. That's not becoming a Christian. Making the decision. Walking to the front. The decision of the moment -- by God's grace, the decision of the moment may really be the radical turning point in somebody's life. But if there is no radical turning, there has been no decision. All there is, is a presumption. Why? says Paul, because they have been ignorant of the real nature of the gospel. Isn't that something? The apostle Paul.. now why does he say this because he's passionate to see people really converted. He is seeing when you presume on the riches of His kindness and forbearance and patience, now gloriously God is full, rich in kindness and forbearance and patience, but he says, the evidence that I've grasped that kindness and his forbearance and the sheer riches of His grace is that I've embraced Christ permanently. And that I live for Christ permanently. Otherwise, I'm simply ignorantly presuming, you see?

And this Jewish man apparently was in a very similar situation. His God is gracious. God's covenant grace, God's covenant mercy, everything will be all right. I wonder if you remember Paul's later words to Titus, when he explains why the grace of God appears. He says "the grace of God has appeared to teach us to deny all ungodliness and to live a new life for Jesus Christ." I wonder if we are clear about this, dear friends? That becoming a Christian is a radical transformation of our lives. So radical,

whatever the ups and downs may be, that its reality will become clear. God save us from, in Paul's language, "ignorantly presuming on the grace of God." And he's really saying, look, when the grace of God works in your heart, one of the first things you do is you repent. And your life by God's power is transformed. What did? What did Zacchaeus do? When you receive the grace of Jesus Christ? His life was turned around 180 degrees turned around for the glory of Jesus Christ. Yes, he must have had his ups and downs that we don't know about because we hear no more about him. But Paul is saying, Oh, please, please, please don't make the mistake of presuming on the grace of Jesus Christ. There is forgiveness with him that he may be feared.

Now, now maybe this man at the back knew something about the story of -- Wait a minute. He says wait a minute. I've got you, Paul. The woman taken in adultery. "Neither do I condemn you." Do you remember what the words that follow that are? "Go and sin no more." Now that's how grace works. When we are delivered from presuming upon the grace of God to trusting the grace of God, it really does make all the difference to our lifestyles. So let us not presume. The moment I say because of the grace of God, I can keep on living in sin that's the moment I show I haven't begun to understand how the grace of God works. And Paul will go on to that later on in Romans.

So this is very searching isn't it? God's judgment reflects the reality of the situation. It allows no exception whatsoever. It unmask our presumption. And it results, finally, in verse five, in terrible retribution. Now, what's the problem here? The problem here is this. This is the man who when he goes into the temple stands, and he prays something like this, "Lord, I thank you." That's a good way to begin praying. Lord, He says, "I thank you. I thank you that I, I tithe, and I thank you that I fast twice a week. And I'm so grateful to you that I'm not like that publican, that sinner in the corner. Oh, Lord, I thank you for all this." But you see, he doesn't really pray the sinners prayer does he? He doesn't pray "God be merciful to me the sinner." And so when he meets Jesus on his way out of the temple, and Jesus system, my dear man, do you realize what a dreadful condition you're in? Do you realize you're under the judgment of God? Do you realize that your very own prayer has condemned you? Well the man is in a state of apoplexy. The man will experience a tremendous shock.

Now, I think I've told some of you before, I cannot begin to describe what a shock it was to me as a youngster that I wasn't actually a Christian and that I'd never been a Christian. And if that can be a shock to a boy of 14, I can't imagine what a shock it must be to people I've known they'd been in their 40s their 50s or 60s, and have have discovered by God's grace, that they've been presuming on God's grace. And they've never actually tasted God's grace. They've never sought him for salvation. I sometimes wonder if it's the sheer fearfulness of discovering that you need to be saved that sometimes keeps religious people away. I couldn't take the shock of that. Oh, well, if you're in that condition tonight, my dear friend, let me tell you, I want to tell you with all the compassion of my heart, far better to go through that shock now than to go through that shock then. Because look at what Paul says, in verse five. You're presuming on the grace of God but because of your heart and impenitent heart, you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath, when God's righteous judgment will be revealed.

Remember how Jesus spoke about this at the end of the sermon on the mount, he says on the last day, they'll be people coming to me, and they'll be saying to me, think of it they'll be saying to me, "Lord, we did great things in your name. Lord, we did mighty works in your name. Lord, we even cast out devils in your name." And Jesus will say, do you remember what Jesus will say to them? He will say to them, "Who are you? Who are you? I never knew you. You never came to me and said, Oh, God, be merciful to me a sinner." All you did was run around saying, we've done this and we've done that. And we've

done such mighty works and it's all in the name of Jesus. But you never came to me and said to me, Lord Jesus, save me. Be my Savior. I see my sin. I see my need. Please, please, please, please, Jesus, help me.

In the book of Revelation tells us in that staggering picture language that even great ones of the earth will run to the mountains and say, oh cover us! Hide us from the wrath of the Lamb. There's an awful relentlessness about this. Isn't there? It's like Nathan saying to David, "You are the man." You are the man? Now why does he do this? Because he wants this man's heart to be broken, his mouth to be shut, and his cries only to be the same as the Apostle Paul's cry. I am the chief of sinners. But God had mercy on me in Jesus Christ.

And you see that, that's why, that's why he hasn't joined this man in his condemnation of others. Because Paul himself knows that by nature, he too, is under the condemnation of God. But the glorious heart of the gospel is this. You see this means something only when we realize that by nature we are condemned. The glorious heart of the gospel is this. But the Son of Man came, not to condemn the world. But the world through him might be saved.

Now, as a very young Christian, we were taught this little song. And I guess that's why I think I've tried never to despise little songs in the Church of Jesus Christ. "He did not come to judge the world. He did not come to blame. He did not only come to seek, it was to save he came. And when we call him Savior, and when we call him the Savior, and when we call him Savior, then we call him by his name."

Dear ones, this may seem to be the strangest question with which to end a sermon. But it is the most serious question I could ever ask you as a minister of the gospel. Have you ever called on Jesus to be your Savior? Have you ever called on Jesus to be your Savior? Only as you begin to feel your sinfulness and long for His grace and find that he is merciful? What a great thing to be able to say to you tonight. I wouldn't be anywhere else in the world seeing anything else in human vocabulary tonight than saying this to you. If you call upon Him as your Savior, He has promised that no one who comes to Him will ever be turned away. Isn't that wonderful? Isn't that absolutely amazing? And you've maybe never done that. You're a teenager, been brought up in the church. You you've presumed on the kindness of God and you're never asked him to be your Savior. You could be 75 years old and never done it. But you could do it tonight. And he will save you because that's his name. Savior.

CLOSING PRAYER:

Lord Jesus Christ, how at times as we read your word we, were almost bound to say to you, you seem to be cruel to be kind. You show us our sin. You show us our hearts. We find ourselves at times brought very low by your word. But always so that we may seek you and find you in your word. And we are so grateful to you tonight. That when we call you Savior, we call you by your name. So Lord Jesus from the youngest to the oldest here, from anyone who is not a Christian to those who have been Christians for decades, we want to say to you with all our hearts -- thank you that you did not come to judge the world that you did not come to blame, that you did not only come to seek, it was to save you came. And when we call you Savior, when we call you savior, when we call you Savior, we call you by your name. And we thank you for your salvation. Amen