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THE DAMNABLE SIN OF SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS

Romans 2:1-5

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Romans, Lesson 9

The Damnable Sin of Self-Righteousness Romans 2:1-5

Waiting for his first orthodontist appointment, a 12-year-old boy was a bit nervous. He was completing a patient questionnaire and apparently had high hopes of winning the dentist's favor. In the space marked "Hobbies" he wrote, "Swimming and flossing" (*Reader's Digest* [Aug., 1994], p. 112). That humorous story reflects how we all want to portray ourselves to others as better than we really are. We all want to make a good impression!

But when we do that, we're forgetting something important, namely, that "all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do" (Heb. 4:13). God knows the very thoughts and intentions of our hearts (Heb. 4:12). Someday we will stand before Him to give an account of our lives. So we must judge our sins on the thought level. And especially we must be on guard against the damnable sin of self-righteousness.

In Romans 1:18-32, Paul indicts the Gentiles (mainly) for their many sins: idolatry, sexual immorality, homosexuality, and a long list of destructive relational sins. Being a Jew and a former Pharisee, Paul knew that his fellow Jews would be sitting on the sidelines, cheering him on: "Give it to those pagan sinners, Paul!" They smugly would be thinking, "Thank God that I'm not like those awful Gentile sinners" (Luke 18:11).

So in chapter 2, Paul begins to zero in on the Jews. He does not begin directly (he doesn't address them directly until 2:17), which has led to a lot of debate about whether he is addressing the moral Gentile or the Jew in these opening verses. It really doesn't matter practically, but I think he is using the same indirect approach that the prophet Amos uses (Amos 1 & 2), where he begins by condemning the foreign nations around Israel. Just when the Jews are cheering him on, he moves in to hit them with their sins. (See, also, Nathan with David, 2 Sam. 12:1-7.)

From his own pharisaical background Paul knew that self-righteous people tend to justify themselves by blaming others. Self-

righteousness is a very difficult sin to get people to see and condemn in themselves. But it's a serious, damnable sin because it keeps people from seeing their need for the gospel. It believes the lie that we can be good enough in ourselves to qualify for heaven. Thus we don't need a Savior who died on the cross to pay the penalty for our sins. "Maybe really gross sinners need a Savior. But me? Hey, I'm a basically good person! God wouldn't judge a good guy like me, would He?" Or, would He?

If you're tired of hearing about God's judgment, I'm sorry, but clearly it's a major theme of our text. Paul refers to "the judgment of God" in 2:2, 3, and 5, plus he refers to condemning yourself (2:1) and "storing up wrath for the day of wrath" (2:5). So it's hard to dodge Paul's message:

If you do not repent of your self-righteous hypocrisy, you are storing up wrath for the day of judgment.

I was going to say "we" instead of "you," but I changed it because Paul does. In chapter 1, he speaks of "they." But in chapter 2, he directly addresses his reader as "you." He's going from preaching to meddling! He knows that it is easy to be blind to this deadly sin of self-righteousness, so he reaches out, grabs us by the lapels, shakes us a bit, and says, "I'm talking to *you!* Listen up!" He makes four points in his indictment. I'm going to follow Paul by using the more direct "you" instead of "we."

1. You are prone self-righteously to judge others for the very same sins that you commit (2:1).

"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."

It is difficult to understand the connection of "therefore." Probably it refers back to the overall theme of 1:18-32, that God's wrath is revealed against *all* ungodliness and unrighteousness of men. *Therefore*, when seemingly moral people condemn other sinners, but then it comes out that they are practicing the very same sins, it renders them without excuse before God. By practicing the same sins, Paul probably is not referring to the more outwardly flagrant sins of idolatry, sexual immorality, and homosexuality

(1:24-27), which are not so common among religious people, but rather to the relational sins (1:29-31), of which we all are guilty.

Paul is pointing out how prone we all are to condemn others and justify ourselves, even though we're guilty of the same sins that we're condemning in others. I read about a man who was a Republican Party chairman of a county in Florida who sued a former GOP county executive committee member for defamation because he sent out a letter to state party officials accusing the chairman of having been married six times. The chairman called the charge "unconscionable," and stated that the correct number of marriages is five. He declared, "I believe in family values" (in *FlagLive* [12/29/05-1/4/06]).

We need to understand that Paul isn't condemning the act of judging others *per se*, in that he expects his Jewish readers to agree with him that the sins of the Gentiles (1:24-32) are wrong. The problem with judging others is when you secretly engage in the same behavior that you openly condemn. When a pastor berates sexual immorality from the pulpit, but then it comes out that he secretly looks at porn, he has condemned himself. When a politician postures himself as standing for family values, but it comes out that he snuck off to visit his mistress in South America, he has condemned himself.

Probably one of the most frequently used, but misapplied, verses in the Bible is Matthew 7:1, "Do not judge so that you will not be judged." If people would keep reading, they would see that in verse 6 Jesus tells us not to give what is holy to dogs or to cast our pearls before swine. He was not talking about literal dogs and swine, but rather about people who are dogs and swine. To obey that verse, you have to judge whether a person is a dog or a swine. Then, in verse 15, Jesus warns about false prophets who come as wolves in sheep's clothing. You have to judge carefully to conclude, "This isn't a sheep—this is a wolf masquerading as a sheep!" The point is clear: if you don't make correct judgments about others, you'll be eaten by wolves! Also, Paul tells us that we are responsible to judge those in the church who profess to be believers, but who are living in sin (1 Cor. 5:9-13).

So in Romans 2:1, Paul is not saying that it is wrong to judge others. Rather, he is saying that it is wrong self-righteously to judge

others, while at the same time you're practicing the sins that you're judging. We could come up with more, but let me give you five marks of a self-righteous hypocrite by which to evaluate *yourself*. (If you apply these to your spouse, then you are one!)

(1) *A self-righteous hypocrite judges the sins of others while overlooking his own sins.* As Jesus says (Matt. 7:5), "You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye." Someone has defined a hypocrite as the guy who complains that there is too much sex and violence on his DVD player! (*Reader's Digest*, Oct., 1991, p. 183; I changed VCR to DVD.)

(2) *A self-righteous hypocrite judges others based on selective standards, not on all of God's Word.* One of the most helpful chapters for understanding the sin of self-righteousness is Jesus' indictment of the Pharisees in Matthew 23. The Pharisees picked out certain parts of the Law and prided themselves on their obedience, but they neglected the weightier parts of the Law (Matt. 23:23). They tithed their table spices, but they neglected justice, mercy, and faithfulness. They invented loopholes around keeping the Law. They said that if you swore by the temple, you were not obligated to keep your word, but if you swore by the gold of the temple, you were obligated (Matt. 23:16-21).

We laugh at how stupid that sounds, but many Christians do the same thing. God's Word tells us that God hates violence (Ps. 11:5) and that we should not even talk about immorality, impurity, or greed (Eph. 5:3). We should be innocent in what is evil (Rom. 16:19). But somehow it's okay to fill our minds with TV shows and movies that are filled with profanity, violence, and sexual immorality. The self-righteous person picks parts of the Bible that he likes and prides himself on keeping those parts. And he condemns as "legalists" those who seek to obey all of God's Word.

(3) *A self-righteous hypocrite is more concerned about external conformity than with true, inner godliness.* Jesus said (Matt. 23:28), "So you, too, outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness." The Pharisees were concerned that they not defile themselves for the Passover by going into Pilate's Gentile court (John 18:28) at the same time that they were seeking to crucify the innocent Lord Jesus! Self-righteous hypocrites want

to keep up outward “Christian” appearances, but they don’t judge their own sins on the heart level. They put on the happy Christian face at church, but use abusive speech with their families at home.

(4) *A self-righteous hypocrite is not interested in helping others grow in godliness, but only in gaining a following.* Jesus said (Matt. 23:13, 15), “But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you shut off the kingdom of heaven from people; for you do not enter in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in.... Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you travel around on sea and land to make one proselyte; and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves.” They didn’t care about the people or their hearts before God. They just wanted to gain followers so that they looked good.

(5) *A self-righteous hypocrite justifies himself by comparing himself with others or by blaming others for his own sins.* Jesus told the parable of the proud Pharisee who went to the temple and prayed, “God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get” (Luke 18:11-12). He wasn’t comparing himself with God’s Word, which condemns pride. Rather, he was comparing himself with others who, in his mind, were worse than he was. In his mind, he kept some of the Law; the tax collector didn’t keep any of it. So, on the curve, he is accepted by God, while the tax collector is rejected. But, God doesn’t grade on the curve!

This is the most common problem that I encounter when couples come to me for marriage counseling. It is also the biggest hurdle for them to get over. The husband says, “I know I’m not perfect, but I work hard to provide a good living for this woman, but all I hear is griping. When I come home after a hard day’s work, I deserve some time to watch a ball game, but she harps at me about disciplining the kids or fixing something around the house.” He justifies himself and blames her.

She does the same thing: “I’m not a perfect wife, but I work hard to make a good home for him. I do all the shopping, cook the meals, do the laundry, clean the house, and take care of the kids. All I want is a little love from him. But he just comes home and ignores me and the kids. He yells at us to be quiet. He gets mad if supper isn’t ready on time. He expects me to respond to him in the

bedroom and gets upset when I'm too tired." In her mind, she's doing the best that she can do. The marriage problems are his fault.

They are both passing judgment on one another, while each of them is doing the same things that they are blaming their spouse of doing. If each of them would stop blaming the other and justifying himself or herself, they would see dramatic improvement in their marriage. So Paul's point is quite practical: You are prone self-righteously to judge others for the very same sins that you commit.

2. Self-righteous hypocrisy brings you under God's judgment (2:2-3).

"And we know that the judgment of God rightly falls upon those who practice such things. 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?"

Verse 2 literally reads, "the judgment of God is according to truth upon those who practice such things." He means "that God's judgment against sin is fully in accord with the facts, that it is just" (Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* [Eerdmans], p. 131). Paul's hypothetical Jewish reader that he is addressing would have agreed that God's judgment is according to the truth.

Where he would have disagreed is with Paul's assertion that God's righteous judgment falls on the Jews just as it falls on the Gentiles. In other words, the Jews claimed special status before God because they were His covenant people. They believed that if you were a Jew living in Palestine, you were treated as if you kept all of the commandments and were guaranteed of the life to come (Alfred Edersheim, *Sketches of Jewish Social Life in the Days of Christ* [Eerdmans], p. 5). But Paul applies God's just judgment to Jew and Gentile alike and says, "If you judge others for the very sins that you commit, you're guilty in God's court of justice."

At this point, Paul isn't pointing to God's revealed Law as the standard for judgment, although he could have done so. Rather, he is saying that if a self-righteous person judges someone else for a sin that he himself is practicing, he will not escape God's judgment. If you condemn someone else for lying to you, but then you lie to someone else, you've just condemned yourself. If you berate someone who stole from you, but then you cheat the government on

your taxes or steal something from your employer, you will not escape from God's judgment. Of course, Paul is not saying that you'd escape God's judgment if you lie or steal without judging others for those sins! Rather, he is showing that all of us have violated our own standards by doing the very things that we condemn in others. And so we are guilty before God.

3. The riches of God's kindness, tolerance, and patience should lead you to repentance, not to presume on His grace (2:4).

"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?"

In verse 4, Paul "introduces a rhetorical question that brings to light the false assumptions of the person who is addressed in v. 3" (Moo, p. 132). Paul is saying, "If you think that you can get away with sin because God is kind, tolerant, and patient, you're greatly mistaken! His kindness should lead you to repentance, not to self-righteous complacency. If you go on sinning, presuming on His grace, you're only storing up wrath for the day of judgment (2:5)."

God's kindness, tolerance, and patience overlap somewhat, but have different nuances of meaning. His *kindness* points to the many good gifts that He bestows on this rebellious human race. He gives us air to breathe, food to eat, homes to live in, families that love us, beautiful scenery to enjoy, and bodies and minds that (for the most part) function as they are supposed to. He treats us far better than we deserve.

God's *tolerance* points to the fact that He does not strike us dead instantly when we defiantly sin against Him. How many times we have known what is right and deliberately disobeyed! God could have struck us dead on hundreds of occasions and He would have been perfectly just, but He did not. He is tolerant.

God's *patience* is similar to His tolerance. The word literally means "long on wrath," or slow to anger. He gives us opportunity after opportunity to repent, without inflicting judgment.

God doesn't just trickle these benefits on sinners. Rather, He gives them *richly*. But the problem is, sinners mistakenly think that because they experience all of these blessings and God's judgment

has not hit them yet, He must think that they're okay. They won't face His judgment, because they aren't really bad sinners, like the pagans that Paul has just described in chapter 1. But Paul says, "If you think that God's kindness, tolerance, and patience mean that you will escape His final judgment, you're in big trouble! God is kind, tolerant, and patient so that you will repent!"

Thus, you are prone to self-righteously judge others for the very sins that you commit (2:1). Such self-righteous hypocrisy brings you under God's judgment (2:2-3). Don't mistake God's kindness to mean that you will escape His judgment. He is only giving you time to repent (2:4). Finally,

4. If you do not deal with your hard, unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath for the coming day of God's judgment (2:5).

"But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God."

Frederic Godet (*Commentary on Romans* [Kregel], p. 116) captures the grim irony of Paul's words, "Every favor trampled under foot adds to the *treasure of wrath* which is already suspended over the heads of the impenitent people." James Boice (*Romans Baker*, 1:220) pictures it as a miser who for years stores his horde of gold coins in the attic above his bed. It's his treasure. But then one night, the weight of all that gold breaks through the ceiling and comes crashing on his head, killing him. He thought he was storing up treasure, but he was only adding to his own judgment.

It's the same for the self-righteous person who presumes on God's kindness and patience. He judges others, but does not judge his own sin. He goes on in his pride, thinking that his outward righteousness is amassing a great treasure in heaven. But, actually, he is amassing a "treasure" of wrath for the judgment day!

Note that Paul isn't talking here to idolaters or to the sexually immoral. He's talking to the moral, religious person. Also, the *day* of wrath points to its certainty. There *will be* a day of wrath for those who have not repented of their sins, especially the sin of self-righteousness. It's on God's calendar. "He has fixed a day in which

He will judge the world in righteousness ..." (Acts 17:31). Since it is absolutely certain, we need to be ready for it. How?

The problem that we've got to deal with is our hard, unrepentant hearts. The word "stubbornness" (NASB) comes from a Greek word from which we get our word sclerosis. It means spiritual hardening of the heart. Repentance (2:4) is a change of heart and mind that causes us to turn from sin to God, not just outwardly, but on the heart level. It includes sorrow for our sins and the resolve to turn from them. We don't just do it once, when we come to Christ. Rather, it is the ongoing mark of true conversion. True Christians habitually judge their own sins on the heart (or thought) level, based on the standards of God's Word. That includes the damnable sin of self-righteousness, which stems from pride. True Christians are marked by broken and contrite hearts before God (Ps. 51:17).

Conclusion

A man complained about the amount of time his family spent in front of the TV. His girls watched cartoons and neglected schoolwork. His wife preferred soap operas to housework. His solution? "As soon as the baseball season's over, I'm going to pull the plug" (*Reader's Digest*, June, 1981, p. 99). How easy it is to fall into this deadly sin of self-righteousness!

God's solution is to deal with our sins on the heart level before Him. Come to Christ and confess your sins, turning from them, and He will forgive and cleanse you from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9). Spend time daily in His Word. It's like looking in the mirror and applying soap and water to the dirt in your soul. Don't play games with God. His kindness should lead you to genuine, ongoing repentance.

Application Questions

1. How open and honest should we be in sharing our own sins? Where do we draw lines of privacy?
2. Why is judging others sometimes both necessary and right? When is it wrong? How can we know the difference?
3. Some hesitate to confront another Christian who is in sin because they don't want to be judgmental. Is this right? What biblical principles apply? See 1 Cor. 5; Gal. 6:1; 2 Tim. 2:24-26.
4. Should Christians watch movies that contain profanity, violence, and sex scenes? Where do we draw the line? What criteria should we apply?

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