

Calling out the Self-Righteous: Part 2

Romans 2:6-16

*He will render to each one according to **his works**...on that day when, according to my gospel, **God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus.**"*

Introduction: One of the classics that many of us had to read in high school (or for some, did NOT read, or used the analog version of *ChatGPT* called "Cliffs Notes") was *The Scarlett Letter*, a novel by Nathaniel Hawthorne published in 1850 and telling a story of a Puritan colony in Massachusetts Bay in 1642-1649. *What made this story a classic and a favorite of certain English teachers?* Certainly the vivid language and symbolism, but most likely because it deals with universal themes that every person in every culture experiences: *love, judgment, shame, and disappointment*. But one of the primary themes is the issue of **conscience**, particularly in dealing with known and convicting sin.

For those that have never heard the story or read the book next to a fan in school, the story follows **Hester Prynne** who has given birth to a baby named Pearl in adultery. Unwilling to give up the identity of the father, she had to endure public shaming in front of the whole town and forced to wear a **scarlet letter "A"** for the rest of her life. This would have been a form of punishment, warning, and shame concerning sin. It also was a commentary into *Christless religion*, where morals were upheld but no forgiveness, restoration, and reconciliation were possible for falling short of the morality imposed. This is a vivid reminder to every believer that we do NOT believe anyone should have a scarlet letter, whether actual or perceived, because of our sin, but know there is full restoration for any and every sinner.

But Hester is not the character that we wanted to consider. It was the concealed father of Pearl. His name was Arthur Dimmesdale, the local minister of Hester's church, and though he watched Hester absorb the abuse from the town, he kept his part of the sin hidden, continuing to function as if nothing ever happened, too afraid of the consequences to admit and acknowledge his part. What is fascinating about his portrayal was the fact that though *he got away with it* publically, he NEVER got away with it privately. His conscience was constantly accusing him, affecting his health and countenance. Hester, though shunned and isolated, actually showed her character in serving the poor, where Dimmesdale continued down a pathway of misery. At the conclusion, Dimmesdale finally confessed on the same scaffold where Hester stood years earlier, confesses his sin, and dies in Hester's arms, with some believing that they saw a letter "A" on his chest, signifying the burden he carried all those years.

The novel addressed **two pathways of dealing with sin**, both falling short of the hope that the Bible lays out in Christ. Either we **ADMIT our sin** and deal with the public shame to come without hope of restoration, or we **HIDE** our sin and hope no one finds out. Both lead to misery, but at the very least both capture a vital truth: ***sin is real, and every person must deal with it, since no one can ignore it.*** Judgement is coming for sin, and it will be for every person, everywhere, for all time, since we are ALL on equal footing in our sin. This is the point Paul continues to make in Romans 2.

For those that are new with us or missed last week, let's review a bit. Paul, in a logical and judicial way, has taken the whole world into a courtroom. For three chapters, he builds a case with the goal that leaves everyone knowing they have a *guilty* verdict against them. But *being guilty* and *acknowledging* that guilt are two different realities. So Paul made his opening and closing statements (Rom. 1:16-17 and 3:21-26) that included the hope of the **gospel of Jesus Christ**, where the *righteousness of God* is seen in

the fact that God saves **sinful mankind BY FAITH in the person and work of Jesus Christ**, and this salvation is open to ALL equally – Jew, Gentile, Greek, wise, foolish, and barbarian alike. In order to receive this “*Not-guilty*” judgement however, every person needs to come to grips with the fact that we are all under **God’s wrath**, experienced both in the present and future.

Paul’s opening salvo was to show all of humanity fell short (1:18-32), by exchanging the truth of God for a lie and the worship of God for idolatry, which led to a **giving over** to the unnatural and culminating in both **immorality followed by insanity**. God’s wrath is received by sin breeding more sin, giving humanity what they wanted in their desires, as those very desires spiraled out of control. Mankind **KNOWS** there is a God through the Created World, but suppress that truth, and in order to buoy up the nagging reality of judgment, they give **approval** to others who do the same thing, finding strength in numbers. But Paul also anticipated there would be arguments by both groups and individuals who may have agreed with the premise but not the precise implication. So Paul created a *diatribe* in order to answer all the arguments in the courtroom, starting with the **self-righteous** (2:1-5) who passed judgment on others but missed the fact that they did the exact same things as those they judged.

Now Paul turns to the fact that salvation is not by works but **judgement is, and everyone is judged by God’s wrath impartially, and everyone KNOWS their works based on the gift of conscience, which should point every person to the fact that they stand guilty under God’s righteousness**.

Impartiality of Works (2:6-11)

He will render to each one according to his works: ⁷ to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; ⁸ but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury. ⁹ There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, ¹⁰ but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. ¹¹ For God shows no partiality

A whimsical judge is terrible for the innocent, but an impartial judge is a terror for the guilty. Paul pictures the courtroom with a Judge who is completely independent, not swayed by background, looks, or accomplishments. He simply viewed each person through the lens of **His righteousness**, which is the foundation for judgement, and the **works** produced by the person He’s handing out a verdict. In order to understand Paul’s argument and NOT view this as teaching something contrary to salvation by faith alone, we must see that the point of these verses is to show that **ALL people**, both Jew and Greek, **are judged by the same standard**. He will then build on this premise in the next section. At first glance, this section *seems to* contradict the entire argument Paul makes in most of the letter ---- that one is **justified by faith apart from works of the Law** (Rom. 3:28) --- but what he is teaching is that **judgement is based on works, but salvation is by faith alone**. “In Romans 2:1-16, Paul is not talking about the basis for salvation but the basis of judgment.”¹

Before looking at the particulars of the text, which are clear once we understand the argument, it is good to look briefly at what the Bible says about “works”, or deeds that people do.

1) Every person’s deeds will be revealed and judged at the Great White Throne –

Revelation 20:11-15 “Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. ¹² And I saw the dead, great and small,

¹ John Macarthur, “Romans”, p. 130.

*standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, **according to what they had done**. 13 And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, **according to what they had done**. 14 Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. 15 And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, **he was thrown into the lake of fire***

After the second coming of Jesus, His rule on the earth for 1000 years, and the release of Satan, God will judge the living and dead. Notice, like Paul, John wrote that everyone is judged by their deeds or works, but are saved only when their name was written in the book of life, not by their works. This is reiterated in the OT (see Isa. 3:10-11 and Jer. 17:10) and the NT (Matt. 16:27; John 5:28-29).

- 2) **Believers will have their works judged for reward** – The judgment seat in 2 Corinthians 5:10 is not to separate out heaven and hell, but rather works that were worthless or good (see also 1 Cor. 3:11-15)
- 3) **Believers are saved by faith ALONE, which WILL PRODUCE good works** – Good works are planned out by God for every believer (Eph. 2:10) and He is at work in us to will and to work for His good pleasure (Phil. 2:12). This is the same argument James made in James 2:14-26, saying that faith without works is dead (v. 17, 26), since even the demons **believe** but are not saved. True born again believers will be known by the fruit produced in and from them (Matt. 7:16-20)

In coming back to our text, Paul is making one of two arguments, based on these above factors. He is either giving a **hypothetical**, saying that NO ONE can produce the deeds or works that God requires, OR he is saying that those that are saved by faith alone WILL have these kinds of deeds produced in and from them. Most conservative scholars are split (which means this is what is on my mind when I wake up in the middle of the night). The hypothetical makes sense in the context since Paul has not yet dealt with salvation but rather what constitutes God's wrath and judgement, but he also could be laying out what true salvation looks like in terms of God's partiality, much like Peter said in **Acts 10:34-35** after a Gentile named Cornelius was saved:

*So Peter opened his mouth and said: "Truly I understand that God shows **no partiality**, 35 but in every nation anyone who fears him and **does what is right** is acceptable to him*

So it seems that Paul is building the argument that deeds will be judged, and only certain deeds will be acceptable. Those deeds ONLY come out of the gospel of Jesus Christ as He changes us from the inside out (what we will look at next week in Romans 2:29). He makes the argument in a *chiastic* structure, with the first and last line corresponding, the second and fifth together, and the third and fourth together.

- **Works produced in those God will NOT judge guilty** (7, 10) – The works that are acceptable to God are those that produce **perseverance** in doing good, seeking the **glory of God** rather than their own glory, the **honor of the Lord** rather than their own pride, and understanding that this world is the ultimate prize, seek **immortality and peace**. This produces **eternal life**, which is not simply a destination or duration of the future, but a present reality of living for Christ (Gal. 2:20) and knowing the one true God and Jesus Christ whom He sent (John 17:3). These are the evidence of salvation, not what gains it.

- **Works produced by those God will judge as guilty** (8, 9) – The evidence of God’s wrath is found in the works of the unredeemed. They are characterized by **self-seeking**, rather than seeking the glory of God. They know but refuse to obey the truth, but instead are slaves to unrighteousness, or that which flies in the face of God’s character and command. A person who practices these things are deservedly destined for **wrath and fury, tribulation and distress**.

Now, we also notice that Paul twice uses the phrase “*to the Jew first and also to the Greek*”. This is the crux of his argument. He is impartial when it comes to the Jewish nation or the non-Jewish people, whether they were the learned and intellectual like the Greeks or anyone else. People can hide behind many things, but who they are will always be revealed in their actions, whether **religious or not, have read the Bible or not, have been to church or not**. This leads into the next level of Paul’s argument.

Inescapability of Conscience (2:12-16)

*For all who have sinned **without the law** will also perish without the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law. 13 For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified. 14 For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. 15 They show that the work of the law is **written on their hearts**, while their **conscience also bears witness**, and their conflicting thoughts **accuse** or **even excuse** them 16 on that day when, **according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus***

Again, to understand the flow of thought, we must remember that in chapter 2, Paul is helping any Jewish reader understand that they too were under God’s wrath in the same way the Gentiles were. The Jewish nation had graciously received *covenant promises from God*, and had been given the **Torah**, or the Law of God, which SHOULD have produced the kind of faithfulness God required. Yet, as we saw in our study of **1 & 2 Samuel**, the nation of Israel was marked by more *faithlessness* rather than robust trust in the Lord. So Paul addresses those who knew the Law (the Jews) and those who had no idea it existed. What we find is that BOTH are condemned the same way.

- 1) **The purpose of the Law** – The Law was given to people of Israel through Moses as part of a covenant relationship, God being their God and they being His people. God had set Israel apart from every other nation by choosing to place His love on them (Deut. 7:7) in order that they would be a light to the Gentile nations around them (Isa. 42:6; 49:6; Acts 13:47). But the Law was never intended to be a **means** of salvation but rather a revealer that salvation was NOT possible in keeping the Law!

Galatians 3:24 “*So then, **the law was our guardian until Christ came**, in order that we might be justified by faith*”

A guardian was a teacher or supervisor, one who would guide and protect for a time. The law pointed to the ineptitude that it possessed, and waited for a NEW covenant reality in Christ.

- 2) **Only Doers, not just hearers of the Law were justified** – *Does this mean that someone could be justified in keeping the Law?* Nope. The true doers of the Law are those who come to God in repentance and faith, knowing that only through Jesus Christ could we be saved and declared righteous (Rom. 3:24, 28). The Law was a gift to the Jewish people, and it should have been a

tutor for them to know salvation, but they neglected the Law, and became mere auditors rather than full students.

- 3) **What about those who do not know or care about the Law of God?** – Non-Jews are judged on the light they know, but Paul makes an astounding observation regarding natural law here. Even unbelievers, or those who have never opened a Bible, know God’s law. How do we know? Every person knows there are **absolutes, right and wrong, good and bad**. Every person’s mind condemns murder, knows lying is wrong, stealing is unacceptable, and envy is devastating. Cultures that have corrupted these things had to counter what everyone was innately born with in order to change the whole. When even an unbeliever follows the law written on their heart, they become a law unto themselves, and are condemned by that law. Every time we lie, or steal, or cheat, or strike someone, we know that we are doing something wrong, and are condemned because of it.

- 4) **Every person has been given a conscience** – *which will be revealed in the end*

Romans 2:15 “*They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their **conscience** also **bears witness**, and their conflicting thoughts **accuse** or even **excuse** them*”

The conscience is the God-given capacity for moral discernment. It is *a person’s internal witness to their own behavior, the guilt over wrongdoing and the satisfaction of choosing right over wrong* (Lexham Theological Wordbook). This means that consciences can have varying degrees of sensitivity, based on knowledge as well as training. In other words, consciences can be strengthened by conviction and practice of the truth (1 Tim. 1:5), and weakened by a lack of knowledge and resisting what we know is right (1 Timothy 4:2), producing a **seared conscience**. But here we are given insight to how the conscience works, since it both **accuses and excuses**, depending on whether we comply with it or not. Because we are **image bearers**, made in the likeness of God, we have built into our DNA the knowledge of right and wrong. When we stand before the judgement seat of God, all things that we thought were secret, all the times that we knew what was right and good and did the opposite, will be revealed and will be put under judgement. This will be well deserved, scary, and justified.

So what does this teach us about ourselves or our present time?

- **This helps explain the culture around us** – Putting this together with chapter 1:18-32, we see clearly why people are in such angst around us. A neglected conscience produces **guilt and shame**, and those are two things we cannot live with. The way to rid yourself of that guilt is either to repent, or to numb. Guilt is assuaged by numbing oneself by simply sinning over and over again til feeling is actually gone. On top of this, you must rid yourself of the reality of God, truth, and idea of punishment. So you surround yourself with people who approve of a certain lifestyle, affirm you in your desires, and cancels anyone who upholds the truth. In this guilt, is assuaged, as well as **joy, contentment, clarity, hope, and reasonableness**. When we see this in people, we know exactly where it comes from, which helps us respond in graciousness and compassion, rather than anger
- **This helps us appeal with the gospel** – What does everyone who has been made in God’s image possess? Two things: 1) A knowledge of God through Creation; 2) A knowledge of God’s law through our conscience. Both of these can be suppressed and neglected, but that does not mean they are gone. Everyone knows that they stand guilty, knows what they have done is not right, and know they deserve to die as a result. This means that we can appeal to these things,

since we offer a counter, an exchange or misery for joy, guilt for peace, rest for shame, and hope for the hopeless.

- **This calls everyone here this morning to a decision point** – Our works and consciences bear witness to our hearts and where we stand before the Lord. No one here this morning can maneuver around the reality of judgment, God's wrath, and what we deserve. So this morning I simply appeal to your conscience in the truth. **Have you ever come to grips with your own sinfulness, or are you still making excuses or explaining things away?** *Have you ever asked God for forgiveness in Jesus Christ? Have you ever repented of your sin?* You may fool others, but you will never fool God in these things. If you have heard the gospel, you are certainly responsible for it.

This is where the Lord's Table speaks. As we come to participate in Communion together, we remember there is a **New Covenant** in the blood of Jesus Christ. He gave Himself, willingly shedding His blood on the cross so that by faith alone, believing in Him we can have the forgiveness of our sins, turning from our idolatry, immorality, and insanity and knowing Christ our Savior. On the night before He died, Jesus took bread, broke it, and gave it to the disciples saying, *'Take, eat; this is my Body'*. He also took a cup and when He had given thanks, He gave it to them saying, *'Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.'* (Matt. 26:26-28).

Communion reminds us that we all come to Christ the same way. We do not have to wear a **scarlet letter** of guilt and shame for our sin, nor do we have to hide it. We can confess it, turn from it, and be restored fully from it. This is an opportunity to examine yourself, to confess hidden sin, to commit to being restored by someone you've been in conflict with, and to remind yourself and family of the work of Christ on your behalf. Our only caution is that if you are NOT a believer, have never repented of your sin and followed Christ, you would let this time pass. We will get up, spread out, and remember Christ together, and then worship Him in song afterward.

Let's pray.