

Coming Judgment

GOD WILL JUDGE EVERY PERSON ACCORDING TO
THEIR RESPONSE TO HIM.

Over the years I have participated in numerous evangelism programs. All involved meeting people and sharing the good news about Jesus in ways that the recipient would be most likely to hear. I distinctly remember one person we visited telling us that he was a Christian because he was an American and all Americans are Christians. Many of the people we talked to thought of themselves as religious people, but their concept of being religious was a bit shallow. One of the questions we were encouraged to ask people was, “If you died tonight and faced God, and He asked you why He should let you into heaven, what would you say?” Often, the response was some variation of “I believe in God and try to do good. And honestly, I think I do more good than bad.”

That kind of response always reminded me of the conversation that Jesus had with the rich young ruler (Matt. 19:16-22; Mark 10:17-22; Luke 18:18-23). The young man was very religious. He insisted that he had kept the commandments in the law since he was a youth. Nothing in any of the accounts suggest that he was lying about his faithful efforts to keep the law. In fact, the Mark passage tells us that Jesus loved the young man, apparently for his sincere devotion.

All of the Gospel passages inform us that Jesus invited the young man to “follow” Him—the same invitation He gave to the Twelve. But when told he needed to give away his wealth to do so, he declined. It seems that the young man loved his wealth more than he wanted to follow Jesus.

Genuinely good and religious people sometimes think that the good they do is sufficient to place them in good standing with God. The gospel tells us that it is good to be good but that a person can never be good enough to earn his or her way into heaven. Both those who are blatantly wicked and those who are religious and generally good will be judged by God on the basis of their actions. But since the good we do can never atone for our sins, all will be found wanting. The gospel tells us that the only way to achieve right standing before God is through faith in Jesus. This was Paul’s message to the church in Romans 1-3, and it is still the message that we should live by and share with others today.

Romans 2:1-3:20

After giving his reason for writing and stressing the importance of the gospel, Paul launched into the body of the letter by detailing the fact that all people need to be saved from the penalty earned by their sin. The godless and unrighteous are subject to God's wrath for their willful rejection of God as revealed in creation (1:18-32). The idolatry and immorality of such people condemn them and make clear their need for salvation. Any Jews, or Jewish Christians, reading these comments would have heartily agreed with Paul's comments that looked like a condemnation of the Gentile world.

Interestingly, as Paul delivered the warning that godlessness and unrighteousness earns God's wrath, he did not explicitly state that he was condemning Gentiles. In the verses that follow 1:18-32, we find out why. Gentiles are not the only ones who have sinned, earned the wrath of God, and are in need of salvation. Even those who might think of themselves as godly and righteous have also sinned. They too are subject to wrath and stand in need of salvation (2:1-16). This includes the Jews. They have long had the law but often violated it. They have long known God but have not always obeyed Him (2:17-3:8). Thus, all (not just Gentiles) live under the burden of sin (3:9-20) and are in danger of suffering the wrath of a just God who must judge every person according to his or her response to Him and His commands

No Excuses (Rom. 2:1-5)

Many of those who received and read Romans would have agreed with Paul's condemnation of the ungodly and unrighteous in 1:18-32. Both Jews and Christians would have agreed that such people deserve God's wrath. But just as such readers would have been tempted to say "amen" to the condemnation of sinners, Paul turned the tables on them. The religious who were prepared so readily to condemn the ungodly needed to take an honest look at themselves too.

VERSE 1

Therefore, every one of you who judges is without excuse. For when you judge another, you condemn yourself, since you, the judge, do the same things.

The passage begins with a **therefore**, but the connection to the previous statements in the letter is not entirely clear. The most likely link is to Paul's assertion that God will judge those who "practice such things" (sinful behavior) and/or who "applaud others who practice them" (1:32). Since this is true, then all who sin in these ways also are subject to God's judgment, whoever they are. Those who condemn others for sinning against God clearly know God's teachings. Therefore, when they commit the same sins as those whom they would label as ungodly and unrighteous, they cannot claim ignorance of God's revelation. Thus, they are condemned by their very judgment of others.

Because judgment of others reveals knowledge of God's will, the one **who judges is without excuse**. It is important to realize that judgment itself in this passage is not evil. The evaluation of various actions and the determination that they are contrary to God's commands is always appropriate. The evil is the sinful act, not the act of judging. However, the judge who commits the same sinful acts as those they judge is doubly condemned. For that judge is both a sinner and a hypocrite.

Judges who condemn others and yet **do the same things** reveal that they themselves are *without excuse*. The Greek term translated *without excuse* was often used in legal settings and marks a defendant as having no reasonable or valid defense. Paul had already used this word in his condemnation of those who rejected God's self-revelation in creation. They are "without excuse" (v. 20). Now he applied the same term to religious persons who judged others but committed the same sins. (The text has not yet identified these persons as Jews. That is implied in 2:9-11 and then explicitly stated in 2:17.) Such a person has no basis for claiming innocence before the court. Lacking a valid defense and considering the evidence against him or her, the person is judged to be inexcusable.

VERSE 2

Now we know that God's judgment on those who do such things is based on the truth.

Whether a person is a judge or the one being judged, both are subject to **God's judgment** because both have sinned. God's judgment falls on **those who do such things**. The phrase *such things* refers to things

such as the list of sinful acts committed by both the unrighteous and the ones who would judge them (vv. 17-24). Emphasized in the verse is the fact that God's judgment **is based on the truth**, or more literally, it is "according to truth" (KJV). In other words, God's judgment is just and accurate, based on what the person has done with no exceptions allowed and no favoritism shown to anyone.

VERSE 3

Do you think—anyone of you who judges those who do such things yet do the same—that you will escape God's judgment?

Paul's address directed to "every one of you who judges" (v. 1) leads to a series of questions directed to the same people. This style of argument, called a diatribe, was common among first-century writers. Using this approach, the author would make an assertion directed to his readers and then follow it up with a question or an objection that someone in his audience might have raised. This allowed the writer both to engage his audience and advance his argument at the same time.

Do you think builds on the assertion that God's judgments are "based on the truth" (v. 2). God is just and does not show favoritism. God is true to His Word and will punish all evil doers. Given this fact, one who judges others but does the same kind of things as those he has condemned must realize that he too is subject to God's judgment. How could that person honestly not recognize this fact? Using the diatribe technique, Paul challenged his readers to admit their guilt. And as guilty sinners, Paul charged, how could any of them think that **you will escape God's judgment?**

Some Jewish writers actually argued that God would excuse them for their sin, asserting that even if they sinned, they remained the children of God. They used God's promises to His people as a way to nullify God's promise of judgment on the wicked. Paul considered this a flawed and misleading theology. Beginning at this point, and at several other places in the letter, he warned his readers that God cannot be so easily manipulated and that ultimately all sinners are subject to wrath.

VERSE 4

Or do you despise the riches of his kindness, restraint, and patience, not recognizing that God's kindness is intended to lead you to repentance?

God does not delight in wrath nor rejoice in the downfall of sinners. He seeks their **repentance**. And in order to give people the opportunity to repent, God holds His wrath in check and delays judgment.

The riches of God's **kindness, restraint, and patience** must not be misunderstood or abused. *Kindness* can refer to both the goodness and the benevolence of God. *Restraint* implies a temporary holding back from a necessary, sometimes unpleasant, action. *Patience* or forbearance refers to remaining tranquil or delaying a reaction in the face of provocation. **Riches** stresses the abundance of the kindness, restraint, and patience God has displayed as He has dealt with humanity. However, no one should take these for granted. They must not **despise**, that is, "consider unimportant," disregard, or treat with contempt, God's patience.

A morally good God cannot abide sin, but at the same time a benevolent God seeks not the punishment but the *repentance* of the sinner. The term *repentance* used here means to change the mind, implying turning from one course of action or attitude and adopting another.

VERSE 5

Because of your hardened and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath, when God's righteous judgment is revealed.

God is patient, but His patience is not endless. Paul warned any religious yet sinful readers against taking the absence of immediate judgment as a sign that they were in good standing with God. Rather, their **hardened and unrepentant heart** would in fact lead to their punishment. Hardness of heart in this context refers to the stubbornness seen in persistent sin in spite of the warnings in God's Word. The phrase *unrepentant heart* uses a negated form of the very repentance that God's kindness is intended to inspire (v. 4). The two statements together indicate a person unwilling to change, persistently unwilling to follow God's commands.

Self-appointed, hypocritical judges might think they were getting away with their own evil actions. They might think that by assuming the role as the judge of others (who they think are worse than them) that they were excusing their own failings. But the truth is they were simply **storing up wrath** that will descend upon them **in the day of wrath**. A time will come in the future when **God's righteous judgment** will be **revealed**.



Explore Further

Unfortunately, all of us have a tendency to judge others while ignoring or excusing our own sin. This problem is not solved by ignoring sin altogether but rather by being as honest about our own shortcomings as we are about those of others. Take time to pray, asking for God to help you see and repent of your own sins. Ask Him also to give you gracious patience and wisdom as you seek to help others who are also struggling with sin.

Perfect Standard (Rom. 2:6-11)

Paul warned the ungodly that their sin would reap the wrath of God. He then warned those so eagerly judging the ungodly that they ought to attend to their own sins and not try to claim a right standing with God by condemning others. For a righteous God will judge each person on his or her own merits, not by comparing him or her to other flawed sinners.

VERSE 6

He will repay each one according to his works:

When “God’s righteous judgment is revealed” (v. 5), hypocritical human judges will not be able to point at others, argue that the trespasses of others are worse than their own, and excuse themselves. Echoing both the Old Testament (Ps. 62:12; Prov. 24:12), and the teachings of Jesus (Matt. 16:27), Paul asserted that in the day of judgment God **will repay each one according to his works**. *Repay* translates a word that can mean to pay something that is owed or to fulfill something promised. God’s Word repeatedly promises punishment to unrepentant sinners, and He always fulfills His promises to those who have earned His wrath.

Each person will receive what he or she has earned *according to his works*. This statement does not assert some sort of works salvation. As the argument of Romans unfolds, the letter clearly states that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (3:23). Even those who live good lives and try to follow God’s law fall short. Only those who confess Jesus as Savior and Lord will be saved (10:9).

A person is “saved by grace through faith,” not saved by his or her “works” (Eph. 2:8-9). However, while a person cannot earn salvation by

obeying the law or by good works in general, salvation achieved through Christ does change the way a person lives. Those who become new creatures in Christ are “created in Christ Jesus for good works” (v. 10). Salvation in Christ and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit lead to a Christian life characterized by good deeds (Gal. 5:16-26).

All people are condemned by their own sin. No one is exempt from the just judgment and resultant wrath of God, for no one is truly righteous (Rom. 3:9-20). Even the religious “are storing up wrath” for themselves (2:5). Given this truth, the assertion that God *will repay* people according to their deeds warns of a universal punishment of humanity. A punishment that is only averted by the sacrifice of Christ for those who turn to Him in faith.

VERSES 7-8

eternal life to those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor, and immortality; but wrath and anger to those who are self-seeking and disobey the truth while obeying unrighteousness.

Paul expanded on the promise of God’s just judgment by presenting two balanced couplets (2:7-8 and 2:9-10) depicting two contrasting attitudes toward God and their two inevitable results. First, Paul contrasted those destined for **eternal life** and those destined to reap **wrath and anger** or “wrath and fury” (ESV).

In the letter to the Galatians, Paul asserted that the person who “sows to his flesh will reap destruction” and contrasts this with the person who “sows to the Spirit will reap eternal life from the Spirit” (Gal. 6:8). With each group that which they sow indicates the reward they will harvest. The same contrast is present here in Romans. Humanity has a choice regarding how they will conduct their lives, and that choice will impact their eternity.

A person can, on the one hand, **seek glory, honor and immortality**. *Immortality* describes achieving an incorruptible state of being (1 Cor. 15:50-57). This is the person who looks beyond his or her present existence and seeks more than the things that this life can provide. This person looks beyond the material and seeks the spiritual and eternal life that results from a relationship with God in Jesus Christ. He or she is the kind of person who would see the glory of God’s creation and seek to know Him better rather than ignore Him (Rom. 1:18-22). This kind of person hears the gospel with joy and faith. Such people can be recognized by their behavior and will receive *eternal life*.

On the other hand, a person may live devoted to **self-seeking** or “selfish ambition.” These are the kind of people who do not want God or goodness getting in the way of enriching or empowering themselves. They do not seek honor, and either do not believe in or are unconcerned with *immortality*. These too can be recognized by their behavior and will reap the *wrath* of God.

VERSES 9-10

There will be affliction and distress for every human being who does evil, first to the Jew, and also to the Greek; but glory, honor, and peace for everyone who does what is good, first to the Jew, and also to the Greek.

Paul drove his point home with a second couplet, expanding on the thought of the first in order to stress that the consequences apply to everyone, no matter their background or heritage. **Affliction** can refer to trouble of various kinds that inflict distress or oppression on its recipient. **Distress** envisions stressful events that create anguish or anxiety. Both words are used of negative circumstances in this life, more than future judgment. They imply that evil deeds create problems for the evil-doer now, not just in the future. The problems reaped now by those who engage in bad acts is, in fact, a part of the judgment of God on everyone who does evil.

In contrast, **glory, honor, and peace** are the harvest reaped by everyone who does what is good. This does not mean those who do good have no problems. Paul certainly knew that was not the case, considering the list of afflictions he suffered for serving Christ (2 Cor. 11:22-33). But in spite of the hardships inflicted by evil people and a fallen world, Paul’s point was that those who do good reap an appropriate harvest both now and in the future.

Glory as a reward achieved in the present life refers to recognition, the respect accorded to one who has earned a high regard from others. *Glory* as a reward in the future can refer to the splendor or grandeur achieved in eternity as one shares in the glory of the presence of God. A person who receives *honor* is one who is valued highly or revered. Expressions of *honor* can come in the form of respect, praise, or even compensation (1 Tim. 5:17). Doing **good** should earn praise from people, and certainly does from God. *Peace* is the absence of conflict or the presence of harmony. Often it is the equivalent of the Hebrew *shalom* and refers to a sense of well-being, either among people or in relation to God.

First to the Jew, and also to the Greek [all Gentiles] stresses that the judgment of God falls equally on all people. Ethnicity, including being part of the people of Israel, provides no advantage when faced with the judgment of a just God.

VERSE 11

For there is no favoritism with God.

God judges all equally. All should understand, therefore, that God will judge all fairly and without showing **favoritism**. The term *favoritism* depicts a judge who receives a person graciously and rules in his or her favor on the basis of who he or she is, not on the basis of impartial evidence. The law explicitly warned against this kind of favoritism (Lev. 19:15).



Explore Further

Read “Works” on pages 1668–1669 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. How would you explain the role of “works” in relation to “saving faith”? What part do “works” play in the Christian life?

One Way (Rom. 2:12-13)

The consequences of sin are universal. All are judged on the basis of how they respond to God’s revelation. All who turn away from Him to live selfish, ungodly, and unrighteous lives will face His wrath. God judges all people justly and none can escape His judgment, no matter who they are, what their heritage, or how religious they may think themselves to be.

VERSE 12

For all who sin without the law will also perish without the law, and all who sin under the law will be judged by the law.

Again, Paul asserted that all will be **judged** on the basis of their response to the revelation that God has given them. Some might object that they did not have God’s law, so they should not face judgment. But Paul had

already dealt with such people and explained their guilt. They rejected what they knew of God and chose to live ungodly, unrighteous lives (1:18-32). They did this in spite of the fact that their consciences condemned them (2:14-16). Though these sinned **without the law** (of Moses), they still knew their actions were wrong. Thus, even *without the law* they were still guilty and will **perish**.

Others possess God's **law**. Their obligation to act according to God's will is obvious. Yet they still **sin under the law**. Although at this point in Romans Paul had not explicitly stated that the hypocritical judges of others were the Jews, his intent has become clear. Devout Jews "rely on the law, and boast in God, and know his will," and consider themselves "a guide for the blind" (vv. 17-24). Yet, they have committed the same sins that they have condemned in others. As a result, they **will be judged by the law** and found wanting.

VERSE 13

For the hearers of the law are not righteous before God, but the doers of the law will be justified.

Hearing is important, but both hearing and doing the law reveals a person's desire to obey God (Matt. 7:24-27). Such obedience, even when imperfect, reveals a heart that seeks God and is open to His guidance and will be receptive to the gospel. As the argument of Romans continues, Paul made it clear that even those who try to keep the law will fail. Neither obeying the law of Moses nor doing good works in general will justify anyone before God. None are righteous by their own actions (Rom. 3:9-20). Jesus is the only righteous doer of the law. Only through placing saving faith in Him are believers **justified**—being permanently placed in right standing before the Father (vv. 21-24). Just as the ungodly need to repent and turn to Jesus, so also even the most religious among us are in need of the salvation available only through faith in Christ.



Explore Further

Read "Justification" on pages 948–950 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. What does it mean to be justified? What role does justification play in a person's salvation and their relationship with God?
