**There is No One Righteous**

July 18, 2021

Romans 2:1-3:20

Key Verse 3:10b “There is no one righteous, not even one.”

In the last passage Paul indicted the fallen Gentile world that lived without God. They suppressed the truth by their godlessness and wickedness and became idol worshipers, immoral and depraved. Upon them God’s wrath was being revealed. When we hear this indictment, we may say, “Yes, that is right! Punish those evildoers - they deserve it!” However, Paul makes a sudden shift in chapter 2 from “they” to “you.” The personal pronouns, “you,” “your,” “yourself,” appear 15 times in verses 2:1-5. Here, “you,” refers to those who pass judgment on others based on their own moral standard. Now Paul turns his attention to moralists, whether Jew or Gentile. Probably, Paul’s main target was the Jews, whose morally superior lifestyle set them apart from pagan Gentiles. They freely condemned the Gentiles as animals. Yet, Paul also addresses moralists among the Gentiles, such as the Stoics, including Cicero and Seneca. They had a high ethical standard, followed a moral lifestyle and were respected by their people. They judged others based on their own standards but did not think of themselves as sinners. Paul indicts moralists, both Jew and Gentile, based on God’s truth and declares that they are also under God’s judgment, and without excuse. In some sense, it may be more difficult for moralists to accept the gospel because it is so hard to recognize that they are sinners. So they easily judge and condemn others. This was the problem of the Pharisees and the elder brother of the prodigal son (Lk 15:28-30; 18:9-12). This can be our problem too. When we hear someone honestly confess all their sins, we say, “Wow! What a terrible sinner. Thank you, God, that I am not like that wretched person.” Of course, we would never say this openly, but we tend to have a judgmental attitude in our hearts. Paul exposes this hypocrisy by telling us about God’s righteous judgment, and declares, “There is no one righteous, not even one.” Everyone is in need of the Savior Jesus Christ.

**First**, God’s righteous judgment (1-16). While fallen Gentiles suppress the truth by their wickedness, moralists suppress the truth by passing judgment on others. Look at verse 2:1. “You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge another, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgement do the same things.” People pass judgment without compassion, mercy or love. They want to be right and others to be wrong. Then they feel superior to others. It is even entertaining and makes them feel good. They pretend to be righteous before people’s eyes. But in fact, they secretly do wicked things. It is so easy to detect others’ faults, point them out and talk about them and find the reason for all of our troubles in that person’s fault. But it is hard to find our own fault, even when it is much larger than the small faults of others. Jesus said, “Do not judge, or you too will be judged” (Mt 7:1). We have no right to judge others. Judgment belongs to God alone. God’s judgment is not based on incomplete, inaccurate, or circumstantial evidence.

Firstly, God judges according to what each person has done. Look at verse 2:6. “God will repay each person according to what they have done.” God will judge people one by one, not family by family, or tribe by tribe. Each person is responsible for their own words and deeds. No one can blame their parents, the government or the system. A husband cannot rely on his wife’s righteousness, or vice versa. Children cannot rely on their parents’ righteousness, saying, “I come from a good family of pastors. My grandfather was a pastor; my father was a pastor. So God should cut some slack because of the good they have done.” Notice that the verb “do,” is repeated four times in verses 2:6-10. It refers to the actions that come out of a person, be they good or evil. Ultimately these actions are the fruit of our inner life. Words can be deceptive, but fruit is the unmistakable evidence. One can say, “Lord, Lord,” and say many wonderful things, but if they do not bear good fruit in their lives, they will be judged based on what they have done. Social position, education, wealth, or family line are irrelevant. God’s judgment is unbiased and fair to everyone.

Secondly, God judges according to life purpose and motive (7-11). Look at verses 2:7-8. “To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life. But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger.” Here Paul’s emphasis is on what a person is seeking, which reveals their life purpose and motive. Knowing one’s motive is necessary to make a proper judgment. If someone gives a lot of money to charity, but their motive is selfish, God will judge according to their selfish motive. Basically, there are two kinds of people: those who seek glory, honor and immortality, and those who are self-seeking. Self-seeking is serious sin. Why? It is exalting one’s self to the place of God, a form of idolatry (Gen 3:5). Self-seeking people inevitably reject the truth and follow evil. No matter how noble their actions may appear, whatever they do is sin, because it is from an evil inner motive. For all who follow evil, wrath and anger are inevitable. On the other hand, those who seek God’s glory and true honor and immortality by persistence in doing good will receive eternal life. When we read verse 2:7, we may think that God will give eternal life on the basis of good deeds. That’s not true. It is impossible for fallen people to do good. Isaiah said, “...all our righteous acts are like filthy rags…” (Isa 64:6). This means that doing good is not a means of salvation. Doing good is the fruit of believing the gospel (Titus 2:14). Only those born again by the Holy Spirit through believing in Jesus can do what is good continually and with a right motive.

Thirdly, God judges according to the law (12-15). Look at verse 2:12. “All who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who sin under the law will be judged by the law.” God judges sin whether people have the written law or not. Those who know and violate the written law will be judged by it. Whether people recognize it or not, the consequence of sin is death. Hearing the law is not enough to be righteous in God’s sight; one must obey the law (13). But no one can do so. James 2:10 says, “For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.” There are 613 commandments in the Old Testament. If a person kept 612 commandments, yet broke just one before they died, they become a lawbreaker. That person will be under curse and judged by God. So the Bible says, “Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law” (Gal 3:10). Someone may say, “Gentiles do not have the law, so how can God judge them?” Paul tells us that even though they do not have the written law, they do by nature things required by the law (14). This means that they know in their hearts the requirements of the law. What evidence is there of this? Each person has a conscience. When they commit sin, their conscience testifies against them and they feel guilty (15). They constantly struggle inside to justify themselves. When we commit sins, our hearts become like a court of law. This is why we have no excuse. God is right when he judges according to the law, whether it is written on tablets, or on the human heart.

**Second**, the hypocrisy of the Jews (2:17-29). The Jews felt special because they were the only people chosen by God who received the law as God’s revelation to them. As a result, they were convinced that they were a guide for the spiritually blind Gentiles, a light for them in their darkness, instructors of them in their foolishness. Paul indicts the self-confident Jews for their hypocrisy. Look at verse 2:21. “...you, then, who teach others, do you not teach yourself You who preach against stealing, do you steal?” This hypocrisy was historical reality. A prominent Rabbi, Jochanan ben Zakkai, who lived from 30-90 A.D., said, “The glory of God left Israel because of the increase of murder, adultery, sexual vice, commercial and judicial corruption, bitter sectarian strife, and other evils.” Although the Jews boasted of the law and taught others, they lived according to their sinful desires. They deceived themselves and others and lied to God. What they taught and how they acted were so different, which is a most detestable sin.

Yet, they bragged about having circumcision. Circumcision was the sign of being God’s covenant people. It was so serious that one who was not circumcised would be cut off from their community (Gen 17:14). So, they circumcised infants on the eighth day, even if it was a Sabbath (Jn 7:22). The problem is that they assumed physical circumcision guaranteed their salvation and was the ticket to God’s kingdom. Many Jews thought that they were immune from God’s judgment. The rabbis taught, “Circumcised men do not go to hell.” The Gentiles, on the other hand, were fuel for the flames of hell. But circumcision is not a magical ceremony. It began with Abraham as the sign of God’s covenant with him, given after he was justified by faith. It was not the means to be justified, but a sign of obedience. It has value only if one obeys the law. If one breaks the law, circumcision is useless. Uncircumcised people who keep the law will condemn circumcised lawbreakers (25-27). It is more important to keep the law than to be circumcised. In Galatians 5:6, Paul said, “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.” For Christians, circumcision can be compared to baptism. Some people believe that the act of baptism itself guarantees salvation. They assume they can live as they please after baptism. This is a great mistake. The ceremony of baptism has value only if we have faith in Christ that leads to obedience.

**Third**, there is no one righteous (3:1-20). In the first part of chapter 3, a Jewish objector appears and debates with Paul. He first questions, “What is the advantage of being a Jew?” In modern terms the Jews can be considered as the ones who were born in Christian family. It can be rephrased as, “If a person can become a Christian later in life, full of mission and zeal, what is the advantage of being born in a Christian family? Why was I born in a missionary family, with so much restrictions and laws?” Paul’s answer is the following: To be entrusted with God’s word is a great blessing, because God is giving us an opportunity to serve him, and serving our Creator makes our lives rich and meaningful. The Jews were entrusted with the word of God, but because of their lack of faith, they failed in their stewardship of the world and did not share God’s word with the world. Then the objector asks, “Well, not all Jews believed. Does this mean that God will go back on his promises? Can the unbelief of some cause God to break his word?” Paul’s answer is following: God did not fail. God’s word is true. Anyone who, in faith, takes hold of God’s promise will be saved; and those who reject God’s word through unbelief will be lost. Everyone who knows the truth and rejects it, is responsible for his rejection. We cannot blame God for our disobedience and unbelief. Whenever there is a question whether God or man is right, we need to proceed on the basis that God is right and every man is a liar.

After silencing all the arguments of the Jews, Paul makes his final declaration about the condition of all human beings. Look at verse 3:9. “What shall we conclude then? Do we have any advantage? Not at all! For we have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under the power of sin.” Being under the power of sin means being slaves to sin, under its control. Sin is like a cruel tyrant who holds the human race imprisoned in guilt and under judgment. All human beings commit sin and become prisoners of sin who are powerless to escape. Karl Heim, a German theologian said, “Sin is like a prison which I always freely can enter in from outside with a key. But as soon as I come in, the door is locked, and I cannot but be a prisoner who can’t run away.” Paul sometimes distinguishes sins and sin. Sins refer to wrong things that we have done. Sin refers to our sinful nature. What we are is a lot worse than anything we have ever done. Look at verses 3:10-18. “As it is written: ‘There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one. Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit. The poison of vipers in on their lips. Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood; ruin and misery mark their ways, and the way of peace they do not know. There is no fear of God before their eyes.” These verses explain practically how sin affects human beings. In fact, sin affects every part of our being: our understanding, what we seek, what we do, our thoughts, throats, tongues, lips and mouths. We don’t do the good things we should do, but we do the evil things we should not do. Of course, we have not committed every sins mentioned here, but we have the sinful nature which is cable of committing them all. It is God’s X-ray of humans. Sin is in our very being - it is in our nature - which we call “sinful nature.” This describes the total depravity of human beings. “Total depravity” refers to the comprehensive effects of sin that make us unable to do anything to obtain salvation. It does not mean that humans never do anything good, but rather that we are totally incapable of saving ourselves.

Paul finally declares in 3:19-20, “Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin.” The primary purpose of the law is to make people silent. The law was not given to justify people but to produce the knowledge of sin—not the knowledge of salvation, but the knowledge of sin. We can never know what a crooked line is unless we also know a straight line. We can use a mirror to see that our face is dirty, but the mirror cannot clean the dirty face. The law was given to produce the conviction of sin so that we may feel the need for the Savior Jesus Christ. As we grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus, may God help us to be aware of our sinfulness more and more so that the cross of Jesus gets bigger and bigger in our hearts and we can grow in gospel faith.

Big Idea: Become aware of our sins so that the cross may become bigger and bigger