

Leveling the Playing Field

Text: [ROMANS 2:1-16](#)

Pastor Andrew B. Pigott

[Chinese Christian Church of New Jersey](#)

Sunday, March 14, 2004

Today we will begin reading the second chapter of Romans. And as we do, I hope you will notice that the main themes we discussed in Romans 1 are also present in ROMANS 2. Last week I tried to emphasize the point that God's wrath is not only something people experience after they die. It is that, but it is also something that people experience before they die. I believe this theme (which is found in Romans 1) is also emphasized in ROMANS 2. Last week I also tried to point out the reason why people experience God's wrath is because they have suppressed truth that had been clearly understood. And I also stressed the fact that every person has had at least some truth made known to him. These themes are also emphasized in the second chapter of ROMANS. So the issues in Romans 1 and the issues in ROMANS 2 are really the same. They are truth, the rejection of truth, and the wrath of God that comes when truth is rejected.

But, there is a significant change that does occur starting with verse 1 of the second chapter of Romans and running through the eighth verse of chapter three. In this large section of scripture, the apostle Paul (who wrote the Book of Romans) begins to address people as "you" instead of "they." At first he does not mention names, but later we can see that the 'you' refers to Jews.

What does such an obvious shift mean? Well, it probably means that, when Paul wrote this letter to the church at Rome, he was thinking that most of those who would read the letter (at least at first) would be from a Jewish background. He knew the mindset of people with Jewish backgrounds. He knew, for instance, that they had trouble understanding and accepting his mission to preach the gospel to the Gentiles. So, by saying what he said in the first chapter of ROMANS, Paul was actually justifying his calling. He was telling his readers that the people to whom he had been called to minister were in desperate need of the gospel, because the wrath of God was being revealed in their midst. Those reading Paul's letter who were familiar with the lifestyle of the average pagan living in Rome would have probably given a hearty "Amen" to everything that Paul said.

But now, the Apostle Paul needed to level the playing field. In essence, Paul says, the focus of my letter is now going to change. The focus will no longer be on 'them', but it will be on 'you.' And since Paul, himself, was from a Jewish background, he could just as well

have said, "the focus is no longer on them, but on us." The focus of the letter is no longer on the people who are only exposed to the general revelation of truth through creation; it is now on people who have been exposed to the specific revelation of truth. In other words, beginning with Romans 2:1, the major focus of the letter is now on people from Jewish backgrounds, because they are the ones who have been exposed to this special category of truth.

But, of course, things have changed since the letter was written. It is no longer only those with Jewish backgrounds who have been exposed to truth revealed through the special revelation of God's Word. Many (if not most) people who profess to be Christian today have also been exposed to the truth of God's Word.

So the words recorded in today's scripture lesson are really cater-made for us. We will be dealing with the same issues of truth and wrath that we dealt with last week. But now we will be looking at them as people who are privileged to know more truth than the average person living on the face of this earth. Realizing that the words are cater-made for us, let's now read [Romans 2:1-16](#).

You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge the other, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things. ²Now we know that God's judgment against those who do such things is based on truth. ³So when you, a mere man, pass judgment on them and yet do the same things, do you think you will escape God's judgment? ⁴Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness leads you toward repentance?

⁵But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed. ⁶God "will give to each person according to what he has done." ⁷To those who by persistence in

doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life.

⁸*But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger.*

⁹*There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile;*¹⁰*but glory, honor and peace for everyone who does good: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.* ¹¹*For God does not show favoritism.*

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.* ¹³*For it is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God's sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous.* ¹⁴*(Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law,* ¹⁵*since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them.)* ¹⁶*This will take place on the day when God will judge men's secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares.*

One of the characteristics of people like us who have been exposed to a lot of special truth is our tendency to observe the behavior of people who do not have Biblical truth and make the following conclusion: *The more perverted and nasty the behavior is, the more severe the judgment will be.* Of course, there is a sense in which we are correct to think this way. It is the way man-made courts tend to operate. Last week Judge LeRoy Millet, Jr. upheld a jury's decision that John Allen Muhammad should receive the death penalty for the killings he committed around Washington, DC. The judge said, "These offenses were so vile they were almost beyond comprehension to the community." Severe crimes deserve severe punishment. It makes sense, doesn't it? And it also puts the average non-Christian in a bad light. Isn't it obvious that their behavior is much more vile than ours? I do believe that the impression many non-Christians have of us Christians is that we regard their behavior as being a lot worse than ours. It's not hard for them to guess what we are thinking about them.

Now the important thing for us to understand is that God does not use the same standard that men use when He is deciding the amount of wrath a certain

person will experience. God's judgment is based on truth. It is not based on the degree of vileness of the act. In [Romans 2:1](#) we find this puzzling statement: "You who pass judgment do the same things." You can almost hear the reaction of the reader. "No, Paul, you're crazy. We do not have sex with people of the same sex. We are not idolatrous, and we aren't perverted in our morals." And then we hear the answer to this protest coming from the logic of Romans: "Perhaps you don't have sex with people of the same sex. And perhaps you do not do the exact same kinds of vile things that were just mentioned (in Romans 1). But you are suppressing the truth even more seriously because you have more specific and special revelation to suppress!"

Wow, talk about leveling the playing field! God's principles of divine judgment really do put those of us who are exposed to a lot of Biblical revelation in either the same light or even worse light than people like John Allen Muhammad. It's down right scary. It almost makes a person want to deny the fact that he knows much about the Bible at all.

But, we cannot deny it. Our own pronouncements of judgment upon people who do things that are extremely immoral expose us. They condemn us. When we pronounce someone wrong we are admitting that we have a special ability to discern between right and wrong. Our exposure to Biblical truth has given us a special moral capacity that the average person does not have.

These words recorded in the first two verses of Romans 2 are not meant to condemn us for telling each other how bad television has become these days with all the sex and violence and profanity. It is not wrong for us to tell each other that. Nor is it wrong for us to make public statements about how sinful it is for people to abort lives of babies or terrorize a community by setting off bombs in its crowded train stations. All of those things are terrible. And it is not wrong for us to speak out against them. Paul is not trying to tell us that it is wrong to speak out. That is not his purpose in writing these words.

His purpose is to humble us. He wants us to realize that, according to the universal principle of judgment, we are already condemned. There is no way for us to hide behind our religion. There are no convenient excuses we can use that will make us immune from God's wrath when we decide to suppress the truth. The playing field is now leveled. It is wrong for us to conclude that the severity of wrath we receive will be less than that of the vilest pagan who has ever lived. In light of this awesome principle that God uses for judgment, the most important thing for people like us to do is to face the truth about ourselves and to do it

often. And it is extremely important that we face the truth about who we are before we die. If we wait until after we die to recognize the wrath that is present in our lives, it will be too late to do anything about it.

But to face the fact that the dynamic of God's wrath is active in our lives is an extremely hard thing for people like us to do. Our tendency is just the opposite. We look at all the terrible things that people around us are doing, and because we don't do those things, we feel that everything is OK with us.

I would wager that I spend more time studying the Bible on a daily basis than the average person in this auditorium. As a member of the human race, it is easy for me to compare myself with other people and conclude that I'm OK. But that is a terrible mistake for me to make. My increased exposure to Biblical truth puts me in a state where I am anything but OK. How much of the truth that has been made plain to me do I obey? Certainly not 100%. Is it 80%? Maybe it's 60%. For the sake of argument, let's just say it is 60%. Now, when I compare myself with other people, it is easy for me to conclude that I am obeying a whole lot more truth than the average person. But when I think about the 40% of truth that I am not obeying, I must confess that I am disobeying a whole lot more truth than the average person. God does not judge me for the truth I am obeying. He judges me for the truth I am disobeying.

Now the important thing for me to do is to think about that huge amount of truth that I am not obeying and realize that my refusal to obey is shaping me into the person that I am. I must face who I am. I must see myself as a person within whom the wrath of God abides. This is extremely hard for people like us to do, but it is absolutely essential that we do it.

Now some might come to the conclusion that I am advocating that Christians should go around feeling guilty all of the time. And some might conclude I am saying that Christians should never feel assured of their salvation. Please do not come to those conclusions.

I am not advocating that we should feel guilty. I am advocating that we should face up to the fact that we have a constant need. Because God's wrath is constantly a part of whom we are; therefore, we are forever in need of God's grace. We are always in need of the gospel. There is a sense that we are even in more need of the gospel than the pagan. Too many of us are walking around with what we think is a clear conscience; when, in fact, what we have is a conscience that has been deceived.

And please don't think I am saying that it is wrong for

a Christian to feel assured that he is going to heaven. I have stood at the bedside of people who are dying. I have seen them face death with a strong assurance that they would soon meet their Savior face to face. That is not wrong. How foolish we are to use the book of Romans in an attempt to win doctrinal arguments. When the Holy Spirit inspired the apostle Paul to write this second chapter of Romans, He never intended it to be used as ammunition in a debate to prove that a person can lose or not lose his salvation. Instead, his purpose was to persuade us to face ourselves and admit that we desperately need His grace.

And how can we practically do the self-evaluation that is needed for us to understand who we really are? For people like ourselves who have so much Biblical knowledge compared to the average person, the best way for us to understand who we are is not to examine the doctrines to which we have given intellectual assent. When I consider the doctrines in which I place my faith, I give myself a high score. But when I consider my behavior, I realize that the list of failures is extremely long.

Not too long ago I read an interview someone had with Dr. Billy Graham that illustrates the point I am trying to make. You would think that a person like Billy Graham would feel pretty good about himself in the final days of his life. But when the interviewer asked him if he had any regrets, Billy Graham thought about the opportunities he passed to do good things. And he talked about the time he had wasted and how he wished he had spent more time memorizing scripture.

Billy Graham did not talk about his failure to believe in this or that doctrine. He talked about his failure to obey. The emphasis in Romans 2 is all on obedience. The message of [Romans 2:6](#) is taken from the Old Testament. In the Day of Judgment "God will render to every man according to his deeds." Similar words are found in [Psalm 62:12](#) and [Proverbs 24:12](#).

Does this mean that the grace we need for salvation comes by works and not by faith? That kind of question is entirely misleading, because faith and obedience were never meant to be pitted against one another. They are not opposites. They are one and they are the same.

When we are confronted with truth, obedience is the only acceptable response. Any other response must be understood as suppressing truth. What greater contradiction can there be than to give intellectual assent to a particular truth; and, at the same time, refuse to obey that truth? The fact that people like us try to do this does not altar God's universal principle of judgment. If it is impossible for the pagan to make choices outside of God's sovereign will, it is also

impossible for us to make choices outside of God's sovereign will. There is no question that God's sovereign will shall be accomplished in spite of man and his puny resistance to it. Truth will always triumph in the end.

It is absolutely essential that those of us who take pride in knowing a lot about the Bible face the truth about ourselves. And it is necessary that we think about all the truth we are not obeying. I think that Billy Graham has probably memorized more scripture than any person here. But even a person like Billy Graham can think about his life and conclude that he has suppressed truth by not doing enough. We should follow that kind of example.

Our conscience is intended to be the final measure of who we are. A healthy conscience is a conscience that is constantly active. It is constantly bearing witness of who we are in such a way that we are constantly aware of the presence of God's wrath in our lives. And this constant awareness of the presence of God's wrath in our lives should make us constantly aware of our need for His grace. An unhealthy conscience is one that always feels that everything is OK. As a result, it never feels the need to ask for grace to make it through each day.

You know what the final determining factor will be when we stand before the Great White Throne at the

final judgment? It will be our conscience testifying to the fact that, during our time here on this earth, we have acted "not according to worldly wisdom but according to God's grace." ([2 Corinthians 1:12](#))

Here, on this earth, our conscience never should stop accusing us of the fact that there is a huge amount of truth that we are constantly suppressing. This realization of who we are should then constantly drive us back to the cross where we find the needed grace to live day by day. Then, when our days on earth are over and we stand before God's judgment seat, our conscience will speak for us. It will proclaim that we have lived by God's grace, and it is only by God's grace that we can enter into heaven.

The truth recorded in today's scripture reading requires deep and personal reflection. Please take some time this week to face the truth about you. Don't allow your religion or even your baptism give you a false sense of security. Think about the truth you know. You know far more than the average person who lives on this planet. Allow your conscience to wake up to the reality of the wrath of God that is present and active in your life. Allow the Holy Spirit to do what He has wanted to do for such a long time so that you will see your desperate need for the gospel. If you do this, you will experience personal revival. If we all do it, this congregation will never be the same.