

August 5, 2018
Lesson 10: God's Justice
Scripture: Romans 2:1-12

Context:

In this final section on *Justice and The New Testament*, we leave the Gospels and go to the writings attributed to the apostle Paul. Throughout the letters in the New Testament, there is a focus upon a new life in Christ. All of the letters are concerned with instruction for how the Christian community is to live with one another as brothers and sisters in Christ, regardless of their former backgrounds.

In chapter two of Romans, Paul dives right into all the issues of the early Roman church after the salutation and greeting in chapter one. One of the issues is how the Roman Christians treat one another and judge one another for their behavior. As the letter indicates, some of the Christians have been judging others and sitting upon a throne of self-righteousness. Yet there is a word of caution for those who judge. They themselves are in trouble as God is the ultimate judge.

The writer makes it very clear that God is the only one who gets the final say on judging others. To help put in perspective, the author reminds the audience of the abundance of God's generosity, tolerance, patience, and kindness that has been given to each and every one of them. God has given every member of the church the opportunity to grow and be loved even as they sin and make mistakes.

To drive home the point, the author tells all those who judge that they are storing up wrath for themselves with their inability to change and focus on looking at other's behaviors without examining their own. God is the one who will make the judgment calls and will look at the way that each person lived on their own. There is not a human scale of what behavior is worse than another.

God does have a warning for those who are wicked and delight in evil. They will have trouble in this life for everything that they do. It does not matter whether one was first a Jew and then Christian, or a Gentile convert. All will be held accountable for their decisions and how they choose to live with others. God will not show partiality based on position, family status, or any other factor. God does not have favorites, period.

Application

There is the adage that it is not what one knows, but whom one knows that is important. However, that is not the line of reasoning for Paul. According to Paul in this passage, it is not what one or whom one knows, but what one does that is the main thing. There is a difference between knowing and doing.

In the case of living with one another and doing life together, our author wants the congregation in Rome to start internalizing that grace that they hear so much about. Because God has given them grace, they are to give grace to others instead of acting out. Doing evil in the name of good is not a part of the equation.

Unfortunately, the words judging and church have become synonymous. Growing up, I often heard my friends outside the church talk about some of the sermons and studies they attended. They often walked out disappointed and hungry for more. What

they had received was often more condemnatory and draining than life giving. Some of the teaching they heard sounded more like a list of rules with the outcome always being that if you did not follow them, you could go ahead and prepare for the depths of Hell. This is how people were introduced to Jesus and to discipleship.

How sad that the church they attended did not ever read or preach on this pericope. Here, we are given good news that judgment is not in our hands. Instead, it is in God's hands. This is the same God who loves and gives us grace. Jesus is the example of who to follow as he lived a grace-filled life from birth to death. Christ ate with sinners and tax collectors and even died for those who crucified him. God saved humanity and made very clear that the job of the follower was to have faith in Christ and to live out Jesus's teachings of mercy and love.

Of course scripture gives us ways to live into that mission. We are called to be good neighbors. We are called to watch our words and our tongue. We are called to be patient, kind, and helpful. Everyone can do those things whether they're Episcopalian, Methodist, Baptist, Pentecostal, or even those who aren't sure where they fit in the grand scheme of things.

Yet from this passage we do get a very clear message that we are not to judge. That is not our place and it is not our job to determine who is going to Heaven or Hell. We go above our pay grade when we choose to do something that ultimately belongs to God.

That is why clichés like “love the sinner, hate the sin,” are not actually Christian sayings. They are tropes to not fully engage others. They are used to shame and to hurt others so we do not have to deal with our shortcomings and sins. It goes very much against the grace of God that is given to all of us. It puts others up on pedestals as “better” sinners whose offenses are somehow less offensive. It negates the very statement in Romans 2:11 that God does not have favorites.

If the church is to live into the mission of making disciples of Jesus for the transformation of the world, then our main includes leaving the judgment of others in God's hands. Our job is to love others and do good in our world. We are not to harm anyone, exclude anyone, or make it clear to others that “their kind” is not acceptable in our community of faith. Because the good news for us is that Christ has not treated us that way, than God. Instead opened his arms wide for all saying: “Welcome home!”

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