

PROLOGUE TO PRISON

Paul's Epistle to the ROMANS

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Chapter Four -

But We Are Different (Romans 2:1-16)

Paul has painted a pretty black picture about human nature in the last part of Romans 1, and now he anticipates the Jewish reaction. He is sure of two things: first, that the Jew will agree with what has been written about the pagan Roman, Greek or Gentile; secondly, that by a neat little twist of logic the Jew will exclude himself from the picture. He will say, "This is certainly true of the Romans, but we are different!"

The Jews, Paul concluded, had suffered physically and they would readily endorse Paul's indictment of the Gentile; but they would also, with rather common human pride, divorce themselves from the withering blast and reason, "That's true of them, not of us!" Forget it not that the writer of Romans is poignantly aware of this attitude, for he himself embraced it with deep conviction and zeal. The Apostle Paul could not easily erase from memory those days as Saul of Tarsus when with righteous rage boiling he did all he could to extirpate the Christian Church. With deep embarrassment he remembered his arrogant condescension toward the most cultured non-Jew; he could not forget the superiority he had felt of himself and his people. He does not indicate immediately that he is addressing the Jew; that comes a bit later in the passage, but there is no mistaking whom he has in mind.

"Therefore thou art inexcusable, O man, whosoever thou art that judges: for wherein thou judges another, thou condemnest thyself; for thou that judges doest the same thing" (verse 1). Underneath human nature is all alike; the same heart in the Jew as in the Gentile; the same affinity for sin and unrighteousness and godlessness. How easily they forgot or overlooked the chronic defections of Israel from her peculiar role as the chosen of GOD: the Golden Calf of Aaron hours after GOD had thundered on Sinai; the whining and grumbling in the wilderness; the recurring worship of Baal; the stoning of the prophets. They had a tradition, in fact, that Abraham sat beside the gate of hell to keep all Jews out, however evil their deeds. They thought of themselves as invulnerable to the judgments of GOD. Were they not sons of Abraham? Had not the promises been given to Abraham? Were they not the disciples of Moses? Had not the law been given to Moses?

Now Paul must expose this devilish perverseness in the human heart which causes a man to justify himself by condemning another, this despicable practice of exalting one's self by downgrading another. It is a common propensity of the human heart to condemn in others that which

we most despise in ourselves. *Someone has pointed out that one cannot point a finger of criticism at another without pointing three fingers at himself.* The critic stands condemned because he sees in others what he is unable to handle in himself.

This tendency is dramatically and vividly revealed in the so-called perfectionist, who, because he cannot be what he knows he ought to be in himself, demands perfection in those about him, making life for them utterly intolerable.

So Paul admonishes, "**And thinkest thou this, O man, that judges them which do such things, and doest the same, that thou shalt escape the judgment of God?**" (verses 3). Then Paul reinforces his argument with the principles by which GOD judges a man, four principles of Divine judgment, in verses 2, 6, 11 and 16.

The first, "**But we are sure that the judgment of God is according to truth against them which commit such things**" (verse 2), in contrast, of course, to the error of the Jews' judgment against the pagan. When man judges man, he is at best subjective in his judgment. Furthermore, he does not have all the facts. GOD's judgment is according to the truth, not in an abstract sense but according to the actual condition of the man being judged. *No man can hide from GOD; no man can fool GOD; no man can deceive GOD.* He may deceive a neighbor by condemning in someone else a sin for which he is guilty; he may deceive a friend that way; he may thus deceive one in his own family; may even deceive himself, but he cannot deceive GOD! *He knows all about us!* Our lives are an open book to him. Indeed He knows the secret thoughts of the heart, and Paul reminds us in verse 16 that it is upon the secrets of man's heart that GOD's judgment is based. He judges on the basis of the secrets of one's life, things which no one else knows, which may have been covered so successfully that they have been forgotten. GOD is utterly objective and unprejudiced in His judgments.

At this point in his argument the Apostle Paul issues a sober warning - beware of presuming on the mercy, the patience, and forbearance of GOD. Deferred judgment is ignored to one's mounting peril. The fact that the wrath of GOD has not fallen is not to be equated with Divine indulgence or absolutions.

Indeed, the very fact that GOD is patient, the very fact that GOD is good, the very fact that GOD forbears is meant to stir men to repentance. "**Or despisest thou the riches of his goodness and forbearance and longsuffering; not knowing that the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance?**" (verse 4) Do you not see America, that the very benefits that GOD has given ought to lead us to repent instead of hardening our hearts and taking for granted every gift, every act of mercy as though it is ours by right of special privilege?

America, America, beware! GOD is patient. GOD is long-suffering. GOD wants men to come to repentance. But by continuing to harden your heart against GOD's very patience and goodness, you simply store up for yourselves treasures of wrath! What a picture!

The Hebrew prophets thought of GOD's wrath as being operative continually in history, but it was also cumulative, increasing to that moment when the consummate wrath of GOD would overflow on the Day of the LORD. This day is coming for every man, for every woman. "**The judgment of God is according to truth.**"

Secondly, GOD will "**render to every man according to his deeds.**" Just that explicitly does Paul state this principle in verse 6. Does this, therefore, mean that Paul is contradicting his own theme, "**The just shall live by faith?**" Notice that he points out beginning at the 7th verse, that he is talking about the one who longs for immortality. In other words, the deeds are the expression of the desire which GOD sees and honors.

This is illustrated in two familiar incidents in the New Testament: Cornelius, for example, whose story is recorded in Acts, chapter 10. "**There was a certain man in Caesarea called Cornelius, a centurion of the band called the Italian band, A devout man, and one that feared God with all his house, which gave much alms to the people, and prayed to God alway. He saw in a vision evidently about the ninth hour of the day an angel of God coming in to him, and saying unto him, Cornelius. And when he looked on him, he was afraid, and said, What is it, Lord? And he said unto him, Thy prayers and thine alms are come up for a memorial before God**" (verses 1-4).

A parenthetical note is in order here. Not uncommonly one will hear a well-meaning Christian say that the only prayer of the unsaved man which GOD hears is this, "**God be merciful to me a sinner.**" This is simply not true. Here is an "unsaved man" Cornelius. Think of the means GOD used to get Peter to go to him! It required a special vision, repeated thrice, after which GOD had to rebuke him. And when Peter tried later to explain to the Jews this apparent deviation to a Gentile, he said rather apologetically, "**What was I, that I could withstand God?**" Of this "unsaved" man Dr. Luke records, "**Thy prayers and thine alms are come up for a memorial before God.**"

On another occasion the Jews came to JESUS on behalf of a certain Roman centurion (Luke 7) and said, "**he was worthy for whom he should do this. For he loveth our nation, and he hath built us a synagogue**" (verses 4, 5). JESUS responded to the request; but when He was near the home of the centurion, the Roman officer bade Him to come no farther, for said he, "**Lord, trouble not thyself: for I am not worthy that thou shouldst enter under my roof**" (verse 6).

Here was an "unsaved," good man, desiring immortality, whose good works were no substitute for faith in JESUS; nor did he assume his goodness efficacious for salvation. He was not basing his hope for eternal life upon his good deeds. Not at all. Here was a man whose reputation for goodness was generally accepted, and yet who himself felt utterly unworthy of JESUS. Such a one, says Paul, shall be given eternal life.

The same principle is found in the Beatitudes, "**Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled**" (Matthew 5:6). If you want it, you shall have it. GOD will give it to you. The authentically good man does not present his record to GOD saying, "Look what a good man I am - I deserve Heaven!" The authentically good man whose virtue commends itself to GOD is always aware of his unworthiness, yet he seeks immortality and eternal life. *GOD gives to the man who desires it eternal life. It is a gift. It cannot be purchased. It cannot be earned.* But the sincerity of the man who "**seeks for glory and honor and immortality**" will be evident by "**patient continuance in well doing.**"

Thirdly, Paul tells us, verse 11, "**There is no respect of persons with God.**" GOD is impartial in

His judgments. The Jews had quite a case: sons of Abraham, Moses, the law, the prophets, the Ark of the Covenant, the priesthood, the Tabernacle, the Temple. The Gentiles had none of these things, but it is as though Paul says, "So what?"

The modern counterpart of this boast is expressed in other ways; for example, "I am a church member!" "My mother sang in the choir and taught a Sunday school class." "My father was a minister as was his father and his father's father." "I am on the Session of the Church." "I was raised in a Christian home." How easily we equate salvation with pedigree or environment or inheritance. "I am an American; of course I am a Christian!" It does not necessarily follow.

The apostle penetrates this illusion, explodes its complacency as he writes. You say you have the law in contrast to the Gentiles, but the very fact that Gentiles keep this law of which you boast demonstrates the fact that they have the law in their own hearts. Long before GOD gave the Decalogue to Moses, he engraved that same law upon the hearts of Adam and Eve.

Thomas Guthrie describes Dr. Livingstone's experience among the rawest tribes of Africa, "on whose Cimmerian darkness no straggling ray of revealed truth had ever fallen, natives ready to admit that they were sinners. Indeed, they hold almost everything to be sin which, as such, is forbidden in the Word of GOD.

"Nor is it possible," continues Guthrie, "to read his clear statements on that subject without arriving at this very interesting and important conclusion - that the ten commandments received from GOD's own hand by Moses on Mount Sinai are but the copy of a much older law, that law which the finger of the MAKER wrote on Adam's heart and which, though sadly defaced by the fall, may still, like the inscription on a time-eaten, moss-grown stone, be traced on ours."

Years ago in Kansas City an eminent contemporary philosopher was addressing a large crowd in the lovely Civic music Hall. He had been laboring the point that there are no absolute moral standards, morality being a product of social mores. When he had finished his lecture, he opened the meeting for questions; and the first to respond was a senior high boy. "Sir," he said, "Is it ever right to tell a lie?"

The inadequate answer of the philosopher was interesting, but it was not to the satisfaction of the student, nor, for that matter, to anyone else in the auditorium. Why? Because when GOD created man in the Garden of Eden, he engraved on his heart that which later he wrote with his finger on the stone He gave to Moses.

Paul is saying, listen my people, all that you have is meaningless if you do not obey the Commandments because the Gentile, though he has not Moses' law, has that law written in his heart, his conscience. He knows when he does wrong and when he does right, his conscience either accuses him or excuses him (a neat little device of each man's conscience, incidentally, excusing himself by the process of rationalization). GOD's judgment rightly falls upon all men, Jew or Gentile, Jew and non-Jew. He is not a respecter of persons. You keep the law, you will not be judged. No matter how much law you have, you break the law, you cannot escape judgment.

Finally, the fourth principle of Divine judgment is this, "**In the day when God shall judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ according to my gospel**" (Romans 2:16). JESUS CHRIST is

the JUDGE. The FATHER hath given all judgment into His hands. The day is coming when each of us shall stand before JESUS CHRIST to be judged. You do not even believe in Him; some day you shall to your own condemnation. For every eye shall see, and every knee shall bow, and every tongue shall confess that JESUS CHRIST is the supreme GOD of the universe. He is the JUDGE, and the standard of judgment is the Gospel. But, you say, there are people who have never heard the Gospel. How do you know? The Gospel was not a New Testament innovation, remember. Paul says in his introduction, he was "**called to be an apostle, separated unto the gospel of God, (Which he had promised afore by his prophets in the holy scriptures)**" (Romans 1:1, 2).

In Romans 4 Paul uses the progenitor of the Hebrew race, Abraham, who lived two thousand years before CHRIST, as the supreme example of men who are saved by the Gospel. Paul has told us in Romans 1 that there is not a corner, not a niche, not a cranny in the universe where GOD has left Himself without a witness, so that all men are "**without excuse.**" This is the condemnation, that "**light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil**" (John 3:19). This was that "**true Light, which lightest every man that cometh into the world**" (John 1:9).

The question finally resolves to this: what does JESUS CHRIST mean to you? Is it a matter of indifference to you who JESUS CHRIST is? Is this just a matter of intellectual persuasion, or is JESUS CHRIST really LORD and SAVIOUR? You must answer that question now or later, for some day you shall have to give an answer, and you will be standing in His presence when you do! Is JESUS CHRIST a matter of indifference to you? Does it matter who He is, what He said, what He did on the Cross, the fact that He arose from the dead, and that He is coming again? ***Is this the most glorious fact in your experience?***

~ end of chapter 4 ~

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