

ABST Summer 2018: Lesson 10

August 5, 2018

God's Justice

Purpose: To commit to leading a non-judgmental and repentant life.

Scripture Text: Romans 2:1-12

Hearing the Word

Paul's Epistle to Rome

What follows may also be helpful in a few weeks when you are teaching about the epistle of Romans and your class is learning. Romans will be lesson number 12 in the Adult Bible Student Teacher Guide.

In the history of Christian theology Romans has played a crucial role in the formation of either individual theologians or movements that these individuals founded. Augustine writes of his hearing a voice in a Milan garden to "take up and read." What he takes up and reads is part of the epistle to Rome, chapter 13. The text reads: "dress yourself with the Lord Jesus Christ, and don't plan to indulge your selfish desires," of course, it was in Latin. Romans also influenced Martin Luther. He wrote an important commentary on it and it inspired John Wesley momentarily. The protestant doctrines of both justification and sanctification come from Luther's understand of Paul. For United Methodists, we know all about a passage that John Wesley wrote in one of his journals:

In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed, I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.

Paul wrote, according to various scholars, from between seven to thirteen of the letters in our New Testament. This judgment depends on many factors. Not disputed are seven letters. Classified as authentically Pauline are: Romans, Philemon, 1 Thessalonians, Galatians, Corinthians, Philippians, and 2 Corinthians. Many scholars include the letters Colossians and 2 Thessalonians, but scholarly opinion splits about these two epistles. The division seems about half for and half against inclusion. Virtually no one denies that Paul wrote Romans.

Among his letters, Christians across the centuries have valued Romans most it seems. Reading this epistle is not for the faint hearted. Romans as we all know is Paul's longest epistle and in many ways the most complex. Paul always wrote to the context of the churches with which he corresponded. Yet Paul had never visited there, but Romans is about as close as Paul comes to a systematic explaining of the gospel from his point of view.

Although Paul did not plant the church at Rome, nor visit it in the beginning, the letter Romans too grew from a particular state of affairs. We know that Paul was collecting "the offering" from Gentile churches and carrying it to distribute to the poor believers in Jerusalem.

Romans 15:26 helps us see the picture. "Macedonia and Achaia have been happy to make a contribution for the poor among God's people in Jerusalem." Many Bible scholars think, given clues in Romans and Acts that Paul was going to swing by the relatively prosperous Roman church to get money for the poor in Jerusalem. Thus, Romans was a way of introducing himself to a congregation he did not know well—yet planned to take an offering. The epistle to Rome also served to lay out Paul's chief theological or doctrinal understanding of the gospel. Paul also included several chapters about how Christians might apply the ethics of the faith. That section of Romans 12–15 academics call paraenesis, which means "advice of a moral, ethical, or religious nature." Perhaps Paul knew something of some moral issues in Rome and addressed these specific ethical circumstances. That would follow his tendency in his other letters to address specific issues.

If you or your class wants to know more about how Paul was arrested and came to Rome as a prisoner then look at the Acts of the Apostles (see: Acts 21–28, specifically Acts 21:30–33 and Acts 28:14, 30–31).

Paul's purpose for writing Romans was simply to communicate the gospel. This plain teaching is this: Human righteousness arises by faith in Jesus Christ and apart from our human labors to earn it by the law or good works.

The Context of Romans 2

After Paul initially greets the readers in chapter 1, he then gives thanks for them. In a way Paul is currying favor with his Roman readers because before the apostle is finished he will have written many hard truths to people he does not know face to face—and he is planning on asking them for money. In verse 16, which many scripture students think is the gospel's abstract, Paul defines it by writing: "It is God's own power for salvation to all who have faith in God, to the Jew first and also to the Greek."

Thus, the first chapter of Romans 1 introduces the epistle. Paul shares how God discloses

God's righteousness. Then Paul writes that no one is exempt from God's judgment as if to say that we, either Jews or Gentiles, are each guilty before God. In the first chapter of Romans, as Paul has discussed the Gentile circumstance, Paul now will continue in chapter 2 by addressing those who deliver judgment on others when they reveal their own guilt concerning the same things. Paul proposes to Gentile and Jew believers that they are in danger of God's righteous judgment. He writes that these are those whom "God will repay everyone based on their works" (Romans 2:6).

Romans Chapter 2

Prior to chapter two, Paul castigates Gentiles. We read about natural theology which is God revealed in nature or through reason. Paul suggests that Gentiles knew God and supports it with this statement: "Ever since the creation of the world, God's invisible qualities—God's eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, because they are understood through the things God has made. So humans are without excuse. Although they knew God, they didn't honor God as God or thank him" (Romans 1:20-21).

Perhaps the Jewish Christians enjoyed hearing Paul really shred the Gentiles, but Paul turns the tables on the Jews beginning with chapter two. In verse 9 Paul lumps humankind together when he writes: "There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil, for the Jew first and also for the Greek." At times scripture uses the word "Gentile;" sometimes translators translate the same word as "Greek"—they mean the same thing. God is the only one who judges because only God is righteous. In this text the judgment of persons against one another Paul laid up against and next to God's righteous judgment. God's own righteousness is the cosmic reason that God and God alone can judge. It is that righteousness that authorizes God to judge.

Romans 2 also weighs the law and its effect or lack of effect on Jews and Gentile alike. Of course we all know that law was central to Jewish understanding of their relationship with God. Yet after centuries most first century people realized the law did not seem to bring the closure that its intention desired. We can see how important the law was by the several ways Paul writes of it. He employs law, *nomos*, in four distinct ways; figuratively, as a "principle," generically, as a "statute," as a reference to the entire Old Testament, and as a reference specifically to the Mosaic law, the Torah. But . . . no matter how you slice it, law cannot save people—it can only be a person's custodian until they have faith in Christ. "The righteous person will live by faith" (Romans 1:17). Paul no doubt used this from his knowledge of the Hebrew Bible where we read that the prophet wrote:

I, the Lord, refuse to accept
anyone who is proud.
Only those who live by faith

are acceptable to me (Habakkuk 2:4).

The upshot for Paul was that whether Jew or Gentile—“All of us have sinned and fallen short of God’s glory” (Romans 3:23). Consequently, law or no law, people have done bad or evil to each other and in front of God’s righteous presence. Paul suggests that Jews and Gentiles—or everyone in other words—has done bad things; we have fundamentally broken our relationship with both God and each other. God has no favorites, thus no one has an excuse for bad behavior.

Rhetorical questions

As a preacher I spend some time in trying to prepare sermons. Pastors base sermons—or should—on biblical texts. Paul is sometimes hard to read and follow, especially in Romans. Thus one of the things I have noticed over the years in many of Paul’s epistles is that he does what I convey my 18-19 year old philosophy students. When they have writer’s block, then I suggest that they write a question about the topic at the top of the page—and then write an answer to their question. In some ways this is how Paul writes some of the great passages in Romans. In our lesson today, notice the rhetorical questions Paul asks:

Do you believe that you will escape God’s judgment?

Or do you have contempt for the riches of God’s generosity, tolerance, and patience?

Don’t you realize that God’s kindness is supposed to lead you to change your heart and life?

If it fits into your lesson plan, then use Paul’s questions for small groups in your class.

A Literary Example of How Judging Others Looks in Replicated Life

In a short story “Revelation” by Flannery O’Connor we have Ruby Turpin waiting with her husband, Claud. Taken from O’Connor’s *Everything That Rises Must Converge* collection this story begins with the main character, Mrs. Turpin, looking for a seat in a doctor’s waiting room. We readers are led to believe that as she often does, Mrs. Turpin passes her time labeling the other waiting-room people by class—“white trash,” middle class (like her), and so forth. From the deep and segregated South there are no black people in the waiting room, but Mrs. Turpin is pleased to judge them, too.

By the end of the story, however, Mrs. Turpin has a vision of the kinds of people she has classified as beneath her and sees that many will be going to heaven in front of her—a disturbing thought to her indeed. Yet it is by means of this disturbing vision that Flannery O’Connor offers the readers a glimpse of the possibility of grace for Mrs. Turpin—and this vision for Mrs. Turpin is the climax of this short story.

This is a story that disturbs because it rings so true. Here is the epitome of the kind of person Paul writes about when he writes: “So every single one of you who judge others is without any excuse. You condemn yourself when you judge another person because the one who is judging is doing the same things” (Romans 2:1-2).

Seeing the Need

We all like to think that we have no prejudices and that we are “judgment free.” I like to think that I have no prejudices and that I am “judgment free.” After all I have pastored many kinds of people in my ministry. I taught in Liberia for a year when I was in seminary. I got along famously with everyone in Liberia—as I remember the experience. I have pastored churches that include large numbers of Asian, African-American, Hispanic, and Anglo people. My church currently has a superb ministry to special need children and adults. I have never been judgmental that I recall. Yet I do remember the first time I served communion thirty years ago to a male student with an earring. I also remember baptizing a baby whose mother had some serious tattoos and thinking ill of her.

When he writes “every single one of you who judge others is without any excuse” Paul is speaking about me. My guess is that Paul is writing about you too. We judge others concerning their level of education, and school they may have attended. We judge others by where they live, what they drive, their occupation, and the list goes on and on and on. We all do it—and so do other people.

Once I ran into a person in a grocery store and the individual said: “Say are you the Methodist preacher?” After I said “yes” this person promptly informed me that I was “worse” than all the rest of the Methodists in our town. Why? Because I led people away from salvation and into the den of Satan. I said, “I’m really just here to get some bread and milk for my family.” All people have their blind spots and their prejudices. Paul seemed to understand this.

Living the Faith

Beginning the Session

As you begin your lesson make sure that you help familiarize your class with the purpose statement for today. It is: “To commit to leading a non-judgmental and repentant life.” Most people are judgmental to one degree or another. Another truth is that we often live the way we think. Sometimes when we confront our failings it is easier to do it in a way that elicits humor rather than, in this case, being judgmental about being judgmental. For that reason I included what I remember about a funny and true story about prejudice from David Letterman’s late night television show—probably about 25 years ago.

On a weekend in Atlantic City, a woman won a bucketful of quarters at a slot machine. She took a break from the slots for dinner with her husband in the hotel dining room. But first she wanted to stash the quarters in her room. “I’ll be right back and we’ll go to eat,” she told her husband. Then she carried the coin-laden bucket to an elevator.

As she was about to walk into the elevator she noticed two men already aboard. Both were black. One of them was tall . . . very tall . . . an intimidating figure. The woman froze. Her first thought was: These two are going to rob me. Her next thought was: “Don’t be a bigot; they look like perfectly nice gentlemen.” But racial stereotypes are powerful, and fear immobilized her. She stood and stared at the two men. She felt anxious, flustered, and ashamed. She hoped they didn’t read her mind but they had to know what she was thinking.

Her hesitation about joining them in the elevator was all too obvious now. Her face was flushed. She couldn’t just stand there, so with a mighty effort of will she picked up one foot and then the other foot; stepped forward and followed with the other foot and was on the elevator.

Avoiding eye contact, she turned around stiffly and faced the elevator doors as they closed. As time passed her fear increased. The elevator didn’t move. Panic ensued and she thought, I’m trapped and about to be robbed. Perspiration poured from every pore.

Then one of the men said, “Hit the floor.” Instinct told her to do what they told her. The bucket of quarters flew upwards as she threw out her arms and collapsed on the elevator floor. A shower of coins rained down on her. Take my money and spare me, she prayed. More seconds passed.

She heard one of the men say politely, “Ma’am, if you’ll just tell us what floor you’re going to, we’ll push the button.” The one who said it had a little trouble getting the words out. He was trying mightily to hold in a belly laugh. The woman lifted her head and looked up at the two men. They reached down to help her up.

Confused, she struggled to her feet. “When I told my friend here to hit the floor,” said the average sized one, “I meant that he should hit the elevator button for our floor. I didn’t mean for you to hit the floor, ma’am. He spoke genially. He bit his lip. It was obvious he was having a hard time not laughing.

The woman thought: My God, what a spectacle I’ve made of myself. She was too humiliated to speak. She wanted to blurt out an apology, but words failed her. How do you apologize to two perfectly respectable gentlemen for behaving as though they were going to rob you? She didn’t know what to say. The three of them gathered up the strewn quarters and refilled her bucket.

When the elevator arrived at her floor they then insisted on walking her to her room. She seemed

a little unsteady on her feet, and they were afraid she might not make it down the corridor. At her door they bid her a good evening. As she slipped into her room she could hear them roaring with laughter as they walked back to the elevator.

The woman brushed herself off. She pulled herself together and went downstairs for dinner with her husband. The next morning a courier delivered flowers to her room—a dozen roses. Attached to each rose was a crisp one hundred dollar bill. The card said: “Thanks for the best laugh we’ve had in years.” It was signed: Eddie Murphy and Michael Jordan

Although judging others is serious business, sometimes it puts us in humorous situations. Ask your class to share some moments when our preconceived notions led to embarrassing circumstances in our own life. An example might be when we mistook a female doctor for a nurse.

Examining the Scripture

When we read about Paul writing about judgment he was quite familiar with it. Many people in Paul’s ministry judged him. All we have to do is read portions of the Corinthian letter to see this. Some said Paul did not preach with power. They said: “in person he is weak and his speech is worth nothing” (2 Corinthians 10:10). In other examples people falsely judged Paul. He responded by writing, “I beg you that when I’m with you in person, I won’t have to boss you around. I’m afraid that I may have to use that kind of behavior with those people who think we live by human standards (2 Corinthians 10:2).

Eventually Paul wrote something that he knew would establish his pastoral authority: “I’m not aware of anything against me, but that doesn’t make me innocent, because the Lord is the one who judges me” (1 Corinthians 4:4).

Judging other people is always a temptation in religious communities. What Paul has been denouncing against in other letters he devotes Romans 2 to revisit the scourge of judging one another. His point is that it is essentially absurd of a church that is an assembly or ekklesia of God, dividing itself along the lines of judging other sisters/brothers.

Applying the Scripture’s Truth

When and if we forget the God who calls us, then we forget that to which we owe our ultimate allegiance and loyalty. In a way when we criticize others then we are no longer dependable or “reliable, steady, and trustworthy” in the sight of God. It is God who judges. Yet at times many Christians feel the need to evaluate others—teachers, doctors, city council people, judges, our parents, our children, neighbors, grocery clerks, restaurants, businesses, newspapers, and so on.

For example, we have people in all churches who feel like they know more about vascular surgery than any surgeon; more about fracturing and methane gas than any petroleum engineer; more about how to set tax rates than any economist. Many of us not only feel the right to judge and criticize others. We see judging others sometimes as almost a duty, a moral obligation—we are compelled to assess and judge others.

Thus, it is not only by moral or ritual practice that Paul understands ultimate Christian identity, but rather the loyalty to which one pays reverence. “Don’t you realize that God’s kindness is supposed to lead you to change your heart and life (Romans 2:4)? In some ways Paul is echoing what Jesus said: “Don’t judge, so that you won’t be judged” (Matthew 7:7).

Most of us face these judgment-type Catch-22 questions each day. “What do you believe” some ask. Depending on the answer they decide whether or not you are really a believer. I have a friend with cancer who does not think I am an authentic pastor because I cannot lay hands on him and cure his multiple organ tumors.

There are many questions similar to this in which other persons decide the merit of our faith. Perhaps no one asks if we are circumcised or not today as they did in Paul’s time (“outside the Law”), but there are other invasive questions too.

What is your stance on female clergy? Baptism? Copywriting Christian music? Watching movies? Have you given away all that you possess? Which version of the Bible do you read and do you hold it inerrant? Does your faith permit dancing or playing cards? Do you drink alcohol? What is your stance on human sexuality? Do you think polygamy is sinful? How do you judge with respect to: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these (Galatians 5:19-21). And so on

Optional Activities

Because the topic of judging other people will be a real life an authentic issue with most of your class divide them into groups of about five or six. Then make sure you have three or more translations of the Bible on hand. Here are some translations that would be most helpful: New International Version, King James Version, English Standard Version, Common English Bible, Revised Standard Version, or the New Revised Standard Version.

Then in the small groups use the translations to help your group come up with a paraphrase that makes the most sense in terms of your lesson.

Spend about half of your time in the passage Romans 2:1-12 and then join together as a whole class. Have each group share their interpretation of the passage knowing that every translations is also an interpretation. Expect some surprises and insights that you may not have



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anticipated.

Finally, encourage your class to discuss and talk about what unexpected things you learned or discovered in this process.