

Sinful Morality

by Ray C. Stedman

Chapter 2 of Romans is part of Paul's penetrating analysis of the 1st century civilization, beginning with its rejection of the God who had revealed himself in nature and in man's conscience. Rejecting the true God, men turned to false gods and widespread destruction of the home occurred because of sexual immorality and perversion. A spirit of violence and cruelty was rising and a total disregard of human rights was spreading throughout the 1st century world. And yet, to our astonishment, we see how accurately the apostle has analyzed the civilization of twentieth century civilization as well. All that is recorded in the first chapter of Romans took place last night in San Francisco and Los Angeles, up and down the West coast, and throughout this nation, and the world in which we live.

Yet there are many people who would say they do not belong in this picture. I am sure there were thousands in Paul's day, and I know there are millions today who feel they are not described in Romans 1. "That isn't talking about us. We're not like that. It may describe them, but it does not describe us."

Whenever you read this first chapter of Romans you find that division immediately evident – them and us. They are the wicked, the obviously gross, wicked people; we are not. Many people would say, "We're law-abiding, home-loving, clean-living, decent people." Many of these people have been church members most of their lives. Others perhaps do not go to church at all, but nev-

ertheless pride themselves on their moral standards, their ethical values, and their clean, law-abiding lives. They say the world may be in its present condition because of the wickedness of gangsters, radicals, revolutionaries, prostitutes, pimps, and perverts of our day; but they themselves are the salt of the earth.

It is on these people that the apostle turns his spotlight in Chapter 2. We will see his argument developed in three separate steps. The first is given in Verse 1:

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. {Rom 2:1 NIV}

Here Paul talks about those who pass judgment on others. If there are any here this morning who do not belong in that category, we will excuse you. You are free to go, because I want to talk to those who have, at one time or another, passed judgment on someone else. The apostle makes two points about these people in Verse 1:

- First, he says that these people know the difference between right and wrong; otherwise they would not presume to be judging. They have a clear understanding of a standard. They know that one thing is wrong and another thing is right. They are clearly aware, therefore, that

there are things that are wrong, and which merit the judgment and wrath of God released in society. This wrath, explained in Chapter 1, is primarily God's removal of the restraints upon human wickedness, allowing evil to become widespread and publicly evident. That is the wrath of God at work. The people Paul speaks of in Chapter 2 are aware that there are things that bring forth the wrath of God, things that cause society to degenerate.

- Paul's second point about these people who have a clear view of what is wrong in society is devastating. He says they are guilty because they are doing the same things themselves. The judges are as guilty as the ones they have in the dock.

As a practiced, self-righteous hypocrite, I always have a feeling of surprise at that statement. I feel that whenever moral people, those who pride themselves on a degree of righteousness and a standard of ethics, read a statement like this, they are taken by surprise. "What do you mean? How could this be?"

This reminds me of our Lord's account of his return, when all the nations are to be judged before him {cf, Matt 25:31-46}. He will separate them into two bands, the sheep and the goats. The test of judgment is made on the basis of how people treat others. He will say to the sheep, "When I was thirsty, you gave me to drink, when I was hungry you fed me, when I was naked you clothed me, when I was in prison you visited me." To the goats he will say, "When I was thirsty you did not give me to drink, when I was hungry you did not feed me, when I was naked you did not clothe me, and when I was sick or in prison you did not visit me." Both groups are taken by surprise and say, "When did this happen? When did we see you thirsty or hungry or naked? We don't remember that!" This feeling of surprise is highly indicative of how little we understand ourselves and why we need a passage such as this. We are all guilty.

I am going to use myself as an example, simply because I feel I am such an excellent example of what the rest of you are like. As I have been thinking this through, I see three ways by which I try to elude the fact that I am guilty of the things that I accuse others of doing:

1. First, I am congenitally blind toward many of my own faults. I just am not aware of them. I do not see that I am doing the same things that others are doing, and yet other people can see that I am. I don't see it, and neither do you see it in yourself. We all have these blind spots. One of the greatest lies of our age is the idea that we can know ourselves. We often argue, "Don't you think I know myself?" The answer is, "No, you do not know yourself. You are blind to much of your life." There can be areas that are very hurtful and sinful that you are not aware of.

I stayed with a pastor and his delightful family not long ago. They had three children, two boys and a girl. The oldest boy was about sixteen, and, like all sixteen-year-olds, he was very concerned about the undisciplined life of his twelve-year-old brother. One day, his mother said, he came in all upset at something his brother had done. He said, "Who does he think he is? Why, he acts as though he's as good as the rest of us!" What a typical example of the attitude we all have, only he was honest enough to say it.

I caught myself the other day saying to someone, "*Relax!* Take it easy!" It was only afterward that I heard my own voice and realized that I was not relaxed, and I was not taking it easy myself.

Have you ever lectured your children on the sin of procrastination? Then did you barely get your income tax report in on time, or not get it in at all?

How blind we are! We are congenitally blind toward many of our own faults. We just do not see them. In that way we can indeed be guilty, as the verse says, of doing the very things we accuse others of doing.

2. A second way we try to elude the fact that we are guilty of the very things we accuse others of doing is by conveniently forgetting what we have done that is wrong. We may have been aware of our sin at the time, but somehow we just assume that God is going to forget it. We do not have to acknowledge it in any way – he will just forget it. As the sin fades from our memory, we think it fades from his, as well.

For example, let's consider our thought life. Much of this passage must be understood

in the light of our Lord's revelation in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus says that God, who looks at the heart, sees what is going on in the inner attitude and judges on that basis; he doesn't judge as men judge, according to what is observable from the outward life. In the Sermon on the Mount we learn that if we hold a feeling of animosity and hatred against someone, if we are bitter and resentful and filled with malice toward an individual, then we are guilty of murder, just as though we had taken a knife and plunged it into that person's breast, or shot them with a gun. If we find ourselves lustfully longing to possess the body of another, if we play with this idea over and over in our mind, and treat ourselves to a fantasy of sex, we have committed fornication or adultery. If we find ourselves filled with pride, yet we put on the appearance of being humble and considerate of others, we are guilty of the worst of sins. Pride of heart destroys humanity.

We think these things will go unnoticed, but God sees them in our heart. He sees all the actions that we conveniently have forgotten. He sees it when we cut people down, or speak with spite and sharpness, and deliberately try to hurt them. He sees it when we are unfair in our business tactics, when we are arrogant toward someone we think is on a lower social level than ourselves. He sees it when we are stubborn and uncooperative in trying to work out a tense situation. All these things God takes note of. We, who condemn these things in others, find ourselves guilty of the same things. Isn't it remarkable that when others mistreat us we always think it is most serious and requires immediate correction. But when we mistreat others, we say to them. "You're making so much out of a little thing! Why it's so trivial and insignificant."

3. The third way we try to elude the fact that we are guilty of the very things we accuse others of doing is by cleverly renaming things. Other people lie and cheat; we simply stretch the truth a little. Others betray; we simply are protecting our rights. Others steal; we borrow. Others have prejudices; we have convictions. Others murder and kill; we exploit and ruin. Others rape; we pollute. We cry, "Those people ought to be stoned!" Jesus says, "He that is

without sin among you, let him cast the first stone," {cf, John 8:7}. Yes, we are all guilty of the same things we accuse others of doing.

Paul develops the second step of his argument in Verses 2-4. He asks two questions; here is the first:

Now we know that God's judgment against those that do such things is based on truth. So when you, a mere man, pass judgment on them and yet do the same things, do you think you will escape God's judgment? {Rom 2:2-3 NIV}

What a ridiculous ground of hope! How tenuous to hope that God, who sees all men openly and intimately, who sees not only what is on the outside but also what is on the inside, will pronounce judgment on these other people, but not on you.

People will say, "How can a just and loving God permit the injustice and vileness that takes place in this world? How can he allow a tyrant like Hitler or Stalin to arise and murder millions of innocent people? How can he allow these godless regimes to come into power and crush people, usurp their rights, put thousands in prison, and spread destruction and sorrow across the land? Why does he allow these things to go on year after year? Why doesn't God judge these men?"

The question we ought to ask is, "Why didn't he judge me yesterday, when I said that sharp, caustic word that plunged like an arrow into a loved one's heart and hurt him badly? Why didn't he judge me? Why didn't he shrivel my hand when I took a pencil and cheated on my income tax? Why didn't he strike me dumb when I was gossiping on the phone this morning, sharing a tidbit that made someone look bad in someone else's eyes? Why didn't God judge that?" The God of truth and justice sees the one as well as the other. Paul asks, "Do you think that you will escape the judgment of God?"

Then Paul asked the second question, the other horn of the dilemma:

Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, even realizing that God's kindness should lead you to repentance? {Rom 2:4 NIV}

Paul's question is, "Why are you acting the way you are?"

Why do you judge others so critically and so constantly, yet never seem to judge yourself? Surely it can't be that you think you are going to escape! If you know that God judges according to truth, you must be included in that judgment as well. If it is not that you think you'll escape his judgment, then it must be that you are treating with disdain the opportunities God gives you to repent. Why are you allowed to live? Why are you permitted to experience life, to find a new year lying ahead of you, with all its chances to correct these wrong attitudes and conditions? God's goodness, tolerance, and patience are exhibited in his giving you a chance to change, a chance to acknowledge your sins and to be forgiven.

We have to see all our life in this respect. A faithful God, judging the inner part of life, does give us these opportunities. He knows we are blind. He knows that we often struggle at recognizing what is wrong in our life, and so he gives us these opportunities to repent and change. These moments of truth are very important.

In Verses 5-11, the apostle presents the last step of his argument, and describes what lies ahead for those who refuse to face the actual condition of their lives:

But 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. God "will give to each person according to what he has done." 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. There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil: first for the Jew, and then the Gentile; but glory, honor and peace for everyone who does good: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For God does not show favoritism. {Rom 2:5-11 NIV}

I am amazed to see in my own heart how many times I expect God to show favoritism. Even as a Christian, I expect him to overlook areas of my life without any acknowledgment on my part that they are there. I expect him to forget them without re-

vealing to me what their true nature is. Yet the Scriptures tell us that God is constantly bringing to our attention times when we see ourselves clearly. What valuable times they are!

Paul says that when we refuse to judge these areas we are storing up wrath for ourselves. The word is "treasures." We are laying up treasures, but the treasure is wrath. This is the same word that Jesus employed when he said, "Lay up treasures for yourselves in heaven," {Matt 6:20 KJV}. We are constantly making deposits in a bank account which we must collect one of these days. In his wrath, God allows us to deteriorate as human beings. We become less than what we want to be. I think C. S. Lewis has described this very accurately. In his book, *Mere Christianity*, he says,

People often think of Christian morality as a kind of bargain in which God says, "If you keep a lot of rules, I'll reward you; and if you don't, I'll do the other thing." I do not think that's the best way of looking at it. I would much rather say that every time you make a choice, you are turning the central part of you, the part that chooses, into something a little different than what it was before. And, taking your life as a whole, with all your innumerable choices, all your life long you are slowly turning this central thing either into a heavenly creature or into a hellish creature; either into a creature that is in harmony with God and with other creatures and with itself, or else into one that is in a state of war and hatred with God and with its fellow creatures and with itself. To be the one kind of creature is heavenly, i.e., it is joy and peace and knowledge and power; to be the other means madness, horror, idiocy, rage, impotence, and eternal loneliness. Each of us, at each moment, is progressing to the one state or the other.

In very eloquent terms, that is saying the same thing Paul brings out here. God is a righteous God. He judges men and he assesses wrath against those who do wrong. No matter what the outward life may be like, he sees the inward heart and judges on that basis. There is a righteous judgment awaiting. It comes, in part, all through life, because we experience the wrath of God even now. But a day is coming when it all will be manifested, one way or the other.

The question Paul brings out here is this: What do you really want out of life? What are you seeking?

- If you are “by persistence in doing good seeking glory and honor and immortality,” i.e., if you want God’s life, you want to be his kind of a person, you want to honor him and be of value to him – if that is what you really want above everything else, then you will find it. God will give you eternal life. In the context of the whole Scripture, this means you will find your way to Jesus Christ, for he is life eternal. You will find him as your Redeemer and Lord and Savior. You will grow increasingly like him, as you judge these evil areas of life, and honestly confess them, not assuming that God will pass over them. But what do you really want?
- If what you really want is not God, truth, life, glory, and immortality – if you really want pleasure and fame and wealth and power and prominence, if you want to be the center of things and have everybody thinking of you and looking at you and serving you – then, according to this passage, “there will be trouble and stress for every human being who does evil, first for the Jew, and then for the Gentile.” God plays no favorites. Church member or pagan, civilized or savage, white, brown, red, black or yellow, it makes no difference before God.

Now if all this sounds very harsh, if it sounds unloving, it is because you have not read the passage in its context. For this is not inconsistent with the picture of a loving God, who loves humanity and wants to restore it. It is a picture of a loving God who loves us so much that he tells us the truth, and that is true love. He will not allow us to deceive ourselves, to be tricked and trapped by falling into self-deceit. He tells us the truth. There is no way out, except one, and that is what he wants us to see. God’s love is helping us to see that there is only one way to deal with sin – admit it is there, and recognize that God has already dealt with it in Christ. On that basis, God offers us full and free forgiveness. There is no other way.

Any person who thinks he will escape by taking another route, or listening to some of the other voices that try to trap us into ways of rationalizing these feelings, and accepting them on other terms rather than dealing with them as ugly sins before God, will discover ultimately that he has stored up a treasure house of wrath. That is why God tells us the truth now. God, in great love and at tremendous cost, has provided a way out. It is that we surrender self. We give up self-seeking and living for ourselves, and begin to live for the God who made us. By the power of the Lord who forgives us and restores us and makes us his own, we have heaven instead of hell. C. S. Lewis says the principle of giving up self runs all through life, from top to bottom:

Give up yourself, and you will find your real self. Lose your life, and you will save it. Submit to the death of your ambitions and your favorite wishes every day, and the death of your whole body in the end, submit with every fiber of your being, and you will find eternal life. Keep back nothing. Nothing that you have not given away will ever be really yours. Nothing in you that has not died will ever be raised from the dead. Look out for yourself and you will find, in the long run, only hatred, loneliness, despair, rage, ruin, and decay. But look for Christ, and you will find Him, and with Him, everything else thrown in.

This is the gospel. This is what this tremendous passage is aiming at, that we might realize there is no hope, none whatsoever, except in a day-by-day yielding to the plan and the program of God, as we find it in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Perhaps there are some here this morning who have seen themselves in a new light. Perhaps you have seen that you need to stop justifying and excusing yourself, and are in need of forgiveness from God just as much as though you had been a red-handed murderer. We all are.

Perhaps there are many Christians here who have realized that when we protect and allow areas of our life to be given over to this kind of judgmental condemning and criticizing of other people, we are blocking the flow of the life of God to our lives, keeping back the joy and peace that he would have us enjoy. These areas need to be judged in the Christian life as well as in the unredeemed life.

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Above all else, this process is designed to make us take seriously God's way of escape. There is a way of escape: Admit your sins freely, and receive the forgiveness of God – on the basis of the work of Jesus Christ in his death on the cross and his resurrection life available to us.

Prayer:

Our heavenly Father, we thank you that you do tell us the truth. You are the God

of truth. You do not deceive us, you do not delude us; you tell us the blunt, stark, naked truth, that we might know exactly what we are, and what we can do about it. Save us, Lord, from the folly of trying any other method. Save us from the folly of trying to protect and rationalize and justify these areas of evil in our lives. Grant to us, Lord, the grace to confess and be forgiven. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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