

ROMANS—WEEK 2

SIN AND JUDGMENT



F. Michael Slay
A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The cover image is the Conversion of Saul by Michelangelo Buonarroti

We are not, as the Declaration of Independence puts it, “the supreme judge of the world.” That’s God’s job. Yet our innate hypocrisy causes us to act in embarrassing ways—embarrassing for God too.

Fortunately, salvation by grace alone makes everything work out fine—to His glory!

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Romans, Week 2 — Sin and Judgment
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1 Romans 2:1-11 (NKJV) again

Therefore you are inexcusable, O man, whoever you are who judge, for in whatever you judge another you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things. But we know that the judgment of God is according to truth against those who practice such things. And do you think this, O man, you who judge those practicing such things, and doing the same, that you will escape the judgment of God? Or do you despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance? But in accordance with your hardness and your impenitent heart you are treasuring up for yourself wrath in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, who “will render to each one according to his deeds”: eternal life to those who by patient continuance in doing good seek for glory, honor, and immortality; but to those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness—indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish, on every soul of man who does evil, of the Jew first and also of the Greek; but glory, honor, and peace to everyone who works what is good, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For there is no partiality with God.

We’re not supposed to judge. We’re guilty of the same things. And judging others “despises” *the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering*. What’s the connection between those three things?

We don’t appreciate God’s mercy because we expect it, even demand it. That’s why so many people don’t believe in hell. “There can’t be a hell. God wouldn’t do that.”

Why not? What’s wrong with sending people to hell? What’s the big deal?

And many of the people who do believe in hell think that only the worst tyrants end up there. Why is that? Have they not noticed what goes on around them every day?

Logically, God forgiving us is ridiculous. Sending everyone to hell would be a glorious demonstration of God’s perfect justice and holiness. Anything else needs to be explained.

And the New Testament gives a magnificent explanation—but to us it’s too obvious. There’s no awe.

“Of course God forgives us.” Then, after embracing the wonders of His forgiveness, we won’t forgive others, sometimes for doing the exact same things we expect to be forgiven for.

That’s the connection. That’s how we *despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering*.

Think about some of your biggest pet peeves (for me, it’s some of the things automobile drivers do). What corrective actions would you like to see applied to them?

Now think of the annoying things you do (if you can’t think of any, get help). What corrective actions should be applied to you?

See the difference? We don’t just take forgiveness for granted; we demand it, as if it’s our right.

This takes a long time just to learn to see, much less fix. Ask God to open your eyes.

2 Romans 2:12-24 (NKJV)

For as many as have sinned without law will also perish without law, and as many as have sinned in the law will be judged by the law (for not the hearers of the law are just in the sight of God, but the doers of the law will be justified; for when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do the things in the law, these, although not having the law, are a law to themselves, who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves their thoughts accusing or else excusing them) in the day when God will judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ, according to my gospel.

Indeed you are called a Jew, and rest on the law, and make your boast in God, and know His will, and approve the things that are excellent, being instructed out of the law, and are confident that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of babes, having the form of knowledge and truth in the law. You, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself? You who preach that a man should not steal, do you steal? You who say, “Do not commit adultery,” do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who make your boast in the law, do you dishonor God through breaking the law? For “the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you,” as it is written.

Paul is getting at one of the facets of sin that’s hard to describe and even harder to fathom. Paul poses this as questions, but they’re really facts. *You who preach that a man should not steal, do you steal? You who say, “Do not commit adultery,” do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples?*

When people steal, it stimulates a “hypocrisy hormone” that causes them to preach against stealing (or preach it more stridently). So, we see adulterers rail against adultery, cheaters rail against cheating, etc. I don’t know if psychiatrists have a label for this, but it’s definitely sin.

And here’s the chilling part—this evil lives inside of every one of us. Commit the sin and the corresponding hypocrisy will naturally sprout.

So Paul lowers the boom, particularly on the show-offs. He knows the rule about braggarts not being the ones who should be bragging.

You who make your boast in the law, do you dishonor God through breaking the law? For “the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you,”

This is why legalism is so poisonous. You can’t conquer sin by trying; grace is the only way.

Trying to be good leads to pretending to be good. That’s the first step on the road to hypocrisy.

Salvation by grace alone thrives on honesty. That’s why honesty ministries like Celebrate Recovery and Pirate Monks are so effective.

When the masks come off, the gospel blossoms.

3 Romans 2:25-29 (NKJV)

For circumcision is indeed profitable if you keep the law; but if you are a breaker of the law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision. Therefore, if an uncircumcised man keeps the righteous requirements of the law, will not his uncircumcision be counted as circumcision? And will not the physically uncircumcised, if he fulfills the law, judge you who, even with your written code and circumcision, are a transgressor of the law? For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh; but he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter; whose praise is not from men but from God.

Circumcision is an irreversible surgical mark of a covenant. Jewish men could no more deny their heritage than they could deny their humanity. That sounds like a good thing and certainly fits the covenant concept beautifully.

But sin has a way of wrecking everything, and this is no exception. They turned circumcision from a sign of a holy covenant into a sign of privilege. Instead of a sign of the covenant, they saw it as a guarantee of one. Why bother to do all those things when you have the mark of the covenant?

That's pride at work, and it's the quintessential human flaw. Our hearts have a way of gaming everything. We're experts at making excuses. We think, "I'm one of the good guys so I don't need to worry about that." Rules are for others.

This all has a, "The dog ate my copy of the law," feel to it. It'd be funny if it wasn't such a horror show. Privilege offends people and privilege in the name of God dishonors Him. Witnessing for Christ is trashed by a condescending sense of privilege.

For "the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you," — Romans 2:24a (NKJV)

That's why repentance is so important and why repentance must not be a one-time event. It's so essential to the structure of Christianity that Martin Luther made it the first of his 95 theses.

<http://www.luther.de/en/95thesen.html>

1. When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, "Repent" (Mt. 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.

This "rules are for others" syndrome is usually not so blatant that we notice it in ourselves. So, countering it is tricky. Just trying to do better at obeying the rules gets into legalism and hypocrisy real quick.

The best approach isn't to try harder to sin less; it's repentance. The key isn't even stopping the sins; it's seeing them.

But you can't teach yourself to see; only the Holy Spirit can do that.

"Lord help me see my sinfulness and my sense of privilege about it."

4 Romans 3:1-4 (ESV)

Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision? Much in every way. To begin with, the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God. What if some were unfaithful? Does their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God? By no means! Let God be true though every one were a liar, as it is written,

“That you may be justified in your words, and prevail when you are judged.”

The key to understanding Romans is understanding what Paul is doing when he says, “*By no means!*” Look this verse up in different translations and you’ll see many variations. The Greek just doesn’t translate succinctly into English. It’s only two words in the original—**μ γ νοιτω** (may GEN-oi-taw, with the “g” pronounced hard, as in “get,” not soft, as in “gel.”)

“May” just means “not.” “Genoitaw” is the verb “to become” in the optative mood. Optative is like subjunctive—something that might happen—but with the extra sense of desire. So, “may genoitaw” translates to, “I hope that never happens,” or more literally, “Not that it might ever come to pass.” That’s too long, so translators try to come up with something short that means the same thing. The King James translates it as, “*God forbid!*” The NKJV says, “*Certainly not!*” The NIV says, “*Not at all!*”

Paul will use this phrase over and over in Romans. Every time Paul asks a question and answers it with may genoitaw, he’s doing two things. First, he’s saying that the answer to the question is no.

Second (and this is critically important) he’s saying that it’s a good question. If you’re wondering about this, you’re on the right track; you understand his point. This forces the reader’s mind down a very specific path.

But these questions are going to get increasingly blunt. Not everyone is aggressive enough to even consider them. So Paul brings them up. By asking tough questions—questions we may not even be willing to think—he’ll force us to confront tough issues, and to fully understand what he’s teaching.

It’s a brilliant trick and it makes the theology of Romans bulletproof. There’s no room for confusion.

So, with this first use of “may genoitaw,” Paul answers the question, “*What if some were unfaithful? Does their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God?*”

May genoitaw!

Thank God for that. Where would we be without his longsuffering faithfulness? We’re saved by grace—incredible, extreme, ridiculous grace.

Praise God for the gospel of grace. Praise Him for his longsuffering faithfulness, in the face of our relentless faithlessness. Praise Him for Paul and his epistles. Praise Him for Romans.

5 Romans 3:5-8 (NKJV)

But if our unrighteousness demonstrates the righteousness of God, what shall we say? Is God unjust who inflicts wrath? (I speak as a man.) Certainly not! For then how will God judge the world?

For if the truth of God has increased through my lie to His glory, why am I also still judged as a sinner? And why not say, “Let us do evil that good may come”?—as we are slanderously reported and as some affirm that we say. Their condemnation is just.

He did it again. May genoitaw! But what is Paul talking about this time?

But if our unrighteousness demonstrates the righteousness of God, what shall we say? Is God unjust who inflicts wrath?

Is this the question that popped into your head when you read Romans 3:1-4? It didn't pop into mine. That's why Paul brings it up himself.

And his answer is short and sweet. May genoitaw! *For then how will God judge the world?*

But if this doesn't completely answer it for you, join the club. At first, this answer seems circular. The question was whether his judgement of us would be unrighteous. Paul's answer is that it can't be, because then He couldn't judge. Well, okay then, but how does that answer the question?

Paul will get back to this issue many more times in Romans, with longer explanations, but the point here is that the creator must be able to judge His own creation.

It's His world and He can do anything He wants to with it. If God wanted to create a world with a completely different Ten Commandments, He could have. He makes the rules.

God can't be unjust because He gets to define what justice is.

God is good in ways we never think of. We take for granted all the things in life that we're used to. A fish doesn't know that it's wet either.

This has become a hot topic among physicists because the constants of the universe (such as the speed of light and the weight of an electron) seem to be perfectly designed. By all accounts, a universe with different parameters would be fatally flawed; life couldn't exist.

This is a big puzzle for non-believers. They've come up with multiple explanations, including the fantastical idea that there are many universes but we're in the only one that works.

<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/multiverse>

The Heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. – Psalm 1:1 (NIV)

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. What are your biggest pet peeves?
2. What do you know about "honesty ministries" or "recovery ministries"?
3. What helps you see your own sin?
4. What is your mental image of God's patience?
5. What are you thankful for that's unusual?

Items for prayer: