

It's been a few weeks since we were in the book of Romans, so we need to have a quick recap to remember where we are. You remember that Paul is writing this letter in order to introduce himself to the Romans. And he starts by talking about what the Gospel is. In particular, he starts by talking about sin. And to be even more specific, Paul is talking about God's wrath being poured out upon the nations, that all men by nature have turned away from him, because they didn't want to acknowledge the truth. They were trying to suppress it, trying to hold it down. And they didn't worship him like they were supposed to. And so God, Paul says, is handing them over to judgment. He's causing their sin to become its own punishment. And that's where we left off at the beginning of Lent.

But now in our reading for this evening, Paul is carrying on a one-sided conversation. He imagines that there is somebody who has been listening to him up to this point. And this imaginary speaker is basically saying to him: "Everything that you've said, Paul, is great! I agree with everything. All those people out there, all of those sinners, yeah, they truly deserve what is coming to them! God judges them rightly because of their sins. So yes, I'm fully on board with what you're saying." But the problem is that this speaker that Paul is imagining has missed the point, because he thinks there is something different between him and the rest of the world. He thinks that what Paul is saying is true for everybody else, but not for him, because he's different. All those sinners out there deserve what's coming to them, but he is something else.

And specifically Paul has in mind here a Jew, one who would say that "I am the son of Abraham. I am the son of Israel. God made all of these promises to my fathers, and they also apply to me. And I have the law, so I am different from all the rest of the world. All of these things that you've been saying, Paul, just don't apply to me, because I am different. I am better than all of those people out there." But Paul says, "No, that's not right. There is no difference between you and the rest of the world." "You, O man," he says, "have no excuse, because you're doing all the same things that the world is doing, committing all of the same sins, going along in all of the same things." And God is going to judge the world, he says, in the same way, so that all people, regardless of who they are, regardless of their background, regardless of what they claim to be, are going to be judged in the same way. Because all people are equally sinners before him.

Because the main issue that's at work here, Christians, is this idea that God somehow has two different ways of judging the world, that he has two different standards. He's got the one standard for everybody else out there, for all of those sinners out in the world. They're going to get what's coming to them. But he has a different standard for me and for my sins. And this Jew that Paul is speaking to is thinking this way. That because I have the law, because I have all of these things, God will judge me in a much nicer way than everybody else. I have all of these things going for me, so God is kind and patient with me despite my sins. But all of those sinners out there, well, they're just going to get what they deserve because they are sinners. But Paul says: "No. If you're doing the same things that they are, why would you think that there would be a difference between you?" As he says in verse 3: "Do you suppose, O man, you who judge those who practice such things and yet do them yourself, that you will escape the judgment of God?" If you persist in your sins, you're going to be condemned. It doesn't matter who you are. It doesn't matter what your background is. Because God rightfully will judge all people. You don't get a free pass based on your identity. God judges all the world so that there is no difference between the Jew and the Greek.

And Christians, how often do we also fall into this temptation, into this way of thinking! Thinking that God is somehow going to go easier on me because of who I am. Let me use an example. Maybe you come from a long line of Christians. Your family is all Christian. Your parents were Christians. Your grandparents were Christians. Your great-grandparents were Christians. All the way back as far as you can remember. That's a great blessing. We should be thankful for that, that God has given that to us. But do you think that God is going to judge you differently because of it? Do you think that because you come from a line of Christians and that your family are all Christians, that God is somehow going to go easier on you for that reason? That he's going to give you a free pass simply because of who you are? But Christians, it doesn't work like that. God will not judge you based on who your family is. We are not going to be saved simply because our parents were Christians or all the rest of our family are Christians. This is exactly what the Jews are doing that Paul is speaking against! Saying that, "Because my father was a Jew, and his father was a Jew, all the way back to Abraham, that God's going to treat me different than the world." But that's simply not true. All are accountable equally before the Lord.

Let me use another example. There are many out there, unfortunately, who think that belonging to a church is what makes them a Christian. That as long as I have my name on the membership rolls, as long as my name is in the books, that I'm going to be just fine. And God is going to look at me differently than all of those people out there. So as long as I'm on the records, that's all that I need. But there are some, unfortunately, who think that way and then never go to church. They never actually show any other evidence in their lives that they are Christians, and yet they imagine, "My name is on the books so that's all that matters." Or even those who would go to church but don't show any difference in the way that they live. "But my name is on the books! That's all that matters. As long as I'm outwardly connected to this church, God is going to treat me differently from the rest of the world." But Christians, that's not true either. Just because we have our names on the rolls doesn't mean that God is going to go easy on us. Nobody is going to be saved just because they belong outwardly to some church. God is not going to give you a free pass. All will be judged the same before the Lord.

Or to use another example. Maybe you've been a Christian your entire life. You've been a part of the church as far back as you can actually remember. And that's also something we should give thanks for, that we had parents who actually raised us in the faith and who brought us to know Jesus. That is a great blessing. But do you think that because of that God is going to treat you differently? That he's going to give you a free pass, that he's going to go easy on you and not be as harsh simply because you can remember being a Christian as far back as you can remember? That doesn't work either, Christians. All are accountable before God. There is no difference between people. And the person who's been a member of the church their entire lives is not going to be judged any differently from the person who has never set foot in a church their entire life. Because all stand guilty before the Lord, no matter what their background, no matter what their identity, no matter what their membership may be.

And Paul really drives home this point in verse 6, where he says: "He will render to each one according to his works." So God tells us very clearly that he's going to judge all people by what they have done. Now, maybe that sounds a little strange to us. We say that doesn't sound quite right, but it's true. When Christ returns to judge the living and the dead, he will judge us on the

basis of our works. Jesus himself, for example, says in Matthew 16: "The Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done." Paul also says in 2 Corinthians 5: "We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil." So yes, Jesus will judge us based on what we have done. And those who have done good will receive good, and those who have done evil will receive evil.

But ask yourself this question, Christians? Can you truly say that you have done good? Can you truly say that you have done what the law requires? Because James says if we break the law in even one point, we become guilty of the entire law. So yes, we will be judged on the basis of our works, but if that's the case, we all stand condemned. Because not one of us has actually done what is right.

But this is exactly the point where we're tempted to say that God's going to treat us differently, that he's somehow going to look at us differently because of who we are. Because of our identity, because of our background, whatever it may be, he'll give us a pass on that day. But that's simply not the case. God judges everyone the same. As Paul says in verse 11 of our reading, "God shows no partiality." Jew or Greek, lifelong member or person who's never been in church in their life, all will be judged the same before the Lord.

And just in case there was any doubt left about this, Paul goes on to say in verse 12: "For all who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law." Now, the law here that he's talking about is the law of Moses, that law which God gave to Israel on Mount Sinai. So those who are "under the law" are the people who know what that is. In other words, the Jews. All the people who know God's Word, they know what he has said. And those who "sin without the law" is everyone else, the people that simply don't know what God says. They do not know the Word. They don't know the Bible. But they're still going to be judged the same.

But Paul really wants to drive home this point, because he says sometimes those who don't have the law, who don't know what God actually said, keep at least in some sense what the law demands. Somebody who's never heard of God lives a somewhat moral life. They know that you shouldn't kill somebody. They know that you shouldn't steal. They know you shouldn't commit adultery. All of these things. They know that somewhere in their conscience. And in a very dim way, they keep that in their lives. But that's because, Paul says, the work of the law has been written on to their hearts. Notice he doesn't say the law is written on to their hearts. He says the work of the law is written on their hearts. They know in some dim way what God wants them to do, and they do it. That's not going to save them, of course, but they still do it, because they know that's what they're supposed to do. But if those people who don't know God and don't know what he says still do what the law requires in some way, where does that leave the Jew who knows the law perfectly and clearly, and yet doesn't do it? Or to put it on our terms, where does that leave us who know what God wants, who know what he has said, and yet we don't do it? Can't you see that we all stand condemned before God? We are all the same before the Lord. And God is right to condemn us, to judge us in this way. As he says in verse 2: "We know that the judgment of God rightly falls on those who practice such things."

So where does that leave us, then? It means that we shouldn't trust in outward things, Christians. We should not trust in who we are. We should not trust in what we claim to be. Because God is going to hold us all to the same standard, and we all stand judged before him. But what we should trust in, Christians, is the one thing that actually does matter, and that is our Lord Jesus Christ. Because we will be judged by our works, yes, but we will be judged in Jesus. And when we have faith in him, God will accept the things that we have done for Jesus' sake. When we have faith in him, we will find the mercy of God. When we have faith in him, we will find forgiveness. All of these outward things aren't going to make a difference on that day. The one thing that matters is Jesus Christ our Lord. So let us turn to him, Christians. Let us call on his name, and then we will be saved.

Let us pray. Lord God, heavenly Father, you have given us your Son, Jesus Christ, to forgive us our sins. Do not look upon us as we deserve, but look upon us according to him. In his name we pray. Amen.