

No Excuse!

Romans 2:1-11

Series: Romans 2022: Righteousness from God – Yay!

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Worship: His Riches

Key Sentence: Unrepented hypocrisy or presumption lead to God's judgment.

Outline:

I. The Double Standard of Hypocrisy. (Romans 2:1-3)

II. The Presumption of God's Kindness (Romans 2:4-5)

III. God Reality of God's Impartiality (Romans 2:6-11)

Romans 2:1–11 Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things. ²We know that the judgment of God rightly falls on those who practice such things. ³Do 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?

⁴Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? ⁵But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed.

⁶He will render to each one according to his works: ⁷to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; ⁸but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury. ⁹There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, ¹⁰but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. ¹¹For God shows no partiality.

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Romans 2:1-11

Last week we looked at the first part of Paul's two-chapter analysis of the bad news, which will culminate in a few weeks with the by then well-proven assertion that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. Paul's initial focus in this argument was on the Gentiles and on humanity as a whole. All peoples, he claimed, suppressed the truth about God's eternal power and divine nature, which can be seen in creation. Despite the plain evidence, they did not honor him or give thanks, but became foolish and darkened and idolatrous, which in turn led to all kinds of rebellious and self-centered sins which did nobody any good, even the sinners and made the world a broken and painful place.

That was last week. You would think that would be enough. Paul could have stopped there. But he couldn't, because he knew that there were many among those he was writing to in Rome and in his larger experience who would look at that and "thank God that's not me. I've never denied God that way. In fact I know what God wants. I have nothing but contempt for all those people who don't do what God wants." So, Paul has to change his focus and say, "No, I'm sorry, that attitude and your behavior proves that you're as much a sinner in need of a Savior as anyone we've talked about so far." He spends all of chapter two on this. We're not going to finish it all this week, it's like a two-part miniseries on the awful realities of hypocrisy and legalism and presumption. For every sinner who knows they're going to hell because of their sin, there is another sinner who thinks they're not, because they're OK. And there is a group in the middle who seem like they might really be OK. But they're not either.

Before I nail this down to a key sentence and an outline, let me sketch these three groups as three people. Harry Hypocrite, Perry Presumptuous and Gary Goodguy. Sorry I didn't use any female names in this, but they wouldn't rhyme and alliterate. Harry Hypocrite is easy to understand. Hypocrisy is a common accusation against Christianity, partly because it's so often true. This is a person who preaches all kinds of godly law-keeping behaviors and tells others to do them, but they don't do them themselves. Outwardly they are loud and judgmental, but inwardly they harbor the same kinds of sin they condemn. Then there is Perry Presumptuous. This guy is a little harder to get a handle on. His key characteristic is that he presumes that God is just a really nice guy and wouldn't really judge sin. In fact, Paul will say, he presumes so much that he never quite gets to repentance from sin but while softhearted to everybody else, he remains hard-hearted toward God.

Finally, I think Paul talks about a third kind of person here, who we'll call Gary Goodguy. This is somebody who honestly tries to do what's right and honestly succeeds some or a lot of the time. He doesn't judge others, and his life appears to be good and humble. But Gary Goodguy has a problem too. He's relying on himself instead of on God. If he honestly examined himself he would know that much as he tries to do good and be good, deep inside he's still got pride, sometimes masking itself as humility. If he was good through and through, perfectly loving God and perfectly loving others, he would be righteous. But he's not. There is no one, Paul is going to prove, who actually meets that standard and receives that reward.

Our key sentence is that unrepented hypocrisy or presumption lead to God's judgment. But the important corollary, which Paul is moving toward, is that there is no Gary Goodguy. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. Romans 2 verses 1-3 reveal the double standard of hypocrisy, verses 4-5 show the peril of presuming on God's kindness, and verses 6-11 affirm that God does not show partiality. He would reward righteousness if he found it, but Paul will go on to say that he doesn't find it. All this will bring us back to the Gospel, because we're all Harry or Perry or Gary. We all need rescue from sin which is found, through faith, in the grace of Jesus Christ.

We begin with Romans 2:1-3, the double standard of hypocrisy. *Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things.*² *We know that the judgment of God rightly falls on those who practice such things.*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?*

The first word, "therefore," points back to Romans 1:18. God's wrath is revealed against "all ungodliness and unrighteousness of human beings." The person accused in 2:1 belongs in this very general category. Therefore, in light of the revelation of God's wrath on all sinners, this person is also an object of that wrath. Moo says "because God's wrath is revealed against all people, and because all people have been given knowledge of God, therefore even the person who judges is without excuse before God." Up to this point Paul has been using words like "they" and "them," plurals, talking about a group of people. Now he turns and, in a style typical of Greek rhetoric, begins to dialogue with a single representative person. "They" do all these things, but "you" judge. Moo calls Paul's representative person his "discussion partner," but we're going to call him Harry, Harry Hypocrite.

But what are “the very same things” that Harry and the others in this chapter do? Obviously, Paul’s pointing back to the list of sins in Romans 1. Harry could be guilty of any of them. But if Paul is now beginning to address the Jewish legalist, the Pharisee and Judaizer types that often opposed him, then some sins are unlikely. The Jews of Paul’s day weren’t external idol worshippers. They probably weren’t, overtly, law breakers. They prided themselves on keeping the letter of the law. But in terms of truly honoring God, the hypocrite is the biggest sinner. And some other sins in Romans 1 fit Harry Hypocrite well: envy, malice, slander, gossip, insolence, haughtiness, boastfulness, and heartlessness. Also, Harry Hypocrite may be practicing different sins than he’s calling out. The point is he’s a sinner in one or more of these categories. The fact that he doesn’t practice what he preaches makes him, on top of that, a hypocrite. In pointing the finger at others Harry has three fingers point back at himself. Paul places Harry firmly in the category of the all who have sinned.

Therefore Harry, and anyone like him, is the object of God’s revealed wrath. Verse 2 “We know that the judgment of God rightly falls on those who practice such things.” Having accused the self-righteous person of doing the same things as the sinful people of Romans 1, Paul now affirms the reality and fairness of God’s judgment. The word “rightly” in the ESV can be translated “truthfully.” Paul is affirming that God’s judgment against sin is in full accord with the facts, that it is just. Notice too that whereas in Romans 1:18 God’s judgment was being revealed, progressively and at least partially in the consequences of sin, here God’s judgment falls on the sinner. Paul is moving toward the truth of not only present judgment but eternal judgment. 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?” The judgmental, hypocritical sinner cannot hope to stand in the day of judgment.

Now is this you? Is this me? Even as believers all of us continue to sin. We are not fully devoted to God nor fully loving toward others. To the extent that we hold ourselves to a lower standard than we hold others, we are hypocrites. But there is I hope one huge difference between our hypocrisy and that which brings judgment on Harry. We are, I hope confessing and repenting hypocrites. Harry, in these verses, like many of the Pharisees in Jesus’ day, is too full of pride and self-righteousness to turn from his sin and hypocrisy in confession, to humbly receive the forgiveness of God through Christ. Hypocrisy is not the unforgivable sin, nor are any of these. It is grievous, but praise God that all our sins were judged on the cross, not just the ones we committed before we became believers. And if we confess our sins God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

However, Paul goes on to warn us that we can't presume on God. We've got to really repent. In verses 4-5 he speaks to Perry Presumptuous. *Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? 5But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed.*

In the actual flow of Paul's thought these two verses may not represent a different person. But I've chosen to abstract him as a different person because of several characteristics in these verses that don't necessarily fit with hypocrisy. Look at the word "presume," "do you presume." The Greek word literally means "think against" or "think according to." Some translations say "do you despise God's kindness," or "have contempt for God's kindness" but I think the ESV nails it with this phrase "do you presume on the riches of God's kindness." "Presume" means to take something for granted, to assume or suppose something to be true, and, some definitions add, "with unwarranted boldness."

Paul wonders if this person presumes with unwarranted boldness on the riches of the kindness, forbearance and patience of God. "Oh, we all know that God is love, God is patient, God is forgiving. If I happen to be wrong in something, which I don't really think I am, he'll forgive me." What do we think of that? It's true that God is kind and patient. The Greek word here for kindness is used often in the Greek version of the Old Testament and there it is often translated "goodness." This is not the word *hesed*, but a different word often used in parallel to God's *hesed*. For example, Psalm 145 "On the glorious splendor of your majesty, and on your wondrous works, I will meditate. ⁶They shall speak of the might of your awesome deeds, and I will declare your greatness. ⁷They shall pour forth the fame of your abundant goodness and shall sing aloud of your righteousness. ⁸The LORD is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. ⁹The LORD is good to all, and his mercy is over all that he has made." Or even more to the point, Psalm 25 "Remember your mercy, O LORD, and your steadfast love, for they have been from of old. ⁷Remember not the sins of my youth or my transgressions; according to your steadfast love remember me, for the sake of your goodness, O LORD!" One could argue that the Psalmist is presuming on the mercy, steadfast love and goodness of God here. He is, and in many ways that's a wonderful thing. It's a grace system and we are dependent on God.

But Paul is right to push back on presumption. There is a kind of presumption that gets you nowhere. God's patience and kindness, Paul says, is meant to lead you to repentance.

Peter says the same thing “The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.” Repentance is the crucial difference. God’s kindness and his steadfast love is poured out on those who repent. To repent is to turn, to turn toward God from self and sin. Therefore those who presume on God’s kindness but never repent are, like the hypocrite, liable to judgment.

What does Perry or Paula Presumptuous look like? Could be any of a couple things. He or she might be the kind of person who never comes to repentance because they always have an excuse for their sin. “If you only knew how hard my life is or how tired I was or how irritating my day, or how difficult it is to live with my wife, or husband you’d understand why I . . . did what I did.” Pastor Craig Groeschel says, “We judge other people by their actions but we judge ourselves by our intentions.” As long as I know I didn’t really mean it or didn’t have any choice, God will understand. It’s not my fault. I don’t need to repent. This person is presuming on God’s grace without actually turning toward it.

Another kind of presumption is the person who sins, knows they’re sinning but simply refuses to take their sin seriously, or their need for life change. They’ll continue in their same sin for years, and if you confront them on it they’ll admit it, but never make any progress in getting free from it. They’re presuming on God’s kindness and patience without ever reaching repentance.

There is a third kind of presumption somewhat common in our culture. It is the person who says “back in Bible times they called that a sin, but they were misled, or their cultural development was primitive, or we didn’t understand what they really meant. If you’re going to be on the right side of history you’ll recognize that that behavior is not really wrong. In fact, you’ll approve of it.” This sort of “progressive” Christianity is presumption. It presumes on God’s tolerance even when that tolerance would go straight against Scripture. It elevates all statements of God’s kindness in Scripture right out of their context and make them the only thing about God, It is itself tolerant of anything except those who try to defend the plain sense of Scriptural teaching about sin.

Paul answers Perry Presumption in verse 5: “Because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God’s righteous judgment will be revealed.” Notice again that this is related to lack of repentance. The person who presumes does not repent. That means that no matter how kind they may appear on the surface, they have a hard, impenitent heart, an unrepentant heart.

But Paul says that Perry and Paula Presumption are storing up wrath for themselves. And this wrath is not the “being revealed” wrath of Romans 1:18. This is final judgment, the day of wrath, that day when God’s righteous judgment falls. His righteousness is being revealed now, Romans 1:17. His wrath is being revealed now, Romans 1:18. His final judgment will be revealed on that day.

So we’ve hung out with Harry the hypocrite and Perry the presumptuous, and we’ve seen that unrepented hypocrisy or presumption lead to God’s judgment. The next several verses affirm that, but they also bring up a third kind of person, a Gary Goodguy who raises several questions. Romans 2:6-11 *He will render to each one according to his works: ⁷to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; ⁸but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury. ⁹There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, ¹⁰but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. ¹¹For God shows no partiality.*

The key point of this section is that God shows no partiality. The sins of Romans 1 and the hypocrisy and presumption of Romans 2:1-5 are all impartially judged by God. These verses form a simple chiasm, with the key point being in the first and last verse. “God will render to each person according to his works, for God shows no partiality.” At the next level is Gary Goodguy. In verse 7 he is one of those who by patience in well doing seek for glory, honor and immortality, and he receives eternal life. In verse 10 he is the one who does good, Jew or Greek, and receives glory, honor and peace. Then in the middle verses, 8 and 9, Paul talks about the fate of everyone else, including Harry and Perry. Those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth but obey unrighteousness will receive wrath in that day. Notice the word self-seeking, which is nearly a synonym for sin. We look out for our own interests, satisfy our own desires and pleasures. That’s sin. See Ephesians 2:1-3. Verse 9 adds that there will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does this evil. Paul also makes that inclusive to Jews and Greeks.

So, Paul seems to make a clear distinction between Gary Goodguy and everyone else. Gary or Gertrude Goodguy does good. He or she is patient in well-doing and seeks what’s right. Therefore, he or she receives eternal life, because God shows no partiality – he rewards the good and judges the evil. That probably makes you uncomfortable. “Wait a second,” you’re saying “I thought salvation was by grace, and not by works. And I thought the whole point of this section is that all have sinned.”

It is. But that doesn't mean a perfectly righteous person would be judged and condemned. A perfectly righteous person would have no need of judgment. Their salvation would be by works. These verses have, of course, been endlessly scrutinized. Moo says "We now must ask who it is that Paul has in mind in verses 7 and 10, where he promises salvation to those who engage in persistent "doing good." The question is an important one because these promises would seem at first sight to conflict with Paul's insistence elsewhere that 'none is righteous, no not one.'"

Moo then lists five views ranging from "people really can be saved by works" to "these people really are saved by faith even though it isn't mentioned" to the one I most agree with. Moo says "others argue that the promise of eternal life for those who do good is fully valid, but that the power of sin prevents anyone from doing that good to the degree necessary to merit salvation. Verses 7 and 10 set out the condition, apart from Christ, for salvation; Paul's subsequent argument shows that no one is able to fulfill those conditions." This fits well with the fact that in these two chapters Paul is moving progressively toward the conclusion that all have sinned. It also fits well with the principle Paul has already established that it is by faith that people are saved. Paul teaches over and over that it is by faith not by works, so that no man can boast.

Therefore, we have to look at Gary Goodguy and ask "Was he always good? Was he never selfish? Did he never choose his will over God's?" I think the answer would be no. He may be pretty good, but he's not perfect. And on a deeper level, Gary Goodguy has an even bigger problem. He's depending on himself. That's not how creation or redemption work. We are created dependent on God. We are redeemed dependent on God. If Gary Goodguy claims he's righteous by his works, he's dishonoring God, and failing to give God thanks for the most important thing in life, his salvation. And failing to honor God and failing to give thanks, as we saw, are the basic and foundational sins that lead us away from the truth about God.

We've seen that unrepented hypocrisy or presumption lead to God's judgment. We've also seen that though God is impartial, and rewards good as well as evil, no one actually meets the standard of righteousness that would lead to eternal life. We haven't seen that fully, yet, but we know Paul is headed toward that conclusion.

As we close, I want to suggest a rather different kind of exercise than I usually do. It seems to me that none of us is all Harry Hypocrite, none of us is all Perry Presumption, and none of us is all Gary Goodguy.

But each of us has a little bit of each of them in our thinking and behavior. Most of us also have in our thinking and behavior a good deal of the righteousness that comes by grace, because most of us have trusted Jesus for that.

In your bulletin and on the screen, you'll see an outline of a person. Now I need you to imagine that I've given you three crayons, purple, green, and blue. I haven't, because it would be a lot of crayons, and there aren't really enough bulletins for everyone. But I want you to mentally at least color in part of the person with the purple crayon to show how much of your thinking and behavior, evaluated honestly before God, is like Harry Hypocrite. You don't practice what you preach.

Now mentally pick up the green crayon and color in how much of you is Perry Presumptuous. You excuse thoughts and behaviors without repentance because God's a nice guy and he'll let it go or because "it's not really sin." Finally, pick up the blue crayon and color in the part of you that is really trying to be good, but maybe isn't doing it in dependence on the finished work of Christ, by grace, through faith. The remainder, the part that's still uncolored, is the part that is living by faith and doing good by faith. And the faith is a gift from God. Praise him for it and ask him to cleanse you from the purple and the green and even the blue. You don't need to be a hypocrite, or presumptuous, or even good enough. You've been saved from all that.

But if you are totally purple or green, totally Harry Hypocrite or Perry Presumptuous and unrepentant of those sins, you are still in line for judgment. Even if you're Gary Goodguy, deep in your heart you know what Paul is teaching, that all have sinned, including you. You can't depend totally on yourself.

The answer to your Harry, Perry and Gary needs is found at the communion table.