

All Roads Lead Here: Don't Get Cocky
By Jason Huff
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Deuteronomy 10:11-21; John 12:44-50; Romans 2:1-16

Our final Scripture reading today is Romans 2:1-16. May God add His blessing on the reading of His holy Word. “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. Now we know that God's judgment against those who 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? Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness leads you toward repentance? 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, then for 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. All who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who sin under the law will be judged by the law. For it is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God's sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous. (Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them.) This will take place on the day when God will judge men's secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares.”

Have you ever been overconfident in your abilities? Nothing good comes from being cocky. Even though I memorized every line in every play I had a part in during high school and college, I still remember the two times when I completely and totally lost my lines in the middle of a performance. That may be the reason why I write out my sermons line by line every week.

Confidence gives us the ability to try new things, to give ourselves enough leeway to learn and grow. But overconfidence can wreck us. It can keep us from doing all we need to do to succeed, since we already think we have it all together. A person who was confident programming computers in 1980 might have difficulty writing programs today unless they've kept up their knowledge. A marriage spanning 20, 30, 40 years still requires us to love and serve each other well if we expect it to weather the storms to come. You get the picture.

Today, Paul turns his guns towards his overconfident Jewish listeners. Over the last couple of weeks, Paul gave both barrels to the pagan culture in which the Romans lived. But as we said last week, not everyone practices every form of evil all the time. Many people avoid a good number of them. Should they think of themselves as right before God? Paul tells us, “no.”

Paul's first point today is that *the guilty have no business being judges*. We have no excuse, Paul says, for passing judgment on others because we do the same kind of things. This is not an issue of using common sense, "good judgment" – it's no sin to say that what someone is doing is morally wrong. Condemnation is a different matter. Condemnation is writing them off. It's declaring them outside the realm of God's possibilities. It's determining to hate them and belittle them because they're sinners. That's what the Jews did to the Romans.

On Friday, I read an article – a eulogy for the death of Facebook. It claimed that Facebook had died at 13 years of age, felled by the craziness of the politics of 2016. And in many ways, it was right. It's not that we can't talk about our political opinions. It's that we demonize the other side. We do not say, "I love you though I disagree." It's more of a, "If you disagree with me, I will hate you and call you names and question your existence and doubt there's any hope for you." That's condemnation.

We are very forgiving of our own sins and very quick to condemn the sins of others. We are overconfident in our own goodness. When I go 77 miles an hour down the interstate, I'm in a hurry; I'm making good time. But when somebody passes me at 85 miles an hour, I'm all upset. "Watch where you're going! You're going to kill somebody! Crazy driver!" Which of us is guilty of breaking the speed limit? We both are. Yet my breaking it is socially acceptable but the other guys' isn't. It is good judgment to say we are both breaking the speed limit. It might be good judgment to say that we should both slow down. But when the cop pulls me over for going 77, it's not a good argument to say, "But that other guy was going 85!"

Here's the thing. God's judgment is perfect because He has true perspective on everything. He can rightly judge because He sees all sides, from every angle and point of view. But we don't. So it's one thing to say, "You've stepped over the line because you've stolen this item," or "You've committed adultery" or "You slandered someone." Those things can be proven true. In fact, in 1 Corinthians 5, Paul tells the church it should expel those who sin and refuse to change and repent. But to say, "You're going to burn for that," or "You'll never be forgiven," or "You're hopeless"...those all go too far. That's condemnation. And that kind of condemnation winds up condemning us because we are guilty too. Because who knows what God will do in the lives of others?

Here's a second thought for us: *salvation isn't a license to sin but our way out of sin*. Paul warns us with a question – "Do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness leads you toward repentance? But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart," he continues, "you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath when his righteous judgment will be revealed."

We must never think that we have earned salvation, ever, and certainly not by praying a prayer or some one-time act of devotion or repentance or contrition. We shouldn't think that our sins are covered because we did something in the far past that makes our current situation OK. If you've planned a trip from New York to LA but you only make it as far as New Jersey, you can't say that you've been across the country. It's one thing if you're stuck in Topeka due to weather and your radiator gives out in Vegas, but you're making progress. It's another to pack the car and never get out of the neighborhood.

The Christian life is a journey with God. It has never been about a single decision point. You may remember that decision point to keep you going when things get rough. When trouble comes and sin looks easy, remembering that you are a baptized member of the covenant of God and an heir to God's Kingdom can help you overcome the obstacles that are looming in front of you. Touchpoints on the journey, those road markers along the way when God is clearly present, help us when the fog has settled in and you can't see your hand in front of your face.

But we should never take our faith as a license to sin. I fear for those who claim to be Christians because they prayed a prayer thirty years ago or once did all the homework for a confirmation class and officially became members of a church that they never stepped in again. I don't judge them or condemn them; I pray that they might get back on the journey. But there is nothing that frightens me more than when we sin, when we judge others, when we act just like the world does, and then turn around and say, "Oh, God will forgive me."

That scares me because it is one thing to not know God or ignore God. It is another thing to know Him and show contempt for Him. When we know all that Jesus did for us, when we know the weight of our sin, when we know that God gave us Jesus so that we could live as new creations free from the shackles of sin, to run headlong back into it is contempt. Our confidence in God's forgiveness should not make us overconfident in His tolerating blatant disrespect.

Friends, God saves us from His wrath so that we can live holy lives. Christ gave us the Holy Spirit so we have the option not to sin. We fail on a regular basis, particularly in our thought lives, but those sins grieve us and lead us back to the cross. God is patient, tolerant, and kind because we are babes in holiness. He knows it will take time for us to crawl, then to walk, then to run. But to say, "It's fine for me to sin because I'm saved," is a strong sign that you might not be. Paul will talk about this more later in another chapter.

Now Paul moves on to a bit of a philosophical argument – I'll explain that part in a moment – but the central thought is clear: *God will judge every human being's actions, both public and private.* "God will give to each person according to what he has done." That's what Paul writes. This follows everything that the prophets have foretold for centuries. Judgment Day is on the way. The day of reckoning is upon us. Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but our Judge sits on the bench, and His verdict is coming soon.

Being a Christian doesn't get you out of judgment. It only changes how you are judged. We don't know the process; we simply know that all secrets will be revealed. A filmstrip of our lives is as good a metaphor as any – it's only a metaphor, but it works. When the filmstrip shows our sinfulness, our dark places we hid, Jesus will be there keeping those sins from making the list of things to be repaid. It's not as if those things didn't happen, but we are not judged for them. We will be embarrassed and ashamed of them, but the penalty due has already been paid.

Believers will also be judged for what we did in obedience to God. We will receive rewards for our righteous deeds, those times when we fed the poor, helped the sick, visited the imprisoned, clothed the naked, stood up for the oppressed. Why? Because rewarding us for the godliness we showed in this life glorifies God. He gives us faith; He gives us the ability; our rewards will show what He has done in us.

Here's where the philosophical argument comes in: Paul says God grants eternal life to those who persist in doing good, first to the Jew, then to the Gentile, just as He will condemn those who do evil and reject the truth, looking out for themselves rather than others. We have to realize that Paul is speaking rhetorically. He is giving us the equation of judgment. In theory, there is eternal life available for the person who completes the covenant of works, the one who never sins but always does the will of God the Father.

But we must be careful to realize this is only in theory. This covenant was in place with Adam and Eve. And what did they do? They blew it. And throughout history, because of sin's pervasiveness, only one person has been able to fulfill the covenant of works. That's Jesus. Because persisting in doing good means doing good all the time without any evil, without any disobedience. Jesus even said this Himself. When a man once called Him "good teacher," he asked the man, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone." This was a rhetorical question; the man was supposed to realize that if Jesus was truly good, then He was indeed God's Son. At that point, while Jesus was perfect, He had not yet totally fulfilled the covenant of works; He had not yet been good up until the very point of death. His actions were perfect but incomplete.

So here's the question – you can be judged based solely on your works. On the Day of Judgment, many will be. Or you can be judged based on your relationship with Christ, with His blood covering all your sins. Which is it going to be? Because there's no way out of it. The only way to escape the judgment of God is to have someone take your judgment for you. You may have done this through faith; you may have accepted Jesus and walk with Him each day, and He relieves you from the burden of your sins. But have your friends? Your family? Don't let them face the judgment seat of God unprepared. There is no reason for fear as long as you walk beside the One who can save you. There is no reason your family and friends need fear if their sins are covered too. We should have no confidence in ourselves and our goodness, but total confidence in Jesus.

The last thing to look at together today is Paul's discussion of the Law. Next week, Paul is going to look more closely at what it means to be a Jew, a part of God's original covenant community. But here, we need to understand the place of the Law given by God to the Israelites through Moses. The big point is this: *no one is saved simply by knowing God's law*. Here's what Paul says: "All who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who sin under the law will be judged by the law. For it is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God's sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous."

One of the biggest problems in ancient Judaism, according to both Jesus and Paul, is the sense of privilege having God's Law gave the Jewish people. The Jewish people were confident in their chosen-ness. The Law was the chief way they knew it. They alone had insight into how God wanted them to live – that was what they thought. Everyone else was clueless, helpless, and worthless as far as they were concerned. Having the Law made them and them alone God's people. They were cocky, believing everybody else was destined for judgment and they alone were worthy of rescue.

God warned them over and over again through the Prophets and their writings that this was not how it worked. In Amos 5, God says He “despises” their feasts and assemblies and burnt offerings – the very things the Law required them to do to please Him. He wouldn’t listen to their praise songs any more, God said. Why? Because He wants them to be just and righteous, and they aren’t! They worship idols; they live lives of luxury; they are sure that God is pleased with them, but He’s not. In Jeremiah 7, God says in paraphrase, “Don’t trust that things are good just because you have my temple. Repent and change your ways, do what my law says, and then you will live in the land I promised you with blessing.”

Everybody is judged by what they know and what they have been given. In our passage a few weeks ago, Paul told us that the very basics of the Law – the truth that God exists, that He is all-powerful and eternal, our creator to whom our worship and honor and service is due – are on everybody’s heart, whether they acknowledge those things or not. Everybody will be judged based on how they acted on that knowledge. Paul even says that some Gentiles by nature do the things required by the law. “They are a law for themselves,” he says. Their conscience accuses them of some wrongs, but they do some things right. Gentiles without the Law are still capable of doing what is right by God. Their obedience is incomplete; it won’t save them; yet they can keep the law God has written on their hearts better than many Jews kept the Old Testament Law.

This would have shocked the Jewish community. If they alone were the keepers of God’s law, how could God give credit to those who didn’t have the law? God has that right. He made each person with a conscience. Our consciences are faulty and disfigured by sin, but sometimes, we still get it right by the grace of God. Paul pulls the rug out from anyone still counting on their heritage to save them. Obedience to the Law is what matters, not having the Law.

I have a friend who is a big guitar collector. In his home is a wall with all sorts of different guitars. He’s not rich; he’s just picked up pieces over time. But to my knowledge, he’s never played with a band or a group; he just likes them hanging there. I think guitars are a thing of art myself, so I get it. But it kind of breaks my heart that they don’t actually serve the purpose they were made for. To have them and not use them seems like such a waste. It’s kind of like my grandma who had a car at age 101. She wasn’t able to drive for years, but she still liked the idea of it there. But a car that never goes anywhere is nothing but a rust collector.

In the same way, the Law was not given to the Hebrews as a sign of God’s favor, though it was that. It was given to them so that they could follow His ways and really be His people. It’s only worthwhile when put to use. We have a dozen Bibles in our home in various shapes, sizes, translations, and formats. And not one of them means anything unless we read them and fall in love with the God who gave His Word to us and follow Him.

My friends, God is good. There is every reason to trust in Him with your whole heart. Let go of the ways of the past and cling to His Son Jesus. Don’t rely on your own ways, your own thoughts, your own estimation of how good you are. Rely solely on God’s grace and obey Him, and you will know the blessings of being held in His loving arms forevermore.