

“THE DAY OF WRATH” (The Self-Righteous, Part 1)

Romans 2:1–16

Key Verse: 2:5

“But 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.”

Are you aware that you are *self-righteous*? “Who, **me**?!? No, **never!**” Hmm. Of course, some of us are more so than others. But whether we’re religious or not, we humans all develop our own kind of self-righteousness. We turn good things like social manners and activism, personal sleep habits, diet, and work ethics, into forms of self-righteousness. We even turn our consumer choices, like buying only local, sustainable, ethically-sourced products—or even how much we *don’t* care—into a standard we use to look down on others. We’re just weird. And it’s not only hard to maintain; it’s hard to bear. But self-righteousness is not just a human problem; it’s yet another way we suppress the truth of God. It takes strong words—words of warning—to help us get out of it. And this is what Paul is up to here in Romans.

He tells us we all are under God’s wrath due to our own sins. And he starts by describing those who turn their backs on God (1:18–32). But what about those who remain religious, always trying to do what’s right? Paul confronts them, too. From 2:1 all the way to 3:20, he focuses on the Jews, who were given God’s words. Shockingly, he says that they, too, are *under God’s wrath*. Why? Because of their self-righteousness. For the blatant sinners, Paul spent only 15 verses. But for the self-righteous, he has to spend 49 verses! Just as godless autonomy and amorality were the “false reality” of chapter 1, self-righteous autonomy and hypocrisy are the “false reality” of chapters 2 and 3. Only strong, godly rebuking can get us out of it.

So, am I creating my own false reality of self-righteousness? In this study we want to learn why self-righteousness is such a sin against God, and how it can be exposed and demolished so we can truly receive and rely on the grace of

Jesus. We all need to experience this so we can be ready for the day Paul warns about. May God speak to us through his word.

First, the Self-Righteous Sin of Judging: Hypocrisy (1–3)

As Paul's audience listened to the sins of the Gentiles in chapter 1, they were probably thinking, "This world's corruption makes me so angry!" But suddenly, they themselves get severely rebuked. Let's read verse 1. Paul said the Gentiles are without excuse, but here he says these people have no excuse either. Who's he talking about? He specifies: "O man, every one of you who judges," adding the phrases "passing judgment on another" and "you, the judge." The sin here is usurping the throne of heaven. When we judge others, we are taking the place of God. We are trying to steal his role as the ultimate, righteous Judge, which only adds to our own condemnation on the day of wrath. No one can rightly be preparing for the day of wrath and also be trying to dispense it. To be clear, we all need to know what's right and wrong, but this can easily morph into being legalistic, self-righteous, and intensely critical.

Paul hammers home that those who judge "practice the same things" (1,3). Simply put, this is hypocrisy. While he may not mean they committed every gross act of idolatry, he is indicting them for all the relational and heart sins listed in 1:29–31: the coveting, the hatred, the strife, the deceit, the hurtfulness, the gossiping and slandering, the pride and heartlessness. Though they avoided the worst outward sins of the Gentiles, they committed these. By practicing the same sins, they were no better than the people they judged. Worse, by judging, they were *more* guilty, because they were hypocrites.

Paul's warning is intense: those who "judge those who practice such things and yet do them" will not escape God's judgment (3b). He's warning them of their dangerous self-deception. The Jews thought God *had to* accept and bless them because they were Abraham's descendants. This was rooted in their false sense of entitlement, and their lack of self-awareness of their own sin. Paul confronts them: their hypocrisy in judging others meant they were, in fact, facing God's judgment (He expands on this in verses 6–11).

Second, the Self-Righteous Danger of Presumption (4–5)

Paul calls out their wrong attitude toward God. Read verse 4. Until now Paul described the wrath of God. But now writes: “the riches of [God’s] kindness and forbearance and patience.” While often translated “kindness,” the Greek word *chrestotes* is better translated “goodness”—which highlights God’s comprehensive moral excellence (cf. 11:22). God’s inherent goodness helps us better understand his holy wrath. God is not only the God of holy wrath; he’s also “rich” in goodness, forbearance and patience. In his rich goodness, God withholds the wrath and judgment we deserve (that’s what his “forbearance” and “patience” mean). Being “rich” means he can wait a really long time without giving up. Our Lord Jesus said God is “good to the ungrateful and the evil” (Luke 6:35). In fact, God expressed his goodness to us all in Christ Jesus (Eph. 2:7; Tit. 3:4). Humans are quick to judge, and harsh, but God is so good. And his grace is so incongruous even to the self-righteous.

In verse 4 Paul asks if the Jews were “presuming on” God’s goodness. What does that mean? The Greek word *kataphroneis* is often translated as “despise.”¹ Since it’s toward God’s goodness, in this context it means to undervalue it. Paul is describing an overconfident person taking advantage of God’s goodness. To sinful people, goodness looks weak or foolish. So, it’s often taken for granted. Those good to us—parents, spouse, close friends—are quiet and often unnoticed. No matter how bad we’ve been, they keep giving their goodness to us, and we easily abuse it. But Paul is talking about God; he’s trying to help us become more aware of our wrong attitude toward him. God is rich in goodness to us, and we so easily take him for granted, as if we can keep doing whatever we want and he’ll still accept us. This reveals we’re not really aware of our sinful nature and of our need for repentance. At its core, this mindset is pride. We need to reflect seriously: Am I “presuming on” God’s goodness?

To the self-righteous Paul gives the strongest warning. Read verse 5. God is rich in goodness, but one day there really will be “the day of wrath when God’s righteous judgment will be revealed” (5b). In our self-righteousness, we may think our hard work is storing up God’s blessings. But if we’re self-righteous, we’ll be shocked to discover that all along, we were, in fact, storing up God’s wrath.

It’s like having a “personal wrath account.” Every judgmental thought, every act of pride, every time I presume on God’s kindness, I am actively making

¹ Cf. Matt. 6:24; 18:10; Luke 16:13; 1 Cor. 11:22; 2 Pet. 2:10).

a convicting deposit into my personal “wrath account.” What especially contributes to it is having a hard, impenitent heart. The day of wrath is not just coming; my hypocrisy actively contributes to the full weight of that day falling upon me.

Third, the Purpose and Path of Repentance (4b–5)

Now let’s go back and hear what Paul says about the purpose of God’s goodness. Read verse 4b. The Apostle Peter taught that God is patient, “not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance” (2 Pet. 3:9). God’s goodness is not to be abused, but to help us truly change. *The Dodo* video channel has stories of abused animals brought into the homes of good people. In the warmth of that love, formerly traumatized and scared animals gradually change into trusting creatures. It’s like what God hopes his goodness will bring about in our lives. God isn’t just angry, wanting to hurt or destroy us; God wants to give us a future and a hope (Jer. 29:11). All we need to do is come to him “just as I am.” Only the grace of Jesus can change and heal our self-righteous hearts.

Corrie ten Boom experienced this kind of repentance. In a concentration camp, her struggle was not about major outward sins, but about hatred and judgment for her captors. She saw herself as morally superior. But one day, she had a profound conviction. She realized that, despite all her Christian service, her own heart was full of hatred, bitterness and unforgiveness. After the war, meeting her former SS guard, she physically tried to lift her hand to forgive him, but couldn’t do it on her own. She cried out to God to grant her his love and goodness in Jesus. It changed her life.²

Repentance is crucial. Paul rarely says, “Repent!” In all his letters he uses the word “repentance” only four times, and it’s always for his self-righteous opponents or critics (Rom. 2:4; 2 Cor. 7:9–10; 2 Tim. 2:5). He prefers to use the word “faith,” to emphasize turning our entire selves to God. This Greek word *metanoia* means a change of mind—what it essentially means is a radical shift in how we perceive reality. Self-righteous people have a false mind about themselves and God. Repentance cures this fake reality, helping us get back to the truly humble gratitude toward God we need. For the self-righteous, repentance means changing my mind about all the things I thought made me

² Corrie ten Boom, *The Hiding Place* (Grand Rapids: Chosen Books, 1971), 218.

righteous: realizing my sin puts me under wrath, and nothing I do can get me out of that. It means changing my mind about my hard work, faithfulness, and effort. It means acknowledging that only God's grace in Jesus can save me. Paul saves the word repentance for the seemingly good, the self-righteous, because they have the hardest time changing their minds about who they really are.

Repentance starts not with what we do, but with a humble heart toward God. David described it as "a broken and contrite heart" (Ps. 51:17). To repent is to become acutely aware of how wrong we are, and to grieve over our sins (Paul calls it "godly grief" [2 Cor. 7:9–11]). This brokenness is the key that allows us to truly hold onto the grace of Christ. Jesus told a parable about those who trusted in themselves. The Pharisee boasted: "God, I thank you that I am not like other men..." But the tax collector, standing far off, beat his breast, saying, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" (Luke 18:9–14). It's unforgettable.

Repentance isn't just for the beginning of our Christian lives; it's essential for a real, daily walk with God. We need the Holy Spirit's help each day to see our sin as God does, to grieve over it and put it to death (Rom. 8:13; Gal. 5:24–25). Each day, we repent by coming into the light of Jesus, confessing our sins, and putting our faith in his blood (1 John 1:7–9). It's sad but true that Christians are known to be some of the most judgmental people. But if we're truly walking in the light of Jesus, we can be known as the most humble and contrite, and the most gracious people.

Fourth, the Final Judgment (6–16)

In verses 6–11, Paul reveals a terrifying truth about God's judgment. God "renders" or pays us back. For what? For our *works*, but also for our *motives*—what we are truly seeking. It establishes God's principle of no partiality—"for the Jew first and also for the Greek"—which demolishes all self-righteous pride. This is the deathblow to the self-righteous person.

We need to ask: How can I possibly escape the day of wrath if God judges my secret intention behind every action? By showing us that the bar is set at "perfect motives," Paul forces the self-righteous to admit that their *internal* record is just as damning as the Gentiles' *external* record. Who in the world has perfect motives, 24/7/365? The only way to stand on that day is to "obey the truth" (8). In

Romans, this means obeying the gospel of Jesus, learning the obedience of faith, and submitting to God's righteousness (1:5; 10:3; 16:24). We're never safe by our performance, but only by God's incongruous grace.

In verses 12–16, Paul closes his argument by explaining that God's standards condemn everyone. Those without the written Law will perish without it; those under the Law will be judged by it (12). This exposes the religious hypocrite's foolishness. Paul emphasizes that merely *hearing* the Scriptures read is not enough; it's the *doers* of the Law who will be justified (13). To hear the word but refuse to practice it is dangerous self-deception. Then Paul uses the Gentiles to condemn Jewish pride: the Gentiles possess an innate knowledge of right and wrong—a conscience (15). If even they are accountable to the light they have, how much greater is the condemnation for the person who ignores the fullness of God's word? Paul concludes by pointing everyone to the day of wrath, the day when God will judge the secrets of men by Christ Jesus (16).

So, what's *my* version of self-righteousness? How is it blocking *me* from relying on the grace of Jesus? Am I ready for the day God judges all my secrets through Jesus Christ? Continuing in pride and judgmentalism isn't harmless; it daily deposits condemnation into our personal "wrath account." If we remain hard and unrepentant, we ensure the full weight of the day of wrath will fall on us.

But God, in his goodness and patience, restrains that day because he wants to lead us to repentance. Will we continue in our hard, impenitent hearts? Let's cry out for a broken and contrite heart that comes to Jesus daily. Let's confess our sins, cling to his blood for cleansing, and grow in a constant awareness of his incongruous grace to me, a sinner. May God grant us the spirit of repentance, so that on that day we won't be found hiding, but secure in our Savior Jesus, only and utterly because of his amazing, undeserved grace to me.