

Romans 2:1-16 A warning against hypocrisy

Introduction

It has been interesting observing the fall out that has emerged since the full documentation of the Hillsborough tragedy (15 April 1989) has been made available to the general public. Those who were so quick to place the blame on the ninety-six Liverpool fans and a few thousand others around them have been trying to shift the blame for their misjudgements onto other people . This was particularly apparent in the efforts by Kelvin McKenzie, the then editor of *The Sun* newspaper whose infamous headline, 'The Truth', on 19 April 1989, made his newspaper unwelcome in the homes of many Liverpudlians from then to the present day. In September 2012 he made a public statement blaming the Police force on duty that day for supplying him with the partisan viewpoint presented in the paper. As a result he was demanding an 'apology' for being misled. A wiser man would simply have held up his hands and offered an unqualified apology for what he wrote all those years ago. Mr McKenzie doesn't appear to grasp that he had completely misunderstood what had happened on those football terrace. However, all of us at times can have a wrong view of what is happening in our own life or that of another person. We are human and fallible after all. But most of the time this is not a significant problem. Unfortunately this misunderstanding can relate to our spiritual state before God. Human beings can fail to grasp that they are sinners before God who need to seek His forgiveness in order to give us eternal life. It is easy to point to others who have done heinous things as 'sinners', but the Bible teaches that all of us are equally in need of God's grace for salvation. Have you received, by faith, the gift of salvation from God?

1. The people Paul has in mind when writing these verses

Paul has made a clear statement that human beings are guilty before God of breaking His laws and are without excuse in Romans 1:18-20: ¹⁸*The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness,* ¹⁹*since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them.* ²⁰*For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, **so that people are without excuse.*** Each human being has within their conscience a knowledge of basic morality and values placed there by God –whether they are consciously aware of it or not. Therefore, each person can be expected to live up to that level of moral behaviour –yet the sad reality is that the human story is a mixture of great goodness and gross wickedness and a range of behavioural choices in between. The apostle wants to hammer home this personal responsibility by repeating this point in Romans 1:32: *Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them.* We need to remember that the chapter divisions in the Bible were developed by Stephen Langton, an Archbishop of Canterbury. Langton put the modern chapter divisions into place in around A.D. 1227. The Wycliffe English Bible of 1382 was the first Bible to use this chapter pattern. Since the Wycliffe Bible, nearly all Bible translations have followed Langton's chapter divisions. But they are not inspired –only a study aid. Paul's argument continues into chapter two. [Of interest also: The Hebrew Old Testament was divided into verses by a Jewish rabbi by the name of Nathan in A.D. 1448. Robert Estienne, who was also known as Stephanus, was the first to divide the New Testament into standard numbered verses, in 1555. Stephanus essentially used Nathan's verse divisions for the Old Testament. Since that time, beginning with the

Geneva Bible, the chapter and verse divisions employed by Stephanus have been accepted into nearly all the Bible versions.]

The condemnation of human shortcomings continues in this next section but takes on a different angle of the same topic. Some Bible commentators have mistakenly assumed that Paul is addressing only Jews in Romans 2:1-16, assuming that those who saw themselves as superior to the sinners condemned in the previous chapter must be Jews! Of course that is faulty logic. Paul in this letter does clearly divide humanity into ‘Jews’ and ‘Gentiles’, yet in this part of his letter he is stressing their equality in terms of their sinfulness and of the way they must approach God for salvation, through His grace, by faith alone in His Son our Saviour and Lord. The NIV translation could make it much clearer that Paul is addressing all humanity because he uses the words *ὁ ἀνθρώπου* (literally *human being*) in the opening words of chapter two: *You, therefore, human being have no excuse... **Why does the apostle need to make the points he raises in this section?*** It is simply because there were some Gentiles in his day who on reading Romans one could fairly have said –yes some people live appallingly bad lives and make some really poor judgements. I don’t share your belief in the God of the Bible, Paul, but I do practice the kind of moral values you profess. Seneca, the famous tutor to Romans Emperor Nero, was a good example of this. It was said of him: ‘Not only did he exalt the great moral virtues; he exposed hypocrisy, he preached the equality of all human beings, he acknowledged the pervasive character of evil...he practised and inculcated daily self-examination, he ridiculed vulgar idolatry, he assumed the role of a moral guide...[F.F. Bruce, *Romans*, p.87]. In essence, these individuals are saying: ‘I can be good without God’. I don’t need a moral arbiter for the Universe in order for me to lead an exemplary life. I can manage fine on my own. I have met people who have held some version of this viewpoint –maybe expressed with more humility, but equally firmly stressing they could manage fine without the God I was commending to them. The kind of evangelistic approach that might reach such a person would be very different to another who had been convicted of ghastly crimes and had acknowledged that his punishment was truly deserved. I remember in another church an evangelistic event where a number of testimonies were given. The first came from a man who prior to coming to Christ had a criminal record that stretched to pages worth of convictions; the second was an individual who had always lived roughly on the right side of the law but had not lived the best of lives. The third came from a Christian, brought up in a loving caring home who came to see their need of Jesus, but admitted that as a Christian he still made mistakes and was far from perfect but came across very much as a decent honourable person. After the event I spoke to a guest who had not made a public profession of faith. He indicated that the first speaker’s life was so far removed from his that it had actually meant very little to him (whereas the Christians present were thrilled that such a bad man had found Christ); the second speaker likewise had not ‘connected’ with this man; in fact it was the very ordinary local Christian who simply told something of their faith journey that most resonated with him. I suspect the committed church members present at that outreach event would have reversed the order of appreciation of the testimonies. These kinds of people hear us offering Jesus as the answer to their problems and (sometimes!) politely suggest that they are not asking that kind of question. Such a perspective is common today, but this passage informs us that it was also frequently encountered by Paul and his missionary colleagues.

Yet this challenge was also directed towards Jews who thought themselves better than the kind of people that Paul criticizes in chapter one. Jewish literature from the centuries shortly before and after the time of Jesus on earth contains examples of people who thought that way. The book of 2 Esdras, chapters 3-14, is a Jewish work written around 100-120AD (Raymond E. Brown) in chapter 3 verses 34-35 states: ‘Now therefore weigh in a balance our iniquities and those of the inhabitants of the world; and so it will be found which way the turn of the scale will incline. When have the inhabitants of the earth not sinned in thy sight? Or what nation has kept thy commandments so well [as us]?’ A similar perspective was presented in the book of Wisdom chapters 11-15. This latter book,

written in the 1st or 2nd centuries BC, for example, compared how God treated Jews when they did wrong compared with Gentiles and expressed it in this way: ‘When they [Israelites] were tried, though they were being disciplined in mercy, they learned how the ungodly were tormented when judged in wrath. For thou didst test them as a father does in warning, but thou didst examine the ungodly as a stern king does in condemnation (Wisdom 11:9-10) [the two quotations from L.L. Morris, *Romans*, pp. 107-108] Jews who thought like this viewed all their own nation or religious community as being saved simply because of their ethnic identity. In the words of the Jewish tractate Sanhedrin 10:1: ‘All Israelites have a share in the world to come’. A sinful Jew could be punished by God for wrongdoing, but never placing their eternal salvation at risk at any point. However, by contrast, all Gentiles were condemned eternally, because they were not part of the chosen people. These are the two categories of people the apostle has in mind, primarily as he wrote this first part of Romans chapter two.

2. God’s judgement is inescapable (Romans 2:1-4)

The apostle in addressing these people makes the following observations: (a) **You are condemning yourself** *You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge another, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things.* (Rom.2:1) It is sadly a fact of life that our sin nature within us can cause us to judge other people more harshly and ourselves more leniently for committing exactly the same breach of God’s moral standards. In such circumstances we may argue that although our conduct was less than adequate we had a reason, at the time, for making that judgement call; by contrast person ‘x’ was only making excuses for their failures. A similar pattern of behaviour can be exhibited when we hear of wrongdoing by a good friend and by someone else we struggle to get on with; how often will we seek in our minds to mitigate the offence of our friend but possibly even regard more harshly or at least in the standard fashion the shortcomings of the other person. A person who commendably has high moral standards and rightly is outraged by the vile sins committed by ‘evil’ people; yet if such a person is unwilling to deal with their own shortcomings then they are no better than those they are looking down on as the worst offenders in society. The standards each of us uses to judge others can be used by God as a base-line standard to evaluate our own conduct. (b) **You will not escape God’s perfect judgement** ²*Now we know that God’s judgment against those who do such things is based on truth.* ³*So when you, a mere human being, pass judgment on them and yet do the same things, do you think you will escape God’s judgment?* (Rom.2:2-3) We are familiar with Abraham’s assumption in his conversation with God in Genesis 18 over what should happen to the wicked people in the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham thought over various scenarios in his head before making another plea to God. The non-negotiable foundation of this exchange was the righteousness of God; that He could only act with total consistency to His holy character and as a result must do what is right. Genesis 18:25 records Abraham’s summary on this subject: *Far be it from you to do such a thing—to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?*” Paul wrote to the Corinthian Church to urge them to fix their eyes on Jesus and to remember the basis on which we ought to build our lives in the light of the day on which we will be called to give an account of our stewardship on earth. In I Corinthians 3:11-15, he wrote: ¹¹*For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ.* ¹²*If anyone builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw,* ¹³*their work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each person’s work.* ¹⁴*If what has been built survives, the builder will receive a reward.* ¹⁵*If it is burned up, the builder will suffer loss but yet will be saved—even though only as one escaping through the flames.* The sins of the outwardly good respectable

person may appear to be less, but the most serious sin of failing to give God first place in our lives; failing to love Him with all our hearts and minds and strength is the most serious one of all –and is in fact idolatry –putting someone other than God on the throne of our lives. Is He Lord of your life? (c) **Do you misrepresent God's character?** ⁴Or **do you show contempt** for the riches of His kindness, forbearance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness is intended to lead you to repentance? (Rom.2:4) You have observed it and so have I -a person using bad language or engaging in some inappropriate act - and then with reference to a Christian present inviting God to strike them down if He exists? The fact that 'nothing' has happened is then used to claim either that there is no God to account to –so why worry about ultimate accountability or that God has to forgive us no matter how we behave or relate to Him Voltaire famously declared: "God forgives because it's his business." This prominent atheist could refer blithely to the God in whom he did not believe because he also had contempt for the biblical moral standards revealed by God. He would have argued that mercy and pity and forgiveness are not the traits of 'heroic' peoples and cultures. Meekness equals weakness to such people. The fact that God does not judge a person on the spot is evidence of His grace not an inability to take action. The apparent delay in Jesus' second coming, likewise is an evidence of God's graciousness towards humanity to allow more people to come to faith and trust in Him, as Peter explains in II Peter 3:9: *The Lord is not slow in keeping His promise, as some understand slowness. Instead He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.* Are you presuming on His kindness by putting off committing your life to Him by repenting of your sin and accepting Jesus as your Lord and Saviour? You have this opportunity today, but no guarantees of tomorrow. Do you need to take that step of faith this morning?

3. **God's judgement is righteous** (Romans 2:5-11)

(a) **Judgement cannot be evaded** (Romans 2:5)⁵ *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.* Some people then and now were doubting the fact that one day they would be called to give an account of their lives. Peter refers to this in his second letter, written less than ten years after Paul's letter to the Church in Rome. *Above all, you must understand that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires.* ⁴*They will say, "Where is this 'coming' he promised? Ever since our ancestors died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation."* ⁵*But they deliberately forget that long ago by God's word the heavens came into being and the earth was formed out of water and by water.* ⁶*By these waters also the world of that time was deluged and destroyed.* ⁷*By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly* (II Peter 3:3-7). It is not just serious criminals who have carried out acts of great evil who have this sceptical mindset. Paul here is talking of outwardly good living people who are respectable citizens, but who live their lives without reference towards or thoughts of God. In God's eyes idolatry –putting someone or something in the first place in our lives is the most serious sin a human being can commit. The very first of the Ten Commandments states: *You shall have no other gods before Me* (Exodus 20:3). This is part of the reason why in recent years we have had so many disappointments with the politicians in our Edinburgh and Westminster parliaments who have framed an increasing number of legislative bills that promote values that are contrary to the biblical standards of morality. When there are no agreed common moral values life in the public square becomes increasingly based on arbitrary standards and makes social interaction in many workplaces an increasingly challenging experience. Everyone needs to recognise that one day we will give an account of our lives to God and to live now in preparation for that day.

(b) **Judgment will be according to our works** (Romans 2:6-8) ⁶ God “will repay each person according to what they have done.” ⁷ To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honour and immortality, He will give eternal life. ⁸ But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger. Our salvation as Christians is based on God’s grace alone, received through faith alone (Ephesians 2:8-10), but genuine faith shows evidence of conversion in an individual’s life. James in his general letter to the Christian community in the Roman world underlined this truth. In James 2:17 he wrote: *In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.* Yet this statement does not contradict Paul’s teaching. For example, he reminded the Philippian Christians about the way they ought to conduct their lives with these words: *Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling,* ¹³ *for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to His good purpose* (Phil.2:12-13). The word translated ‘work out’ literally can be rendered ‘continue working to the finish (line) [A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures*]’ It has the idea of self-discipline –keeping focussed on what we need to do to accomplish that which God has entrusted to our care. In this case, in the first instance, becoming who God has called us to be in Christ, and as a result playing our part in the building up of His Church here on earth. A truly converted person will want to gather with fellow believers in worshipping the Lord Jesus on God’s special day in His house; a genuine profession of faith will result in a desire to serve in the work of a local congregation.

(c) **Judgement will be fair** (Romans 2:9-10) ⁹ *There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile;* ¹⁰ *but glory, honour and peace for everyone who does good: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.* ¹¹ *For God does not show favouritism.* Here on earth the verdicts of many a court will be partial or skewed. Some times the innocent will be vindicated and on other occasions the guilty will get away with wrongdoing. However, when we stand before the Lord each person will be treated as their conduct merits, regardless of their ethnic origins; no favours because you are Jewish Paul declares; no favours because you have a lesser faith heritage as a Gentile. Therefore we must determine to be heavenly-minded in order to be of earthly use. To keep in mind the shortness of time and the nearness of eternity will help us make choices and determine priorities that might otherwise be different. Do you need to make priority changes in your weekly schedule? Or does the Lord have that first place? John Wesley’s famous maxim of living as if the Lord was coming back tomorrow but planning as if His return was delayed for a thousand years is so apt. This enabled him when once asked by a heckler what he would do the following day - if he knew that Jesus would return at the end of the next day- to get our his diary read out his list of public preaching engagements and say that he would do exactly what he had planned to do prior to meeting His maker! In the words of Paul from II Corinthians 5:6-10: *Therefore we are always confident and know that as long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord.* ⁷ *For we live by faith, not by sight.* ⁸ *We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord.* ⁹ *So we make it our goal to please Him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it.* ¹⁰ *For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.* Is it your goal each day of your life to please Him by the priorities you hold and the choices you make?

4. **God’s judgement is impartial** (Romans 2:12-16)

¹²All 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. ¹³For 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. ¹⁴(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. ¹⁵They show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts sometimes accusing them and at other times even defending them.) ¹⁶This will take place on the day when God judges people's secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares. Jews and non-Jews in their religious practices may be quite different, but what counts is their obedience to the revelation of God which has been given to them. Verse twelve assumes that all of us are sinners and that outside of Christ our sin will condemn us to a lost eternity. The form of words the apostle uses in verse twelve points to the fact that this verse is a summary of each person's life from the perspective of the day when we stand before Jesus on judgement day. There is in theory the works option for salvation; that is, in endeavouring to live a perfect life in thought and word and deed from birth to death. Some people who make no faith claims can lead remarkably decent and moral lives. They may be truthful, treat their parents' right; hold high principles concerning sexual morality and be content with their lot in life. Yet even such people good as they are will have thought wrong thoughts as their consciences will bear witness. It is possible in terms of outward conduct to tick all the boxes. Paul, with reference to the Orthodox Jewish rules for conduct wrote of his pre-conversion life: *as for legalistic righteousness, faultless* (Philippians 3:6b). This is an extraordinary statement. But even attaining this standard is insufficient to get us into heaven because God also judges our words and our attitudes, and no-one could attain such a standard in their thought-life. Therefore, as Paul continually reminded his hearers, for example to the Athenian philosophers in Acts 17:31: *For He has set a day when He will judge the world with justice by the man He has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising Him from the dead.*" Have you accepted Jesus as your Saviour and Lord? This is the only ground on which we can be certain of an eternity with Him. If you haven't done so yet, please take that step today, for your good and for His glory, Amen.