

COMING UNDER GRACE

iv. The Patience of God

Romans 2:1-11

Paul was no arm-chair theologian. A pioneer missionary, he was a man of action, first and foremost a preacher of the gospel, particularly among the unevangelized. His special calling was to preach the gospel to the gentiles. Remarkably however, Paul puts the Jews (read religious people) in the same needful situation as pagan gentiles. All are under sin, all need the remedy provided by the saving work of Christ.

In this passage comprised of two parts (verses 1-4, followed by verses 5-11) Paul does not address shaky discipleship, rather complacent and persistent double standards. His target is the hard heart that has false assurance and refuses to repent, rather than the penitent heart that lacks assurance.

Verses one to four take the form of dialogue between Paul and an imaginary partner. This was a common literary device in those days known as a diatribe in order to make a point for one's readers. In so doing Paul turns from a world of shameless immorality in 1:18-32 to a world of self-righteous moralism in 2:1-4.

It is quite possible to be so taken up with the faults of others that one does not consider one's own failures (cf, Matt 7:2,3). Paul is reading the inmost thoughts of a presumed Jewish debater whom he understands thoroughly from his own pre-Christian experience. Judging others leads to receiving God's judgement, building up a reservoir of divine wrath that will break on the guilty on the day of reckoning. Like the accumulative power of compound interest, the power of God's judgement is a reality.

God's judgement is delayed in order to give opportunity for repentance. God does not punish immediately. He holds back his final judgement, giving the sinner time to turn to God. This interval, as it were, is temporary. It implies a limit, pointing to a truce, not peace. If we reject the invitation to repent, in due course we must face God with all our sin about us.

There is a level playing field when it comes to God's ultimate verdict. The argument of verses six to eleven is clear and logical. It follows a pattern called a chiasm, after the Greek letter xi, similar to our letter x. It describes a structure in which the basic sequence in this instance is ABCCBA.

- A God will judge everyone according to his work (v6)
- B People who do good will attain eternal life (v7)
- C People who do evil will suffer wrath (v8)
- C Wrath for those who do evil (v9)
- B Glory for those who do good (v10)
- A God judges impartially (v11)

This is the second principle of divine judgement in Paul's argument. What people receive depends on how they live. Judgement is based on the facts of the case and not appearance or pretensions. The gospel and the practice of righteousness are inseparable. The good works we do do not bring salvation but they attest or confirm the salvation the believer has already received by faith. Therefore, they have an essential function in God's great plan of salvation.

Our destiny does not depend on our religious heritage (in this instance, whether Jew or Gentile) but on our relationship with God through Christ by his Spirit. In that sense, even God's judgement must be seen in the context of mercy, affording an opportunity to lead people to repentance and forgiveness. We are saved entirely by God's grace but judged according to our works.

In the final analysis, what Paul wrote is not designed for our information but our transformation. Scripture is not a quarry to find stones to throw at others, but to find the rock on which to build our lives.

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