

# GOD WITH US

## Part 10: EARLY LETTERS

### Message 12 – Romans The Divine Mirror Romans 2:1 – 3:20

#### Introduction

We all tend to “*see the speck in our brother’s eye, but fail to notice the log in our own eye*” (Matthew 7:1-5). Paul now turns his attention to the moralist or the religious person who passes judgment on the sinful world that he was speaking about in the previous section. Notice the first word of Romans chapter 2: “**You.**” In chapter 1 the problem was “**they.**” *They* do this and *they* do that. *They* have no fear of God, so *they* are experiencing the judgment of God because *they* have rejected God. God has given *them* over to their own ways. In chapter 2, Paul says: *Now let’s talk about YOU.* God’s mirror comes out in chapter 2 and the reflection the self-righteous person sees is not good. Romans 2 *personalizes* the problem of human sin. It shows that all of us fall short of God’s standards, even those who think they are very good.

#### **YOU have a problem: 2:1-4**

Imagine a very religious friend sitting next to Paul as he points out the sin of the world in ch.1. The friend is saying: “*Give it to them, Paul! They deserve every word of it!*” Suddenly, Paul turns to his friend and says . . .

***“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. Now we know that God’s judgment against those who do such things is based on truth. 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? Or 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” (2:1-4).***

In chapter 1, “they” were without excuse for ignoring God’s voice through conscience and creation. In chapter 2, “you” are without excuse for ignoring another obvious fact: “**You do the same things**

that **they do!**” Look in the mirror and be honest. You are good at passing judgment on other people, but not so good at judging yourself.

NOT EVEN PAUL! Prior to his conversion, Paul (formerly named Saul), was a self-righteous, religious man. He worked very hard to try to obey God’s laws, while pointing the finger of condemnation at others. It took a dramatic encounter with the risen Christ for Paul to be confronted with his own self-righteous, murderous heart (Acts 9:1-19; Acts 22:3-16; Acts 26:9-18). As God began to shine His mirror into Paul’s inner person, he saw himself from *God’s perspective*. As he went back into the Old Testament scriptures, which he had learned from infancy, he began to see his own sinful (self-willed) inner person, as being just as unrighteous as others, and even more so, as he was a murderer of Christ-followers. He realized that his own soul contained all the same evil tendencies he condemned in other people. It just took Paul a long time to see himself in light of God’s holy standard.

But someone might say, “I don’t commit those same sins! I try to live a good, clean life.” Jesus said that if you even *think of committing adultery*, you’re guilty like the person who does the act. If you even *think hateful, murderous thoughts*, you share the same guilt as the one who follows through and murders someone. In other words, **our *thought-lives* reveal a lot about the depth of the sinful tendencies that reside in our hearts.** There is a LOT of sin buried beneath the outward surface of our lives. (Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5.) Jesus said of the Pharisees: “*You look good on the outside, but inside you are full of dead men’s bones! You look a lot like white-washed tombs*” (Matt.23:27,28). This is Paul’s point in Romans 2. We can look good on the outside; but on the inside, our sinful hearts tell a different story. Paul knew:

***“I was formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor. Yet I was shown mercy because I acted ignorantly in unbelief; and the grace of our Lord was more than abundant, with the faith and love which are found in Christ Jesus. It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all. Yet for this reason I found mercy, so that in me as the foremost, Jesus Christ might demonstrate His perfect patience as an example for those who would believe in Him for eternal life” (1Tim. 1:13-16).***

*It is popular to be optimistic about our human potential, but who is setting the 'potential' standard? If it is a potential measured by human standards, then we are ignoring the higher mirror of God's standards. In the end, that is the only standard or potential, that matters. When we begin to have our eyes opened to the divine mirror that is far above any human potential or standard, then everything changes. THEN the awakening begins and BROKENNESS BEFORE GOD BEGINS. Sadly, the Holiness and Righteousness of God is beyond our understanding. Humanity has defined our own standards and potential, depending on what culture and beliefs are taught. If we do a good job of reaching to those ideals, then we have reached 'our potential' in the eyes of ourselves and others. God wants us to have our eyes opened to a much higher standard, not to shame us, but to awaken us to HIS HOLY STANDARD which NONE OF HUMANITY is able to attain.*

### **Storing up judgment: 2:5-11**

This passage has two main ideas. 1) God only saves *broken people*, not self-righteous people. In fact, the self-righteous person is "storing up wrath" not "points with God."

***"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" (2:5).***

Brokenness always precedes salvation. *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven (Matt.5:3)*. If we want to be right with God, we first need to see that *we are NOT right with God*. We need to see our own need for a Savior. We need to come to the end of ourselves. Like the poor tax-collector in Luke 18, we need to say: *Lord, have mercy on me, the sinner (Luke 18:9-14)!* God only saves broken people who see that their own sin is a very real problem. The self-righteous person is on the wrong track (like the self-righteous Pharisee in that same parable – Luke 18:9-14).

2) God doesn't play favorites based on religious backgrounds.

***"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" (2:9-11).***

God does not accept (or reject) a person based on religious titles or affiliation. He looks at our true *condition* - what's going on in the

secret places of our hearts, where no one can see but God. The beginning of our faith journey is in response to our basic understanding that we truly do need God's forgiveness and His Son Jesus Christ is our only Savior. The continuation of our faith journey involves growing to know God's truth, and learning to pay attention to the Holy Spirit as He reveals TRUTH to us in many ways.

As we mature, what matters is our heart condition before God *and how that heart condition is manifesting itself in the fruit of our lives*. God will judge the fruit of our lives (our works) because that fruit gives evidence of the true condition of our hearts.

Paul, being the apostle to the Gentile world, knew a lot of Gentiles (non-Jews) who had admitted their sin (brokenness/repentance) and were being transformed by the grace of God, and the truths of God. As a result, good works were springing forth from new hearts. At the same time, being a Jew by birth, he knew a lot of religious people who refused to admit their sin problem (pride/self-righteousness). As a result, their works were springing forth from spiritual pride, rather than from humility. God examines the heart behind the actions; not just the actions themselves.

### **People of the Book: 2:12-16**

In Paul's day, the Jews were known as "the people of the Book." They prided themselves in being the recipients and guardians of the laws of God, given through Moses and the prophets. They had God's Word, while the Gentiles lived without the privilege of knowing God's Word. Yet, Paul tells us that having God's Word *is not enough*.

*"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. They 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.) This will take place on the day when God judges people's secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares" (2:13-16).*

Paul knew a lot of Gentiles who were better law-keepers than his

Jewish countrymen. These Gentiles showed that God's law was inscribed on the tablets of their hearts. That is what God judges: the secrets of our hearts, not the appearance of our outward actions and not the religious privileges or advantages that we may have.

*The Bible is a supernatural "Divine Mirror" where God displays His deep heart, and Holy standards. The mirror shows us who God is, how much He longs for a deeper relationship with us, and how holy His standards are. These truths are a light that shines on our thoughts, words, motives, reactions, actions etc... and should make us more self-aware, and less critical of others. Is the Bible part of your daily life? Does God's Word do its work in your heart as you daily listen to His voice? Remember you can read it or listen to it on your smart phone. Ask God to reveal what He sees. Pay attention to yourself, and humbly ask those closest to you to tell you how they experience you. You will gradually be able to say with the Apostle James that God's Law, is a true "Law of Liberty" (James 1:22-25).*

### **Religious affiliation: 2:17-24**

Much of chapter 2 is aimed at Paul's fellow Jews who prided themselves on being the "children of Abraham" and thought that this physical heritage guaranteed their right standing with God. Paul warned them that being in the right religious line did not satisfy God's righteous standards concerning the condition of our hearts.

***"Now you, if you call yourself a Jew; if you rely on the law and boast in God; if you know his will and approve of what is superior because you are instructed by the law; if you are convinced that you are a guide for the blind, a light for those who are in the dark, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of little children, because you have in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth — you, then, who teach others, do you not teach yourself? You who preach against stealing, do you steal? You who say that people should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who boast in the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? As it is written: "God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you" (2:17-24).***

Religious backgrounds, family ties, names and titles don't mean much with God. *What matters is the reality of the inner life.* Does the teacher teach himself? Does the advocate for integrity live

with integrity? Does the one who speaks out against idolatry have idols in their own heart? Paul was saddened by the fact that as he moved about in the Gentile world, he realized how bad a reputation the Jewish people had *because of hypocritical behavior*. They said one thing . . . but they practiced another.

*We see this happen often. Someone speaks out against this or that, and then turns out to be doing the same thing. Paul knew full well that there were spiritual guides running around telling people how to live; but in their own personal lives, they were living by another standard. Paul was one of those hypocritical teachers before he met Jesus. Names, claims and words don't mean a thing to God. What matters is whether your walk matches your talk, at the deepest levels of your soul. How does this impact your thinking about your own life? Where do you see/sense areas of hypocrisy? Is the name of God respected by others because you; or do people find a reason to stay away from God because of you?*

### **Religious rituals: 2:25-29**

Along with many other religious groups, the Jews believed that certain religious rituals guaranteed their right standing with God. For the Jews, the key ritual was circumcision (see Genesis 17 where circumcision was introduced as the physical sign of the covenant between God and Abraham's descendants). Paul argued that a physical, outward sign/ritual had no value IF it was not matched by a spiritual, inward transformation.

***“Circumcision has value if you observe the law, but if you break the law, you have become as though you had not been circumcised. So then, if those who are not circumcised keep the law's requirements, will they not be regarded as though they were circumcised? The one who is not circumcised physically and yet obeys the law will condemn you who, even though you have the written code and circumcision, are a lawbreaker. A person is not a Jew who is one only outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a person's praise is not from other people, but from God” (2:25-29).***

*The Jews relied upon circumcision to guarantee that they were right with God. Sadly, this was a false hope of salvation. Today, people rely on the ritual of baptizing their infant, which is similar to Jewish circumcision. This can be a false hope of salvation. Each person ultimately must believe in Christ for themselves. A ritual such as Christian baptism should be the outward symbol of an inward reality of a true faith. This is why people in the New Testament were baptized AFTER they placed their faith in Jesus Christ. That is why at Oak Pointe Church, we stress “believer’s baptism.” Have you declared your own personal faith in Jesus through believer’s baptism? Or, are you relying on the rite of infant baptism, that your parents had performed on you, to guarantee your standing with God?*

When God looks at our hearts, He sees a sin problem. He’s hoping that we see it also; that we stop ignoring the problem, or pretending that we’re just fine. God sees that we need some spiritual surgery, and He’s ready to perform that surgery in our hearts . . . IF we see our need for His divine intervention. That’s where the final lines of chapter 2 come in. Here Paul begins, for the first time in this letter, to point toward *the real solution that we all need – spiritual surgery.*

***“A person is not a Jew who is one only outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a person’s praise is not from other people, but from God” (2:28,29).***

We need a new heart, given to us by the Spirit of God. We need the Holy Spirit to come inside and circumcise our hearts . . . to baptize our hearts in the cleansing water of Jesus Christ. We need an inward kind of religion, not an outward form of religion. This is the only way that our lives can begin to produce the sort of fruit that truly pleases God. In short, we need Jesus.

*This is where the good news of salvation in Christ begins to take root in the human heart – when we till the soil and uproot any false notions of self-righteousness; of self-saving. When I root that out, and I admit MY BAD (brokenness, poverty of spirit), then I am ready to have the seed of the good news planted in my heart. That’s what Paul is helping us do in Romans 2. You must come to the END of your self-righteousness before you can ever begin to have the righteousness of God take root in your soul.*

## Being “Jewish” has its benefits: 3:1- 8

Romans 3 opens with a necessary digression. Paul was hard on his Jewish countrymen in chapter 2. He told them that they were as sinful as everyone else in the world. So, his Jewish readers were left with a question: *What good is it, then, to be part of God’s ‘chosen nation?’ Does it mean anything at all to be Jewish?* Paul will give a fuller answer to this question in chapter 9 – 11. For now, He gives a quick answer.

***“Then what’s the advantage of being a Jew? Is there any value in the ceremony of circumcision? Yes, there are great benefits! First of all, the Jews were entrusted with the whole revelation of God. True, some of them were unfaithful; but just because they were unfaithful, does that mean God will be unfaithful? Of course not! Even if everyone else is a liar, God is true. As the Scriptures say about him, “You will be proved right in what you say, and you will win your case in court” (3:1-4).***

Yes, the Jews were given great blessings. Foremost of all, they were given the Word of God through Moses. The problem was that they weren’t good at *obeying* God’s Word. Remember his point in chapter 2? The Jews ‘owned’ God’s laws; but God’s laws didn’t ‘own’ them (rule their lives).

That led Paul to another question. Having been given God’s Word, they were *unfaithful* to God because they did not obey His Word. But if the Jews were unfaithful, did that mean *God* also would respond unfaithfully (by rejecting the Jews and failing to fulfill His plans and purposes for them)? Not a chance! God remains faithful, even when we are not. In 2Timothy, Paul puts it like this: *“If we are faithless, He remains faithful; for He cannot deny Himself” (2Timothy 2:13)*. Paul will spend a chapter dealing with God future plans for His “chosen” people, the Jews (Rom.11).

That led Paul to one final thought/digression. Some of his fellow Jews were saying that his teaching promoted sin. They said that his emphasis on God’s grace gave people a free ticket to sin more. Further, they said that since our sin magnifies God’s grace, then we should sin more to make God’s grace look even better.

***“But,” some might say, “our sinfulness serves a good purpose, for it helps people see how righteous God is. Isn’t it unfair, then, for him to punish us?” (3:5).***



***“And some people even slander us by claiming that we say, ‘The more we sin, the better it is!’ Those who say such things deserve to be condemned” (3:8).***

Paul did not defend himself against such slander. He knew the difference between sincere questions and slanderous accusations. To say that he was encouraging people to be greater sinners was a foolish insult not worthy of a response. (He will argue in chapters 6-8 that when a person accepts the grace of God – freedom from sin’s penalty – they also receive the gift of the Holy Spirit Who desires to increasingly give them freedom from sin’s power. This is the doctrine of “sanctification,” which Paul’s detractors did not understand. Salvation by grace through Christ is the first step. Sanctification by the power of the Spirit is the second step.)

### **WE ALL have a problem: 3:9-18**

Since 1:18, Paul has been painting a picture of the human condition. He culminated his description using a string of Old Testament quotations to pronounce God’s guilty verdict.

***“Well then, should WE conclude that WE are better than they? No, not at all, for WE have already shown that ALL PEOPLE, whether Jews or Gentiles, are under the power of sin. As the Scriptures say, No one is righteous; not even one. No one is truly wise. No one is seeking God. All have turned away. All have become useless. No one does good, not a single one. Their talk is foul, like the stench from an open grave. Their tongues are filled with lies. Snake venom drips from their lips. Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness. They rush to commit murder. Destruction and misery always follow them. They don’t know where to find peace. They have no fear of God at all” (3:9-18).***

These lines fall like staccato blows upon the human heart. We may think there is enough good in the human heart to get by, but there is not. Paul is talking about EVERYONE here, both past and present, himself included. There are no exceptions. Something is broken in our world, and it is ALL OF US. Paul summarizes:

***“Everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God’s glorious standard” (3:23).***

Notice that last bit: we all fall short of GOD’S GLORIOUS STANDARD. The yardstick by which we are measured is GOD’S STANDARD for how He created us in the first place – sinless.

*"Sin" = "falling short of God's standard." Let's say you and I have a long jump contest. I jump 5 feet. You say: "I can beat that." So, you run really fast and you jump 6 feet. You're good; I'm not. But as you are gloating over your victory, a long-jumper from the U. of M. track team walks by and wants to join our contest. He walks back about 30 yards, gets up a full head of steam . . . and jumps 25 feet! You and I are dumb-founded. We both say simultaneously, "He's good! We're not." By our standard, he's a winner and we're both losers.*

*Now imagine we move our 3-man long-jump contest to the edge of The Grand Canyon. We tell the U. of M. track guy that this time he can go first. He says, "OK." Back he goes about 30 yards, gets up a full head of steam . . . and jumps 25 feet, 6 inches, a new personal best for him. As he plummets to the bottom of the Grand Canyon, you and I say simultaneously, "Not good enough!"*

*You see, the Canyon is now the standard; not me, not you, not even the track star. When it comes to the issue of righteousness, God's glorious standard is what we are measured by. And according to His standard, we all fall short of the glory of God! No one is good enough.*

Romans 1, 2 and 3 provide the fullest explanation anywhere of the biblical doctrine of SIN. Sin is a condition of alienation from God, a condition that produces all kinds of actions that are contrary to God's design. Sin is a heart condition that every human being has, and that condition must be changed before a human being can begin moving in the right direction.

One last thing before Paul outlines God's plan of salvation. In spite of everything that he has said, many people still try to FIX the sin problem by some form of "clean up your act" plan. "I need to be a better person. Give me a rulebook and I'll try to obey it. Give me a set of moral guidelines and I'll do my best to do it. Then, hopefully, God will see that, and He will be pleased with me." This is the approach of virtually every world religion: Save yourself!

### **Self-saving is NOT an option. 3:19,20**

***"Obviously, the law applies to those to whom it was given, for its purpose is to keep people from having excuses, and to show that the entire world is guilty before God. For no one can ever be made right with God by doing what the law commands. The law simply shows us how sinful we are" (3:19,20).***

No one can ever be made right with God by doing what the law (the religious code) commands. Why? Because no one can obey the law well enough to please God. The law *shows us our sin, but it cannot cleanse us from our sin.* (This was the major argument of the book of Galatians, especially Galatians 3. The Law is our ‘tutor’ to lead us to Christ. It is not a ladder to climb our way into heaven.)

### **Summary: Don’t fake it.**

When Shirley and I were in Italy, we spent a day in Taormina, Sicily. We passed by a street-vendor selling Ray Ban sunglasses ... for \$10.00. They had Ray Ban stickers on the glass, and Ray Ban logos on the sides. Then I noticed a legit looking sunglass shop across the street and I wandered in to see if the shopkeeper had the same glasses as the guy out on the street. Sure enough, a rack full of Ray Bans. But the prices were a bit higher. \$200. \$250. \$300. I didn’t bother to ask why. I had seen the same thing on street corners in Asia. A “Rolex” for \$5.00. A “Gibson” guitar for \$25.00. Fakes.

When we got to Turkey a few days later, they had a similar kind of deal going on watches; but at least in Turkey they were straight up about it. The big sign on every store read: **Genuine Fake Watches.** How interesting. At least they weren’t trying to fool anyone. They were admitting their products were *real fakes!*

Don’t fool yourself, or try to fool everyone else, says Paul. Don’t say, “I’ve got the right name on me.” Or, “I’ve got the right Bible on my table.” Or, “I’ve got the right rituals on my resume.” “I come from the right religious line.” Admit you’re a fake . . . that the issues outlined in Romans 1-3 are alive and well in your own sin-filled heart. Put a sign on your heart that reads: Genuine fake! That way, the *good news* can find its proper place in your life, because the *bad news* has been fully received.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. What part of Paul’s description of our sin problem stands out to you the most? How do you personally relate to what he said?
2. Were there times in your life when you were trusting in your own efforts, etc. to make yourself “right with God?” Describe.
3. What is God’s solution for our problem? (See Rom. 3:23,24).