

Judgy Much?

a sermon on Romans 2:1-11

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Before we begin, I'd like to briefly preface this sermon by saying that this is a hard text to preach. It's hard because the content of this passage might hit a little too close to home for many of us, it feel a little too relevant. And it's also hard because this is one of those sermons that I'm preaching just as much to myself as to anyone else. I would be so grateful for your partnership in the Gospel, leaning in together to God's Word as we submit ourselves to the Lord to be refined and challenged and encouraged as we seek together to become more like Jesus. Let's pray.

(prayer)

Not long ago I took Ellia for a walk to a playground and didn't bring a facemask. Instead of enjoying a beautiful afternoon with my daughter, which is what I should have been doing, I spent most of the time ashamedly pondering what the other parents, who were all wearing masks, must be thinking about me for not having a mask. I didn't want to be judged, especially wrongfully, simply because I didn't have a mask. And yet I myself have done the exact thing I was afraid of these other parents doing to me – I have judged people I don't even know for their public face mask behavior without any having knowledge of their circumstances or their stories.

We Americans, myself included, have become judgy people. Judgment of others is like the currency of our nation's emotional, relational, and spiritual economy.

Think back to the summer. Remember all the memes and commentary that buzzed around about Karens and Chads? This is a perfect example of our culture's tendency to judge anything and everything. Now I do want to offer my sincere apologies to all of you lovely folks named Karen who in no way contributed to this cultural phenomenon. But, like it or not, unfortunately in the last year, the term "Karen" has come to pejoratively describe seemingly-entitled or demanding women who pass harsh judgment on others. Of course the irony is that the people who created all the Karen memes and jokes are themselves judging the self-entitled women they find so despicable because of their judginess.

This spirit of judgment is the focus on our passage in Romans 2. But before we look at Romans 2, we need a refresher on last week's sermon from chapter 1. Because, of course, as usual with the Bible, the content of chapter 2 is very related to the content of chapter 1!

In chapter 1 Paul indicts the gentiles for their improper, sinful behavior. Paul says the Gentiles have no excuse to behave so sinfully, so unrighteously, because God's blueprint for life is revealed in the natural world. To put it simply, Paul is telling the Gentiles, you ought to know better.

Now, I want you to put yourself in the place of a first century Jewish person reading this letter. The Jews knew what it meant to be righteous. They knew how to uphold God's law, and went to painstaking efforts to do so. Beyond that, they were descendants of one of God's favorite dudes, Abraham, which gave them a special status in God's eyes. Given all that, how easy would it be to read Paul's indictment against the Gentiles and think to yourself, *Finally, someone who gets it! Someone who is speaking the*

truth! Those unholy gentiles should be condemned for their unrighteous behavior! Their lifestyles are clearly antithetical to the ways of God! If you were a Jew reading this letter, you might even wonder if the next thing Paul will offer is a commendation of those Jews whose commitment to the Torah reflects a life of holiness and righteousness. Good things ahead for us righteous Jews, you might be thinking.

Let's you and I read Romans 2:1-11 and find out for ourselves what Paul actually said to the Jews.

You [Jews], 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. 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? ⁴ 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?

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. ⁶ God "will repay each person according to what they have done."^[a] ⁷ To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor 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. 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, honor and peace for everyone who does good: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. ¹¹ For God does not show favoritism.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God!

Big surprise, right! Paul does not commend the Jews, but rather condemns them. You see, the Jews' status, ancestry, and knowledge of the law actually got them into a big mess, because they developed attitudes of self-righteousness, of being holier-than-thou.

Using similar language as he did in chapter 1, here again in chapter 2 Paul writes, "You [Jews] have no excuse" – this is the same language he used with the Gentiles in chapter 1. "You 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." It's like me at the playground: my assumption-riddled judgment of maskless people at the grocery store was reaped upon my own maskless head at the playground. Paul is saying that when I get judgy toward others, I am guilty of the very same unrighteousness that I am trying to condemn. In other words, judging others brings God's judgment upon yourself. Let me say that again. Judging others brings God's judgment upon you. Paul says later in verse 11 that God does not show favoritism. In other words, there isn't some sliding scale of better sin and worse sin. Sin is sin, and deserves God's judgment, no matter who you are and no matter what the sin. The Jews' sin of self-righteousness is equal to the Gentiles' sin of unrighteousness.

Now, before we go any further with examining this passage, let's try to wrap our minds around what human judgment actually is. To judge is criticize other people for something in or about them that seems wrong. And judgment goes beyond simple truth-telling. There is a sense of value attached to it, a sense of you're wrong and I'm right, and *that* somehow makes me better than you. We can be prone toward judgment when we feel that sense of superiority over another person. Our hearts can become hardened to anything other than what we already think or believe, and then this causes us to be

hardened toward the actual people who represent different perspectives. This hardening of heart reinforces the self-righteous, superior mindset that leads to judgment.

This is precisely what's going on in Paul's indictment of the Jews in Romans 2. He is calling out their sense of superiority, their better-than-thou attitudes; he's calling out their judgment.

But there seems to be a big, glaring issue here. What's wrong with calling out sin? Aren't Christians supposed to speak the truth? Isn't this part of sharing the Gospel? Well yes, but there seems to be a very fine line between pointing toward the ways of Jesus, which we are indeed supposed to do, while avoiding the tendency to judge others.

This feels messy. What are you and I to do when we see others blatantly disregarding what we understand as God's best? How do you lovingly point toward truth while avoiding judgment? How do you highlight the way of Jesus without judging a person for walking in a different way?

As we consider this messy but important question, it may be helpful to start by identifying the traps that can ensnare and skew our understandings. To put it very generically, some Christians believe we need to speak the truth at all costs; we need to call out sin, because sin is a barrier to relationship with Jesus, and relationship with Jesus is the very most important thing. Meanwhile, and again I'm oversimplifying here, other Christians tend to only focus on loving one's neighbor and shy away from speaking hard truth, even when the truth needs to be shared, because the most important thing is demonstrating Jesus' love. But Paul's writing in Romans 2, as well as the example of Jesus throughout the Gospels, both indicate that neither of these extremes are the best way to handle the complex world of truth-telling, judgment, and loving neighbor.

In this passage Paul demonstrates that there *is* room for truth-telling. Paul names the sin of the Gentiles. He calls it out. He points towards God's truth. He also names the sin of the Jews. There are some things, some brokenness, some systemic and some individual sin, that need to be named. But Paul is clear, here and throughout his other letters, that while followers of Jesus should always point to Jesus, you and I are not the ones who judge. God alone is the judge of all human hearts and behavior.

So how do we point toward Jesus without judging? In order to press further into this question, let's jump over to the Gospels and consider Jesus' example. There are actually several different ways Jesus holds together truth-telling and love. For instance, when Jesus interacts with the Pharisees and addresses the institutions and systems within the religious leadership structure that need correction, he was often quite harsh. But in other instances, particularly in stories where Jesus is interacting with individuals on the margins, without power, or who were outcasts, such as the Samaritan woman in John 4 or the woman caught in adultery in John 8, Jesus didn't focus on the sin of the women. He was relational toward them, and altogether avoided condemning either of them.

Still a third example is Matthew 18, in which Jesus lays a pathway for truth-telling without judgment. Matthew 18 is specific to sin that has occurred between two people. The first stepping stone in a loving approach to truth telling is to go directly to a brother or sister to have a one-on-one dialogue. This implies a pre-existing relationship. Here in Matthew 18, truth-telling is narrowed to someone with whom you already have a relationship. This means going directly to that person, not to other friends or allies,

especially not to social media, and it means not talking behind someone's back. And truth telling is for the sake of restoration into the community of God. It shouldn't be motivated by self-superiority. It shouldn't be for the purpose of ostracizing someone. It's for the sake of restoration within God's family. Lastly, Jesus says that if this pattern doesn't work, the very last resort is condemnation. Only if, after multiple conversations, the other party refuses to listen or change, only then is there room to condemn.

Now remember, Matthew 18 is not the only example offered by Jesus. But it gives us one way to embody being gracious and truthful while avoiding judgment. Lead with relationship, lead with being present, lead with intentionality. Be willing to speak the truth when the time is right, but do it within the context of a relationship built on love and trust, and within the context of mutual dialogue and a commitment to listening well to the other person. And always seek to avoid judgment, that hardened sense of self-superiority.

So what does this look like in day to day life? I think we have to start with humility and self-examination. It's easy to forget that God alone is the judge. Why do we sometimes trick ourselves into thinking that God needs me to take up the gavel in His place?

When you find your heart self-righteously hardening toward someone or toward a group, it might be helpful to ask yourself some of the following questions: First, allow yourself to examine the certainty you that have about your rightness. The sense of absoluteness in what you or I believe to be true can lead to the moral superiority that Paul is calling out here in Romans 2. When's the last time you opened yourself -- and your opinions and beliefs -- up to the Lord to be corrected or refined by Him? Have you ever asked yourself, might I be off base in my certainty about what I think?

Another question you could ask yourself is: what happens in my heart that turns my pursuit of truth into judgment against others? For me, at least, I can get judgy when I lose the desire to love someone and instead just want to correct them. My self-righteousness can be rooted in a turning away from a willingness to love or welcome another person, especially when they think differently than I do. Instead of welcoming and loving and listening, when I get judgy I simply want to stop someone doing what I think is bad and wrong. I don't want to listen to them; I want to correct them. I want to compel them to start doing what I think is good or right.

When this tendency becomes exaggerated, Christianity can be reduced to religious legalism. And Christians can be reduced to threatened watchdogs of orthodoxy rather than open-armed listeners who embody the beautiful, truthful, gracious life of Jesus.

Let's restate what we just talked: how do we avoid judging others in order to live in the way of Jesus? Start by embracing the humility needed to open ourselves up to the Lord's examination. We need to allow our sense of superiority and the certainty of our rightness to be refined.

And moving on from there, we ask again the same hard question we've been grappling with throughout this sermon: how do we avoid judging others in order to live in the way of Jesus? The second thing is this: As Paul brings to our attention in verses 3-5, you and I need to realize our own need for God's righteousness. We need God's righteousness – not our own self-righteousness.

In Paul's day, the Jews lived under an illusion of self-righteousness that prevented them from seeing that the way they judged other people's sin actually brought condemnation upon themselves. My friends, we are those people.

We have forgotten not to judge, and instead have become consumed by our own perspectives and opinions. We have become like the Karens in the memes, and we have become like the people who created the Karen memes. We have forgotten how to have real conversation; instead we resort to consequence-free, division-riddled comments on social media that only serve to champion our own viewpoint. We have forgotten the importance of listening well to each other; instead, we tune in only to our favorite news channels or podcasts, or to our own tribe of folks who already think the same way.

We are like the Jews in Romans 2, we are those God-followers who "get it." We understand what is asked of us to follow in the way of Jesus. And sometimes those very things, all of that knowledge about God and His ways, can blind us to the fact that we are desperately in need of God's grace, just as much as "they" are. You and I need this correction from Paul just as much as the first century Jews did.

How do we avoid judging others while living in the truthful way of Jesus? Our words and our actions both must point toward Jesus. We must embody Jesus' life in our own lives, while avoiding the tendency to take on God's role as judge. We must be gracious. We must be generous. We must be humble. We must seek first to welcome rather than to push away. We must seek first to understand rather than be understood.

An episode from the Apple TV show, *Ted Lasso*, illustrates the kind of life that avoids judgment of others. I'd like to close by showing you this clip. The basic premise is that an American football coach from Kentucky named Ted Lasso is hired to manage an English Premier league soccer team. Upon arriving in London, Ted is met with ridicule and criticism. And part of that is somewhat warranted, because he literally knows nothing about soccer. In this clip, Ted interacts with the former owner of the soccer club, a man named Rupert, whose ex-wife Rebecca now owns the team. Let's watch together.

(SHOW TED LASSO VIDEO CLIP – 3 MINS)

May we be a people who are curious, who seek to listen and understand, rather than to judge. May we be a people whose day-to-day interactions, attitudes and mindsets are filled with the truth, beauty, and abundant generosity of Jesus. In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

(PRAYER)