



Sermon Transcript

October 11, 2020

The Gospel

The Four R's of God's Wrath

Romans 2:1-16



This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on October 11, 2020 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio and video version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at www.wethefc.com

Sermon Text
Romans 2:1-16

¹ Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things. ² We know that the judgment of God rightly falls on those who practice such things. ³ Do you suppose, O man—you who judge those who practice such things and yet you do them yourself—that you will escape the judgment of God? ⁴ Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? 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.

⁶ He will render each one according to his works: ⁷ to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; ⁸ but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury. ⁹ There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, ¹⁰ but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. ¹¹ For God shows no partiality.

¹² For all who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law. ¹³ For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified. ¹⁴ For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. ¹⁵ They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them ¹⁶ on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus.

Introduction

We are in the middle of a conversation about the gospel. The word “gospel” literally means “good news.” We live in a world that could use some good news. As Christians, we believe that is exactly what we have. We have “good news.” In the gospel we have “good news” that addresses man’s most pressing problem.

Last week we were exposed to the problem all of us have. I mentioned last week that **“you can’t know what the solution is if you don’t know what the problem is.”** In the first three chapters of Romans, Paul identifies for us our problem. We are all *under sin*. We are enslaved to it. It is “hard wired into our boards at birth.” There is not one person who can claim to be without sin. No one can answer the challenge of Jesus when he said, *“Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone.”* Like the crowd that day, we would all need to drop our stone and walk away. And so last week we heard Paul say rather emphatically, *“None is righteous, no not one.”*

We saw last week that our sin has consequences. Our sin is destructive. It destroys our relationship with God, with others and even with ourselves. One of the examples Paul gives of the destructive nature of our sin is the words that come out of our mouths. This is no small things. James says of the tongue in James 3 that it *sets on fire the entire course of life* and the tongue itself is *set on fire by hell*. In other words, the tongue reveals the pride—the root of our sin—that rests in our hearts and exalts self above God. So whether it be slander or gossip or grumbling or lying or boasting or cursing or tearing down or leading astray or defaming the image of God in others through harsh words . . . our sin destroys God’s creation. We make a mess of it all.

But that is just the first half of the problem that the gospel addresses. It leaves you asking, **“what is God going to do about our rebellion and sin?”** This morning we are going to look at the second half of our problem. This morning we will see that God is going to do something about our sin and our rebellion. He is going to judge it. In Romans 2:6 Paul says that God *will render each one according to his works*. And our passage ends this morning in verse 16 with the sobering truth that *God judges the secrets of men*. Nothing is hidden from God. If *no one is righteous, no not one* then no one can stand when their life is laid open before God. The consequence of all of this is severe. Paul asks in verse 3, how do you think *that you will escape the judgment of God?* This day of judgment in verse 5 is characterized as a *day of wrath*. He promises in verse 9 that *there will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil. For God shows no partiality*. This is our most pressing problem.

Now I am very much aware of the fact that as soon as I say that there is a “day of judgment” or that God is a “God of wrath” that for many this is highly offensive. This is one of the main objections people have with Christianity. I don’t think it is an exaggeration to say that by and large the world hates this historically and biblically rooted doctrine of the Christian faith. In the ancient creed we confess that Jesus “shall come to judge the quick (the living) and the dead.” Our world hears that and on one hand can’t see how you can square a God of love with a God of wrath and judgment. And yet, a constant cry that emerges from our hurting world where injustice abounds is the cry for justice. One of the phrases that has captured the cries of the recent protests over racial injustice has been, “No justice! No peace! So clearly “wrath” and “love” are not opposed to each other. They actually go hand in hand.

But perhaps what is most distressing of all is how a growing number of Christians find the notion of the wrath of God—a day of judgment—to be taboo and so they either outright deny it to be true or avoid it as though it is an embarrassing teaching of the Bible that needs to be somehow explained away or tempered a bit. And I get it. I feel the tension of this truth every time I go to preach on it. It is a hard thing to look at. And yet, this is a critical part of the gospel, the good news that comes to us in Jesus. Notice what Paul says in verse 16, “*on that day, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus.*” Jesus said it rather plainly in John 3:36, “*Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life and the wrath of God remains on him.*”

Perhaps part of the problem we feel is the way people have communicated this truth in a condemning and insensitive manner. Instead, if we really believe that there is a day of judgment and that the gospel addresses this problem, then we should respond like Paul did in Romans 9:2 where he confesses, “*I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart.*” This is what he felt towards his fellow Jews. It compelled him to proclaim the gospel. If we grasp this truth it ought to also move us to tears and compel us to point people to Jesus. In Hebrews 9:27 we are presented with the sobering truth. “*It is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment.*”

This morning, I want to concentrate on Romans 2:2. “*We know that the judgment of God rightly falls on those who practice such things.*” From this verse I want to talk about “the four R’s of God’s Wrath.” *God’s Wrath is Revealed . . . God’s Wrath is Right . . . God’s Wrath is Retributive . . .* and then I want to give you a peek into next week and look at *God’s Rescue from Wrath*. **You can’t know what the solution is until you know what the problem is.** We are under sin and stand condemned.

God's Wrath is Revealed

Notice how Paul begins verse 2. He says rather confidently "***We know that the judgment of God rightly falls on those who practice such things.***" How does Paul "know" that there is a day of judgment? How does Paul know what he knows?

To answer this question, it is helpful to know what is going on in Romans 2. At the beginning of the chapter, Paul makes a shift in who he is talking to. You can see the shift he makes by the pronouns he uses. In Romans 1 he uses the words *them* and *they* quite often. For example in Romans 1:20 he says "*they are without excuse.*" The "*they*" Paul is pointing at in Romans 1 are irreligious Gentiles and God has revealed himself to *them* through his creation; through what he has made he has revealed to *them* that there is a God and he is powerful. But then in Romans 2, Paul moves from talking about *them* to talking to *you*. He says in verse 1, "*Therefore you have no excuse, O man, everyone of you who judges.*" So the *you* of verse 1 and the *we* of verse 2 is the religious Jew who doesn't just have creation to look at to know something about God. They have been given the Word of God. Paul even mentions this in Romans 3:1-2. He says that the Jew has an "advantage" because "*the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God.*" This is why Paul can be rather assertive with what he knows to be true about God. "***We know that the judgment of God rightly falls on those who practice such things***" because this is what God has clearly revealed about himself through the Word of God.

The Jews have what we call the Old Testament. You can observe through the actions of God in the Old Testament that God is a God who judges and who displays anger over sin. He judged Adam and Eve. During the time of Noah, God judged the world with a flood. He judged nations like Sodom and Gomorrah, Egypt, Babylon and even Israel. The prophets of Israel were sent by God time and time again and they were constantly warning Israel of God's coming judgment. The Psalms begin in Psalm 1 by telling us that *the wicked will not stand in the judgment*, a theme repeated throughout the Psalms. And when God revealed himself to Moses in Exodus 34 he told Moses what kind of God he is, "*The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty.*"

Now here is what some people will say about this. Some will say that this image of a God of judgment and wrath is the image of God from the Old Testament. But, the God of the New Testament, they would say, is a God of love. Well for starters, the Old Testament passage we just looked at, Exodus 34, sees no contradiction between the love of God and

the wrath of God. And furthermore, we are told that God does not change. But if you think that the New Testament does not speak to the coming judgment of God, then you haven't read the New Testament very closely. Aside from all the references to judgment in our brief New Testament passage this morning, the coming day of judgment hangs over the pages of the New Testament like a cloud. Actually, this theme of a coming judgment isn't diminished one bit in the New Testament. Instead it is intensified. The emphasis of the New Testament is that all of history is moving towards a day when every person will stand before God to give an account. That is what we see in verse 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.*"

But then some might ask, but what about Jesus? Isn't he all about love and isn't he opposed to wrath? There is a group that call themselves "The Red Letter Christians." In some of your Bibles, the "red letters" refer to the words attributed to Jesus. One of the problems with this group is that they tend to give more weight to these words than the rest of Scripture. And yet, do you know where the first mention of hell is in the Bible? It is in "the red letters." It is in the Sermon on the Mount. I heard one teacher say that Jesus was "the first hell-fire and brimstone preacher." In fact, the way Jesus talks about hell in the Sermon on the Mount puts you back on your heels a bit. In Matthew 5:22 he talks about the fires of hell and in verse 29 he describes the terrible nature of hell by saying that it would be better for you to pluck out an eye or cut off an arm than to enter hell. Of the twelve times the word hell is used in the Bible, Jesus uses it eleven times. And this is but a sampling of what we find about the judgment of God in the Bible.

Tim Keller refers to the skeptics who say that they can't believe in the God of the Bible, who punishes and judges people, because they believe in a God of love. Tim Keller challenges them with a question. He asks, "What makes you think that God is love?" Can you look at life and say that this proves God is love? Can you look at history and say that this proves that God is love? He is asking them to identify the basis for their claim that God is a God of love. He responds by saying, "I must conclude that the source of the idea that God is Love is the Bible itself. And the Bible tells us that the God of love is also a God of judgment who will put all things in the world to rights in the end."¹ So we, like Paul, can say, "*We know that the judgment of God rightly falls on those who practice such things.*" We know because it has been revealed to us.

God's Wrath is Right

Paul goes on to say in Romans 2:2 that God's wrath is right. He says, "*We know that **the***

judgment of God rightly falls on those who practice such things.” What he is saying here is that God’s wrath is right and good. He repeats this notion in verse 5 when he describes that coming day of judgment by saying *on the day of wrath when God’s righteous judgment will be revealed.*

How do you feel about that? How do you feel about the idea that God’s anger and justice is “right?” Perhaps one of the reasons why it is hard for us to understand the anger or wrath of God is because of the ways we tend to display anger. Our anger is something that needs to be controlled—“control your anger,” we say—because it can lead to harming others. If your anger is out of control it can lead to your own ruin and so there are things like “anger management” to help people keep their anger in check. But at the same time, anger is a legitimate emotion. There is such a thing as a “righteous anger.” In fact, we are told in Scripture to *be angry but sin not.* This tells me that anger is a legitimate response to what is wrong and to what is evil, but we need to watch ourselves because we can allow that anger to fester and it can lead us to do inappropriate things that bring more harm. But not so with God. God’s anger fits within his moral perfection. It is a perfect anger against what is evil. It is right.

I heard it said this week that the opposite of anger is not love. That is one of the hang-ups people have with the wrath of God. They can’t square it with the love of God, though the passage we looked at in Exodus 34 doesn’t see a contraction at all between the love of God and the wrath of God. The God who is *merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin . . .* is also a God *who will by no means clear the guilty.*” So what I heard this week is that the opposite of anger is apathy.² If God didn’t care about the evil and injustice in the world he would cease to be loving. Love without justice is mere sentiment. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13 that love does not rejoice in what is wrong but it rejoices in what is right. Therefore, at the root of God’s anger is something we long for. We long for the wrongs of this world and the evils of this world to be set right. So if God is truly good, he would be a God who would be angry over the evil and injustice that destroys his creation. Because God is a God of love there is a day of reckoning when wrongs will be set right.

Miroslav Volf is a theologian at Yale Divinity School and is from Croatia where he witnessed the violence that took place in the Balkans. He said, “If God were not angry at injustice and deception and did not make a final end to violence—that God would not be worthy of worship.”³ In fact, it is this very truth that helps us “make it” in a world that is filled with violence and injustice. Can you recall what we observed last

week about man? We referred to “the cruelty of man.” Man’s cruelty is seen on the international and national scene and at that same time, it hits close to home where we live. It marks every area of life. And so we often cry, “It is not fair!” “It is not right!” As the psalmist looked at life he too cried, “why do the wicked prosper?” At the same time, we are called to be a people of peace and to love our enemies. How can we do that? Paul says in Romans 12:19, “*Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.’*” The God who *judges the secrets of men* will someday make all things right. In our hearts, we know that this is good and right and we can entrust our lives in a broken world to the just judge who will make things right. God’s wrath is right.

God’s Wrath is Retributive

The third thing we notice about God’s wrath from this verse is that it is retributive. Paul writes, “*We know that the judgment of God rightly falls on **those who practice such things.***” What he is saying here is that God will judge us according to the works we have done. Now here is where this doctrine of the wrath of God makes us feel uncomfortable. It is easy for us to talk about the injustices “out there” or to long for justice over the wrongs we experienced in life. But don’t forget what Paul is doing here in Romans 2. He is moving his sights from *them* to *you*. And the *you* he is talking to are religious people who tend to readily judge others. He starts out in verse 1 by saying, “*Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges.*”

It is so easy for us to find fault in others. John Stott said, “We work ourselves up into a state of self-righteous indignation over the disgraceful behavior of other people, while the very same behavior seems not nearly so serious when it is ours, rather than theirs.”⁴ So Paul says that when we do this we *condemn* ourselves because we *practice the very same things*. In the context here, Paul says in verse 12 that the conscience convicts the Gentile because there is a moral sense of right and wrong. In verse 15 he says that this moral conscience is *written on their hearts*. That universal sense of what is right and wrong points to the fact that there is a God. But the Jew had more than their conscience. They had the law that told them what is good. They were told that they should have no other gods before them and that they were to love others as themselves. But in failing to keep the law it judges them.

Francis Schaeffer called this “the invisible tape recorder.”⁵ It is like you have a tape recorded around your neck—your I-phone is on constant record—and on the day of judgment God says that he will be fair and he will simply play back to you your own

words and judge you according to the standards you had for others. Paul asks in verse 3, “Do you suppose, O man—you who judge those who practice such things and yet you do them yourself—that you will escape the judgment of God?” Just think of all the times you point your finger at others because of their shortcomings and complain about their failures and how they hurt you. It will come right back at you.

Paul is talking to religious people here and in verse 5 he refers to their *hard and impenitent heart*. Tim Keller says that these words *hard and impenitent* are words used to describe idolatry.⁶ While they may reject bowing down to external idols, the danger for the religious person is to worship their own goodness or morality. So if you think your goodness is going to save you, you are mistaken. Because when we play that tape recorder back and replay the complaints you had about other people, you will be held to the same standard and your very own words will condemn you.

But is my sin really worthy of eternal judgment? J. I. Packer responds to this by saying, “Anyone who has ever been convicted of sin knows beyond any shadow of a doubt that the answer is yes.”⁷ The reason the answer is “yes” is because of the severity of sin. We saw it last week. It is the rejection of God and the making of good things ultimate things—idolatry—pride—the Big Me. And so ultimately hell and judgment is God giving man over to what he really wants—life without God.

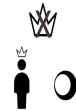
C. S. Lewis captures this image in his book *The Great Divorce* where he describes a busload of people from hell traveling to the outskirts of heaven. They are being urged to leave behind their sins that have trapped them in hell—but they refuse. Lewis says, “Hell begins with a grumbling mood, always complaining, always blaming others . . . In each of us there is something growing, which will be hell unless it is nipped in the bud.”⁸ Packer says it this way, “the unbeliever has preferred to be by himself, without God, defying God, having God against him and he shall have his preference. Nobody stands under the wrath of God except those who have chosen to do so.”⁹ And so Keller summarizes what Lewis says: “The people in hell are miserable. We see raging like unchecked flames their pride, their paranoia, their self-pity, their certainty that everyone else is wrong, that everyone else is an idiot! All their humility is gone, and thus so is their sanity. They are utterly, finally locked in a prison of their own self-centeredness and their pride progressively expands into a bigger and bigger mushroom cloud. They continue to go to pieces forever, blaming everyone but themselves.”¹⁰ Hell is the greatest monument to human freedom. It leads to our destruction. Summing it up, Lewis said, “There are two kinds of people—those who say *thy will be done* to God or to those to whom God in the end says “*Thy*

*will be done.*²¹ It is retributive. It is God giving man over to what he wants.

There is a God. He made the world and he made us to know him and to live under his good rule. You can't find yourself apart from finding God.



We all reject God's good rule and try to live our life without God. We make a mess of our lives, our society and our world. Our sin destroys the creation of God.



What is God going to do about our rebellion? He won't let us rebel forever. *It is appointed unto man once to die and then face the judgment.* (Hebrews 9:27)



God's wrath is revealed. It is part of the gospel and clearly affirmed in Scripture. *God's wrath is right.* It is a reflection of the perfection of God and his love. *God's wrath is retributive.* We will be judge for what we do. If that is the case, what hope do we have? Paul said it well when he said, "*Do you suppose, O man . . . that you will escape the judgment of God?*"

God's Rescue from Wrath

We need rescued and I can't leave you here without giving you a peek into next week. Paul says in Romans 3:23-25. "*For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified [made right with God] by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.*" That word *propitiation* is a mouth full. But do you know what it means? It means that through the cross, Jesus SATISFIED the anger and wrath of God against our sin. He took our judgment on himself. He cried out from the cross, "*My God, My God, why have you forsaken men?*" So by faith in Jesus, we can be rescued from the coming wrath of God.

I was in a conversation with a few guys this week over a passage of Scripture and the passage pointed out the judgment of God against all sin. One individual was really taken back by how comprehensive God's judgment was and with a measure of holy fear he asked, "who can possibly escape it?" It was a great insight. My response was, "Yes! That is it! No one can escape on their own. We need rescued. We need Jesus." We heard Carl Sagan cry out in despair last week that there is no one coming

to rescue this planet from the cruelty of man. The Bible has something to say about that. The Bible says, “Oh, yes there is!” Jesus the risen Savior and Lord, the coming judge, can liberate you from your sin and judgment. He is your atoning sacrifice for sin. Repent of your sin. Turn to Jesus and rely on his death and resurrection. And you can be saved!

¹Tim Keller *The Reason for God* (New York: Dutton, 2008) 82-83

²Philip Jensen, “Two Ways to Live #3: Judgment” Lecture at <https://phillipjensen.com/resources/two-ways-to-live-atonement/> March 10, 2016

³Miroslav Volf *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness and Reconciliation* (Abingdon, 1996) 303-304

⁴John Stott *The Message of Romans* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1994) 82

⁵Francis Schaeffer, quoted in Tim Keller *Romans 1-7 For You* (The GoodBook Company, 2014) 41

⁶Ibid., 43

⁷J. I. Packer *Knowing God* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1973) 152

⁸C. S. Lewis quoted in Keller *The Reason for God* p 78-79

⁹Packer, 153

¹⁰Keller, 79

¹¹Ibid., 79

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COMMUNITY
GROUPS

Getting To Know Me Questions

1. Can you think of a time when you were angry? Why were you angry? What was right about your anger? At what point can your anger turn to sin?
2. How would you try to explain “the day of judgment” to someone if you were sharing the gospel?

Diving Into The Word

3. Read Romans 2:1-5. When you consider how those outside your church live; do you shake your head and judge in your heart; or do you think: *My heart is by nature just like theirs; it just shows itself differently.* Talk about it.
4. What are the sins you are tempted to excuse in yourself while condemning them in others?
5. Read Romans 2:1-16 a section at a time (1-5, 6-11, 12-16). What do you learn from each section about the judgment and wrath of God? What is “right” about God’s judgment? How do you feel about the doctrine of God’s wrath?
6. Read Romans 9:1-5. Describe Paul’s burden for the one who doesn’t believe. What moved Paul to feel this way for the unbeliever? How do you think that kind of burden grows in a person?

Taking It Home

7. Practice walking through the first three points of the gospel on page 10.
8. As a group develop a prayer list of people you would like to see turn in faith to Jesus.