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TO ROW, ROW, ROW THE BOAT

Romans 2:1-24

There have been a couple of incidents in Laurie’s and my life that have served as reminders of the truth of the human race. One of them happened years ago, an incident I’ve referred to a number of times, when our late night red eye flight home from Maui was canceled. That’s a frustrating and stressful experience because you’re tired to begin with, since it happened at midnight. By the time our flight was canceled the rest of the airport was deserted. There were just a couple hundred of us poor, benighted, tired folks from our flight. Eventually the airline people told us to be patient and they would get us booked on flights the next day. Also, buses were coming to take us to hotels where the airline would put us up for what was left of the night. There would be two buses. The first one finally showed up at 2 in the morning. But there were quite a few more people than there were seats on that bus. That’s when we saw human nature at work. There was no pushing and shoving, no fights broke out. But it wouldn’t have taken much for that to happen. People were clearly maneuvering and angling to get on that bus. They didn’t want to wait for the promised second bus. The mood was definitely, “I and my loved ones are getting on this bus, so stay out of my way.” It most definitely was not a, “Please, you go first,” kind of situation. Laurie and I decided we didn’t want to join the fray, so we let them have at it and chose to wait. What we saw was that if you stress human beings enough, what comes out is, “I’m taking care of me.”

There is a scary part of human nature that lies not far beneath the veneer of civilization, that survival of the fittest, take care of me streak. It shows up more than we’d like to think. In Romans 1:29-31 Paul gave a harsh review of what you see in human beings. He said that when you look at the human race you see every kind of wickedness and evil. There is envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice, slander, gossip, a lack of love, understanding and mercy. He did not mean that every single individual has all of those lamentable characteristics, but that when you look at the human race as a whole you can see all of these things

I realize that’s a dim view of the human race, but sometimes the truth hurts.

Some might say that’s extreme, that people aren’t that bad. A woman from Delaware named Chloe Mrozak wanted to go to Hawaii. She presented the required vaccination card that allowed her to skip a 10 day quarantine for unvaccinated people. However, some sharp eyed person noticed somehow that “Moderna” was misspelled “Maderna” on her card. This raised suspicions. They checked with authorities in Delaware and learned there was no record of her vaccination. She had used a fake vaccination card. By this time they had lost track of her on the island, but they were able to locate her through social media as she posted a number of pictures of her vacation. She was arrested when she showed up at the airport for her flight home. When arrested she tried to convince officers that she had paid her personal physician to vaccinate her, even though the vaccinations are free. She was charged with a misdemeanor, bail set at $2000. This is the human race in all its glory. Deceit, taking care of me no matter what the effect on others so I get what I want. Her case is not some hideous atrocity, but it is just one more small example that humans have a problem.

Today we’re going to think about the nature of human beings and the fact that though some may disguise it, it has a real unpleasant aspect to it, and it is there in all of us. Let’s look at Romans 2:1-24, which peels away the mask that disguises some religious people. It will illustrate what I’m talking about.

WHEN WE JUDGE OTHERS WE CONDEMN OURSELVES

In Romans 1 Paul identified the root cause of the problems of the human race. The dogma of our culture is that people are basically good. That’s a nice sentiment, but if it’s true, why do we have so many problems? Why is there so much crime and violence, why is there so much division, so much ugliness between people, so many broken relationships? If we are all basically good, then we ought to see humans producing basically good things, instead of bad stuff like envy, slander, lack of love, broken relationships every where you look. Our neighborhood homeowner’s association is having its annual elections for our association board. There is a woman who has served on that board for a couple of years who, we recently learned, is not going to run for the board again. She’s done. She said she can’t take it anymore. She has been surprised at how mean people are. She has been subjected to a lot of ugliness. This is stunning, because we have what most would consider to be a very nice neighborhood. Most of our neighbors love our little 70 house neighborhood. We don’t have any big issues. No one has parked a huge RV on their property and has relatives living in it. No one has a couple of derelict cars sitting up on blocks in their front yard. No one has painted their house chartreuse. There are no weed grown, rat infested homes that are candidates for a slum. There are no big controversies. And yet this woman has been ground down by all the sniping, back-biting and selfishness she’s had to deal with. She has found out the hard way that Paul’s description of the human race was right on the money. That shouldn’t be how it is if people are basically good.

Paul certainly knew through first hand experience that what he said was true. He had been subjected to hatred, opposition and abuse on a fairly regular basis. As he looked around the Roman Empire he saw injustice, division, in-fighting, jealousy and brutality everywhere. Where does all this come from?

Paul identified the source of the trouble in 1:21. “Although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.” That’s where all of the trouble starts. Refusing to honor God and submit to him instantly and inevitably puts people on a track to have a society full of injustice, division, violence and broken relationships of all kinds. That brings us to the classic religious person. It’s great that there are religious people who don’t have this problem because they do honor God and give thanks to him, right? Religious people don’t display malice, deceit, envy, slander, gossip, lack of love, lack of mercy, dissension and broken relationships, right?

The Jewish people of Paul’s day would have nodded their heads and given hearty agreement to his analysis of the problem of the human world. But they would have insisted that they were exempt from what Paul described as the root cause of all the problems. They did honor God and give thanks to him. Their entire culture was formed around the idea that they were God’s chosen people. The center of their life together was the temple in Jerusalem where they went to worship God. The driving force in their culture was God’s Law, given through Moses. So what Paul said of the Gentile world of his day was absolutely true, but it was not true of the ancient Jews. Despite that reality, they exhibited all the unfortunate traits of the human race. They also were torn by division, dissension, bickering, back-stabbing, jealousy, malice, deceit, lack of love, broken relationships and all the rest of it. If what Paul said was true, that all of that stemmed from failing to honor God, but they did honor God, how did that stuff show up among them? Was Paul wrong about where all these troubles come from?

Paul takes up that question in chapter 2. He is essentially going to say that there’s a problem with their premise. Their premise was that they did honor. Paul is going to say they did not, in fact, truly honor God. Verse 1 says, “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.” Paul insisted that the ancient Jews, in their condemnation of that world, were condemning themselves because they did the same things. In other words, they didn’t really honor God, and as a result they also were selfish, fighting, hurting others, envious and all the rest.

We all have a couple of unfortunate quirks. One is that we tend to criticize and judge other people. In fact, that seems to be an almost irresistible knee jerk reaction. We naturally decide what is wrong with people and what they’ve done without even consciously choosing to do so.

A couple of weeks ago I watched a playoff football game between the San Francisco 49ers and the Dallas Cowboys. San Francisco outplayed Dallas the entire game, yet in the closing minute Dallas still had a chance to somehow snatch victory from the jaws of defeat. They were down by 6 points, but they had the ball and were moving down the field though with no time outs left. A touchdown and an extra point would win the game for them. They had the ball around the Niners’ 40 yard line with the clocked stopped with 14 seconds remaining. They snapped the ball and the quarterback took off running up the middle of the field. As soon as he did it, I said to Laurie, “Oh, this is a bad decision.” He gained 17 yards, but the problem with a play like that is the clock keeps running. By the time they were able to line up and snap the ball again the clock read 0 seconds left. The game was over. I immediately said, “That was idiotic! That had no chance of working.” Pretty much the entire football world has agreed with my assessment. My point here is that I have never been a football coach or a serious player of the game. Yet somehow I felt my role was to sit in judgment on those who are coaching and playing the game. It was just natural. That’s what we humans tend to do.

There is another thing about us that is worse. The second quirk is that we see other people’s flaws but are not very good at seeing our own. It seems to be easy for us to judge others and not notice that we are guilty of the same things they are.

I have encountered too many followers of Jesus who have a thorough, even exhaustive knowledge of doctrine, who have impressive knowledge of the Scriptures, who have been believers for many years, who seem to be mature, admirable examples of faith, but who are rigid, quick to find fault and write people off. I have seen many times Christians put their own good ahead of the good of others, sacrificing other people rather than what they want. When Jesus faced that choice, he sacrificed himself on a cross. But too often I’ve seen Christians do the opposite and never even notice it’s a problem.

Paul says in verse 3 when you pass judgment on others and yet do the same things, do you think you will escape God’s judgment? In other words, God will use the same standard to judge you that you use to judge other people. Doesn’t that seem fair? In Matthew 7:1-2 Jesus said, “Do not judge, or you will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.” God is not a fan of double standards. He insists the standard we use for others is the standard we will be held accountable to.

GOD JUDGES ON THE BASIS OF REALITY

What do you suppose would have been the response of ancient Jews to Paul’s claim that they did the same things as the Gentiles upon whom they passed judgment? I’m pretty sure it would have been a very offended, “How dare you say such a thing? How can you say we don’t honor God? We are all about him. We’re not like the Gentiles. We are God’s people!” Paul is going to answer that objection in a bit, but first he wanted to establish a truth about the character of God. That truth is that he is a totally fair judge. He doesn’t ever get scammed by the fake image projected by human beings. He judges what they really are, not what they try to convince themselves and others they are.

If you don’t follow the flow of Paul’s argument in Romans and you take verses 6-11 out of their larger context, you will end up with some theological difficulties. Paul says in verse 6, “God will repay each person according to what they have done.” In verse 11 he says, “God does not show favoritism.” That’s the point Paul was making. God has one standard, and he applies it to everyone equally. Those who “persist in doing good” will be given eternal life. But those who are “self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil,” will get wrath and anger.

That sounds like God will look at what we’ve done, good or bad, and if it’s mostly good, we get a thumbs up. If it’s mostly bad, we get a thumbs down. In other words, we will be judged according to how good we are. That’s what we heard about in December. He’s making a list, checking it twice, he’s going to find out who’s naughty or nice. This is salvation by our works. That’s a problem for us. It is not good news.

However, we know that is not what Paul meant to say. We know from 1:17 that Paul said we can have a righteousness “that is by faith from first to last.” Righteousness means passing the class with flying colors, and there Paul said that doesn’t happen by our good works. It happens by faith. That is going to be the major theme of this letter. It is all about God’s grace being given to us by faith. So we are not saved by doing good works. That’s really good news because by our own efforts, all of us are squarely on the naughty list.

How are we to understand these verses then? Paul was making a point about the character of God. He is fair and impartial as a judge. If he goes on the basis of our actual character and actions, we are all guilty. If you judge other people and are certain that God will condemn them, then you do the same things they do, then you’re in a world of hurt. And that’s the point he made clear to the ancient Jews in verses 12-24.

GOD JUDGES PEOPLE DEPENDING ON WHAT THEY KNOW

Verses 14-15 help us with that question of what God will do with people who never hear the news about Jesus. Many Gentiles of Paul’s day had no clue about the Law of Moses. But Paul said that didn’t mean they couldn’t do some of the things the Law requires. He says, “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.”

His point is that people have consciences. They know right from wrong even if they know nothing about the ancient Jewish Law or about Jesus. We know this is true. People who know nothing of the Bible still have a sense of what is right and wrong. We see that all the time. How is it that they know right from wrong much of the time?

There is an example of obeying a law without ever knowing it. It is the law of ablaut reduplication, which is a law that you obey instinctively even though no one has ever taught it to you. That law is that when you repeat a word with a different vowel, the order of the vowels will always be I A O. So you never refer to hearing the patter pitter of little feet, it’s always pitter patter. Politicians never flop flip on an issue, they only flip flop. This is a law you obey all the time when you refer to King Kong, or ping pong, or someone being wishy washy or in tip top shape.You follow the law when you zig zag or dilly dally, and when you mention that the clock goes tick tock. That’s a silly example with no moral implications whatsoever. But the point is that people instinctively know some things, including laws of right and wrong, without being taught about them.

Does that mean, then, that some people will gain salvation by obeying their own consciences, doing what is right in their eyes? No, we need to notice what Paul said in verse 12. “All 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.”

Let’s consider the case of someone who knows nothing of the Jewish Law or of Jesus. This person knows something about right and wrong. He or she has a conscience. These verses tell us that God will judge that person on the basis of their conscience. On that basis, Paul says, that person will “perish apart from the law.” We all know that it would be unfair for God to judge people on the basis of information that they never had. He doesn’t do that. But he will judge on the basis of what we do with what we do know.

What God does is say, “All right, you don’t know some of the things I have revealed to others, but you do have some knowledge of right and wrong. So I will judge you on how well you follow your own conscience.” If he does that, how do you think we’ll do? Do you always do what is right? One of the most common issues Christians have is they struggle with believing that God really loves and accepts them. Why is that? Because we know there is a gap between what we ought to be and do, and what we actually are. We feel guilty because we are.

The ScienceAlert.com web site has reported on a recent study that revealed the average person is holding on to 13 secrets, and that of those 13 they’ve never told a single person about 5 of them. In other words, we all have something to hide, something we feel guilty about. All of us have some nagging guilt. Why is that? It is because there are things we know we should do that we haven’t done, there are ways we should be living that we are not. In other words, we don’t measure up to our own standards, our own consciences. Which means if God just judged us based on our own conscience, we would, in Paul’s terms, “perish without the law.”

Sadly, Paul also says that those who “sin under the law” will be judged by the law.” This is a reference to the first century Jewish people who would have objected that they do honor God. Paul claimed that they were just as guilty as the Gentiles. In verse 23 he said, “You who boast in the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law?” He answered his own question in verse 24, “As it is written: ‘God’s name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.’”

Verses 21-22 get quite specific. “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?” Wait, Paul was claiming the ancient Jews stole and committed adultery even as they were condemning those actions? Yes, but he almost certainly had some particular aspects of those wrongs in mind. His fellow Jews were known for some rather ruthless and ethically ambiguous business deals, especially when dealing with Gentiles. They even had a reputation for that kind of thing. Paul was saying that they were ripping people off with their clever schemes.

They committed adultery through their contorted interpretation of Scripture. They took a verse out of Deuteronomy that said if a husband found something “unclean” in his wife he could divorce her. They did two things with that verse. First they said it *commanded* that he should divorce her, which was not true. Then they defined unclean as anything he didn’t particularly like. In other words, they gave husbands carte blanche to discard a wife for pretty much any reason whatsoever so they could have another one. Jesus said that was tantamount to committing adultery.

But what about this business of robbing temples? There’s a lot of debate about what that meant and I don’t think anyone knows exactly what Paul had in mind. Some scholars believe that “robbing temples” was actually a euphemism for doing something sacrilegious. I suspect that is what he meant.

This kind of thing hasn’t gone away. In 2013 authorities in New York arrested 5 men who were part of a drug ring selling illegal prescription drugs. The police called it the “Only After Sundown” case because the group refused to sell their drugs after sundown on Friday and only opened for business again on Saturday after sundown. That’s right, they were scrupulous about observing the Sabbath, but had no issues with selling illegal drugs.

We have some family members who had some dealings with a man who lives in our neighborhood who is a very “Christian” man. He’s involved in his church, he sent his kids to a Christian school, and he is always eager to talk about faith and about God. He’s a very up kind of guy. And in his dealings with our family members he did everything he could to cheat them. He literally attempted to break the law in his efforts to essentially steal money from them. It was appalling. Somehow his faith gets overwhelmed by his greed. And that’s the kind of thing that happened with Paul’s contemporaries.

Paul was aiming at the question, who needs grace from God? If there was a person who, without fail, in every part of his soul and his life, did what Paul described in verse 7, by persistence in doing good, seek glory, honor and immortality, that person would deserve eternal life. Here’s the truth we need to remember. We only need grace when we don’t meet the standard. At one point Paul thought he met the standard. He deserved eternal life. He had earned it. And he knew quite a few of his colleagues who thought the same thing about themselves.

What Paul did in chapter 2 was to disabuse some ancient Jews of the notion that they deserved something good from God. They would be judged by the law, and that meant, as he said in verse 9, “trouble and distress.” His message for good religious people today is the same. You may look like you don’t do what the Gentiles do and fail to honor God, but the truth is you choose your own desires over his will and glory, and in so doing you are guilty of the same thing. You need grace!

IMPLICATIONS

WE’RE ALL IN THE SAME BOAT

The main point of this passage is for every person to understand where we stand before God. After Paul’s description of the Gentile or non-believing world it would be easy for God’s people, the religious tribe, to say, “Yeah, those people are really a mess. I’m glad I’m not like them.”

In this chapter Paul says, “Not so fast, Religion Boy.” He says you’re just as much of a mess. In fact, maybe you’re worse, because you think you see what’s wrong with all those other people and you look down on them. Meanwhile, you’re guilty of exactly the same things that you condemn in them.

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus revealed the real meaning of Righteousness, the intent of God’s Law. It was that we are so pure good that we never even have an unworthy thought. We never get frustrated with people, we never get angry with them, we never wish them I’ll. There is just patience and kindness in our hearts. We don’t ever act or even think selfishly, we just love from the heart and instinctively do God’s will without even thinking. How do we measure up by that standard? Not well. I mentioned the Christian who cheated some members of my family. I confess my thoughts about him were not uniformly charitable and full of grace. I said things about him to Laurie that were less than kind and loving. By Jesus’ standard I revealed an underlying ugly truth about me.

Paul is setting us up to reveal to us God’s solution to the human condition. But why would we be open to a solution if we don’t think we have a problem? There are still people in our country running around saying that Covid either doesn’t exist, or if it does, it’s no big deal. Why would I be afraid of getting a cold? If Covid isn’t a problem, then why would I need a solution like some vaccine? If there’s no problem, who needs a solution? Solutions are for problems. Ancient Jews, especially of the Pharisee brand like Paul used to be, did not think they had a problem before God, And that is something of a theme with religious people. We’re better than those other nasty people, and we are God’s favorites, so we don’t need a solution.

It’s funny, as I was studying this passage verse 16 caught my eye, and a baseball event popped into my mind. Verse 16 says on the day he judges, “God will judge people’s secrets.” Early in June last year the San Diego Padres were still sailing, an exciting team that looked like it might be set for a genuine chance at the World Series. This was before their spectacular and ignominious collapse. One of the encouraging aspects of that team was the pitching of Ryan Weathers. He had skyrocketed through the organization, made the big club, and was in the starting rotation pitching surprisingly well. They needed him and he was pitching great. At one point my son, Toby, said, “Dad, he really concerns me.” I asked him why. He said because of his underlying numbers. I didn’t know what he meant. Baseball these days is astoundingly technical. There are arcane statistics about everything. The game is nearly dissected to death. All my life when it comes to pitchers you look at their won loss record and their earned run average, and Weathers looked great on both. No problem, right? Toby said his swing and miss rate is not good, meaning batters were not swinging and missing his pitches very often. He said his hard contact rate and average exit velocity given up were bad. In other words, batters weren’t missing his pitches and when they hit them, they hit them really hard. Then he told me his BABIP, his batting average on balls in play that he was giving up, was very low. So batters were hitting the ball a lot, they were hitting it really hard, but they weren’t getting a lot of base hits. In other words, they were hitting rockets right at people. All that adds up to this guy was really lucky as a pitcher. But you can’t last very long just on luck. Toby said, “Dad, it’s going to catch up to him. He’s not going to be able to keep this up.” A little ways down the road he proved to be a true prophet. Those hard hit balls started finding places to land. He began to get torched spectacularly every time he pitched. It got so bad they had to stop playing him. At first he looked good, but there were some secrets, and if you knew the secrets he didn’t look good at all. And at some point the secret was no longer a secret.

Why talk about that? Because we all have a secret, and the secret is that like Weathers, we’re not nearly as good as we look. This passage tells us that our secrets are going to come out. God is going to judge us by them, and at that point we’ll be way more exposed than Ryan Weathers was. How would you feel if everything you think and are inside was put on display for everyone? I wouldn’t like that at all. None of us would. We hide things because they are ugly and we know it. Can’t hide them from God. Which means we are all in the same boat. We have a problem. We are just as guilty as we could be before God. We need a solution.

THE RIGHT RESPONSE IS HUMILITY

Being in the same boat reminded me of something I experienced when I was working for a ministry on the campus of Long Beach State. A good friend who was involved in that ministry eagerly jumped into the university rowing team and became a rowing fanatic. One day the rowing team had an open house to publicize their sport. They invited people to come and learn a little about it and actually gave them a chance to get in a boat and row. My friend invited me and several other buddies to come. They offered us guests the chance to get in one of the boats with a couple of the actual rowers. I figured, “How hard can it be? I’ve rowed boats before. No problem. After all, the song says you “row, row, row your boat, gently down the stream. Sounds easy.” It turned there was a bit more to it than that. They actually had to instruct us even on how to get into the boat. The boat I was in was an 8, meaning there were 8 rowers and a coxswain. The boats are very light and kind of fragile so you have to step only on the places that can hold your weight. You have to sit on this seat that slides back and forth as you row. You have a place to put your feet that you push against with your legs to get power into your stroke as you row. You have to push with your legs as you pull the oar back, and as you push the oar back you have to push it down to get the blade out of the water and you have to rotate it. As I was rowing along I thought I was doing pretty well. I saw a couple of people in my boat that were struggling and I thought, “What kooks. They look clueless. But I’ve got this.” Right about that time I failed to rotate my oar properly and on the back stroke I accidentally let it dip into the water. Rowers call that “catching a crab.” The boat was moving through the water at a pretty good clip, and when I did that the oar slammed back into me. So who looked like a kook now? I’m telling you all this because my one day of rowing all of us newbies recognized we were literally in the same boat. We were terrible and we knew it. We had no sense that maybe we were pretty good at this thing.

That should be our attitude as we regard ourselves before God and in comparison with other people. Just imagine all your secrets being put up on a giant screen for all to see, and you will know that humility is the absolute right attitude in all things. We should see ourselves as in the same boat as all those around us, and in huge need of God’s solution before him.

SEEK THE RIGHT THING

A question this passage raises for us is, “What kind of people does God want us to be?” There is an interesting contrast in this chapter that points us in the right direction. Obviously the kind of people he wants us to be is humble people of faith, who trust in God’s solution for our condition, not in ours.

But there is also a point here about what we seek. Notice verse 7 speaks of people who by persistence in doing good “seek glory and honor and immortality.” Wait, how does seeking glory and honor go with being humble? Good question. It is answered by the last words of this chapter. “Such a person’s praise is not from other people, but from God.” All of us want glory. That’s as much a part of being human as needing food. But we think it is glory before other people that we need. It’s not. What we need is to seek glory from God. It is to have praise from him. It is to be humble as we desires, to have faith as he desires, and to be faithful to him in all things. It is to long for him to say, “Well done, my child.” God wants us to live seeking that glory and honor.

The opposite of that is in verse 8. It is to be self seeking. That is to please myself, to get what I want for myself, to seek to get other people to notice me and praise me. That, Paul says, is the path to wrath and anger, trouble and distress. Who would want that? So the answer for us is to have God is the only audience for our lives, to long for the glory that is what we truly need, his praise. We don’t do that to earn his favor and love, but we do it because he has given his love and we want to honor him.