

## Prayers

### **To God**

*Read Psalm 24, and then use this as a way of focussing your prayers. Let the Spirit lead you to those parts of the psalm which most fully express your thoughts and feelings. If the psalm does not reflect these in any way, then let these words of scripture challenge you and your faith.*

### **For Self**

*Pray about your speech.*

*Pray for those you find it hard to speak to*

*Pray for those to whom you perhaps speak too much*

*Ask the Lord to guide your speech so that it reflects the love of Jesus*

*Ask the Lord to bring love, joy and peace into your speech, whenever you speak*

### **For others**

**Lord God Almighty, we live in Your world and yet we do not fully understand it. We live as if we have a right to do what we want, and forget to live responsibly. We assume we know everything about our world when we do not. We are selfish and not generous in our lifestyle. So forgive us, and from Your Word, teach us to live with responsibility, care and consideration towards others and towards our world. For the sake of the present as well as the future; speak to us now we pray. AMEN**

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## Meditation

In the Kingdom of God there will be peace.

Peace to think;

to dwell on what is good and right and true  
and not be oppressed by temptation.

Peace to love;

to offer ourselves in unrestrained affection  
and not fear rejection from anyone.

Peace to see;

to open our eyes to the beauty all around us  
and not be influenced by fashion and publicity.

Peace to listen;

to hear what is said and enjoy music's breadth  
and not be subjected to the noise of the world.

In the Kingdom of God there will be peace, and so much more.

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## Bible Passage

### **Romans 2:1-11**

<sup>1</sup> So, whoever you are, you have no excuse when you pass judgement on others; for in judging someone else you condemn yourself, because you do the very same things for which you judge others! <sup>2</sup> Now, we know that God's judgment rightly falls on those who do such things; <sup>3</sup> but as for you, do you imagine that when you pass judgement on people who do these things and yet do them yourself, that you will escape God's judgment? <sup>4</sup> Or do you presume upon the riches of His goodness, tolerance and patience, disregarding the fact that God's kindness is intended to lead you to repentance? <sup>5</sup> Because of your stubborn and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath, when the truth of God's judgements will be revealed.

<sup>6</sup> For God will repay everyone according to what they have done: <sup>7</sup> giving eternal life to those who strive for glory, honour and immortality by persistently doing good; <sup>8</sup> but wrath and fury to those who are selfishly disobedient to the truth but follow wickedness. <sup>9</sup> Trouble and distress will come on every one of you who brings about evil, Jew first and Greek as well. <sup>10</sup> but glory and honour and peace for every one of you who does good, Jew first and Greek as well. <sup>11</sup> For there is no partiality with God.

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## Bible study Review

Paul has just lambasted human society and the world in general (1:18-32), concluding that death is the unavoidable consequence of all sin (1:32). We might hope that he now explains the Gospel of God's grace by which we are saved, but there is more he must say about sin, much more. The passage we have read today begins by questioning the judgemental attitudes people have towards sin. Judgemental attitudes frequently destroy Christian fellowship, let alone human relationships and endeavours. Paul knows what he is talking about therefore when in developing his theme of the sins of humanity, he homes in on this difficult subject.

The first part of our passage today is Paul's rather strong attack on judgemental attitudes. People persist in accusing others of being sinners yet as he says, God's judgement alone is righteous (2:1-3), and before Him, the only true response should be repentance, not intolerance towards others. However, why would Paul say this, and what is his purpose here? This begins to come out in the second half of the passage, where, after declaring God's just reward for good and wrath for evil (2:6-8), he says that all will come under this judgement, '*Jew first and Greek as well*' (2:9). Indeed, the phrase is repeated (see verse 10). But although this phrase is not a part of his substantive argument, it reveals something of Paul's thoughts as he speaks, for Paul lived in a world divided between Jew and Greek (Gentile).

The problem Paul was faced with as he taught the Gospel was that by declaring a Gospel for the forgiveness of sins, this was misunderstood by some of those who heard him. There were within most Christian churches a percentage of Jewish people who thought, even if they did not say so, that as Jews who obeyed the Law, they were inherently 'good'. They believed that by their special relationship with God they were exempt from God's judgement on sin, and

assumed God would save them whatever. Paul's opening words here are directed firmly against such attitudes. 'Oh no', he says in verse 1, if Jews '*pass judgement*' on Greeks by retaining such attitudes, they are themselves subject to God's wrath (2:2f.!) He caustically points out that God's graciousness is supposed to lead people to repentance, not to encourage judgemental attitudes towards others (2:4,5). Paul lays down his marker '*there is no partiality with God*' (2:11). It was an important point that Paul had to make.

Without understanding this, we might find ourselves misinterpreting the passage. For example, we might think the passage says we should never 'judge' others, which is of course entirely impractical, because critical judgement is the important driving force for all manner of good change within human relationships. 'Judgement', per se, is surely not 'wrong'. Also, the passage makes it sound very pious to be one who refrains from making judgements about others, but none of us can escape the need to make choices about our own behaviour, or take decisions about life. Judgement is necessary if we are to be decisive, or to learn and be taught. At the very least, we must remember that this passage is about God's ultimate judgement of our sinful nature, not the sometimes unclear details of everyday life about which we have to make various critical 'judgements'.

The last five verses of this passage (2:6-11) are a stark message. Good is rewarded by God and evil is destroyed (2:6-8). It is not easy for a Christian to hear this because we are so used to reading about the Gospel of grace from the pen of Paul. Here, however, Paul is speaking of the absolute and final justice of God as Judge, the same God Jesus spoke of when He gave the 'parable of the Sheep and the Goats' (Matt 25:32-46). The reason Paul writes this is because even God's people can fail to take proper account of God's absolute justice and the ultimate consequences of their actions. He insists, God is judge (2:9-11), moreover, he is the same judge for Jews and Gentiles. All people of all origin and background come under the same authority of their one and only Maker.

Of course, without Christ, there is no hope, and this is the point Paul is building up to presenting (in chapter 3). There is much to take in, here but it is important. Some read through Romans and miss out this section because it is difficult to interpret. We cannot afford to do this, because it is all part of Paul's greater description of the Gospel.

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## Going Deeper

### ***The nature of judgement***

The first few verses of chapter two make a compelling case for all people to refrain from making judgements about the sins of others (2:1-3), because all stand before one Judge, who is God. However, we should be careful about what this means in practice. Paul himself makes frequent criticisms of people and their behaviour in his own letters (see, for example, Gal 3:1-5, 2 Thess 3:11, Rom 16:17,18), so some cause him of hypocrisy. Can he make comments about the behaviour of others on the one hand, and here, say that all people who judge each other are at fault?

It is only by taking into account Paul's general theme (above) that we can avoid such a misinterpretation. This passage does not tell people to abstain from making judgements in life, for we have to do this all the time, just as Paul did. Paul's condemnation is for those who make the unjustified claim that they are all right before God and do not have a problem with sin, when according to God's Word, all people have a problem with sin. This is a specific point. When it

comes to making judgements about sin, it is a good rule of faith to refrain from saying or implying that we know best ourselves, but point to the Gospel and the teaching of Jesus Christ. After all, Jesus Himself taught that we should look at the '*plank in our own eye and not the mote in the eye of another*' (Matt 7:3-5). All of us stand condemned before God without the mercy of Christ; God is our Judge and Jesus is our Saviour.

### ***Judgement for Jews and judgement for Gentiles?***

In order to understand why Paul was concerned about Jewish Christian attitudes (see above), we must look in some Jewish literature which was very influential in the first century, the so-called 'apocryphal' books of the Bible. These books were part of Scriptures in Jesus' day, but because they were originally written in Greek, not Hebrew, the Jews omitted them from the Old Testament centuries after the time of Christ, and they are not now part of Old Testament scripture (at least for Protestants).

Now in Jesus' day, a book of the Apocrypha called the 'Wisdom of Solomon' was very influential. It contains these verses: '*But You, O God, are kind and true, patient, and ruling all things in mercy. For even if we sin, we are Yours, knowing Your power; but we will not sin, because we know that You acknowledge us as Yours. For to know You is complete righteousness, and to know Your power is the root of immortality.*' (Wisdom of Solomon 15:1-3)

These verses were well used in Jesus' day, and they clearly imply that if Jewish people sin, they will be accepted by God because they 'know God'. When this ancient passage talks about 'knowing God', it means having the laws of Moses and the heritage faith in the Covenant given to Abraham, their forefather. So if anyone sought to argue against Paul then he could well have quoted these words.

### ***Leading to repentance***

Paul, however, would not have wanted an argument about this. He wanted to make the point that the goodness of God is intended to lead us to repentance (2:4), and it was essential to Paul's argument that God sought to save those who accepted their sinful nature, not those who sought to avoid responsibility for their actions by claiming special favours.

Paul goes on, for there is a sting in the tail for those who '*think they will escape God's judgement*' (i.e. the Jews - 2:4). By refusing to repent and accept their own sinfulness, they display a stubbornness of heart which has consequences; they store up '*wrath for yourself on the day of wrath*' (2:5). Here Paul demonstrates a feature of his writing which we have not yet met in Romans; he connects what happens now with what will happen in the future on the '*Day of the Lord*'. In other words, verse 5 means that those who are un-repentant are judged by God; they receive the consequences of his wrath not just now, but finally on the Day of the Lord when His wrath will be released on all evil (Rev 11:8 etc.)

### ***Salvation according to good deeds?***

The whole of our passage up to this point speaks about God's final judgement of all things (2:2,3,5), but it is only in verses 6 to 11 that Paul begins to describe this in detail. Elsewhere in Scripture, the so-called 'Last Judgement' is described in different ways, often as the 'Day of the Lord', or 'the Day of His Coming'. Paul explains here that the moral nature of the world God created requires that good is rewarded (2:7) and evil is met with God's 'wrath and fury' (2:8).

Many Christians have difficulty reading this, even when it is explained that this is part of Paul's explanation of the moral nature of the world as created by God, where the saving work of Christ

has not yet been proclaimed. It is therefore helpful if we compare what Paul says here about the Last Judgement with what Jesus said in his last parable before he died, the famous '*sheep and the goats*' (Matt 25:31f.). In this parable, Jesus warns starkly that the sheep who are saved by God at the coming of the '*Son of Man*' are those who did the good deeds of feeding the hungry etc. not knowing that in so doing they served Jesus Himself. The goats who are condemned to everlasting damnation (25:46) are those who judged for themselves that they were safe, but in reality, they had not served their Lord or done good, and God gives them no further explanation before they are condemned to hell! Jesus' own picture of the moral nature of the world and the final judgement is a great deal more scary than Paul's! Again, many Christians have great difficulty with this parable because it appears to tell us that the only way we will escape the wrath of God is by doing good.

The truth is that both Paul and Jesus were saying that it was impossible for anyone to escape the judgement of God on the basis of their own perceptions of doing good. If you read Jesus' parable carefully, you will realise this is what it says. The sheep who are saved do not know what they had done, and the goats who think they have done well find themselves outcast. Jesus' parable tells us that God's judgements are right and true, but that our judgements about 'doing good' are invariably ill-advised. Paul's letter tells us exactly the same. In Matthew's Gospel, the answer to the conundrum posed by Jesus' last parable is provided by His death and resurrection, which comes immediately next in the Gospel. In Paul's letter to the Romans, he goes on to explain that we are saved from the predicament in which we find ourselves precisely by Christ's death and resurrection.

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## Application

### ***Discipleship issues***

#### ***The absolute judgements of God***

This passage teaches us that while we make judgements all the time about various things, and we need to do this in the course of ordinary life, absolute moral judgements belong to God and God alone. In addition, we must be people of repentance, who respond to the evils of this world not by pointing the finger, but by turning to Almighty God ourselves. This is also the only way we can respond to the teaching of the parable of the sheep and the goats, and avoid its awful conclusion that those who think they are good end up outcast as evil. It is the purpose of this parable as well as our text today to point this out, so that we can understand how our deeds and God's judgements affect our eternal destiny.

#### ***Dealing with sin***

Paul is building a platform upon which he will build a full description of the Gospel, so he must start by describing the moral nature of God's world before he can go on. Though it may seem that the issue is overplayed. However, the reason why Paul goes into great detail about the moral nature of the world is because throughout history and even to this day within the Christian church, these things are often ignored or misunderstood. For example, people quickly say to themselves that this or that sin 'does not matter', when in truth, they do, and it is not our role to point them out in others, it is our duty to search them out in ourselves!

Too many Christians harbour sins that become so deeply hidden that they do not even accept that God's Word reveals them! For example, within the church, we can find people who act

with great domination of others, and seek to justify their actions. Some rebel against parents, others abuse others by words and have long stopped worrying about it. Unrepentant anger and unforgiveness are also common problems faced by those who seek to deal with sins amongst God's people. In truth, too many Christian people think, just like the Jews of Paul's day, that once they have a relationship with God, what happens next does not matter because God will somehow just deal with it. In this way, the Gospel is treated like a special favour rather than a matter of the very life or death of our souls.

We may feel that what Paul says in this passage is not the Gospel. I reckon that Paul would reply something like this; *'No, it is not the Gospel of salvation, it is the moral truth about our world, and it explains why we need a completely radical Gospel that changes human life completely to restore the image of God.'*

### **Ideas for what to do**

- *How do you see this passage of scripture applying to you? It is very difficult to read this passage and not feel that we should be very cautious about our judgements of others. On the other hand, we must live by the moral standards God reveals to us, and this means making a considerable number of personal decisions about what is right or wrong, and we do this from what we observe in others. Pray for the Lord to help you retain a repentant heart.*
- *Pray for those who feel judged by the church unnecessarily and feel the finger is pointing at them. Ask the Holy Spirit to overcome the misunderstandings that can generate such situations.*

### **Questions for groups**

1. In your experience, do you find that Christians are judgemental people, or do they refrain from judgement about others? How does this affect the church?
2. How important is 'repentance' to the life of the church? How can repentance become something that lies at the heart of a Christian community?
3. Discuss in your group what you believe about the meaning of the 'wrath of God'.

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## **Final Prayer**

Lord God Almighty, You have given us the greatest of gifts; You have given us life and You have saved us. Accept the worship and service of our lives, as we take part in all You have provided for us to do this day. Revive our souls for all that lies ahead of us we pray: AMEN