

A paragraph given quite different interpretations lays stress on God's salvation as the transformation of sinful human life into a life that is good and admirable. God's love and God's grace have greater things in store for us than simply extricating us from our predicament as sinners before a holy God.

“Some Difficult Theological Reasoning”

Romans 2:1-11

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Text Comment

- v.1 In the previous verses Paul has been describing the sins of mankind and how God gave man over to his sins. Now he employs a literary device common to philosophical and ethical writing of the time. He imagines some complacent person who has been enjoying this exposure of everyone else's sins, confident that he himself is not among those being described. Paul has been writing in the 3rd person through chapter 1, but suddenly shifts to the second person and addresses this imaginary person. There is a debate as to whether Paul is addressing a pagan moralist or a Jew. He certainly is talking to Jews from v. 17 of chapter 2, but what of the first 16 verses of the chapter? Some think he is imagining some Gentile, like the Roman moralist Seneca, who would have concurred with Paul's judgment of the masses in 1:18-32, and would have gone on to say that he deplored those sins as surely as Paul did. [e.g. Bruce, 86-87] Others think there is evidence to suggest that Paul has the Jew in mind from the beginning of chapter 2.
- v.4 This is perhaps the verse that suggests most clearly that in this section of his argument, whether or not Paul is thinking of Gentiles, he is also thinking of Jews. The Jews, as Paul will say later in this same argument, prized their spiritual privileges but allowed them to make them complacent. They failed to see that they came with responsibilities. No one should be more careful of sin and righteousness than one to whom God had revealed his holy will. Being a Jew will do nothing for a man or woman in the judgment if it is a matter of outward belonging only and does not lead to obedience and faithfulness to God's covenant with his people.
- v.10 One point is absolutely clear; a point Paul will ring the changes on in the next chapter: God is no respecter of persons. He will judge all men – Jew and Gentile alike – by the same impartial judgment. In the Middle East today vast multitudes of people think it a matter of terrific importance whether one is a Jew or an Arab. In fact, in all that really and finally matters for time and eternity, those identifications are irrelevant. The question is whether one is right with God and it is as easy not to be right with God being a Jew as being a Gentile. And either *can* be right with God!

It is also plain that from the very beginning of this great summary of the Bible's doctrine a double destiny awaits the human race; an alternative is placed before every human being. Eternal life for those who are righteous; trouble and distress, divine wrath for those who are not righteous. This prospect is utterly fundamental. If, in fact, there is no heaven

and no hell, or if there is but one and not the other, nothing of what Jesus taught and nothing of what Paul is teaching here makes any sense whatsoever.

As the title of the sermon indicates, we have some thinking to do. A lot of thinking is required in reading Paul's dense argument in Romans and we have come to place in that argument where the great Apostle has left even the wisest and most able of commentators having to do some hard thinking to understand what he has written.

In short, there are two very different ways of taking Paul's argument in vv. 1-11. Both interpretations amount to attempts to explain how Paul could say in v. 6 "That God will give to each person according to what he has done" and, in vv. 7 through 11, that hell or heaven will be the result depending upon whether one lives wickedly or righteously. Remember when we talk about doing good, being good, living righteously and living unrighteously, we are talking about righteousness and goodness as these things are defined in the Bible, by the law and commandments of God, and as they are defined by the example of the Lord Jesus Christ. That is what the Bible means when it speaks of living righteously. Living wickedly is living in disobedience to God's commandments. I say, how can such statements be reconciled with what Paul will eventually argue in chapter 3: "no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by observing the law..."? How can Paul say that God will acquit and reward those who do good and reject and punish those who do evil in chapter 2 and then in chapter 3 say that the only way to find acceptance with God is through the work of Jesus Christ? There seems to be an inconsistency here. Which is it: it is my doing good and being good that leads to my eternal life or is it Christ's suffering and death in my place?

One solution to the problem is to take the statements in vv. 6-11 as a statement of what is true *so far as the Law is concerned*. If one is to meet the conditions for eternal life, he must live this way. He must do good. But, of course, as Paul will go on to demonstrate, no one meets these standards and no one *can* meet them. All men are sinners and profoundly and persistently so. This is what makes so necessary God's provision of righteousness through Jesus Christ his son. So in vv. 6-11 Paul is establishing the standard against which to measure human behavior and in the following argument he will demonstrate that everyone, Jew and Gentile alike, utterly fails to meet that standard. The argument of 2:1-11, in other words, is part of the demonstration that everyone needs Christ's righteousness because he has none of his own and that no one, however good he thinks himself to be, can possibly earn his way into heaven by his own goodness. Two important American Presbyterian authorities, Charles Hodge and John Murray, understand Paul's words in this way.

There is no doubt that taken this way Paul's statements agree not only with the argument that follows but with many similar statements in the Bible, Old Testament and New Testament alike. Man *is* a sinner and is so ruined by his sin that there can be no thought of his *earning* his way to heaven by obedience to the Law, by doing good and being good. His sins, as Isaiah puts it, have made a separation between him and God, have placed between them a distance that man is incapable of crossing. He is *not* good, so if the Law requires him to be good to be saved, he is doomed; his situation is hopeless. His behavior will take him speedily to hell; it will not get him within a million miles of heaven. That certainly makes sense as an interpretation of these verses.

But not so fast. There is a punishing objection to this interpretation. The problem is that the statements Paul makes that God rewards the good with eternal life and gives to each person according to what he has done are not found only here. In fact, statements like these are found quite frequently in the Bible, in nearly identical language in some cases, and are found in the Bible's positive teaching *to Christians* about the *Christian* life. Indeed, what Paul says here in vv. 6-11 is what he says frequently elsewhere *to Christians*. It is not the fact that a statement such as we have in v. 6 or in vv. 7-11 is designed only to disabuse *an unbeliever* of thinking that he could be good enough to earn a spot in heaven. It is rather the fact that such statements are simply true. That is what God will do at the judgment day. He will reward the good and punish the wicked. Paul isn't describing what *would* be true if anyone could keep the law; he is describing what *will be* true for everyone at the Last Judgment.

The finest work on Pauline theology written in the 20th century, the Dutch biblical theologian, Herman Ridderbos' *Paul: An Outline of his Theology*, argues that these statements in Romans 2 should not be taken hypothetically (or as a description of the demand of the law that no one, in fact, can meet) for the obvious reason that Paul as much as says the very same thing in other places in his letters *as part of his exhortation to believers*. By setting forth the demand of God's Law, Paul is not demonstrating that because no one can meet that demand, everyone needs the righteousness of Jesus that can be obtained only by faith. He is telling us what will happen at the Last Judgment and *is assuring us that only the good will go to heaven*.

For example, later in Romans, in 14:10-12, Paul again deals with the penchant of human beings to pass judgment on others. And again he speaks to an imaginary hearer about God's judgment.

“You, then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? [You see, Paul is talking to Christians.] For we will all stand before God's judgment seat.... So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God.”

In Ephesians 6:7-8 and Colossians 3:22-25 the prospect of this judgment and of receiving a reward for the good one does in this life is set before Paul's readers as a motivation *to be good and do good*.

“Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not men, because you know that the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does...”

And in 2 Corinthians 5:9-10 we have Paul once more setting this prospect before us as a mighty motivation for life.

“So we make it our goal to please him...for we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, [That is while we are living in this world.] whether good or bad.”

And, of course, what we read in Paul about a man's goodness being rewarded at the Last Judgment and about those who do good being accepted in the Last Judgment we read everywhere else in the Bible as well. As much as John, for example, stresses the mighty salvation that Jesus accomplished on the cross for us, he does not hesitate to say:

“Dear children, do not let anyone lead you astray. He who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous. He who does what is sinful is of the devil...” [1 John 3:7]

We recently saw how emphatic John was in this teaching about the Judgment Day in the book of Revelation. Several times he reminds his readers that the Lord “will repay each of them according to his deeds” [2:23] and that when the Lord returns he “will give to everyone according to what he has done.” [22:12]

We remember vividly the Lord’s teaching in Matthew 25 to the effect that the righteous will be separated from the unrighteous at the Last Judgment according to what they have done, how they lived their lives, how they served the Lord and how they have loved others in his Name.

The question of interpretation posed to the reader of Romans 2:1-11 is, therefore, at one and the same time acute and perhaps not vitally important. It is not vitally important because whichever view one takes of these verses, it is an interpretation many other times and in many other ways confirmed in the Bible. It is a fact that man cannot keep the law of God sufficiently to earn his way to heaven and it is a fact that goodness and wickedness, right behavior and wrong behavior, will tell the tale at the Last Judgment. Whichever truth you believe is taught in these verses is a truth taught many, many times elsewhere in the Bible.

I will tell you that I am inclined to favor the second interpretation: that Paul is simply telling this imaginary person, this self-confident and spiritually complacent person that *he must be good in order to be saved*, good as God defines goodness. He must live his life in obedience to God’s law. He must live a righteous life. He must *be* good and he must *do* good. It is hard for me to read vv. 6-11 in any other way than as a description of what will *actually* happen. It seems a contrivance of interpretation to me and overly subtle to think that Paul actually means that God will *not* give to each person according to what he has done and that those who persist in doing good will, in fact, *not* receive eternal life because, of course, no one does persist in doing good. The unstated premise required by that interpretation – viz. that no one can do good and no one could ever stand in a judgment based on his deeds because his deeds are, in fact, not good but bad – seems foreign to Paul’s mind here, in my view, and to the emphatic way in which he says that in fact the good *will* stand in the judgment of God and *will* inherit eternal life. Read through the argument again yourself and ask yourself if a reader should be expected to understand that Paul does *not* in fact mean that God will give to each person what he has done or that that to those who persist in seeking glory, honor, and immortality he will *not* give eternal life.

What is more, there is the evidence of v. 4. Talking about what a man ought to be and do, *Paul speaks of repentance*. When he speaks of the man who persists in doing good he does not seem to be referring to someone who is *perfectly* good, to someone who somehow met the theoretical demand of God’s law in *every* particular and at *every* moment of his life as did the Lord Jesus himself. He is talking about a man who is properly repentant. Repentance is for sinners, but it is also the good work and obedience that God expects of his people. In the order of his thoughts here Paul seems clearly to be saying that the man who persists in doing good will be a repentant, a penitent man. He will confess his sins and devote himself to surmounting them. So the thought does not seem to be that this goodness that God will require in the Last Judgment is the goodness

of perfection that no one can possibly meet. It is rather the goodness of a faithful man or woman, a believer in Jesus, a gospel man or woman, who strives to do the will of God and, conscious of his failures, confesses those failures to God, seeks forgiveness through Christ, and strives again to do what is right in God's sight.

But, if that is so, how can this interpretation be reconciled with what we all know is coming in Paul's argument? Paul is going to say that all men are sinners; all are guilty before God, that no man can be justified – that is, declared righteous in God's sight – by observing the law. That is surely the same thing as saying that no man can pass muster at the Last Judgment and no man can get to heaven by trying to be good and living a righteous life. How can Paul seem to say in 2:1-11 that being good will get you into heaven, when he says in chapter 3 that no one is good and trying to be good won't get you into heaven?

Well, I said as we began this morning that these verses would require us to think. Here are some of the data to be considered and then to be organized into a coherent interpretation of these verses and a coherent understanding of salvation as Paul is beginning to explain and describe it to us.

It is true, absolutely true, that no one will be justified by observing the Law, or, in the language of Paul in chapter 2, no man will be justified by being good. But, it is also true, that justification – peace and acceptance with God – inevitably and immediately leads to the transformation of a person's life. Paul is going to spend a few chapters on justification, the forgiveness of sins and our acceptance with God, and then immediately proceed to consider how the same divine grace that makes a sinner righteous before God also transforms his life and makes him or her good. Not perfectly good, as Paul will admit in chapters 7 and 8, but really good nevertheless.

Now, sometimes the way these two realities, these two dimensions of salvation, because they are explained separately in Romans – forgiveness on the one hand and transformation of life on the other, or justification and sanctification, or the forensic, law court, aspects of salvation and the renovative, life-experience aspects of it – I say sometimes in Sunday School classes and even in sermons these two dimensions of salvation are separated from one another in a way they are not in the Bible. God's people can sometimes be forgiven if they have come to think of these parts of salvation in terms familiar to us from the world of the bureaucracy.

“Well, Mr. Doe, here is your signed certificate of justification. I'll just stamp it for you. Here you are. Your sins are now forgiven and you are right with God. However, you must now take this certificate down the hall to the sanctification office, take a number, and wait in line. When your number is called, show them this justification certificate and they will also stamp it and order a sanctification certificate which will be sent in the mail. It takes 5 to 10 business days, though sometimes can take longer.”

But, of course, it is not so in the Bible. The salvation God's great love contrived for his people, the salvation Christ has bought for us with his blood, the salvation that God gives to those who trust in his Son, is at one and the same time both the forgiveness of sins *and* the renewal of life. It comes to us and happens in us all at once. Forgiveness and transformation come with Jesus Christ into our lives in a single moment. Indeed, it is surely fair to say that more renewal of life

takes place in the moment in which a sinner is born again, in which faith first in Christ appears in his or her heart, than in all the years of Bible reading and prayer, of struggling with temptation and practicing obedience that will follow, even if that transformation of heart happens in infancy and the man lives to be one hundred years of age. The sudden and fundamental change in commitment, the exchange of old aspirations and longings for new ones, the dramatic revolution in one's view of the world, of himself, the utter transformation of that person's very *nature* that takes place at the moment a person becomes a Christian – what the Bible calls sanctification or renewal or new birth and what Paul calls the new creation – that is the largest and most consequential change that ever overtakes a life. Life, the Bible teaches us, comes out of the heart. Our behavior is shaped by the motivations and aspirations and commitments that are deep down inside of us placed there by the Spirit of God when he made us new creatures in Christ. And so when the heart is dramatically changed, the entire life must be changed. Out of the heart flow the issues of life. A person's life will not change again so much or so dramatically until he or she dies, sees the Lord, and his or her soul is finally made perfect.

I think it safe to say that the two great moments of spiritual change come at the very beginning and at the very end of a Christian life in this world. All the change that takes place in between, important as it is, necessary as it is, does not amount to nearly as much as the new creation at the beginning or as the entrance into perfection that occurs at a believer's death.

But something else may be said. The real object of Christ's salvation, according to the Bible, is not the forgiveness of your sins or your right standing with God. That is an impossibly great gift, to be sure, and it cost our dear Savior far more than we will ever know to give it to us, but it was itself a means to an end, not the end itself. It is not forgiveness but holiness; it is not deliverance from guilt but goodness of life that is the true end and object of God's salvation. That is one reason why Paul comes to justification – or forgiveness – first in his argument in Romans but then moves on to the way the living of one who believes in Jesus will change.

As Paul puts it in Ephesians 1, we were chosen before the foundation of the world in Christ, not finally to be forgiven, but *to be made holy*, that is, to be good and to do good. Or as he will put it later in Romans, we were predestined, God set his heart and his saving intentions on us so that we would *be conformed to the image of the Son of God*. The whole purpose of God in salvation is to bring us to live a life pleasing to God, the life God intended for human beings to live. In Ephesians 2 he says a similar thing. We were created *in Christ Jesus to do good works*. In Titus 2 we get the same thing:

“Jesus Christ...gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.”

Throughout Romans Paul will make that same point in many ways, famously in 8:1-4 when he says that the purpose of God delivering us from the condemnation of the law, our forgiveness of sins, was that “the righteous requirements of the law might then be fully met in us who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit.” He forgives us so that he can now work in our lives as our heavenly Father and change us.

In other words, the great salvation of God, obtained through faith in Jesus Christ, has as its great and final object to make people good. It is the renovation of life, this transformation from bad living to good living, as bad and good are defined in Holy Scripture, that is the great purpose of God's saving work, of Christ's sacrifice on the cross, and of his resurrection from the dead. All of this is designed finally to make us good people who love one another and who love God with all our heart, soul, strength and mind and do his will day after day.

When we allow our minds and hearts to stop at God's forgiveness, and I think most of us will admit if we search our minds and hearts that we do this very often, as if *this* were the great thing, the main thing, we are not honoring the Lord as our Savior. He did not save us simply to get us out of the jam we were in. He saved us to make us the people we ought to be; people it would be an honor to him to have associated with him and to be in fellowship with him. God is our heavenly father and he loves us as our heavenly father. And what does a good father want for his children but that they should grow up to be good. He wants us to be people whose lives are dominated by love for God and man, by honesty, and by faithfulness, and by selflessness. And he knows, as any father does, that only that life will truly satisfy us in the end. Our Father wants for us the best and the best is for us to be like his Son. What a great person Jesus is and we are to become like him. That is what God set out to make us when he sent Jesus into the world for us and our salvation. Make them like you! And that is what Jesus did and does!

Robert Murray McCheyne, the celebrated 19th century Scottish pastor, preached powerful sermons on the subject of the forgiveness of sinners by God's free grace and Christ's righteousness imputed to us. He was Christ *for us* to the backbone; no one stressed those glorious truths more than he. But McCheyne knew his Bible well enough to describe sanctification, the renewal of our lives or *Christ in us* as the "better half" of salvation.

Now, here is the point as we consider our text this morning. This salvation that Paul is going to describe as the solution and the only solution to our great problem as sinners before a holy God begins with forgiveness and acceptance with God but finishes with the transformation of life. The gift of righteousness from God is not exhausted by forgiveness or justification. That righteousness not only changes our standing, it changes our living! It makes us whole as human beings. It transforms us. It turns us into genuinely good and admirable people. It does this second thing as certainly as it does the first. *All* of that lies ahead of us in Romans 2:1-11. What we have to get to, what *every* sinful human being, which is *every* human being, has to get to is a good life, an obedient life, a life of service to God. *That* is where God's grace and Christ's cross will take him or her. There is no thought in Paul, there is never a thought that one might have the forgiveness but not the transformation of life, that one might be accepted by God and granted eternal life without a life of good works, a life of love for God and man. That isn't what God is after; true love would never leave us unchanged and unbettered. *And that being so*, it is here as everywhere in the Bible the simple truth that at the Last Judgment you will have to have been good, you will have to have lived a righteous life. You will have to have been forgiven, to be sure, but that is not what is going to be in the balance at the last judgment, it is your life, it is what you have done, it is how you have lived. You won't have been saved if you did not live a righteous life. Christ will not have delivered you from sin if you did not live a righteous life. You will not have been his follower if you did not live a life in obedience to God's commandments. It is certainly true that you cannot be good without the salvation of God in Christ, but that means

you cannot live the good life you have to live without Jesus Christ. You can no more transform your living in this world to true goodness – not perfection but true goodness – than you can remove your own guilt. Christ must do the one for you as surely as he must do the other. It is all his salvation. But both always and only together are these two things God's salvation: forgiveness that leads to goodness and holiness of life.

All the more in our day and age when people are so careless about their behavior, so careless about whether they keep or fail to keep the commandments of God, it is no small matter that the Apostle Paul, in beginning to explain salvation – what it is and what it means – that he should begin by saying that only those who live good lives, righteous lives, obedient lives will stand accepted by God at the Last Judgment and be rewarded with eternal life. That is: only those who live righteously will pass muster on the Last Day. If you are complacent, if, somehow you think that because you believe in Jesus your sins are forgiven and therefore it doesn't make all that much difference to God or anyone else if you don't keep his commandments and don't live a righteous life, you have completely misunderstood what salvation *is*, what God intends with it, what Christ *does* in it. God has much more for you, he intends much more for you than simply an escape from his judgment. He wants you to become, he intends you to become, he saved you to become the glorious, wonderful thing a human beings was made to be. He will change you; that *is* his salvation. He saves you to change you. He saves you to make you good and to be the kind of person he would want to live with forever and ever. *That* is what God's judgment requires so that is what God's salvation achieves. He makes us *good*.