ROMANS 2:1-11 - 22.01.17

EVERYONE NEEDS REPENTANCE

INTRODUCTION

What do you instinctively think when I say the word “repentance”? Maybe it sounds like a pious, religious thing that really keen people do, but it’s not for everyone. Maybe you have a vague feeling that you probably should give repentance a place in your life, but you don’t feel motivated or really know what it is anyway. Or maybe you feel keenly that it’s something you need to do but you feel guilty that you’ve put it off too many times. Well, tonight’s passage is going to show us that repentance is not an optional extra. It’s absolutely essential and urgent. It’s not just for really bad people, or really religious people. It’s for everyone. And it’s not a miserable chore. It’s something very beautiful indeed.

So far in Romans, we’ve seen that there’s good news - salvation and righteousness for all people is available. But as Andy showed us last week, this good news only exists because there’s some very bad news: we’re all *un*righteous. We’ve all chosen to live for created things instead of our Creator and filled our lives with deeds that dishonour him. And God is rightly angry.

But if you were here last week, you may have had a question in mind. Perhaps as you listened to last week’s sermon you thought about all the false gods and superstitions of this world, or about the terrible war crimes and terrorist attacks that we’ve seen recently, or about people you know who lie and cheat and hurt others. And we’re absolutely right to react with anger and pain at the folly and insolence of these things and to long for justice. But you may also have thought: “does this description really fit me too? OK, I know I’m not perfect. I know I haven’t always treated God as well as I should and I know I’ve done some things wrong in my life. I know I need him to forgive me. But can I really say that I’ve committed as bad sins as some other people have? Is God really that angry with me? And am I really without excuse for the mistakes I’ve made?”

I think we all react that way, to some extent. And in one sense, these are fair questions, and we’re going to take an honest look at them. But I think we should also see flashing warning lights around those questions. There’s a danger lurking beneath the surface. You see, this way of thinking gradually clouds our vision and stops us seeing the reality of our situation. It slowly dims our sense of our need of repentance. And that’s a dangerous place to go. Paul knows his readers are probably asking those questions at this point. That’s why he addresses this way of thinking directly and gives us two big reasons to take repentance seriously.

READ ROMANS 2:1-11

Here’s the first big reason to take repentance seriously:

1. REPENT… EVERYONE IS WITHOUT EXCUSE

You’ve probably heard the story of *The Emperor’s New Clothes*. A vain emperor wants a new suit to show off to all his subjects. But his tailors trick him, telling him that his suit is invisible to stupid people. Not wanting to appear stupid, he parades before his subjects, only to discover that he is wearing nothing at all. Well, we’re going to to see that our excuses are a bit like that. We put them on because we think they will cover us up, but all they do is end up exposing us.

In chapter 1, Paul was targeting all of mankind. But now he seems to take the spotlight and shine it on a particular group of people. Have a look at verse 1. *“Therefore you have no excuse,*

O man, everyone of you who judges." Who are these people? They are people who are good at spotting sins in other people and condemning them for them. And yet they apparently feel that they can be excused of their own sins. It's not that they think they have *no* sin. They know they're not perfect, but nevertheless they feel they're not as bad as some other people and they've become quite good at finding excuses for their own behaviour.

Actually, I think that *all* people do this to some extent. I think that's why Paul uses the expression "O man". He's not suddenly become an American watching his favourite baseball team lose again ("Oh maaaan !"). He's still referring to *all humanity*, because *everyone* fits this description. People are very good at doing this aren't they. They love to find fault with others, but will effortlessly find a million ingenious ways of excusing themselves. People who criticise politicians for their selfish abuse of others can easily go out the next day, cheat on their wife and call it personal fulfilment. But it's not just people in the world out there, is it. Christians do the same sort of thing. After all, Paul is writing this letter to Christians.

What exactly is the danger with this behaviour? Well, I don't think these people are trying to claim they don't sin. When we read the previous passage, it's not that we think: "oh, other people sin but I don't". As Christians, we know we sin. But what these people are trying to do is *excuse* their own sin, while condemning others. My guess is that what goes through our minds is something like this: "yes I sin, but surely it's not as bad as all that, I don't feel like I've done anything that really deserves as bad a punishment as some other people do". We use our sense of moral superiority as a way of excusing ourselves from judgement. We're experts at spotting other people's sin and identifying just how bad it is. But we want to wriggle out of condemnation ourselves.

But look back at verse 1. Paul says *"you have no excuse"*. Why? Because *"in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practise the very same things"*. Now when Paul says we practise the very same things, he can't mean that we've committed *exactly* the same crimes as other people. You might be thinking: "but I've never murdered anyone or stolen anything". But the point is, we have all committed the same *type* of crime. We've all worshiped the creation instead of the Creator, and we all have lives full of unrighteous behaviour. And we all know this. So do you see the problem when we judge others for the very same sort of sin that we have committed ourselves? Not only is it hypocritical, but *when we condemn others, we end up condemning ourselves*.

Probably the most embarrassing moment for any footballer is scoring an own goal. Your intention may well be to gain an advantage over the other team, but all you end up doing is scoring against your own team. If you go on YouTube you can watch some brilliant ones. Some of these guys actually scored amazing goals - in their own nets. You can't really believe they managed to do something so spectacular… by accident!

Well, when we judge others, it's like we score a spectacular own goal. We try to get ourselves out of judgment by turning the spotlight onto other people. But all we do is shine the spotlight right on ourselves. We shoot ourselves in the foot. We can try as hard as we like to find ways of excusing our own sin, but the moment we judge someone else, we've left ourselves without excuse too. We prove that we know sin is deserving of condemnation. It's been said that when we point the finger at someone else, we end up pointing three fingers back at ourselves.

This is exactly what Paul is describing in verse 2 and 3 as well. We look at the sins of others, especially the more blatant sins like violence and adultery and theft, and we want justice. We're not wrong to feel that way. But how then can we expect God to be any less just towards our own sin? How can we have such double standards? We try to *excuse* our sin by passing ourselves off as less guilty than other people, but we actually leave ourselves with even *less* excuse! The

emperor has no clothes on. We simply prove all the more that we know full well that our sin deserves punishment.

You might be wondering: “hold on, I’m not sure I’d ever do something so hypocritical!”. Well, it might be quite subtle. But we definitely all do it. Let’s think about what could happen in the course of just one day.

It’s Monday morning before work and already a sharp disagreement has broken out between you and your husband or wife over the amount of work you each do and how little time you spend together. You are angry that they could be so selfish and insensitive to your feelings and you press your point of view more and more strongly. But at the same time you instinctively convince yourself that you are in the right and have no need to consider what *they* are saying and see where you could be sensitive towards how *they* feel. But in judging *their* behaviour, you’ve left yourself with no excuse for your own.

A bit later, in your lunch break at work, you are shocked to hear a colleague spreading unflattering gossip about another colleague behind their back. But later you are on the phone to a friend from church and they start to tell you a juicy bit of gossip or criticise someone else in church and instinctively you want to listen, and later you even pass it on to someone else. What we call gossip in others, we call “keeping up with the news” or “constructive criticism” in ourselves. No excuse.

As you sit down to watch T.V. that evening you are once again appalled at how this world idolises power and sex and money and you are glad that you worship the one true God. But then a movie comes on with a classic “follow your dream” kind of message, and you feel compelled to make your career and your life as successful and fulfilling as possible. There’s nothing wrong with having a successful career, but God doesn’t enter into your plans. What we call idolatry in others, we call ambition in ourselves. No excuse.

You lie in bed that night and think about the day. You know that you haven’t had the best day. You haven’t really thought about God all day - you certainly haven’t been overflowing with joy and worship and love. But your mind instinctively reassures yourself that other people in church are much more compromised in their faith than you are. After all, you say to yourself, I’m just really tired and busy at the moment, God understands if I’m not at my best. And it’s not like I did it deliberately. No excuse.

Certainly all those things could happen to me, even in the course of one day.

And the worst of it is, when we make excuses for our sin, we are misrepresenting God’s character. In verse 4, Paul says: *“Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience…?”* Like in that last example I gave, we don’t have any problem judging others, but when it comes to ourselves, suddenly all we can talk about is how kind and patient God is. The problem is, there is truth in this, isn’t there. God is indeed more kind and patient towards sinners than we can imagine. But the mistake is to think that his kindness is just an “oh it doesn’t matter, just sweep the sin under the carpet” sort of kindness. As if he is just a nice old grandfather, rather than the one true blazingly holy God and Creator of the universe. We kind of think like the German poet Heinrich Heine, who said: “Of course God will forgive me, that’s his job”.

So we judge others as a way of excusing ourselves from dealing with the sin in our lives. We even make God’s kindness an excuse for not repenting. But all of this should have the *opposite* effect! Judging others only shows up our own need to repent. And God’s kindness, says Paul, *“is meant to lead you to repentance”*. Let’s not have “hard and impenitent hearts”, as Paul says

in verse 5. Don't let God's kindness *harden* you. Let it *melt* you. He's not saying "sin doesn't matter". He's saying "I haven't condemned you because I love you and I want you to come back to me". When you sin, don't make excuses, let his love draw you back to him in sincere repentance.

So our first reason to repent is that we are all without excuse. I guess that ought to be enough motivation on its own! But Paul is aware that even this might fail to move some people. Not only do we fail to repent, but we even fail to repent of not repenting! But Paul says, you need to know what will happen to those who keep refusing to repent. And so he brings in a second reason, even more powerful than the first. And it's this:

2. REPENT… EVERYONE WILL BE JUDGED FAIRLY [GENTLE TONE HERE!]

Have a look at verse 5 with me: *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"*. There's a certain irony here isn't there. If you try and ignore your guilt and make excuses and convince yourself you're fine with God, you're only digging a deeper hole for yourself. You see, if we keep refusing to repent, we're heading for disaster.

The idea of God's wrath - or anger - was introduced last week. It's not something we like to think about. But as Andy said, we need to remember that it's not some petty tantrum or cold-hearted vengeance. Wrath is the right reaction of an infinitely holy God to the horror of sin. Imagine if God wasn't angry at the atrocities committed by terrorists recently - we would say he was unjust, we would say he doesn't care. So his justice and anger are good things! But that means he must also be angry at the things that *we* have done wrong. And we mustn't talk about this lightly. The anger of a holy God must be a terrible thing.

But what exactly will happen on the day when God judges the world? Well, the principle is summed up in verse 6: *"He will render to each one according to his works"*. And then verses 7 to 10 expand on this. The two outer verses, 7 and 10, say that God will reward those who do *good* with eternal life, glory, honour and peace. The two inner verses, 8 and 9, say that God will punish those who do *evil* with wrath, fury, tribulation and distress. In other words, God's wrath is not just an emotional explosion, but works according to a strict principle of justice.

Now there's some debate as to what Paul means here. He could be saying that, in theory, *if* anyone lived a perfectly good life, they'd earn eternal life, but in practice who can claim to have worshiped God perfectly? And so he convicts us that we're all in the "judgment" category and need to repent. Or he may be saying that those who "do good" are those who have repented. They've been saved by God's gracious forgiveness, not by their good works, but their transformed lives are evidence of salvation. But whichever it is, Paul makes his point clear. Did you see how he twice repeats *"the Jew first, and also the Greek"* (meaning, "non-Jew"), and then adds *"For God shows no partiality"*. His point? Everyone will be judged fairly. So no one can expect God to just "let them off" their sins. As hard as it is to accept, an eternity under God's wrath is what each one of us deserves.

Imagine you're on the jury of a court case for a man caught robbing a bank. The defence lawyer stands up and says: "the defendant would like to point out that he only acted this way because he is in financial difficulties. Furthermore, his crime is very small compared to murder and the like. And I'm sure the jury would not be so cruel as to want to condemn a man." We'd say "are you joking?! You think you can be let off?! No, the jury must be impartial. Everyone must be judged fairly."

I think God does want us to feel the weight of our sin and of his holiness and of his justice and of his anger. We take these things far too lightly don't we. Those are right reactions to this passage. But this is not just God beating us down, is it. We can find the courage to face up to these things, because God has a loving purpose behind them: To get us to repent! Although we all naturally fall into the "wrath category", God has graciously given us a wide open door to escape it, as he's already said. Repentance. But if we continue to refuse to repent, we can expect to be judged fairly, and to get what we deserve. So this is a hard passage, but there's very good news at its heart, isn't there:

3. REPENT… GOD IS GRACIOUS!

Romans is about good news. But Paul knows the danger. If we keep making excuses and hardening our hearts, we'll turn our backs on the brilliant good news that Paul has already mentioned and which he's going to explain more in chapter 3. This passage is in here to make sure no one refuses God's gracious rescue.

If you wouldn't call yourself a Christian, we're really glad to have you with us here tonight, but can I encourage you to talk to someone after the service or to explore this further. I'd understand if you instinctively feel like these things are too difficult to accept. But God's judgment is not some medieval idea. It is very real. But God loves you and he's patiently holding off his judgment so that you can repent. If we'll stop excusing our sin and turn back to God, he has promised that we can be saved from his wrath. He's made a way for us to live in secure, loving relationship with him forever. As Paul has already said, it is possible simply by trusting in Jesus. Jesus who died on a cross to take the judgment that we deserve on himself, so that we could be made right with God. He'll explain this more in chapter 3. God is so, so kind. He's flung open the door of the escape hatch and he's calling everyone to come home to him.

For those of us who are Christians, we can very easily and subtly start to try and excuse our sin or think we can take advantage of God's kindness. When this happens, we step onto a slippery slope. We start to lose our appreciation of what Jesus did to save us. We start to think less and less about the gospel, and gradually forget why we need it. And slowly our hearts can become hard and unrepentant again, as we make more and more excuses for sin. And the more this happens, the harder and harder it feels to repent. Maybe you've seen this happen in your life.

But we *can* repent, because God is very gracious. And we can even repent of our failure to repent, because God is very, *very* gracious! In fact, the brilliant news is that Christians have already been saved from God's judgment. When we sin, he isn't angry anymore. He calls us to keep repenting because we already belong to him, and because he doesn't want us to end up hardening our hearts and rejecting his grace. The Bible tells us that he even promises to keep us holding onto him. So we might sin, we might even go through times of hard-heartedness, but he will always bring us back. So when you find yourself tempted to excuse your sin and not repent, remember that everyone is without excuse, rememberer that God judges everyone fairly, but then remember his grace. Think about the fact that he held off his judgment. Think about the fact that his anger was all spent on Jesus. Think about how patient he has always been with your failures. Think about how much he loves you, even though you're far from perfect. Don't harden your heart. Let his grace melt you into repentance.