

## 105 Who would be a Roman Christian?!

Imagine you are living in Rome and you are a stalwart member of the church there, perhaps a church leader. In fact, let's imagine you are the vicar!

Monday morning, and your doorbell rings; you smile as you see it's the postman. "Morning, mate!" he says cheerily, "Sorry, but I couldn't get this one through your letterbox", and he hands you a very big letter:

**To all in Rome, who are loved by God, and called to be saints.**

"Brilliant!" you say to yourself. "I've been struggling to think what to put in my sermon this coming Sunday, I can just read out Paul's letter – that'll save lots of time, and I can justify watching more of the Masters Snooker on telly!"

But then you remember that in some of Paul's other letters, he does seem to say some quite controversial things. So you decide to read it through first, and not risk just reading it out.

You read chapter 1, and you are reassured – he's writing about the gospel, and he's saying how it's all about faith – trusting God. Good. And that it's by *faith, from beginning to end*. "Brilliant! I couldn't have put it better myself. You're right, mate! It's by faith, and *not by works*. Nice one!"

Then you feel really encouraged by the final 18 verses of chapter 1; they sound as if Paul was quoting one of his own sermons – all about the terrible things people do, and how God will bring his judgment on them for what they do. "Great, yes, people need to understand that they are sinners, so that they can acknowledge their need of God's forgiveness, and we can tell them how much God loves them and that Jesus died for them. Then they will repent and turn to Christ! Awesome! Just what we want, in case there are some non-Christians in the church on Sunday."

But then you start to read chapter 2, and realise that this *isn't* an evangelistic sermon; Paul is addressing the Christians in your church. And as you read through this second chapter you start to feel very nervous and wonder if you dare read it out to your congregation. What will they think?! And you start to get very hot under your clerical collar.

(I'll let you off the hook now and write it in the third person!)

Here's what the vicar read. In italic are the bits that stood out to him [plus his thoughts]:

You, therefore, have no excuse, *you who **pass judgment** on someone else*, for at whatever point you judge the other, *you are condemning yourself*, because you who **pass judgment** do the same things. [I know my congregation! They are God-fearing; they don't do any of those things in chapter 1!] Now we know that God's judgment against those who do such things [I assume he means the catalogue of evil things from chapter 1] is based on truth.

So when you, a mere man, **pass judgment** on them and yet do the same things, *do you think you will escape God's judgment?* [But we're saved by the blood of Jesus; God isn't going to pass judgment on us!]

Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realising that God's kindness leads you towards repentance? But *because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath*, when his righteous judgment will be revealed. ['Stubborn and unrepentant'? That's grossly unfair! My folks are genuinely repentant, and they love God and serve God with all their hearts. I can't tell them they are stubborn and unrepentant!]

God "will give to each person according to what he has done". To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honour and immortality, he will give eternal life. [Paul's lost it! He's now saying that eternal life comes by what we *do*. That's salvation by works!] (*But see also my article [60] about Jesus' sermon on the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25:31-46.*)

But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger. There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile; but glory, honour and peace for everyone who does good: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For God does not show favouritism. [This is all very confusing, Paul!]

OK, I've hammed this up a bit, but the quotes from Romans 2 1-11 are the straight NIV text.

If I were a member of this vicar's congregation, and heard that read out, one (genuine) question I would have is, "What do you mean by 'pass judgement'?"

What is the difference between genuinely trying to work out what the Bible teaches about right and wrong, and 'passing judgment'?

And what is very much on my mind at the moment is my Christian friends who are in faithful, loving, gay relationships. How do we avoid passing judgment on them?

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