

Can Religion Save Us?

Romans 2:1-11

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Therefore, you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things. - Romans 2:1, ESV

Are dutifully religious people more acceptable to God than pagan idolaters? On the surface of it, that seems like an easy question to answer: God must be more pleased with religious people than He is with idol-worshippers, right? Romans 1:18-32 is a scathing indictment of the immoral lives of idolatrous people. The root of idolatry leads to the judgment of God and bears the fruit of immorality. It would be so easy for religious people to read Romans 1 and walk away arrogantly self-assured of their own self-righteousness.

Then Paul opens Romans 2 with a blast against religious self-righteousness. The sad truth is that pagan idol-worshippers do not have the corner on immorality. Religious people can wag their fingers, shake their heads and speak powerful words of condemnation all while being just as guilty of the same things. Are religious people covetous? Are religious people immoral? Are religious people idolatrous? Can religion itself become an idol? Yes, yes, yes and yes!

The only way to be justified by religious morality is to keep the law perfectly, without fault or flaw. If we want God to justify us on the basis of our religion, we need to know that He will only justify that way based on works and not on words. This introduces one of the more confusing sections in Romans, here Paul says:

He will render to each one according to his works: to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury. - Rom. 2:6-8, ESV

It seems like Paul is offering a way for us to be justified by works, to be declared righteous on the basis of being patient and doing good. In a sense, he is doing just that. He is telling us that if we want God to judge us on the basis of our religious morality, fine. But God will judge what we do and how well we do it, not just what we profess and what we outwardly practice.

In the end, seeking to be justified by works will prove to be dead-end street, as Paul will make clear by the end of chapter 2 and in the beginning of chapter 3, which we will see this week. But for today, his point is simple and penetrating: If you are religious and you want to look down your nose at those who are not, be careful: God isn't interested in your outward display of religion, but in the true inner condition of your heart as seen in your actions.