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The Recipients of the Wrath of God: The Moral Religious, Part 1

Wheat and Tares

The kingdom (church) of God is pictured in a variety of ways in the Bible.

- Ephesians 5 pictures it as a Bride.
- John 10 compares it to a Flock of Sheep.
- Ephesians 2 describes it as a Temple.
- John 15 uses the metaphor of vine and branches.

Yet of all the analogies by which the church is described, I want to remind you of that which is pictured in the parable of The Wheat and The Tares...

Matthew 13:24-30, "[Christ] presented another parable to them saying, 'The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed tares also among the wheat, and went away. But

when the wheat sprang up and bore grain, then the tares became evident also. And the slaves of the land-owner came and said to him, "Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have tares?" And he said to them, "An enemy has done this!" And the slaves said to him, "Do you want us, then, to go and gather them up?" But he said, "No; lest while you are gathering up the tares, you may root up the wheat with them. Allow both to grow together until the harvest; and in the time of the harvest I will say to the reapers, 'First gather up the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them up; but gather the wheat in my barn.'""

This picture of the church shows us that the church on this earth is by no means pure. In the words of Paul:

2 Timothy 2:20, "Now in a large house [by this he means the church] there are not only gold and silver vessels, but also vessels of wood and of earthenware, and some to honor and some to dishonor."

In this age the Bible describes the church as containing...

- Wheat and tares.
- Genuine believers and false believers.
- True Christians and sham Christians.

And that is why there are so many passages in Scripture which warn the participant in the church to be mindful of themselves and the body. Paul exhorted us this way in 2 Corinthians:

2 Corinthians 13:5, "Test yourselves *to see* if you are in the faith; examine yourselves! Or do you not recognize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you- unless indeed you fail the test?"

Peter exhorted the believers:

2 Peter 1:10a, "Therefore, brethren, be all the more diligent to make certain about His calling and choosing you..."

John, the beloved stated:

1 John 4:20, "If someone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen."

It is easy to gain a false security on account of one's participation in a church. And that is why throughout the word we read of passages which stir our hearts lest we fall asleep. The text we are looking at is one such passage. Though its purpose ultimately is to show that salvation is only by grace through faith (Romans 1:17), it nevertheless sounds a warning cry to all in the

church to watch themselves. And it is this warning cry that we must heed!

Thus far we have seen from Romans 1:19-32 that Paul discusses God's Wrath as it relates to the Gentile which in Christ's day was the epitome of immoral religion! Now we turn our focus to Romans 2:1-29 where Paul's focus shifts to a new group, which I am calling The Moral Religious.

Romans 2:1, "Therefore you are without excuse, every man of you who passes judgment."

There has been debate as to the identity of this group; however, today most agree that this refers to the Jew/the visible member of the household of God. There are many good reasons for this conclusion. In Romans 2:4 Paul's reference to God's special graces; His kindness, forbearance and patience are an apt description of what God's people have received from the Lord throughout redemptive history. In Romans 2:17, when Paul mentions the Jew by name, he doesn't speak as if he is mentioning a new group. Clearly, the focus of Romans 2 is the Jew. And in Romans 3:9, Paul's summary of this entire section only mentions 2 groups.

So Paul clearly is turning his focus to the Jew, the visible child of God, the member of the covenant community. In Paul's discussion in Romans 1:19-32 of the necessity of the Gospel, the most natural question was this: While the Gentile could never save themselves from God's wrath on account of their immoral living, what about the Jew-, the member of the visible people of God? They have been the recipients of God's special favor (Romans 2:4). They have been the caretakers of God's Word (Romans 2:20). They alone have been given the promise that "God would be their God and they would be His people" (Genesis 17:7-8; Matthew 1:21, 23). For two thousand years they have been a guide to the spiritually blind (Romans 2:19). After all they've done, certainly they aren't the recipients of God's wrath... Are They?

Paul's answer to this question shockingly is, "Yes!" Even those in a morally upright religion can be the recipient of God's wrath!

As we look at this text we will discuss the BASIS upon which Paul would say this. We will see the reason why the Jew, representing the morally upright religious, could be under God's wrath and therefore in need of the gospel. Notice that the morally upright have three problems.

Their Confession, Romans 2:2

Romans 2:2, "and we know."

Paul appeals to what was common knowledge between himself and the Jew! In fact, one of the things in which the Jew took pride was their "knowledge of the law" and their ability to "teach it." (Romans 2:17-20) Paul appeals to this common knowledge.

Romans 2:2, "and we know that the judgment of God rightly falls."

This is a potentially misleading translation. The phrase more literally reads, "And we know that

the judgment of God which is according to truth..." The point Paul makes with this phrase is that the judgment of God as described in Romans 1:19-32 is just. It is not just for the sake of appearance or profession, neither is God's justice something that can be purchased. God's justice is based upon the standard of truth.

Now the Jews of Paul's day understood and knew this that the judgment of God rightly or justly "falls upon those who practice such things." (Romans 2:2). Once again this is a clear reference to Romans 1:19-32, with the implication that Paul's treatment of the Gentile and God's Wrath would not have been new to the Jew but would have in fact been heartily accepted!

This was the confession of the Jew of Paul's day and the Christian in our own. We know and confess these truths:

Romans 6:23a, "...the wages of sin is death..."

1 John 3:8a, "The one who practices sin is of the devil..."

And that the Last Day will catch many off guard.

1 Thessalonians 5:3, "While they are saying, "Peace and safety!" then destruction will come upon them suddenly like birth pangs upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape."

How many people are in hell this very moment that lived their lives professing this? Teaching this? Preaching this? The great theologian, John Gerstner, used to say that "...the deepest pit in hell is reserved for the theologian." Think of the Devil. Satan is doomed to hell not on account of heretical theology per se. To twist the scriptures the way he has requires quite a thorough grasp of the truth.¹ So why will Satan be cast into the Lake of Fire? Satan will be cast into the Lake of Fire because of his wicked and proud heart.²

Family of God let us understand this truth. Knowing theology, having a firm grasp on the truth doesn't save. If it did, we could boldly say that the Pharisees of Christ's day were head of the class when it came to salvation as a majority had mastered the 39 books of the Old Testament. But as it is, we know that many were condemned because they knew their theology and doctrine, but did not act upon what they knew! Christ put it this way:

Matthew 7:26-27, "And everyone who hears these words of Mine, and does not act upon them, will be like a foolish man, who built his house upon the sand. And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and burst against that house; and it fell, and great was its fall."

Because of their confession, the morally religious stand condemned. Now that is not to say that

¹ Compare Matthew 4 and James 2:19

² Compare 1 Timothy 3:6

it is bad to know your theology. That's ludicrous. Of course each and every one of us should strive to know the truth! We just must do more than simply apprehend it; after all, "the demons believe and shudder." (James 2:19) This brings us to the second reason the morally upright can stand condemned before God.

Their Concord, Romans 2:1c

Romans 2:1, "therefore you are without excuse, every man *of you* who passes judgment, for in that you judge another."

To judge means basically to separate, choose, select, or determine. In some cases it is used positively. Christ in fact commanded us to "judge with righteous judgment." (John 7:24) But in most cases it is used negatively, and refers to an evaluation which places the one who judges above the one who is judged.

Matthew 7:1, "Do not judge lest you be judged."

Now because the word "judge" has a dozen or more shades of meaning, its definition must be determined from the context. When we look at the context of this passage we find that the word carries a neutral connotation. The judging identified here is not evil, rather it is...

- An affirmation of the truth of what God Himself has said.
- And an applying of this truth to a given context.

I want you to notice what this implies. The Jew's judging of another, specifically the Gentile for their rebellion and sin, indicates two things:

- One: Knowledge of God's standard of right and wrong.
- Two: An ascent as to the veracity of this knowledge.

In other words you cannot judge others without a standard. The standard Judaism used at the time of Christ was God's Word. That the Jews therefore judged the Gentile indicates that not only did they understand God's word, but they heartily agreed with it!

This is the second reason why the morally upright stand condemned before God. They not only confess the truth of the word of God but they give hearty approval when it comes to the condemnation of the wicked!

You say, "What's so bad about this? Ought we not to confess the truth of God's word and give hearty approval of God's decretive will? Yes, but again we must do so as one's who have applied what we profess to ourselves! And we must live in light of what we are professing. Doctrine and affirmation are important elements to a healthy walk with Christ. Yet these things are not enough to save us!

With this we are brought to the third reason for why a morally upright person can go to hell.

Their Condemnation, Romans 2:1d

Romans 2:1, “therefore you are without excuse, every man *of you* who passes judgment, for in that you judge another, you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things.”

With this the picture comes into complete focus. It is not that understanding and affirmation are bad things. Again we ought to be diligent students of God’s word. It is when we fail to apply what we are studying to ourselves! That’s the problem. Now I know that what Paul says here is offensive to all whose confidence is in their religious attainments. What Paul writes in this text would have been shocking to the Jew of his day. The Jews were sure that the Gentiles were the “sinners.”³ And yet, as we have seen, sin begins in the heart!⁴ The outward manifestation of sin is but the by-product of an inner heart-problem.

Thus, though the Jews did not practice and so were not guilty of the same sins as did the Gentiles, they nevertheless were guilty of the same sin! For example recall Christ’s third year of ministry where Christ was accused of being a glutton. Where did the accusation come from?

Luke 15:2, “And both the Pharisees and the scribes *began* to grumble, saying, ‘This man receives sinners and eats with them.’”

Christ committed a great insult to the religious establishment of His day when He sat at table-fellowship with sinners. To do this was understood as an endorsement of the sinner’s sin! That is why no Jew would ever eat with a reputed sinner. The sinner was condemned. As such and get this by not eating with the sinner the Jew not only confessed that they recognized the guilt of the sinner but also endorsed their condemnation!

But herein was and is the problem. The morally upright know that the wages of sin is death. *And they agree* that such must be the case. They know that the addict is guilty of sin and will be condemned on the Day of Judgment. *And they heartily agree* with the verdict. They know that the one who commits adultery is guilty of sin and will be condemned on the Day of Judgment as a result. *And they endorse the truth*. Yet they stand before God addicted to the praises of men, guilty of adultery on account of lust BUT expect that it will go well with their soul on the Day of Judgment?

To use an expression of Paul elsewhere, “Their condemnation is just!” (Romans 3:8) The morally upright religious receives condemnation NOT because they judge the moral standards of others, BUT because they stop there. They fail to apply to themselves the standard that they

³ Compare Galatians 2:15

⁴ Compare Mark 7:15

themselves affirm, and so they allow their hearts to become defiled with the very sins that they agree are worthy of the wrath of God!

Paul puts the result of this thinking very bluntly.

Romans 2:1, "you condemn yourself..."

The idea behind "condemn" is to "judge against," and so to pass sentence upon, and hence, to denounce as wrong. It is generally used of condemning someone to something. For example:

- Matthew 20:18; Mark 14:64 it is used of condemning Christ to death on a cross.
- Luke 11:31, 32 by implication it is used of condemning people to the lake of fire.

And so here, to condemn oneself is sentence oneself to the wrath of God; it is to proclaim by your action that you properly/justly ought to be punished!

The religiously moral can indeed be a recipient of God's wrath. For while they know full well that God's wrath is rightly against sin, they affirm this to be right and they use God's word to evaluate others; they themselves fall short on account of their hypocrisy and failure to evaluate themselves against the truth of God's word! It is for this error, the error of hypocrisy, these moral giants can be a recipient of the Wrath of God!

Christian! Hear this well and understand. You could have

- Perfect church attendance for fifty years.
- Never miss a day of reading the Bible.
- Do the greatest of deeds each day.
- Entertain the nicest thoughts.
- Have a well-run and well-ordered household.
- Have a great family.
- Master the Bible and its contents.
- Confess the purest theology and teach it to many.
- Instruct many when it comes to godly living.
- Be used by God to bring others to know the Lord.
- Live a life which in many respects glorifies God!

And yet you could still go to Hell! The universal teaching of Scripture is that God's wrath is against the impure of heart- those who...

- Secretly are enslaved to sin.
- Covertly indulge their fleshly lusts.
- Privately rejoice in evil no matter how slight it may appear.
- Derive joy from that which God hates.

- Delight in that which God condemns.

If this is you, then your outward acts of conformity to God's word and your affirmation not only is worthless, but in the day of God's judgment they will testify against you! God's plan in salvation is the redeeming to Himself a people who are purified on the inside.

Matthew 23:25-26, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside they are full of robbery and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee, first clean the inside of the cup and of the dish, so that the outside of it may become clean also."

This is important. It is not that God doesn't care about our external acts or conduct. He does. It is that the external holiness which God desires is that which arises on account of an internal cleansing- "the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit!" (Titus 3:5) And thus we read this:

Psalm 51:16-17, "For Thou dost not delight in sacrifice [the mere outward act of religious devotion], otherwise I would give it; Thou art not pleased with burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart, O God, Thou wilt not despise."- because these are the sacrifices which God accepts, notice...

Psalm 34:18, "The Lord is near to the brokenhearted, and saves those who are crushed in spirit [on the inside]."

Matthew 5:8, "Blessed are those who are pure in heart, for they shall see God."

Therefore, hypocrisy in any and every form is loathsome to God.

1 John 1:5-7, "And this is the message we have heard from Him and announce to you, that God is light, and in Him there is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth."

God desires purity in the inner man; a purity which only occurs as the Spirit of God washes us and cleanses us! And thus to take shelter in...

- Bible Study.
- Church Membership.
- The Sacraments.
- Witnessing.
- Worship.
- And a whole host of other activities of a Morally Upright Religion.

Is of no more benefit in your being saved from the wrath of God than the Gentile's worship of

the idol!

With that we are brought once again to the purpose of this text and its conclusion. If we are going to stand in the Last Day, free of God's judgment, it will only be by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ! Though speaking in a different context, Paul's words are nevertheless applicable here:

Romans 14:4, "Who are you to judge the servant of another? To his own master he stands or falls; and stand he will, for the Lord is able to make him stand."

It is only God who saves. Thus, the only place that we can take shelter is in the cross of Christ!

Romans 1:17, "...He who is righteous by faith shall live!"

Christian and non-Christian alike make the cross your shelter. Live by the sacrificial work of Christ on the cross. Take your evil and wicked heart to the cross, and ask God to transform you. Take your private and secret sins to the cross, and there forsake them. Ask God, and He will make you clean! Apply yourself to a life whose only hope, joy, and confidence is the cross...

Galatians 6:14, "But may it never be that I should boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world."

Be willing to "test yourselves to see if you are in the faith." That is part and parcel of what we do in the Lord's Supper. We ask ourselves, "On what basis do I stand before God this day? My works? My righteousness? Or the person and work of Christ?" And then with the cross as your boast, sacrificially live in its shadow. Deny yourself. Die to yourself. And Live to God!

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Feel free to visit Bethel Presbyterian Church when in Broomfield, Colorado. Bethel Presbyterian Church meets at Broomfield High School, Eagle (10th Street) and Main, Broomfield, Colorado. The telephone number of the church is 303-469-6912. The worship services are at 9:30 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. each Sunday. Bethel Presbyterian Church is a member of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

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About the Preacher

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