

THE MORALISTIC WRATH-DODGER ROMANS 2:1-5

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I. THE NEW PERSPECTIVE ON PAUL

Let me say just a word about the so-called new perspective on Paul. In scholarly circles this approach is connected with the names of men like E. P. Sanders, James D. G. Dunn, N. T. Wright, and Terence L. Donaldson.

What they are saying amounts to a claim that Paul does not really clash with Judaism as sharply as many Lutherans and other Protestants have thought. According to this view, Paul is mainly challenging Jewish exclusivism. Paul, we are told, is insisting that Gentiles can enter the redeemed community by faith in Christ, but that good works are the way that entrants into that community stay inside it.

As you can see, under this conception, final salvation still depends on works. The new perspective seems to be implicitly Arminian, although a Calvinist expositor could accommodate himself to it rather easily. In the Reformed perspective, genuine entrance into the redeemed community only occurs when the entering faith results in the necessary good works.

I am happy to say I don't have to consume your time or mine refuting this "new perspective." That has already been very adequately done by a recent book. I am referring to Stephen Westerholm's book entitled, *Perspectives New and Old on Paul*.¹

Westerholm's book exhibits thorough scholarship and is an incisive critique of this point of view. My sense of the literature on Paul today is that the "new perspective" has largely run its course and is beginning to erode. I hope this erosion will prove fatal.

¹ Stephen Westerholm, *Perspectives New and Old on Paul: The "Lutheran" Paul and His Critics* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004).

But even if I'm not correct in this hopeful outlook, the so-called "new perspective" is seriously misguided. It does not really understand Paul.

II. THE MORALIST OF ROMANS 2:1-5

That leads me to Romans 2. This chapter in particular has played a prominent role in the discussions related to the "new perspective." As a result, I have tried to give Romans 2 very close attention in my commentary that I am presently working on.

Romans 2:1 is addressed to a moralist. Paul's words are:

Therefore you are without excuse, O man (anyone who judges). In fact, in the matter for which you judge someone else, you condemn yourself, since you who pass judgment do the same things.

– Author's Translation

I am surprised that a number of commentators think that Paul has a Jew in mind here. I can see no basis for that in the text. Paul's statement is obviously generalized by the words I have translated as *anyone who judges*. Needless to say, in the Greco-Roman world there were plenty of critics of human behavior. Every age and society can be expected to have this type of person.

In the previous chapter (Rom 1:18-32) Paul has been at pains to pass sweeping condemnation on the behavior of men in general. But his indictment of men is more than just an indictment. He is actually in the process of showing that God's anger with mankind is displayed in mankind's depraved condition. Romans 1:28-32 is a catalogue of human vices into which God has allowed men to sink.

This brings Paul to the moralist of Romans 2. What about people who decry the iniquities of other people and pass judgment on those people? Are these moralistic individuals actually exceptions to Paul's general condemnation of human beings? This question is relevant whether the moralist is Jewish or Gentile.

Paul's answer, of course, is that even the moralist is no exception to what Paul is saying. This is indicated up front by the words, *you who pass judgment do the same things*. The moralist, in other words, is a hypocrite. But here we should note carefully how Paul phrases this point.

In the Greek text, as my translation indicates, the judgment made by the moralist is a judgment of some particular thing or other. In the phrase

in the matter for which you judge someone else, the words *in the matter* render the Greek phrase *en hō*. Of course, *hō* is singular. However, in the phrase *you...do the same things*, the underlying Greek is the plural expression *ta...auta* (*the same things*).

Paul's point is that no matter what the moralist condemns in others, he does the same wicked things they do. This does not necessarily mean that he does the very thing he finds fault with (though this often happens). Instead, it means that he does his own fair share of the sins men generally do.

Let me illustrate. A moralist might say, "I know husbands who lie to their wives. That's wrong. I would never do that." However, the moralist lies to his friends, his co-workers, and the authorities. To take another example, the moralist says, "Adultery is everywhere and it's wrong." But the same person indulges in envy, greed, and hatred.

Even the moralist, Paul is saying, falls under the sweeping indictment of Romans 1. He is not a glowing exception to mankind's depravity. He too, therefore, cannot expect to dodge God's wrath.

III. THE PERSONAL DANGER OF THE MORALIST

Precisely because the moralist does *the same things* that other sinners do, he is himself confronting personal danger.

This is made clear in Rom 2:2-3:

Now we know that God's judgment against people who do such things corresponds to the truth. So do you suppose, O man—you who judge *people who do such things and you do them too—that you yourself will escape God's judgment?*

– Author's Translation

Here Paul is affirming that God's wrathful judgment against sinful behavior is valid. It is *according to the truth*, that is, it corresponds to the reality of man's sin and is fully justified. Since this is the case, how then does the moralist expect to escape this wrath? The moralist condemns people who do the type of things Paul has catalogued in chap. 1. But the moralist is guilty of such things as well.

Paul's question, of course, is pointed and sharp. "So do you suppose, O man...that you yourself will escape God's judgment?" Sooner or later the moralist will be overtaken by God's wrath, just like other men are. How does he propose to avoid that?

There is in fact a way in which he *might* avoid it. This is suggested in v 4 where Paul writes:

Or do you despise the wealth of His kindness and tolerance and longsuffering, *not realizing that God's kind behavior is drawing you to repentance?*

– Author's Translation

The moralist should seriously consider why he has not yet been overtaken by the wrath that has fallen on people all around him. The reason is that God is dealing with him in *kindness, tolerance, and forbearance*. This *kind behavior* on God's part is in fact God's way of *drawing him to repentance*.

Repentance, therefore, is the means by which God's wrath could be evaded. But the moralist is so busy condemning others he does not stop to consider why it is that God is bearing patiently with the moralist's own sins. God wants this moralist to repent.

Paul's statement here is quite revealing. Although in chap. 1 mankind is seen as universally under God's wrath, here we see that God also individualizes His wrath. To put it simply, God's wrath does not overtake men the moment they commit sin. That wrath may be delayed by God's wish not to have to inflict it.

Let me illustrate this. Here is a man who drinks heavily. But he does not destroy his liver overnight. Yet if he continues to drink that may well happen to him. That would be God's wrath. He should repent of his heavy drinking before it is too late.

Or take another case. Here is a man who engages in gay sex. His first sinful liaison may not be with someone who carries the AIDS virus. In fact, he may go through a long series of such encounters without contracting AIDS. But then one day he contracts AIDS. That is God's wrath. He should repent of his sexual activity before it is too late.

Obviously God would prefer that the heavy drinker not reach the point of severe liver damage. He would prefer the homosexual not to contract AIDS. But if there is no repentance from such behavior, God's wrath in some form or other is inevitable.

Therefore, the moralist of Romans 2 should carefully consider his own danger instead of focusing on the failures of others.

IV. THE DAY OF WRATH

Paul now concludes his exchange with the hypothetical moralist by the words of Rom 2:5.

Before I quote 2:5, however, I want to point out that a period should follow this verse, not just a comma. Despite the KJV tradition of a comma after v 5, it is preferable to place a period there along with the NIV and *The Jerusalem Bible*. The following relative pronoun, in v 6, functions as a virtual personal pronoun introducing a new line of thought.

Romans 2:5 reads as follows:

And by means of your hardness and your unrepentant heart
you are storing up wrath against yourself in a day of wrath,
and of revelation, and of the righteous judgment of God.²

– Author’s Translation

What we are looking at here in 2:5 is what exegetes refer to as an *inclusio*. An *inclusio* is a stylistic device that picks up a word, phrase, or idea from the beginning of a unit and repeats it at the end of the unit as a structural marker to indicate that the unit is complete. The writer of Hebrews, for example, is quite fond of the *inclusio*.

More than one commentator has noticed that the wording of Rom 2:5 clearly recalls the material in 1:18. To begin with, there is the double use of the word *wrath* in 2:5. That is the first explicit use of this word since 1:18.

Secondly, there is the word *revelation*. In Rom 1:18 Paul affirms that the wrath of God has been *revealed* from heaven. In 1:18 the verb is used and in 2:5 the cognate noun is used.

Thirdly, the word translated *righteous judgment* is the Greek word *dikaiokrisias*. This is its only use in the NT. It quite clearly picks up a thought that is implicit in Rom 1:18. In 1:18 Paul says that God’s wrath is revealed *against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth by unrighteousness*. This double use of *unrighteousness* makes quite clear the fact that God’s wrath is due to God’s *righteous judgment* against unrighteous men.

² The third *and* (*kai*) in this verse is not found in the modern critical editions of the Greek NT. I am following the Majority Text here, but the presence or absence of this *and* does not materially affect what I am saying.

If ever there was an obvious *inclusio*, Rom 2:5 is it. This means, therefore, that in Paul's mind Rom 1:18 to 2:5 is a single unit of thought. The basic idea of the unit is very simple: All men are exposed to the righteous wrath of God including the moralist who thinks he is better than others. There are no exceptions.

This also leads to another obvious conclusion. When Paul tells the moralist that he *is storing up wrath in a day of wrath*, he is *not* talking about the eschatological future (i.e., the Tribulation, cf. 1 Thess 5:9). He is talking about right here and now!

I have to confess that I previously had read Rom 2:5 as if it had said that the moralist is storing up wrath *for* the "day of wrath." Perhaps, with a little straining, the Greek could bear that idea. But Paul doesn't say *for*, he says *in*. The moralist is *in* the day of wrath.

Paul's point is something like this. I am paraphrasing:

"You, who are as guilty as other people, are actually heaping up a real abundance of wrath in this very time which is already a day of wrath."

In other words, Paul is emphasizing the thoughtless folly of the moralizer. Everywhere around him he can see—or should see—the manifested wrath of God. But instead of trying to avoid that wrath, he is heaping it up for himself as well.

"This very day you live in," says Paul, "is a day of wrath!"

V. CONCLUSION

Romans 2:1-5 is important for several reasons.

First, it helps us to understand that there is a break in the thought between Rom 2:5 and 2:6. Not a radical break in the thought, of course. But a significant one. In 2:6-16, Paul proceeds to the issue of the final judgment of the unrighteous. Of course, there is no such judgment for those who are righteous by faith, since no charge can be brought against them (see Rom 8:33).

Second, my proposed understanding of Rom 2:1-5 places Paul's one and only reference to repentance in Romans in the context of God's temporal wrath.

One commentator states, "Repentance plays a surprisingly small part in Paul's teaching, considering its importance in contemporary

Judaism.”³ If we abandon the “new perspective” on Paul, however, surprise is an uncalled for reaction.

If Hebrews is left out of consideration, in the Pauline epistles the word group *metanoia/metanoēō* (repentance/repent) occurs a grand total of *five times* (Rom 2:4; 2 Cor 7:9, 10; 2 Cor 12:21; 2 Tim 2:25)! I think you will agree that this is not a very big number for thirteen epistles. The simple fact of the matter is that, in Pauline thought, repentance is not relevant to Paul’s doctrine of justification by faith. Romans has only this reference and Galatians has not a single reference.

These facts speak for themselves. Repentance in the Bible is always connected with man’s need to adjust his behavior to avoid trouble and to escape the temporal judgment of God.

Thirdly, even in their unregenerate condition, God desires man to repent in time to avoid His wrath on their particular sins.

As Jeremiah said in Lam 3:33, God “does not afflict willingly, nor grieve the children of men.” Even though God is angered by men’s sin and righteously inflicts wrath upon them, He does not enjoy doing so. He would prefer that they repent.

Think of the sin that makes you angrier than any other sin. Maybe it is theft, murder, adultery, homosexuality, or something else. But remember one thing. God loves those sinners as individuals. His wrath is not immediate in individual cases. And in every case God would be glad to withhold His wrath if there is genuine repentance.

A whole city found this out one time. Its name was Nineveh. If we are going to be people of grace, our attitude toward sinners should be a real improvement on Jonah’s!

James and John once asked Jesus about a Samaritan village: “Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them, just as Elijah did?” (Luke 9:54). Jesus replied, “You do not know what manner of spirit you are of. For the Son of Man did not come to destroy men’s lives, but to save them” (Luke 9:55-56).

Hopefully, GES people know what spirit we are of.

³ Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), 133-34.