

# Reality Check

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Text: Romans 2:12-16;

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Link: <https://www.monergism.com/search?keywords=sinclair+ferguson+romans+&format=All>

## **OPENING PRAYER:**

Our gracious God and loving Father, we thank you for the cross of Jesus Christ and the gospel that proclaims that cross. We thank you that it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first, but also to Gentiles, like ourselves. We praise you that that gospel has come as far as the city of Columbia, South Carolina, over the ages. That it has come to this room this evening where we are gathered. And we pray very consciously that as we study your word together, we may become increasingly conscious, both of our need of that gospel, and of the glorious power of that gospel. And we pray that you would so persuade us of this, that those who have long trusted, may see afresh why we need you so badly. And those of us who have never trusted you, may be bowed low with a sense of our sinfulness and need, but also with an overwhelming sense, that while we are far more sinful than we ever imagined, you are far more gracious than we could ever have dreamed. And so we pray that you would come to us and speak to us now in your word, for Jesus Christ, our Savior's sake. Amen.

Please be seated.

## **SCRIPTURE READING:**

Now we're continuing our studies, these Sunday evenings in Paul's great letter to the Romans. That Martin Luther once called the clearest gospel of them all. And this evening, we're reading in Romans chapter two, and verse 12 through 16. The passage is on page 940, of your pew Bible. If you have your own Bible, that might be a help if you use your own one, and if you have come without one, there should be one in the pew rack in front of you this evening, page 940. And Romans chapter two. Romans chapter two, we begin to read at verse 12.

Paul is speaking I should know about the assessment that God makes of human life. He has spoken about the divine assessment of Gentiles. People who have who have never had the gospel, or the Bible, or even the Old Testament Scriptures. And he has exposed their sinfulness and shown how so often men and women in this world who flaunt the truth of God, then tell us that there is no judgment

that they can do these things freely. And Paul is explaining to us that the ease with which we do things, the way in which we give ourselves over to these things, actually is the judgment of God. God has handed us over to our own devices and desires. And now he turns his crosshairs on those of us who sit at the side and point the finger. And damn to hell, those who thus live. And he says to us, largely religious people in this instance, he is wanting, of course, particularly to address his fellow Jews who have shared what he said in chapter one, verse 18 to 32. And he has begun to reduce us to size as well and expose our own sinfulness. And in this one of the things he's arguing is that the gospel is for Jew and Gentile, because both Jew and Gentile stand condemned before the judgment seat of God. Because as he says, you'll notice in verse 11, "God shows no partiality". "God shows no partiality." And that doesn't mean God shows no partiality when it comes to others. That means there is no partiality when it comes to me. And it's this that he's taking up, verse 12.

*For all who have sinned without the law (that is without having the law without having the revelation given to Moses) all who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law, and all who have sinned under the law (that is those who have had the law of Moses) all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law. For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified. For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of man by Christ Jesus.*

## **SERMON:**

Beginning last Sunday evening, I mentioned an article that one of our members had given to me written by, I think, a quite well known missiologist, a scholar of Christian missions, who was talking about the testimony of a Muslim who had been reading the Gospel, but then said, it was only when I started to read Romans, that I understood the gospel. It was only when I began to see why this gospel and these gospels are so necessary, that it dawned on me why Jesus had come into the world. My wife, Dorothy and I were at a dinner in Dallas on Friday evening, a very striking and interesting occasion in which a former Muslim student gave a testimony to how he had come to faith in Jesus Christ. It was one of the more unusual testimonies I've ever heard in my life. Although it had the kind of features that one often finds in the testimonies of people from the Middle East who have come to faith in Jesus Christ. It featured a dream that he had been given not incidentally, that dreams are revelation, but dreams are certainly divine providences. And that dream, in a sense, had driven him to seek further and to compare the Koran and the Bible. And he'd given many hours to comparing the Koran and the Bible -- and days, this young man literally, days to the study of the Bible as he sought earnestly sought for truth. And then he said, "I read Romans and everything became clear."

But you see, what the Apostle Paul is beginning to teach us here is that Roman speaks not only with extraordinary power to Muslims in the Middle East, but it also speaks with what seems to me to be a contemporaneous, prophetic power to those of us who live in the West. The way in which the Gospel speaks to somebody in the East may be, as it were specially framed by the power of the Holy Spirit for their circumstances and their situation. But there is a way in which the Apostle Paul's teaching here has a very contemporary ring about it because what he has in his crosshairs, as he speaks about the failure and the sinfulness of men and women who have had the Bible is the extent to which we have become obsessed with ourselves. And he had referred to that you'll remember in chapter two, and in verse

eight, to those who are self seeking. And you'll remember how in Paul's last letter in Second Timothy chapter three, he says, there will be days of stress in the future, particular periods of time, perhaps in future Christian history, when society will be marked by this, that men become lovers of themselves, rather than lovers of God.

And you don't need to be a Christian to recognize that that's one of the hallmarks of our time. Many sociologists and social commentators who look upon our times in the West have described these days as the days when we live in what they've called the culture of narcissism. Named of course after narcissists or narcissists, strictly speaking, in Greek mythology. That handsome young fellow who looked into the river and saw his own reflection, and fell in love with his reflection. But then, as he came near to that reflection, he found the reflection seemed to vanish in the river. And so he sat beside the river refusing to drink the water, because to do so would be to destroy the image that he so loved. And he died there -- beside the river. One version of the myth says, He died of self love. And in that spot grew the first narcissists.

But that's our times. And it's not only our times out there, you see, in the world. The thing that Paul is concerned about here in this section of Romans is that that had become the dominant characteristic of the world of religion which he knew. And of course, later on in the New Testament in Philippians, he opens up his soul to say that he, the leading young man in Jewish religion, in Jerusalem in his times, was at the end of the day absolutely obsessed with himself.

And our old friend Martin Luther, who was featured more than once in our study says this is the basic problem men and women have. He had a classical education, so he put it in Latin. But even if you didn't know a word of Latin, you might guess what he meant. He said, our basic problem is, and he is speaking in a profoundly religious society, our basic problem is that we are as men and women -- *incurvatus* -- curved in upon ourselves. And you see, when we are curved in upon ourselves, the apostle Paul would say, when we are curved in upon ourselves we eventually become lovers of self, rather than lovers of God.

Why is that so serious? One, because we were not created to be that. And so we are malfunctioning. A number two, because the great commandment is that I should love the Lord my God with all my heart and soul and mind and strength. And the moment I deviate from that I not only begin to lose my true humanity, or my true femininity, I begin to lose my righteousness -- my life. And I begin on that pathway that leads me to judgment.

Now, the person who has never had the Revelation says, Well, I never knew about these things. And Paul says at the end of Romans, chapter one, you knew fully about these things. You knew fully about these things. That's why men and women who do these things, as we saw, always have to try and get others to do them -- always. Because they have to be able to protect themselves from the incursions of God, knowing full well that the judgment of God falls on those who do such things. They seek to get others, says Paul, to do such things. And of course, the religious man says, but you're forgetting that I have had privileges. You're forgetting I went to Sunday school. You're forgetting I was baptized. We might put it in our Christian vocabulary. You're forgetting that I had the teaching of God's word. You're forgetting I came from a Christian home. And the Apostle Paul is saying, at the end of the day, the great significant thing about your life is not the pedigree that you are able to trot out. But whether you have actually been living for yourself in a culture of narcissism. Because if so, he says, I am in the process

of showing you that at the judgment seat of God, your mouth will eventually be shut. And you will have nothing to be able to plead before the judgment seat of God.

Now, he continues in this vein rather relentlessly, doesn't he? This is I think, is it, our third sermon on Romans chapter two. And we did two sermons on 1:18 to 32. And there are still, I think, another four sermons to go before we are at the end of this section on judgment. So why should we go on? Why should we go on about this? Now, here's his reason. And we will not get to this for at least another year. So try and remember it. It's because when he turns to speak to Christians in the church at Rome, some of these things come back. Some of these things come back to haunt the church at Rome. As Christians in Rome have not fully felt the powerful impact of the gospel and close their mouths. One of the things they're doing is they're judging each other. You see. Now you've never done that, have you? You've never judged a fellow Christian. You've never judged a non Christian have you? And you see one of the things Paul has been doing here, he's, he's setting the scene for later on, when he's saying you're behaving like ungodly people, when you keep talking in judgment over others, and don't have your mouth closed before the judgment seat of Christ yourself. Do you know my dear friends, you can usually tell a Christian whose mouth God has shut. And a Christian whose mouth apparently has never really been shut. There's a something. And the Apostle Paul is wanting, as it were, Christian believers, who are able to say to their own souls, and to one another fourth, or for 1000 tongues to sing my great Redeemer's praise. And no longer for one tongue that is obsessed with myself.

So let's look at some of the things the apostle is now teaching us about this relentless judgment of God. And you understand this will do as much good if we're able to bear it. If we have the heart to bear this, it can only do us temporary and eternal good.

Now, what's the first point to notice -- it's this. It is that judgment, the teaching about judgment is an essential part of the message of the gospel. It's an essential part of the message of the gospel. Now he tells us that right at the end of the section on verse 16. He says, "A day comes when, according to my gospel, God will judge the secrets of men by Christ Jesus." It's part of the gospel. The bad news, I need to grasp before the good news seems really good to me. And that's why at least my experience as a Christian minister is that among God's people, when God's judgment has spoken of, however sore it is to the preacher to speak about it, and you shouldn't speak about it unless it's sore to you. And you can go home on a Sunday night with your heart aching and breaking, because you've spoken about things that are so solemn and serious. And yet, you often notice as you shake hands with people at the door, who are Christian people, that they are glowing with joy on the way out. Why? Because they've seen again, as they've been brought down low, by this aspect of the gospel, they've seen again from the Dark Pit into which they may have felt themselves to be brought -- they've seen how glorious the gospel of Jesus Christ really is. Like stars that you see in a dark night that you can't see in the day. Jesus Christ has never seemed glorious to anyone except those who have been conscious of their sinfulness and of the judgment of God. And that's why Paul says that the gospel is such an essential message for us to grasp not only in terms of the glorious good news to which he will wonderfully, eventually bring us. But he holds us down under the water where we feel ourselves to be drowning, so that when we come up and breathe the air again, we feel that we have breathed the most glorious air in the universe. Because our mouths have been shut. Our mouths have been shut. And we've seen before that's where he's going. Chapter three, verse 19. He says he wants every mouth to be shut, and every one of us to be conscious that we are guilty before the judgment seat of Christ.

This is a rather grotesque illustration, but forgive me for using it. And I don't know where I learned this. And I'm not even sure that it's something every Scottish school boy learned at school, but for 30 minutes after Mary Queen of Scots was executed under the order of Elizabeth the first her mouth kept opening and closing. Isn't that grotesque? Now there's a, there's a physiological explanation for that. And some of the men in the congregation can give you the physiological explanation. I'm more interested in that as a rather grotesque illustration of where we are by nature. We are dead in trespasses and sins, says Paul, but we will insist on talking back to God. And our mouths keep opening and closing and opening and closing, and opening and closing and arguing with him. And saying, we're not as bad as he paints us to be. And that we're better than others. And who does he think he is invading our lives. You would think he thought he was the creator of the universe. And Paul is saying, this is why judgment is such an important part of the gospel because until my self righteousness and my self centeredness are pulled down the kingdom of Jesus Christ is not going to be built in my life.

Some of you will think I'm obsessed with Martin Luther. But I owe a great deal to Martin Luther. And I remember reading as a teenager in his introduction to his study of Romans, how he uses words that God spoke to Jeremiah, in Jeremiah chapter one. When God says to Jeremiah, "Jeremiah, I'm setting you over the nations to pull down and to pluck up and to destroy, and then to plant and to build." And Luther says, "This is what Romans is all about." Romans is about God's gospel, "pulling me down and destroying my self righteousness, and my self sufficiency." And then he says, "planting Jesus Christ." And you see, he's speaking to religious people. And we're the ones who need it, aren't we?

Have you ever noticed, as I've noticed, somewhat to my grief, that so many of us who are conservative Christian people are at ease when, for example, a speaker or a teacher or a preacher is firing the big guns on the immorality of society, but when he begins to analyze the sins of the church, there is anger and bitterness.

I have never forgotten an occasion when I had the privilege of speaking many years ago at a conference with Dr. John White, eminent psychiatrist and Christian teacher. And in one of his addresses this, this quiet, but steely Christian man spent an hour, as it were, analyzing the sins of the evangelical community that was sitting right in front of him. And I've only on a few occasions in my life among Christian people, seen such outrage -- that he dared to do this. And I remember thinking, much younger and less wise, I hope than I am now, I thought, Oh, my oh my our mouths have never been shut. We can take it when it's about them. But we get angry when it's about us. Why? Because he should treat us as though we are righteous you see. So this teaching on judgment is very much part of Paul's gospel.

Second. If the first principle he is speaking about is that judgment is an essential part of the gospel message. The second principle is that judgment is made according to the light we have received. His whole point here, verse 11, God shows no partiality, therefore, verse 12, "those who have sinned without the law", that is without having the special revelation of God, that we find in the Old Testament scriptures, for example, in the Law of Moses in the 10 commandments. "Those who have sinned without having the law will perish without having the law. And those who have sinned, having had the law, will be judged by the law because it's not those who hear the law, those who have the law, who are righteous, but only those who respond to the grace of God in that law. And the directives that God gives from that law." And so there's a very simple principle. And you hear it very often -- God will judge us according to the light that we have had.

But you notice that Paul is very careful to explain that the man or the woman who has never had access to the 10 commandments, to the Torah, of the Old Testament scriptures, is not without law altogether. And he points to a very common phenomenon in the world, it seems to me, when he says, "These people", he says, verse 15, "show that the work of the law is written on their hearts." What does he mean by that? Well, very simply this, that the 10 commandments that God gave at Sinai, were really, as it were, a writing in stone, largely in a negative form, but they were writing on tablets of stone, of the basic instincts that God had written into the heart of men and women at creation. That is to say, they were not surprising when Moses brought them down the mountain. They were actually seeing now, God was saying, I'm putting this in a negative form, because you're spiritually immature, and because you're very sinful. But I'm really just saying to you, this is the way to live, because this is the way I made you to live. So you find in every culture that, as Paul says here, there is evidence that the law of God -- we would need to be totally dehumanized before this is the case. The law of God is written on our hearts, and so we are not without light. People say yes, of course, as long as they live up to the light they have had all as well. But Paul is saying the problem is they don't. That's why he says, did you notice the word he used? He says, "Those who sin apart from the law will perish apart from the law."

Now, I wonder if you have found, as I have sometimes found that people will come when you're speaking about the judgment of God, and they say, now, what really concerns me is what happens to those who have never heard the gospel? What happens to those who have never heard the gospel -- that troubles me? But you know what I say? I say if it troubles you, what are you doing about it? And the answer is usually nothing. It doesn't trouble them. It's just an excuse. Just a little schoolboy argument for saying, Well, I can free myself from this terrible thought of the judgment of God, because it's a mystery to me how God judges those who have never heard the gospel. And I'm really concerned about that. My dear friends, we need to puncture that kind of foolish pride, -- and say, you don't care a rap about those who have never heard the gospel or you would be doing something about it. You don't often hear that from zealous evangelists and world missionaries, you know, who are actually doing something about it. They are the ones whose hearts are broken.

And so you see, Paul is speaking with a, with a devastating power to those who have never heard the gospel. He says, I will not judge you. I will not judge you in the light of what I have done in Jesus Christ. I will judge you according to the light that you have had, and you have had plenty of light. And unless by God's grace, they're brought to Jesus Christ in the mystery of the gospel, says Paul, they will perish. And we too. That's the point. We too. We who have had it. We have had our Bibles. How many Bibles do you have at home? We have had our opportunities for worship. We have had open doors for ministry and for witness and for mercy care to the poor. Yes, let God judge me by the light I have had, we may say, that's a great thing. People love that. God will judge me by the light I have had. And the New Testament says, on that day when the light you have had by which God judges you, becomes crystal clear men and women will be running to the mountains and the hills and calling on them to fall upon them to save them from the wrath that they themselves have said they deserved because -- let God judge me according to the light I've had. And so there's something very devastating about that, isn't there? Something very devastating indeed.

Let me put it like this. If I were to stand, I say this to us as a congregation. And I say it to myself. If I were to stand in this pulpit and go through a few verses of the New Testament of the teaching of Jesus, or the teaching of the apostle Paul, and say to you, you can forget about that verse. You can forget about that verse -- doesn't matter. I hope there would be many letters in the mail tomorrow morning to our session clerk, saying, How can we bring charges against this minister we have? But what if I were

to ask you? What have you done with these verses? If I were to say to you, the verses about evangelism don't matter And you are angry. But if I said, What have you done with these verses? The verses about building the church of Jesus Christ as a strong fellowship with these people that's bonded together. Devoted, prepared as it were to live and die together with Jesus Christ, and to pray and to worship together and to serve together and embrace one another in love and to be free from all the idols of the heart. If I were to say, you can forget about those verses. But you see this is where God sees right through me because he says, Son, you've forgotten about those verses. Close your mouth. Humble yourself under my mighty hand, or you'll never, you'll never find the grace that will enable you to keep these verses and live for them. So at the end of the day, if I'm prepared to, if I'm prepared to argue to the death for the absolute inerrancy and inspiration of Holy Scripture, but it doesn't really make any difference to my life. Then he's saying, Where are you? Where are you?

Well, there's a third thing that Paul says here. Judgment of God is an essential part of the gospel. It's made according to the light we will receive. And thirdly, that we've already touched on, as Jonathan has with the children -- it reaches to the secrets of our hearts. Remember, Hebrews four the Word of God is sharper than any two edged sword and it cleaves right through to the secrets of our hearts right down to our motives -- devastating -- to my motives. It's that accurate. Not the externals, but the motivations, his judgment is perfect and his judgment takes account of my, of my all too subtle motives for, for doing all kinds of things. And, and he's still speaking about religion. Let me, let me turn the, let me turn the gun on myself. He's speaking to me about my preaching. What are my motives in my preaching? When am I tempted to draw back? Or when am I tempted to go too far? And about you and your living? Right down to your motivations? But do you see how this word that is so devastating, really, if we could only, if we could only take it in? Absolutely devastating. The thought that he knows my secrets. But you see there's something if you're a Christian believer, there's something unbelievably comforting about that. You know, isn't there? That what he will judge will be the secret motives. That's what he looks at. For some of us at least, who feel ourselves to have failed so badly and to be to be nobody and nothing in the Christian church, our names will never be in lights. People pass us by, as it were. They don't take much notice of us. We're rarely thanked and we feel that we've, we've done all so little for our Lord Jesus Christ. And -- but you see, it's the motives he'll assess, dear one. Isn't that something? Feel yourself to be a totally insignificant Christian who's accomplished very little. And God says, My child, it's the motives.

You know, one of the delights of being in a church where there are children is, the way sometimes at the church door a child will give you a magnificent portrait of yourself standing in the pulpit, and preaching. They're always very interesting. And at least in my case, they're always very unusual. What would you think of me? If I took one of these pictures that makes my head like this, my body like that, and my arms reach to both sides of the church building and tore it up in front of the child, and said, Don't you dare draw me like that? I don't look anything like that. Well, you'd love the child to see Pal that's exactly how you do look from where I sit in the church. But I don't do that, do I? You wouldn't do that. You take it and you say, thank you so much. You might say with a smile, it's so like me. That was so kind of so loving of you to sit there drawing me during this sermon. Or, or was it during the prayer. And you do that with your children, don't you? And you see, what to me if I'm not a Christian is something I want to try and press away as far as I possibly can, can actually be a great comfort to me if I really am a Christian. That he sees the secrets. He knows the struggle I had. He knows the home I came from. He knows the challenges I had. He doesn't measure my spiritual growth by the height I've reached by comparison with others. But the distance that I've come and the difficulties I've faced in

order to reach the height that I have attained to. And his judgment upon me as the judgment, the assessment, of a father.

And that leads us very naturally to the fourth thing Paul says here. Judgment is an essential part of the gospel message. It's given according to the light we have received. It reaches to the secrets of our hearts. And it is entirely in the hands of our Lord Jesus Christ. Entirely in the hands of the Lord Jesus Christ. No one else will judge us. But him. John five that's our header texts this evening: the Father has given all judgment into his hands. That means, of course, that he is the standard, and that he is the judge.

It would be purely speculative to wonder what will that last judgment look like? But I tell you, one of the things it will look like will be that as those who have never trusted Christ, and those who have never loved Christ, pass him by on the day of judgment, and look into his face, whatever alienation and hatred and opposition they have ever shown to him will be consummated. And they will say, I cannot bear to look upon that face. And they will never see it again.

But you see those who have loved him and trusted him -- who have been able to say as we were singing this morning, "My Jesus, I love thee I know thou art mind, if ever I loved thee, my Jesus tis now." Says the Apostle Paul. That will be a crown of righteousness for all who have loved him.

Now that may be a little difficult to say in a country that's not a monarchy, but you get the point, don't ya? What's your reaction going to be as a Christian believer, as he holds out to you the crown of righteousness, I tell you what your reaction is going to be. Lord Jesus, what did I ever do to deserve becoming a king or a queen. And he will say, as I say to him, Lord, Jesus, this is far too gracious. He will say, My child, your mistaken, or your lifelong, partly because you wouldn't look at the horrible pit of your own sin is that you never really looked up to me, as you might have to see how infinitely gracious I really am. And then on that day, as we pass him who are believers into His eternal presence, if, if there is, if there is a moment of regret, that moment of regret will be, oh I wish, I'd understood my own sin and his exquisite grace, and lived for him more fully without reservation. And you see, I think it's because Paul was learning that, that he was prepared to spend so much time bringing us down, down, down, down.

Dear young friends, let me say to you with all the energy I can muster, at the end of this Lord's the evening until you are brought down by Christ, you will never be brought up by him. Never. Never. It's his way. As CS Lewis says, "There is nothing that has refused to die, that has ever been raised from the dead." When I consent to God's judgment on my life, and what I deserve, because of my sin, and my twistedness and my false motivation, and my hypocritical religion, and I die inwardly and my mouth is shut, then I begin to feel the embrace of Christ, in the Gospel, saying you are weary and heavy laden, my child, but I will give you rest. And I will make something of you for my glory. And that's the value of this. And the value of knowing as I look at my own sinfulness, that the very reason the Savior came into the world, was to bear the judgment of God upon that sinfulness. He was wounded for my transgressions, bruised for my iniquities, chastisement, that makes me whole was his. And with his stripes, with his beating, I may be saved. He is a great Savior.

Well, do you really know that? If you've been brought up in a Christian family, young man, young woman. I wasn't and I have no idea what that privilege is like except what I've seen in my own children. But at the end of the day, that's not the issue. That's not the issue. The issue is, are you Christ's? Are



you Christ's? And once you're Christ's everything else fits into place. Struggles, difficulties, challenges, pains, struggles, spiritual warfare. But friends, brotherhood sisterhood service, evangelism, ministry, mission, and eventually -- glory. So come now, and let us give ourselves to Christ.

**CLOSING PRAYER:**

Heavenly Father, thank You for the sore words of the gospel that heal us. For the dark truths of your word that give us light. For the Savior who became sin for us that we might become in him the righteousness of God. Oh we pray as you bring us low and our mouths are shut under your words of judgment and condemnation, open the windows of heaven and shine with brightness on our souls, that we must see both the grace and the glory of our Savior, Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.