



Pastor Kyle Mercer
Total Depravity and the Breakdown of a Society

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Series: The Verdict
Romans 1:28-2:11

**BIG IDEA - RUN NOT TO YOUR OWN GOODNESS BUT TO CHRIST
AS YOUR ONLY RIGHTEOUSNESS**

All right, Two Cities Church. The Bible says, "A man plans his ways, but the Lord directs his steps." So here we are. We were not planning on doing a "Worship at Home" this weekend. In fact, I had an entirely different sermon written than the one I'm going to deliver to you today, but we'll get there in a minute. I'll tell you all about that.

Let me just say this. First of all...full disclosure...we're recording this at the end of the day on Thursday, knowing there's a snowstorm coming, so I don't even know what we're all in and sitting through and experiencing right now. I think one of the interesting things about being a modern person is we often think we're in control except when it comes to the weather. We're so grateful to be able to see the weather coming, but to be honest, there's not much we can do about it.

I hope you're safe, you're warm, you don't get cabin fever, and you're making a ton of memories with your family. I'm honestly glad... I am so grateful for online ministry (we don't believe in online church but online ministry) and that we can use technology to get gospel content to you, your family, and maybe if you can walk to your Community Group this Sunday morning or Sunday evening, depending on when you're watching.

Now, let me just give you one or two other updates, and then we're going to pray and dive into Romans. The first thing I want to tell you is that because of the snowstorm, because we canceled Sunday service, we also, unfortunately, will not be having our Multiply Night, which would have been tomorrow night. It's now going to be February 5, not a Monday night but a Thursday night.

I'm going to unpack 9 or 10 of the biggest stories in 2025 and what they mean for our church and what they mean for our culture and how, basically, we can pray and prepare in light of those stories. It has been said before that every Christian should have a Bible under their right arm and a newspaper under their left. I don't know who reads the newspaper anymore, but I hope this equips you to do better ministry.

That's why we're doing this Multiply Night. We're going to pray together. We're going to worship together. We're going to look at God's Word and understand what's going on in God's world together.

Then, the final thing... Let me just say, I hope you're using the app. We have had over 3,000 people download the app. There's going to be a recap of this message afterward. We put something special in the app for families and kids, thanks to Ryan Dula and our kids' team. The app is going to continue to be your way to stay connected. I hope you find it beneficial. It's part of our digital discipleship strategy.

So, with that said, let me pray. I'm reminded, as well, that we have the 21 Days of Prayer. Maybe you *are* experiencing a little bit of cabin fever, and maybe being snowed in might be an opportunity, if you haven't yet, to jump in on week two of our 21 Days of Prayer. Let's pray.

Lord, today we're going to change plans, but we can take comfort in that you have always been in control of what's going to happen. You know every day before we see it, we live it, we wake up, and we know your mercies are new every morning. I just pray for a helpful, hopeful, and biblical message on this snow day that we're experiencing together. Lord, I look forward to being back together in person next week with our Two Cities family. We ask this in Jesus' name, amen.

Well, here's what I want to do, since we're all snowed in. I want to really quickly, because I didn't do a good job the last couple of weeks with this... I want to remind us of our theme and where we've been in Romans. This is only week four, but here's where we've been so far. I want you to know Romans is the greatest letter ever written. It's a theological masterpiece, a magnum opus of the apostle Paul. So much great doctrine is in here.

But here's the thing. We've said this the whole time. You're going to hear me return to this. We don't just want to be thinkers; we want to be doers. I told you that Romans has been hijacked by thinkers. We need to take it back, as thinkers who also are doers, because (maybe you've heard this before) it is much easier to educate a doer than to activate a thinker. I say that, and some of you go, "I need to think about that." I'm talking potentially to you.

So, we wrapped the entire Roman series in the heart of the book, in the heart and life and posture of the apostle Paul, which is *centered and sent*, our theme for 2026. We are centered on God's Word; we are sent into God's world. You could say it a hundred different ways. We're anchored to God's Word; we're active in God's world. But we've just said *centered and sent*.

Now, here's what we've done. We're almost through chapter 1. In chapter 1, here's what we've seen: that God is a God of righteousness and wrath, that he has revealed himself in creation and conscience, but that what we've done is suppressed the truth in willful ignorance. That ignorance has led to idolatry. John Calvin said the human heart is an idol factory. We began to see last week that idolatry led to immorality and indulgence. So, that's where we're going to pick up the story.

The last thing I'm going to say before we dive into the text... The plan for today, if we were meeting in person, was going to be for me to preach on, basically, just two verses. I was going to preach on Romans 1:26-27. We were going to talk about everything from homosexuality to same-sex attraction to sex and gender to lesbianism.

Here's actually what happened. I wrote the message and then found out yesterday that, basically, we weren't going to be having services, so I wrote a new message for today. So, here's what we've done. Next week, when you come back, I'm going to preach that message. That may... This sounds like a joke. It's not a joke. That may not be the best week to bring a friend, because I'm just going to be telling you...

Here's the message title, if you want it in advance: *All the Things You've Never Been Taught About Homosexuality*. So, if somebody is actively, aggressively opposed to the biblical teaching on homosexuality, this would not be the week to bring them. This is for people who are Christians. This is for people who have relatives and people struggling with SSA and living in homosexual lifestyles. I'm just going to teach from the Bible what the Bible says. I'm looking forward to it.

But I wanted you to know, I thought it was so important, I couldn't give that message to a camera on a snow day. It needs to be embodied. We need to hear it live, and we have a special testimony from a woman in our church who was living a lesbian lifestyle for years and what God has done in her life. We're going to start the sermon with that story. So, no matter how much snow is left on the ground, you're going to want to be here next Sunday.

So, with that said, turn with me to Romans 1:28, and I'm going to read it. Here's what it says. ***"And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done."*** Here's the first thing. I want to tell

you that, today, we're going to be talking about how the gospel, the message of Christianity, God, his Word, salvation...whatever categories you want to put there...

They are for the righteous person and the unrighteous person. They are for the religious and the irreligious. They are for the moralistic person and the relativistic person. On both sides of the spectrum, what Paul is going to do is he's first going to finish talking about how the gospel is for the most rebellious and unrighteous person. They need God, and they know it, but they push it down.

But today we're going to finish about how the gospel is also needed and necessary for the religious person, the religiously lost person, the moralistic person, and the person who, in general, thinks they're better than everybody else. We'll get there. In verse 28, Paul starts by talking about the mind, so we're going to talk about the mind for a second.

I've told you before the brain is different than the mind. The Bible doesn't talk a lot about the brain; it talks a lot about the mind. The *brain* is the organ between your ears. We know that. The *mind* is the immaterial part of you that *is* part of you that *is* connected to your soul. When you die, your brain goes in the ground, but your mind stays with you.

Now, here's what Paul does. Paul talks about the mind a lot, so *we* need to talk about the mind a lot. I haven't pulled it out specifically, but already he has talked about ignorance, the suppression of the truth that's done with the mind but then affects the heart. It's done with the mind in large part *because* of the heart.

The second thing he does (I'm not going to return to all this) is he says we are futile in our minds, or our thinking is futile (same thing), which means empty, aimless, and purposeless. Then he says we're foolish. We claim to be wise, but we're foolish. We're educated and have a lot of knowledge, but we have very little wisdom.

This is the first time he specifically defines the mind, and he calls it a *debased mind*. What we're going to talk about for a second is what theologians call (here's a good phrase for your snow day) the *noetic effects of the fall*, the effects of the fall on the mind. This could be everything from ignorance to forgetfulness to...here's a common one today...inconsistent thinking.

So, Paul says the mind is debased. Now, nobody talks like that today. The reason I like the ESV translation is it's a very literal translation. Back in the day, the KJV and some of these older translations, if you've known your Bible for a while, call this the *reprobate mind* (pretty intense). Probably the best modern description is the *depraved mind*.

Now, Paul is saying that once the mind doesn't want God in it, it begins to be depraved. Here's what I want you to understand: sin is a symptom of not wanting to think about God. I think that's a deep thought. I think that's something you could think about for a year.

Sin is terrible. It's horrible. We'll get to the list of them, but Paul goes, "Before I name a bunch of sins, let me tell you that sin is a symptom. It's horrible. It's evil. God will judge it, but it's not the main problem. The main problem is you don't want God in your mind, so your mind gets depraved."

Now, we don't talk about depravity; we talk a lot about diversity. Personally, I don't really like and don't use the word *diversity* anymore, because words change their meaning. I used the word *diversity* when I came here in 2016. It was a value of ours. Then I realized that word has been hijacked and a bunch of people are confused.

They say some things are diversity that *are*, like the diversity of personality, the diversity of race, the diversity of cultures, the diversity of disability, and different things like that. Then they have a whole other category, though, where they use the word *diversity* for things that are really depravity. They talk about certain lifestyles, certain sexual preferences as diversity.

So, what Christians can do is we can celebrate what is called *amoral diversity*. We can celebrate all diversity that isn't moral in nature. But we have to be more sophisticated than that. Here's what happens: the mind gets depraved. Now, here's what a depraved and debased mind is. It's the lowest form of thinking. You have already become foolish. You've already become empty. You've decided you don't want God.

Let me give you some examples of a depraved mind today. A depraved mind today thinks one race is better than another race or one sex is better than another sex. A depraved mind thinks a boy can become a girl or a girl can become a boy. A depraved mind doesn't know what bathroom to use. A depraved mind thinks it's okay to kill an unborn baby in the womb.

Those are just some of the basic thought patterns today of modern people because what they believe no longer even makes sense. It goes against creational norms, but the mind is depraved. Okay. That's the first thing. I want you to know this all starts with the mind. Sin is a symptom of not wanting to think about God. If you want to fight sin, one of the things you need to do is think more about God.

Okay. Now we're going to get into the vice list. Look at this. In verses 29-31, we get the longest vice list in the Bible, or at least in the New Testament, for sure. In the Bible, there are vice lists and virtue lists. Next time you see a bunch of sins named,

you should be like, "Oh, that's a vice list." Next time you see the fruit of the Spirit or "Put on the character of Christ," and there are a bunch of things you should do, you should be like, "Oh, that's a virtue list."

What's interesting is, oftentimes, the vice list usually does come first, and then right afterward, there's a virtue list. Why doesn't Paul put a virtue list after this vice list? We don't know for sure. Here's my guess. Paul is not done talking about sin, its implications, and the guilt of the world until the end of chapter 3. So, Paul is like, "We'll get to all of the virtues in chapter 12 once I talk through a bunch of other theology."

Here's what happens. Listen to this. I'm going to read it to you in a second. Paul mentions 21 different sins. This is not an exhaustive list. You might go, "There's something on here that I do that he didn't mention." It's not meant to be exhaustive, but it *is* categorical. I'll show you that in a second. Let me read the list.

"They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless."

I thought to myself, "Oh my goodness! This is a Worship at Home day. This is a snow day. I'm talking to a camera. How do I talk about 21 vices?" Well, unfortunately, or maybe fortunately for you, I don't have time to give you the exact breakdown in length that I would if we were in person and this was a full-length sermon with worship up top and worship afterward in response, but I do want to give you a few things.

First, I want to let you know that this is what we call the doctrine... I told you that you're going to learn doctrine in this series. This is the doctrine of total depravity. It's the only doctrine we can probably prove without a doubt. Any baby comes into the world, and you don't need to teach them to say, "No." They'll say that. You need to teach them to say, "Yes." You don't need to teach them to hit, kick, scream, bite, or yell. They'll do that. You have to teach them the opposite.

So, we can see total depravity, but here's what it means. Total depravity does not mean every person is as bad as they possibly could be. Sometimes people hear that. They're like, "I don't believe in total depravity. Didn't some guy named John Calvin come up with that?" Well, no, he didn't. He's one of the people to name it, but it has been a historic doctrine that Christians have held to.

It means not that you're as bad as you could be. Thank God you're not. Thank God we're all not. It means every part of you is infected and affected by sin. This is why

you're going to realize, the more you grow in the grace of God, the more responsibility you take on in your life...

You get married, you have some kids, you have some grandkids, you work a job, you build a business, you make some friends, you own a home, you make some money, you lose some money, you suffer some, and you're going to realize, "Wow! Sin has infected and affected every dimension and element of my life."

So, here's what I want to try to do, and I think you're going to find it helpful. What I'm going to try to do is break this into four categories. Now, it's very hard to do, and I'm not doing it perfectly, but I think what Paul is getting at... It's hard because he doesn't even give, necessarily, a certain order of sins that's decipherable, but I want to show you what sin does to people. It breaks down four things. It breaks down the *self*, the *family*, the *economy*, and the *society*. They're all in this text.

Let's start with the self. We see the breakdown of the self. We see this in verse 29. **"They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice."** Sin, first and foremost, breaks God's law and breaks God's heart. You know that. I've told you that before. Sin is first and foremost against God, but I want you to know this, because if we're honest, some of us don't care about that as much as we should.

So, here's what I want you to know. When you break God's law, it breaks you. The first person you hurt when you sin is *you*. You cannot sin without becoming more subhuman. The Psalms talk about this. When you give yourself over to all types of sin... And I've heard people talk about it this way. They feel like a beast. They feel like an animal. They've given themselves over to cheap, immediate, hedonistic pleasure, and the best parts of themselves hate themselves.

Here's what happens. I want to show you the breakdown of ourselves. We get four words here. *Unrighteousness* and *evil*. We've seen those already. Breaking God's law. Those are the big categories for sin, transgression, and iniquity. But there are two others, *covetousness* and *malice*. Can I give you three A's? I like alliteration in part because it helps *me* memorize things. Let me give you three A's that show the breakdown of the self in our society today.

The first is *addiction*. We are an addicted people. People are addicted to pain medicine. People are addicted to substances. People are addicted to marijuana. People are addicted to alcohol. People are addicted to pornography. People are addicted to video games. People are addicted to people's approval. We are an addicted generation.

The biblical word for *addiction* is *slavery*. We become enslaved to the passions of our flesh. Some of you have an internal chaos and a lack of self-control, and it's literally

ruining your life. Here's the second one: *anxiety*. We're seeing more and more anxiety. You know what's interesting? When I grew up... And I'm not that old, I don't think. I'm 41 years old. I've told you that many times.

When I grew up, nobody was talking about mental health. It just was not a conversation. Now I read in 2026, 38 percent of Americans put as their top one or two resolutions "Figure out my mental health," some version of "I'm not doing well mentally." Now, listen to this. I've told you before I understand... I'm not a doctor. I understand that some anxiety, maybe *much* anxiety, is biological before there's a biblical text that's speaking to it. I understand that.

But you can't tell me that some anxiety is not the displacement of God from our minds and our hearts, because so much anxiety is anxiety about all of the horrible things that could happen to us, as if there is not a good God, Creator, Savior, and Redeemer who loves us, lives in heaven, and has a plan for our lives. I'm not saying that fixes everything, but I think we can see the anxiety.

Here's the third one: *aimlessness*. I learned a new phrase this week. I'll pass it on to you if you haven't heard it, but I'm getting old, so maybe you *have* heard it. Have you heard of *NEETs*? This stands for "Not educated, employed, or trained." It's dangerous when something becomes so common that the media creates a phrase for it. There is such an aimlessness, particularly among young men...

They don't know how to date a girl. They don't know how to get a job. They don't know how (I'm not making fun of them) to groom themselves and take care of themselves and put themselves together. They don't know how to look someone in the eyes and shake someone's hand. They don't know how to put a CV together. They don't know how to apply to college. They are aimless, and it leads to apathy and a bunch of other...

There has been an increase... They've talked about this for years. They have now renamed much of suicide as *deaths of despair*. All of this is... Once our relationship with God is broken, we then have a broken relationship with ourselves, and we strangely become obsessed with self-actualization, self-awareness, and self-realization, even though we're broken.

Here's the second area. There's the breakdown of the individual, the self. Then there's the breakdown of the family. There's the breakdown of the nuclear family, or let's call it the *family of origin*. You can see this in two main areas. You can see this in fatherlessness in our society, as well as you can see this in (here's another new phrase for you) elder abandonment.

It's the new phrase you use where... Basically, once the Boomers are getting very old, the Millennials don't want to take care of them. It's a very interesting situation in which modern people feel no responsibility to their parents, even though their parents are the ones who made an enormous amount of sacrifice into their lives in the early years of their lives.

Now, here's what's interesting. I believe the greatest problem in America today is dad deprivation. You see this. Look. Let me show you this. I know you go, "Kyle, where are you getting this from the text?" If you look back to the text, there is the word *heartless*. You go, "What does it mean to be heartless?" Well, in the Greek, it means no family love. That's literally what it means: against the family.

For some reason, the nuclear family and the family of origin have been attacked so much in so many ways. We could talk about fatherlessness. You know what they're talking about? Here's another phrase. More and more American families are "time poor." Have you heard of that? It makes a lot of sense.

If both parents have to work all the time and the kids have to be involved in every athletic, academic, and outside activity, what you're finding is more and more families in America, families that are intact...there are two parents and two or three kids...are not as much financially poor; they're time poor.

They don't even have time to invest in a weekly, let alone daily, family meal or to do what is necessary in a family, which is to spend individual time with kids. Here's what happens. I see it here. It says in the text... You can read it in verses 29-31. Among this list of all of these horrible things, it says, "Disobedient to parents."

I want you to know this, moms and dads. Your kids learn to respect all other authority in their life by learning to respect and obey *your* authority. I know some of you are still, no matter how much I preach against it, into passive, permissive, and gentle parenting, which is not helpful and does not work.

You need to be the loving, kind, highly relational authority in your kid's life, because if you are not the authority (this is an issue of parents not taking authority and responsibility for their children), then every other person in their life, including their coaches and teachers, have to deal with them, and they do not enjoy them.

So, what we see is there's the breakdown of the family because individuals are not doing well. Because we're addicted to our work, then we don't come home. The breakdown of the self leads to the breakdown of the family. The breakdown of the family leads to the breakdown of the economy. Verse 29: "***They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness.***"

You probably know this, but do you know what the invisible currency that makes our entire economy work is? One word: *trust*. Every relationship, every organization, and every economy is built on trust. I've told you this before. Have you ever looked at a family and went, "Why can't they decide what school to send their kids to? Why can't they decide on a church? Why can't they decide what sports their kids are going to play? Why can't they decide on a home?"

There is very little trust in that family, because every family and every relationship moves at the speed of trust. What we're told in verse 29 is that in the brokenness of the depraved mind, there is deceit. How does this show up? Well, how many of you have been a part of some "get rich quick" scheme?

This is what happens. Interest rates are high, inflation is up, housing prices are up, healthcare is up, so everyone goes, "I'm at home, and I have about six devices, and I spend all day online. I wonder if there's a way I could get rich quick." It's two things. It's envy, which in this passage can also be translated *greed*, as well as deceit. Greed plus a lack of trust leads to the faltering of an economy.

This is one of the reasons young people who are confused are so interested in socialism. They want the government to be their dad. With Mamdani in New York City as the primary example, we're beginning to see another generation interested in socialism.

The problem with socialism, among many other things, is that it has always failed every time it has been tried, but then people who are prideful go, "No, that wasn't true socialism." The truth about socialism is people who desire socialism... It's not that they love the poor; it's that they hate the rich. They tell you, "You will own nothing, and you will like it." Socialism is communism before it gets guns.

So, it's very important to understand there's the breakdown of the individual, the breakdown of the family, the breakdown of the economy, and finally, worse, the breakdown of the society. Look at this. Verse 30: ***"...slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless."***

This is where our outward thoughts about God go public. It's one thing to ignore God. It's one thing to suppress the truth about God. It's one thing to lie and say you don't believe in a God when there is, but then it becomes haters of God. This is when people go public in their absolute hatred for the God of the Bible.

Exhibit A: what happened in Minneapolis, Minnesota, this last week. This last week in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in a Bible-preaching, Jesus-loving, gospel-centered church, you had a group of people go in there and create chaos, scare women and children,

and make a ruckus and a mess. What you see is these are people who hate God. They hate the things the Bible teaches.

So, first you have haters of God. Our hatred of God goes public. Secondly, you have an outrage culture. What you see in a culture of a depraved mind is everybody is offended by everything all the time. Let me just say...I love you...some of you are way too easily offended.

What we see... I'm telling you, this is the breakdown of an entire society. Mob mentality, cancel culture, political polarization...those three things... We can't hold it together forever if those things are happening. Paul goes, "Guys, this is where..." This is the end of chapter 1. This is how a culture, a nation, a church, and a family implodes and explodes.

That leads to the final thing. He says what happens is people invent evil and approve of evil. Who knows what's going to happen with the mixture of AI, virtual reality, and pornography. I think it is going to unbelievably trap and imprison young men from probably the age of 12, because their parents are not aware and paying attention, in the darkest and most addictive types of sexual experiences.

You have to understand that technology, which we're using right now to get the gospel to our church and to many others, can also be used for trafficking and money laundering and all types of evil that we do not even understand, which is why he ends with, "You actually don't just invent evil; you approve of it."

This is the celebrating culture of Shout Your Abortion, of Pride parades. Here's what happens. People used to bury their sin (that's step one) or at least try to blame their sin on other people. They've passed that. They're not burying, they're not blaming; they're boasting.

You go, "Kyle, how does this happen? You just gave some extreme examples. I mean, Shout Your Abortion? I've never even heard of that." Well, it's real. Divorce parties is another one. But here's where you see it: the passing of laws that legalize and normalize sinful behavior. People want there to be laws that tell them things are okay so their conscience will not condemn them quite as much.

We saw this with same-sex marriage in 2015. We see this with the legalization of marijuana. We see this with gambling laws, which often put young men and the poorest of the poor in our society in addiction, in poverty, in hiding in shame, and a lot of guilt.

Okay. We're done talking about that. That was intense. We're going to move on to the second part. The first part is Paul basically going, "It's going to get really, really bad

because there are very, very rebellious people who do very, very sinful things." If I just stopped right here, you might go, "Kyle, that was a depressing sermon, but I'm grateful I'm not like them," which is why we need the beginning of chapter 2, and then we'll be done.

In the beginning of chapter 2, Paul does something so wise. This is not just like a well-trained theologian but like a great prosecuting attorney in court. He goes from the rebellious to the religious in a moment. Look at what he says here. Turn with me to chapter 2. He says, **"Therefore you..."** In other words, "I'm talking to you." So, let me say that to *you*. I'm talking to you.

Maybe so far you go, "Okay. That's not me. I don't do those things. Kyle, I don't even know what some of those words mean. I was homeschooled" or "I went to Christian school. I grew up with great Bible teaching. I remember the flannelgraphs in my VBS. Kyle, I just have never known a day when I didn't love Jesus and walk with him."

Paul goes, "Good. Now I'm talking to you." He says, **"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."** Watch this. This is so genius. I hope you'll get this.

At the end of verse 32, Paul goes, "Can you believe these rebellious people? They do evil. And look at this. At the very end, they invent evil." Everyone is like, "Oh, I can't believe they do that." He goes, "And not only that; they approve of evil." Everyone is like, "Oh my goodness! I can't believe they do that." And he goes, "And here's your problem: you're very judgmental."

The problem with you and me... I've been a Christian for something like 26 years. The interesting thing about that is I have, in my own personal heart and experience, had so many different struggles with being unrighteous, and then self-righteous, and then going, "Okay, I'm too self-righteous," and then being unrighteous. Then I'm too religious. "Okay, I'm going to get rebellious." Then I'm too rebellious. "Okay, I need to get religious."

Paul wants to go, "Listen. There is..." And we're going to talk about this for a few minutes. There is a self-righteousness in the church. It's very prevalent in Davie County, in Winston-Salem, in Lexington. It is self-righteousness. I'm going to unpack it in a second.

God starts out by going, "You are so judgmental of other people." As soon as I read that list, in a small part, you felt good about yourself. You're the kind of person who likes to watch someone else's life fall apart, or you get some secret joy out of somebody else's failure because it makes you feel better about yourself.

All of these documentaries about people with their moral failures and all this stuff... It has been categorized now (excuse my directness) as *failure porn*, because people are very excited to watch other people fail. It's like, "What's wrong with us?" In part because it helps us feel superior.

So, Paul says in verse 2, **"We know that the judgment of God rightly falls on those who practice such things."** He goes, "Let's agree. We know that everything I said that rebellious people and worldly people do..." And let's be honest. We do it in the church, too, but we're better at hiding it. He says all of those things... "We know God is going to judge them."

He says, **"Do you suppose, O man—you who judge those who practice such things and yet do them yourself—that you will escape the judgment of God?"** In other words, here's what he's saying: "You're judgmental." There's a difference between judging and judgmental. *Judging* is accurately seeing things. This is why Jesus says, "Judge with right judgment." We always are quoted, "Judge not lest you be judged," but Jesus later says, "I want you to judge with right judgment."

You can't make moral decisions or even walk through the world without making judgments. We have to learn how to notice things, observe things, and categorize things without becoming judgmental. He goes, "Look. You guys are so judgmental, and you're prejudiced. You prejudice. You don't even know their story. You don't even know their background. You don't even know where they came from."

We'll see this in a second. "You've been so blessed. You've had so many opportunities. You don't know their starting place." *Prejudice*, by the way, literally means to prejudice. So, he says, "You judge wrongly; God judges rightly." Then he says, "God has been kind to you." Look here. **"Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?"**

Here's what he's saying. Let me translate. This is so important. He's like, "Listen. You're religious." A lot of you are. "You're moralistic, and you think you're better than other people." He goes, "God has been so kind in not judging you immediately. Why are you so quick to judge everyone else immediately?"

Isn't that a great thought? Aren't you so glad God does not bring a judgment on you every...? *I'm* glad. Every time I don't do what I should do, every time I do something sinful. I am so grateful God does not immediately pour out his wrath on me but instead is kind. In fact, he's so kind that Paul goes, "Guys, I don't want you to misunderstand God."

Look at this. ***"But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed."*** Look. This is so important for all of us to understand. God is patient; God is not tolerant. Let me say that again. God is patient; God is not tolerant. I don't want to take God's patience as God's approval of my sin.

I want you to know God has been so patient with some of you, with your besetting sins, with secret sins, with things you haven't confessed, with things you've struggled with the same way that you haven't gotten serious about repenting of yet. God has said, "Clean up the closet. I'm not even going to expose you to the world. I'm giving you time to repent because I love to be gracious." Another text says, "I want all men to come to repentance."

So, how do you...? Because some of you are very judgmental. You're very, very critical. How do you stop being so critical, and how do you stop being judgmental? Well, this isn't a TED Talk. It's not like, "Here are four hacks to being less judgmental." How about have a deeper theology? How about understand how gracious God has been to you?

In fact, this is the thing. We don't realize how kind God has been. I don't have time to get into this, but Paul will later say to the Jewish people, "Do you understand that you have the Word of God and nobody else does? Do you understand you had the tabernacle and the temple? Do you understand that you have the sacrificial system and the priests and Levitical priesthood and the high priest? Do you understand that you have the promises of God and the blessings?"

I'm telling you, some of you woke up on third base, and you think you hit a triple. You do not realize how gracious God has been. Again, I did not grow up in a good, Bible-believing, Jesus-loving, evangelical church. We have to help our kids... And really, it's hard to help *our* kids. We have to help other people's kids, because our kids are going to go, "Dad, you're just saying this." "Mom, you're just saying this."

We need to help the next generation in our church see how special it is to be a part of a good, Jesus-loving, Spirit-filled, Bible-preaching, community-oriented, missions-minded church. You have to realize we are so far ahead of where so many people get to be.

To try to redeem a word, it's like, "Well, how many privileges do we have?" I know there's a debate over privilege and whether we should even use that word. Whatever you mean by *privilege*... Paul says to the Jewish people, "You've been very, very privileged." But what he says is, "The more privilege you have, the more grateful you should be and the more responsibility you have."

So, this is what he says next. Verse 6: ***"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..."*** There are two types of people. They seek glory or they seek themselves. ***"...and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury."***

I told you there's a lot about wrath in the early part of this book. ***"There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek."***

Here's what Paul says. At the end of the day, you're going to be evaluated by works. Now, this does not mean we're not saved by grace. I've tried to teach this tension. Here's the truth. Protestants... (That's what we are.) Protestant evangelical Christians struggle anytime someone talks about good works. They're like, "Uh, I feel uncomfortable. Isn't it just all by grace? Aren't we just saved by faith? Hasn't Jesus just done everything?"

At one level, the answer is *yes*. John Stott says we are justified by faith but judged by our works. Interesting. You might say it a little softer. We are saved by our faith; we are evaluated by our works. In other words, you will be evaluated by what you've done, not by what you say you'll do. Jesus does not say, "Well thought, well intentioned, well said, good and faithful servant." He says, "Well done, good and faithful servant."

Here's what he's saying. It comes down to a root and fruit issue, which we've talked about a lot. He's like, "Look, guys. You're going to be judged..." You religious people in this sense, you moralistic people. "You are going to be judged by what you have done..." This is important for religious people. "...not by what you say you know."

You're going to be judged in the final analysis by what you do, and what you do should flow out of a heart that has been born again, changed and transformed by the gospel. This is why Luther said we are saved by faith alone, but that faith is never alone. It's accompanied by good works and the fruit of the Spirit.

So, here's what I want to end with. I just want to push on this for a few more minutes. I want to talk to us about self-righteousness, because I'm concerned for my own heart. In the Winston-Salem/Lexington/Davie County, just the larger North Carolina/South Carolina Bible Belt kind of ethos, there's a lot of self-righteousness. So, here's what I want to talk to you about. Here's what self-righteousness is. It's a sense of moral superiority.

I just want to tell you something. You can't minister to people you think you're better than. Tim Keller said the number one reason, in all of his years of his church trying to minister to the poor in New York City... The reason it often didn't work was the people who did it had a sense of superiority. "Hey, the upper-middle class people are here. Do you need some food? I know *you* don't have a job, but *I* have a job." That doesn't work.

Let me give you another definition of self-righteousness. You think you're the standard. That's the normal heart and human condition. I'll prove it to you. You think you drive the perfect speed. Everybody else who drives faster than you drives too fast, and everyone else who drives slower than you drives too slow. Right?

Don't you think you're in the right shape? People who weigh more than you, who are heavier than you... "They're lazy. They eat too much. They're gluttonous." People who are more fit than you... "They're a little too serious, aren't they? They don't really have fun. They don't have social lives. They probably idolize the body. They spend too much time in the gym."

We have a sense... We do this all the time, where we think we are the standard. That makes us feel good. Here's what happens. Have you noticed this? You are way more critical of everybody else than you are of yourself. You want justice for them; you want grace for you. Freud called it... No, he was not a Christian but had some interesting, what I would call, common-grace insights. He called it *projection*.

He said that, basically, we judge other people in areas so we don't have to judge ourselves. I'd rather think somebody takes their workout way too seriously than think maybe I have a problem with food. I would rather think somebody takes their Bible reading way too seriously than for me to look if I actually love God's Word.

We love to look at someone and go, "You know, they're just gregarious and outgoing, and they must have the gift of evangelism. Or maybe they're a little too serious about sharing the gospel. They're a little too intense for me." We don't want to look at ourselves and go, "I'm ashamed to share the gospel. What is wrong with me? What has happened in my heart?" It's too painful to look at ourselves.

We see this in the church. I've been very direct on homosexuality and lesbianism, and I'll be more direct next week, but let me say this. The church, for a long time, has called out certain sins and not other sins. It has been hypocrisy and self-righteousness. You'll have a pastor get up there, and he will call out homosexuality, but he will not confront the lust of his own heart.

He will not call out the cohabitating couples or the wealthy deacon who is in an unbiblical remarriage. He just won't do it. He'll call out people for having a glass of

wine or smoking a cigar, and he'll say, "Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit," and he won't realize that *his* temple has a few additions to it, because we cannot talk about the sin of gluttony in the church. We feel really good yelling at everybody else so we can feel better inside.

So, here's how we're going to end. We're going to end by talking about the four types of most common self-righteousness, and I want you to diagnose... I think this will be a great conversation with your Community Group this week if you guys can meet. The first is *moralism*. Here's what this says: "I'm better because I behave better."

Moralism is mostly what I've been talking about. There are a lot of different types. Everybody wants to view themselves as a good person. I've told you before this was the mask wearing that went on. I mean, we still have people... It's 2026. COVID was six years ago. People are still wearing masks.

If people are wearing masks because they are going through chemotherapy or taking care of a very elderly person... I understand some situations, but for most people, it is one of their ways to virtue signal to the world that "I'm a good person." People are constantly trying to figure out how to be on the right side of every political issue and then put it on Facebook so everybody is excited and knows, "Look. They're the type of person who supports this. They're a good person."

Here's why. It's hard to be a good person. It's very hard to be a good person. It's hard to deal with the idols of your heart. It's hard to repent. It's hard to serve and sacrifice and put other people first. It's much easier just to figure out, "What could I do that's simple, that's visible, that shows everybody I'm the type of person who's a good person and I'm on the right side of the current thing?"

The second way we do this is we try to do certain things that make us feel really good about ourselves. In a religious context, this could be "I'm the type of person who goes to Community Group. Bob never shows up to Community Group, and when Bob shows up to Community Group, he doesn't even bring his Bible. He reads it on the phone. Bob hasn't even downloaded the app yet. He's so terrible with his attendance of Community Group."

Well, what's going on in *your* heart? Why are you even attending group? Do you like to watch yourself go to group? Is that what you like to do? There's a lot of psychology and deep spirituality stuff happening in our hearts.

Here's the second kind: *legalism*. *Moralism* says, "I'm better behaved than you." *Legalism* says, "I'm more religious than you. I read my Bible more. I'm a service coordinator on the team. I attend. I'm in every environment I should be in. I'm very good with religious activity."

Let me show you a common way. This isn't going to hit a lot of you, but I've seen this. It'll hit some of you. We're not really *this* type of church, but I've seen this in many churches. I never wanted to lead a church like this. A type of legalism is we will have the most nuanced, sophisticated, and detailed theology on every secondary and tertiary issue, and it will be a purity test to if you're really the right type of Christian.

You go into these environments, and you're like, "They're saying words I don't even understand, like *eschatology* and *supralapsarianism*, and they're asking me if I'm Reformed or Arminian. They're drawing org charts of the end times dates. They're telling me that if I'm not pre-mill or post-mill or a-mill then I'm wrong." Yeah. It's a form of legalism. It's a theological purity that likes to feel like, "We only read books by Reformation Trust" or "I only read the Puritans." I know those people, and I read the Puritans too, but I read other books.

Here's the third one. There is moralism, legalism, and *elitism*. "I am more civilized and educated than you." People think that all the time. It's different. It's not, "I'm better behaved." It's not, "I'm more religious." The world does this all the time. I mean, here we are with the Davos trip in Switzerland this week, where all of the billionaires go, and all of the elites from Silicon Valley are there.

The Emmys, the Oscars... It's basically the elites congratulating themselves on something nobody else cares about. This is what happens. This is the brand snobbery. This is the "I went to the best school." This is "I'm from a certain side of town. I'm from a certain type of neighborhood."

Basically, in part, racism is a form of self-righteousness. It's way deeper than that. It's a sin that needs to be repented of, but it's a form of self-righteousness. The elites become snobs about everything, and they feel like they are in their own class. They get more and more and more separated from the normal lives of normal people in America.

The final one... Maybe you didn't see it coming. There's moralism. There's legalism. There's elitism. I don't know if this is a word...maybe I made it up...*victimism*, which is "I'm better than you because I've suffered more than you." Interesting. This is the victim mentality of our day.

Look. Hear me say this. I love you. I'm a pastor. I care about your suffering. I want to pray for you. I want to cry with you. I want to walk with you. I want to get you the counseling and the care you need. I just want you to know there are a lot of people who are self-righteous in their suffering.

If you ever wonder, "Why can't someone get over that? A normal person would have gotten over that. That happened 10 years ago and wasn't that big of a deal. Everybody

else has moved on..." They won't let it go because it's part of their righteousness. "Nobody suffered like me, because nobody had the troubled teen I had, so even though he's 35, I need to tell everyone how he was as a troubled teen."

This is the whole intersectionality debate. Intersectionality basically says, "The more oppressed identities you have, the more we want to hear you talk and the more we don't want to hear anybody else talk. So, if you're gay and disabled and your husband is an alcoholic and you're Black and unemployed, let's give you the loudest voice." Basically, people feel like they are special, more special than other people, because they've suffered.

Now listen. I want to encourage you. If you've suffered, we have a God who suffers *with* you and a God who suffers *for* you, and people who are suffering want to be ministered to by people who have suffered. But I just want you to know... Do not claim your suffering as a way that you feel self-righteous, which is why Paul hits us with a sledgehammer. One final verse, a few words, and we're done. Here it is: "***For God shows no partiality.***"

Guys, we're just getting started. Paul says the righteous and the unrighteous, the religious and the irreligious, the moralist and the relativist, the churchgoing person and the person who wants to run away from God by having a good time or wants God to owe them by being a good person... They both need God.

Paul is just getting started. We won't be there until the end of chapter 3 where Paul goes, "Every mouth will be shut, and every person is guilty before God." That means you, self-righteous person. That means you, unrighteous person. It's like, "Paul, why are you doing this? Why are you beating us up?" Because when you realize the unrighteous and the self-righteous both are guilty... Paul is going to go, "You got it. Now I can tell you how the unrighteous and the self-righteous can both be saved."

Here's what Jesus said. This is so important. This is of my heart. Jesus said, "I didn't come for the healthy; I came for the sick." What does Jesus mean when he says that? I mean, Jesus in his ministry... People were confused. "Why are you hanging out with sinners and tax collectors? You don't hang out with the religious people." I'm summarizing, but basically, Jesus was like, "They're self-righteous."

They say, "Yeah, but the tax collectors and the sinners and the prostitutes and that kind of crazy group of 12 guys that follows you around... They're all unrighteous." "Yes, they're unrighteous, but they know it." You're either self-righteous and you know it or you're self-righteous and you don't know it. You're either unrighteous and you don't know it or you're unrighteous and you know it.

Let me encourage you. What would it look like, if you're self-righteous, for you to repent of your goodness? And if you're unrighteous, what would it look like for you to repent of your badness? Maybe it would look something like this. There's a famous little prayer parable Jesus tells. He says there were these two guys. One was a Pharisee, and one was a tax collector.

The Pharisee said, "God, I'm grateful that I'm not like others." Self-righteous. The tax collector couldn't even look up to heaven. He said, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." Whether you're unrighteous or you're self-righteous, that is a prayer God loves to hear. God loves to give the gift of the righteousness of his Son, who is our only righteousness, who lived a sinless life, who died in your place, and who rose victoriously.

So, I want to pray for us, because I want us to have a gospel culture in this church. I want you to have it in your family. I think, honestly, in most families, it's not over unrighteousness, if you're a part of our church, that is eating away at your family; it's the self-righteousness of Mom and Dad at the dinner table. It has been the unwillingness of some of you to repent to your spouse or repent to your kids and say, "I need the gospel. I need the gospel not just because I'm unrighteous, but I need the gospel because I'm self-righteous." Let's pray.

Lord, I pray for my own heart. I've said in my heart is both unrighteousness and self-righteousness, and sometimes I feel both in the same day. As Martin Luther said, we're often like a drunk man who fell off one side of the horse, and we get back on and say, "I'm never falling off *that* side again," then we fall off the other.

Would you give us the grace that's in the gospel and the local church, which helps us see ourselves rightly, and the mirror of God's Word? Lord, would we take the Word of God and use it as a mirror for repentance and grace, not binoculars to judge other people? Would you create not just good gospel doctrine or good gospel mission in our church but a deep gospel culture? We ask this in Jesus' name, amen.