

When I was a minister on a college campus, I'd hear it a lot. Why do I want to be a Christian when you all are a bunch of hypocrites?! My reply? Yes, the church is a hospital for all of us- sinners who are in desperate need of God's grace and mercy. Won't you join us? Sometimes the person would roll their eyes while a few were intrigued. "I don't like talking about judgment and that's all you guys seem to focus on," another said. My reply? How can we talk about grace when we don't confess our sins? Can't we all just confess that we're sinners- sinners, as Paul says later in chapter 3 of Romans- who all have fallen short of the glory of God (v. 23)?! In Paul's letter to the Romans, he was writing to both the Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. His ultimate purpose in writing this letter was to invite them to share the gospel- the good news- of Jesus Christ. Right before today's text, Paul condemns the people- some scholars believe it to be a group of Gentiles- for their idolatry and their misuse and abuse of power and acts of injustice- their sinfulness. They were worshiping the "creature" instead of worshiping and honoring the "Creator." And here we find Paul holding up a mirror- so to speak- to another group of people- a group of hypocrites that some scholars believe to be made up of Jews. Regardless, it's a group of believers who are also being shown their sinfulness. Before turning to God's Word, let us first pray. **PRAY. READ. Romans 2:1-5a.**

Can't we all just acknowledge that we're all hypocrites and still be a community of faith? We are all foolish and fragile humans, who are every day tripping over ourselves. We say one thing and yet, we do another. Paul, a former Pharisee who had likely been a hypocrite, recognized hypocrisy within both the Jews and the Gentiles in the Christian community in Rome. Paul gives a "stinging critique of

hypocrites who judge others while taking God's favor and grace toward themselves for granted" (*The CEB Study Bible*). The you here isn't singular. Again, we find another y'all- all y'all- meaning anyone and everyone. My grandmother used to say when you point a finger at someone else you've got three other fingers pointing back at yourself. Yet, we still find ways to judge others, and here Paul is calling the finger pointers- the condemners- out. AJ Levine, who is a Jewish New Testament scholar at Vanderbilt Divinity School, tells the story of teaching a Sunday School class in a large church in Nashville. In the middle of the lesson, a man raised his hand and asked, "I just need to know how you think you're going to heaven?" AJ, who was sitting down, scooted to the edge of her seat and said, "Well, I see it like this. I get up to the pearly gates and walk past Peter and God tells me to come on in. Peter, baffled, says to God, 'Wait a minute! You're letting her in?!' "Then I look back", she says, "to see Peter grabbing a tissue to wipe the log out of his eye." AJ knew very well what Jesus says in the Gospel of Matthew that before you volunteer to remove the speck or splinter from your neighbors' eye, you might want to remove the log from your own eye (7:3-5). In other words, you've got to repent from your own sinfulness before commenting on your neighbor.

I read a meme the other day that read, "If the surest part of your religion- the thing about which you are most confident, adamant, and unyielding- is how someone who is fundamentally different from you should behave, you might want to dig a little deeper into the box of your faith and focus on your own journey, because I don't think you've made it past the packing peanuts" (author unknown). I really don't think Paul is trying to beat up the people just to make

them feel guilty or shameful. No, he's holding them accountable for their behavior and for their spiritual growth. He's holding up a mirror to them and their own sinfulness. Despite what the prophets warned, Israel continued to indulge in immorality, idolatry, and injustice, as did the Gentiles. It sounds in Paul's letter like one group of believers (Jews) was critiquing another (the Gentiles), but we aren't told that for sure. Regardless, Paul is addressing everyone with those sins of attitude to which we sometimes succumb when we turn our ultimate allegiance away from the true God. Remember that the Christian community in Rome is in the minority- they're on the bottom of the food chain. Also know that the mention of sins aren't just individual, they are corporate as well. And salvation? It isn't simply about "winning souls to heaven" but about being part of God's relentless work of restoration, reconciliation, and redemption among all of humanity (N.T. Wright). Although it's hard to compare Paul's world to our world today, some things are similar. Caesar wanted everyone to proclaim him Lord and King. There was economic injustice, mistreatment of immigrants, women, men, and children enslaved, oppression of the poor, worship of money, sex, and violence and systems in place to maintain power and status for a small group of people. These sins are still embedded in nearly every system of our society today. Rather than confessing our sins, and rather than working to dismantle the systems that perpetuate them, many people of faith, perhaps like the ones Paul is addressing in today's text, shrug it off or dismiss it thinking they don't have anything to do with it and therefore don't engage in the hard work of repentance.

Last week we talked about God's righteousness...God's justice...God's making things right through Jesus Christ. God's justice agrees with the truth. Notice that Paul asks a few questions here. Do those guilty of pointing a finger at others think they will escape God's judgment? Do they think that God doesn't know their sinfulness? Or do they think that God's going to let them off the hook just because? There comes a time when we have to look hard in the mirror and acknowledge our own brokenness individually and corporately and ask God to remove the log in our own eyes. There but by God's grace we go. Paul is saying yes, God is kind and loving, yet God's grace doesn't deliver us from the responsibility for what we say and do. We're held accountable for how we treat ourselves and others- how we stubbornly turn away from God's ways. "God's grace doesn't eliminate God's judgment. Rather, by God's grace we're allowed to live in a way that spares us from condemnation in that judgment" (*Interpretation*, Paul Achtemeier). It's so much easier to point fingers though, isn't it?! But to acknowledge and to take accountability for our actions and words- this is what it looks like to repent- to change our heart and life in order to reflect God's justice and Christ's love.

Paul's message to the people throughout the book of Romans and to us is an unrelenting message of God's grace for hopeless sinners. And not all those sinners "out there." But the ones gathered here today or online. The one preaching. And the ones listening, too. "Human feeling and insight are notoriously undependable. But the Gospel- the good news- speaks of the justification of the ungodly, the Gospel tells us that we are sinners beloved by a crucified One, and the Gospel clearly proclaims, 'The Lord is Risen'" (Fleming Rutledge, *Not Ashamed*

*of the Gospel*)! Therefore, “our righteousness comes by God’s grace in Christ” (*The CEB Study Bible*). In what ways do we know what is right- what is just- even saying it out loud, criticizing others- but then go and do something else? What makes up the log in our own eye from which we in our stubbornness need to repent- to change our hearts and life? Paul reminds us that repentance leads to new life. Whereas, self- righteousness, the certain judgment that God is on my side and not yours leads to all kinds of death.

It makes me think of a quote from Pastor Nadia Bolz Weber, who in ranting with a friend of hers, who is also a pastor, was challenged by his response. She was complaining about people who have the wrong opinions and who do the most stupid and heinous things. To which her friend replies, "Nadia, the thing that sucks is that every time we draw a line between us and others, Jesus is always on the other side of it." Oh, snap. I wonder if this is what the people to whom Paul was saying had no excuses realized?! Nadia, in her book, *Pastrix*, confesses her initial thoughts about Rick, a parishioner. This excerpt is paraphrased: “Oh my gosh we’re running out of bread,” Rick yelled from the church kitchen. It was the third Operation Turkey Sandwich day- Rick’s first- where the church bring lunches to unsuspecting folks all over the city who were unlucky enough to have to work on a holiday. We were set to make 600 bags stuffed with turkey sandwiches, pumpkin pie bars and a side of dressing. Rick had come to us six months prior to Operation Turkey Sandwich, experiencing homelessness and mental illness. Without a doubt, Rick was a helpful contributor to the church, though he lied...a lot. He showed up early for every event and stayed late until clean-up was finished. However, when he offered to run out and get more bread that day with

the church credit card, I froze. What hypocrisy! That's the thing about saying that all are welcome at your church, people take you up on it. I had heard Rick's story and I knew the truth of his past. He was known for his con artistry. Being conned is up there with having throat cancer in terms of things I want to avoid. So when Rick showed up at church, my first instinct was to try to get rid of him, you know, just like Jesus would do. Yet I am often impatient and cranky. My first response at most things is "forget you." I don't often stay there, but I almost always start there. And the fact that I am able to make the move from "forget you" to welcoming them makes me believe in God. And every time, it feels like repentance. Repentance is the only explanation I have for how I went from wanting to protect myself and my church by getting rid of the con artist to actually suggesting he settle into our community and stay. Settle and stay he did, and Rick oversaw all food distribution that fall. "Distributing food is awesome" Rick chirped to me one day over the phone. "Everyone is fed. It doesn't matter if you are a homeless guy who is scamming or a lawyer on a lunch break." He paused... "The only place I have ever really seen that is at communion." As we hung up, I tried to pretend that I wasn't crying."

Friends, none of us are fit to live before God – isn't that the point of the Prayer of Confession- admitting our sin before God and one another? Yes, we're a mess, and we're God's mess. And God can turn a mess into a masterpiece. God is the judge, and we're not. It is by God's good grace that we're forgiven. There's a hymn entitled "There's a Wideness in God's Mercy," based on a poem by English minister Frederick William Faber that was first published in 1854 under the title,

“Come to Jesus.” This hymn reminds us that there’s a kindness in God’s justice among earth’s failings- among our sinfulness and hypocrisy. Listen:

*There’s a wideness in God’s mercy, Like the wideness of the sea.*

*There’s a kindness in God’s justice, Which is more than liberty.*

*There is no place where earth’s sorrows- Are more felt than up in heaven.*

*There is no place where earth’s failings- Have such kindly judgment given.*

As we gather as hypocrites around Christ’s table of grace and are fed, may we acknowledge our sinfulness and turn our hearts toward God- open to the kindly judgment given through our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, the Bread of life and the Cup of salvation. Thanks be to God. Amen.