

HIGH-MINDED HYPOCRISY

By Steve Zeisler

One of the most enduring literary forms is the courtroom drama, in which the secret things that have remained hidden throughout the story are brought to light at the end. The verdict is rendered, the truth is established, the wicked are found out, and the righteous are upheld. Remember, Jesus said, "There is nothing covered up that will not be revealed, and hidden that will not be known. Accordingly whatever you have said in the dark shall be heard in the light, and what you have whispered in the inner rooms shall be proclaimed upon the housetops." (Luke 12:2-3.)

I would like to take you back three thousand years to a courtroom drama in the palace of a king: the story of David and Nathan. It takes place shortly after David had chosen to secretly commit adultery with Bathsheba, the wife of his friend Uriah, and had sent Uriah to his death. David had quickly married Bathsheba, who was pregnant, and assumed his sins would remain secret. But in 2 Samuel 12:1-6 we read:

Then the Lord sent Nathan to David. And he came to him, and said,
"There were two men in one city, the one rich and the other poor.
The rich man had a great many flocks and herds.
But the poor man had nothing except one little ewe lamb
Which he bought and nourished;
And it grew up together with him and his children.
It would eat of his bread and drink of his cup and lie in his bosom,
And was like a daughter to him.
Now a traveler came to the rich man,
And he was unwilling to take from his own flock or his own herd,
To prepare for the wayfarer who had come to him;
Rather he took the poor man's ewe lamb and prepared it for the man who had come to him."

Then David's anger burned greatly against the man, and he said to Nathan, "As the Lord lives, surely the man who has done this deserves to die. And he must make restitution for the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing and had no compassion."

Nathan told the king about the cruelty of a rich man who slaughtered the beloved pet of his neighbor to feed his visitor. David is outraged at the terrible thing that has been done. As the king he announces a verdict. Then Nathan, the prophet of God, turns to him, points his finger at David, and says, "You are the man!" The revelation is striking---the judge who pronounces guilt is the guilty man. David finds that the secrets he thought were hidden are all uncovered.

In many respects the early chapters of the book of Romans are a courtroom drama also. Paul is writing as a prosecuting attorney, systematically proving the guilt of the human race in its rebellion against God.

In the beginning of this indictment Paul spoke of self-identified rebels. They exchanged the truth of God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator. This resulted finally in the terrible condition of Romans 1:32: "...although they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them."

Now, many who hear such things will agree with Paul: "Those kinds of folks are terrible, no question about

that. (But I'm not one of them.)" There will be some among the enlightened of the Gentiles who have cared about morality and have rejected overt wickedness, and there will certainly be Jews who have the law of God, and they will all say, "Yes! Such folks deserve condemnation." Our list of hell deserving sinners might include Saddam Hussein, leaders of the Ku Klux Klan, drug lords and child molesters.

GOD'S STANDARD APPLIES TO YOU

But Paul in his wisdom, noting the judgments of moral people, whether Gentiles or Jews, begins chapter two thus- verses 1-2:

Therefore you are without excuse, every man of you who passes judgment, for in that you judge another, you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things. And we know that the judgment of God rightly falls upon those who practice such things.

Verse 2 states the universal point upon which good people agree: These areas of sinful practice are grave and the standards are unambiguous. This is the judgment of God who is applying clear standards and those who have not met them are worthy of condemnation.

The problem, however, is that once you admit that there is a clear standard, truths that are hard and fast to which you can appeal in judgment of others, then you have to be willing to sit under the standard yourself. And that is what everyone who issues judgment longs to avoid. Loud denunciation of the horrible failings of others (even when it is true) does not in any degree alter the facts concerning ourselves.

David's words in 2 Samuel 12 are interesting. He is outraged by this rich man who has destroyed the beloved lamb of the poor man. David says, "As the Lord lives, this man shall die." In other words, God ought to get him! Yet in fact, as Nathan turns and says, he is the one who is guilty.

We see this sort of thing take place in political debate. As soon as one party or one candidate raises an objection to the morality or to some position of the other, the immediate response is to not let the examination do its work, but instead to fight back by pointing out the weaknesses of the opponent. This immediate casting of judgment on another to avoid the searchlight of judgment on oneself is the issue that Paul is raising here.

To think of a courtroom scene again, what Paul is saying that no one may do is join God on the judge's bench, saying in effect, "Lord, you and I can sit here together issuing judgments on terrible people...such as that one over there," assuming equality with God. Paul describes idolaters in chapter one as those who remove God and put themselves in his place. The idea in chapter 2 is very much akin to that. We are never permitted to stand next to God as his equal; that is idolatry as well.

AVOIDING THE SEARCHLIGHT

The psychology of how we avoid being examined ourselves is described in verses 3 and 4. Let's look at verse 3 first:

And do you suppose this, O man, when you pass judgment upon those who practice such things and do the same yourself, that you will escape the judgment of God?

Our hope---as with David's sin in 2 Samuel 12---is that if we redouble our efforts to speak harshly of the sins of others, to make sinners feel bad, to stand tall for righteousness and apply it rigorously to other people; then we will have covered over sin in ourselves. Paul is saying, "Do you really think that God will accept your version of exposing other people's sins and not ask you to account for your own? What a foolish notion."

There are a number of ways that we can discover ourselves doing that. Sometimes the most demanding parents, who refuse to put up with a moment's laziness or defiance from their children, are trying to avoid the

discovery of laziness and other bad dealings in themselves. They yell at their son to get his homework done on time, but they never get around to doing their income taxes, or are avoiding other important responsibilities.

Sometimes in marriage counseling I see these circumstances: The counselor will say, for instance, "We'll talk about your husband's problems in just a moment. But let me ask you to focus on your contribution to the difficulties in your marriage. Now, aren't there some communication problems you have? Haven't you been slightly dishonest here? Isn't there a certain amount of manipulation? Let's just deal with that part of it for a moment." But it's impossible to pursue that approach, because the person who hears those things immediately says, "Yes, but if you knew what he was really like, if you could see the things that he's done...." And what fills their thinking immediately-on both sides-is their well-rehearsed speech in which they describe all the terrible things about the other person. They literally cannot hear any discussion of what they have done to contribute to the problem, so much is their thinking taken up with the sins of the other. Yet Paul's question comes back, "Do you suppose when you pass judgment and do the same things that you will escape the judgment of God?"

I know Christians who have deep antipathy to fellow believers who have been divorced; they treat them with contempt and believe that any failure in marriage at all is the nearest thing to damnation. "How can such people ever be afforded even common courtesy?" But this harshness is, in my experience, very often a reaction to enormous pain in the marriage of one who condemns. If they were honest for a moment, they would have to say, "I would love more than anything to be divorced, I am so distant from my partner. There is more coldness and real divorce in our experience than anybody can see from the outside." The inner reality is divorce even though the outer reality isn't. Yet instead of honesty they denounce and judge others.

MISUNDERSTANDING GOD'S PATIENCE

The second thing that Paul suggests is a defense against the searchlight that forces us to see ourselves, is treating lightly the kindness of God. Verse 4:

Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance?

In chapter 1 we talked about how the wrath of God is displayed from heaven; he takes his hands off and lets consequences descend on people. So we see the lives of people who are in rebellion against God coming to ruin, becoming dissolute: their relationships fall apart, they fall into habits of drugs or drink or get horrible diseases, or some other terrible thing happens to them. Their lives are debased precisely because their sin is leading them to ruin.

Meanwhile, some self-righteous people are cheering on all the terrible things that are happening to these people. Very few consequences, relatively speaking, are occurring to them; by the grace of God they retain friends and a sense of security, they haven't lost their jobs yet, their health hasn't deteriorated too far, and they have some standing in the community. The underlying assumption is, "Because nothing terrible is happening to me, God must be making an exception in my case. Perhaps there are things in my life that I ought to be ashamed of, but evidently God isn't concerned about them. I must be special."

Paul calls this "thinking lightly of the riches of God's kindness and patience." It costs God a tremendous amount to be patient with us. It cost him the life of his son to offer us forgiveness. His patience and forbearance are a very expensive business. He doesn't offer them because we're special and easy to love. The point of his patience is not to impress us more deeply with ourselves, but to lead us to repentance, to give us time while all sin's consequences haven't yet descended, in gratitude for his kindness, to call out to him for help.

Paul next turns to applying the judgment of God in every case, not just to the overtly terrible people, but to everybody. Verses 5-16:

But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself

in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God....

The day that is coming is key to his thought here. When we get to verse 16 at the end of this section, we'll find the same point again: "...on the day when, according to my gospel, God will judge the secrets of men through Christ Jesus." This business of God's being patient and not allowing his judgment to fall yet is all going to be rectified in the final courtroom drama, when all the secrets are made plain and God will evaluate what really is. That notion brackets Paul's thinking in this section. Let's continue with verse 6:

"...who will render to every man according to his deeds: to those who by perseverance in doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, eternal life; but to those who are selfishly ambitious and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, wrath and indignation. There will be tribulation and distress for every soul of man who does evil, of the Jew first and also of the Greek, but glory and honor and peace to every man who does good, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For there is no partiality with God. For all who have sinned without the Law will also perish without the Law; and all who have sinned under the Law will be judged by the Law; for not the hearers of the Law are just before God, but the doers of the Law will be justified. For when Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves, in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness, and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them, on the day when according to my gospel, God will judge the secrets of men through Christ Jesus.

OUR ACTIONS AND OUR CONSCIENCE

There are two themes, the importance of deeds and conscience, that I would like to use to gather up the truths of these verses. Paul is very concerned about our actions. Verse 6 says God will render to them according to their deeds. Verse 7 speaks of those who persevere in doing good; verse 8, those who obey the truth or those who obey unrighteousness; verse 9, the man who does evil; verse 10, the man who does good; and finally in verse 13, not the hearers of the Law but the doers.

This important concentration on what we do-our actions, our obedience, our works-can be confusing at first. Does it contradict the Romans 3:28, "a man is justified by faith, apart from works of the law?" It is not the works of the Law but grace apprehended by faith that pleases God. It seems a bit contradictory that this section is very concerned about the deeds of men and women, about obedience, so we need to ask how this can be.

The second issue that Paul raises here is the role of conscience, in verses 14 through 16. There are those who do not know the Law, who are uninformed about what God has said, and yet find "the Law written on their hearts." Is he implying that mere sensitivity of conscience is enough to bring about salvation for those who haven't heard the gospel? We will return to this question in a moment.

Simply put, the issue raised in Paul's emphasis on deeds is not the tension between the works of the Law and grace. Grace has not entered Paul's argument yet. The tension here is between our actual experience and a fantasy we have about ourselves that is based on our knowledge. There are a great many people who know a lot about God and are able to discuss his thoughts eloquently. If they could they would sit next to him on the judge's bench with their arm around him, and render judgment with certainty regarding the failures of other people. They are wonderfully impressed with their knowledge of the things of God.

But what Paul says is, "Neither I nor God cares about how much you know. The question is, how do you live your life? This fantasy of making yourself the equal of God and having a mind like his of no value unless it affects the way you live."

In verse 7 the word perseverance is very important. Evaluation is not made on one action or two, or isolated actions taken throughout one's life. In perseverance over a lifetime we become one kind of person or another. We either become someone who cares inwardly about the things of God and acts on them, or we increasingly become someone who rejects the things of God. Taken altogether, the persevering quality of our choices is the thing that God cares about because ultimately it's going to declare who we are; it's going to describe the heart

inside that is doing the deeds. That is the reason for Paul's emphasis on deeds. Verse 13 makes the point most succinctly: "...for not the hearers of the Law are just before God, but the doers of the Law will be justified." It's not what we know, it's who we are. These things are the concern of God.

Now, the language in this passage is severe, deliberately powerful, almost cutting. The person whose life is what it ought to be (no matter what he thinks of himself), will inherit eternal life. The one whose life is not what it ought to be will receive tribulation and distress; there is a terrible future stored up on the day when the secrets will be revealed. Terrible judgment and wonderful reward--there is no middle ground. We observe self-righteous people hearing Paul say that they will experience the wrath or the judgment of God, discovering for the first time a group of people with few religious sensibilities and little knowledge who are destined for "glory and honor and peace." Paul is popping their balloons, deliberately deflating fantasies. Therefore the language must be strong. The role that judging others often plays is that of creating a fantasy world in which we think of ourselves as we are not.

WHO CAN MEET THEIR OWN STANDARDS?

The other theme of this paragraph we'll consider is the role of conscience. Is Paul saying that someone raised far from the teaching of the Bible who has sensitivity of conscience is pleasing to God? No, because in verse 12 he is talking about those who sin without the Law and perish without the Law, and those who sin under the Law and are judged by the Law.

What Paul is teaching is this: There are some people who know a great deal about what God thinks and what matters to him. They have read the Bible themselves, they have been well taught. What they know ought to activate their conscience so that when they act contrarily to the Law of God, they see themselves in a dilemma, and if the dilemma isn't solved they are going to die in their sins. Then there is another group of people who don't have the laws of God, they don't know the history of Israel, and they have never even heard of the Ten Commandments. But what they do have is their own standard of right and wrong. Everybody, even the rankest of pagans, the most uninformed, unenlightened person you can meet, has their own standard, and breaks it. You cannot meet a reasonably honest person who can say that they have lived completely up to their own standard, that their life has been everything that it ought to be.

So everyone is in the same boat. Our consciences are going to alternately encourage us and condemn us. Every now and then we'll do something right and feel good about it; our conscience will clap us on the back and say, "That was commendable, you did a great job there." And other times our conscience will jolt us because we've broken the rules, whether God's laws or the ones we know instinctively. Everybody has a conscience that will sometimes condemn them, unless they sear it, or mute it. If they let their conscience do its work, it will proclaim their moral dilemma.

Then the question is, what will they do? The answer is that either they will deny the voice of their conscience, or they will let it teach them to call out to God for mercy. The point that Paul is making is that having a sensitive conscience in and of itself is not the same as faith. Once we realize we have a problem, will we admit it and ask for help?

What the apostle is trying to do in this courtroom is not let anybody be a spectator. The indictment is given first to people who are in open rebellion. The self-righteous applaud this indictment but then he turns to them and says, "Once we establish that there is a standard by which all of us must be judged, we all are going to find ourselves in need of a Savior. And we can't hide from it by increasingly focusing on the awful things that other people do. We must turn the searchlight on ourselves."

No one's sins will remain in secret, unexamined by God. The king had a prophet sent to him. Nathan proclaimed, "You are the man!" and David repented. He didn't cover up that day's events and swear to secrecy everyone who heard Nathan expose him. Instead, he spoke to God and asked for forgiveness. Psalm 51 is David's word of appreciation for God's grace. David's story is that of the self-righteous one judging others, being judged himself, and then becoming not a self-righteous king but a redeemed one.

God will answer our cry for mercy and redemption. Instead of redoubling our efforts to condemn other

people, if we once admit that we are in the same boat, we will find that he will help us. Recall the old spiritual, "It's me, it's me, it's me, O Lord, standing in the need of prayer. It's not my mother, not my father...not my brother, not my sister...not the rich man...." The honest person says, "It's me standing in the need of prayer." That is exactly the point the apostle is trying to drive us to.

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