Romans: Guilty as Charged!
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Bible Reference(s):
- Romans 2:1--3:20

PURPOSE: To show that the whole world is guilty before God and that God judges us impartially.

I want you to picture, please, the jury members filing back into the courtroom and taking their seats. The judge instructs the defendant to stand to his feet for the verdict, and the foreman begins to speak: "We the jury find this defendant to be...guilty as charged."

"But judge, You can't sentence me for this. I didn't mean to do it. It was an accident."

And the judge says, "Guilty as charged!"

"But it wasn't really so bad. I know a lot of people who have done a lot worse."

And the judge says, "Guilty as charged!"

"But judge, I've been a good, moral, upstanding citizen all my life. You can ask my neighbors. I've been such a good family person--kind to my spouse and kids, faithful and true; I don't even kick the dog."

The judge says, "Guilty as charged!"

"But you don't understand, I'm a church member--been baptized, confirmed, taken communion, taught Sunday School, sung in the choir...."

And the judge says one more time, "Guilty as charged!"

Finally the defendant drops into his chair, puts his head in his hands and admits it: "Yes, I am guilty as charged. I did it. I deserve to be punished."

That--as graphically as I can paint it--is the kind of scene Paul pictures for us in the next section of Romans, except in this case almighty God is both the judge and jury. And the defendants are the most religious people on the face of the earth--God's chosen people, the Jews. But just in case the rest of us start feeling a little smug and self-righteous, we're all here by implication--all the religious, moral, ethical, law-abiding, clean-living people of the world. You folks. I mean, that's the kind of people that come to Emmanuel Faith Community Church. Me. I'm a good person, too. That's us.
Now remember, Paul has just brought the wicked, pagan Gentile world of his day under indictment, deserving of God's wrath. And he's anticipating the response of the religious people: "We agree with you Paul. There are a lot of bad people out there who deserve God's wrath. But we're Jews. That doesn't apply to us, does it?"

In six potent paragraphs, Paul answers every possible objection and proves beyond all doubt that the whole world is guilty before God, deserving of His wrath and judgment--Jew as well as Gentile, religious as well as non-religious, pious as well as pagan.

Guilty as charged. That's the point of the passage we'll be studying here.

**God Judges Impartially (Romans 2:1-11)**

You see, God doesn't judge on the basis of a person's pride, or position, or privileges. Unlike us, God judges impartially. Totally impartially.

Romans 2:1. "Therefore, you are inexcusable, oh man, whoever you are who judge; for in whatever you judge another, you condemn yourself. For you who judge practice the same things."

That was the Jew of Paul's day. He could point his finger at the pagan and tell you all about his sins. The only problem was, he himself was guilty of the same things. I wonder if Paul wasn't thinking about himself as he wrote this. Before he met Christ he was one of those proud, self-righteous people who looked down his nose at the "bad" people around him. But when he met Christ, he began to see that he was guilty of the same sins he was judging in them.

We all have a tendency to criticize in others the sins we excuse in ourselves. Have you ever shouted at your kids, "Do you kids have to shout at each other?" Or condemned people who gossip--"I can't stand people who talk about others behind their backs. Why, do you know what she said about me? Yakety, yak yak," Or, we sneer self-righteously, "I think it's disgraceful the way he abuses his body with alcohol, tobacco and drugs," while we're loosening our belts another notch to accommodate the thirty excess pounds we're carrying. My own sins to which I'm blind tend to distort my judgment of others.

But there is no such hypocrisy nor distortion in God's judgment.

Romans 2:2. "But we know that the judgment of God is according to truth against those who practice such things."

God judges on the basis of truth--the actual condition of the person He judges, the way things really are--not just the way they appear. And He won't just judge the other guy. We personally are going to answer to Him.

The question isn't, "Why doesn't God judge those adulterers, those child-molesters, those mass murderers?" The more appropriate question is, "Why hasn't God yet judged me for the sharp, sarcastic words I spoke to my family this morning?" "Why hasn't God yet judged me for juggling those figures on my expense account?"

You say, "Well, maybe what I did wasn't that bad, and that's why God didn't judge it." Read on.
Romans 2:3-4. "Do you think, oh man, you who judge those practicing such things and doing the same that you will escape the judgment of God? Or do you despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance?"

God doesn't delay His judgment because we're so righteous. He delays because He's kind and patient and wants to give us time to repent. If we refuse to repent, the judgment will come. You can count on it.

Romans 2:5-6. "But in accordance with your hardness and your impenitent heart, you are treasuring up for yourself wrath in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, who will render to each one according to his works."

And there's the second major principle governing God's judgment. The first is according to truth (verse 2), the second is according to our works (verse 6).

It doesn't matter who we are. God will impartially examine each of our works and judge us on the basis of what we did--not what we thought we did, or what we wished we did--but what we actually did. Our works.

Romans 2:7-11. "...eternal life to those who by patient continuance in doing good seek for glory, honor, and immortality; but to those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness--indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish, on every soul of man who does evil, of the Jew first and also of the Greek; but glory, honor, and peace to everyone who works what is good, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For there is no partiality with God."

Look at some of those words--like "self-seeking" in verse 8. That one got me. Do you ever look out for yourself rather than others? Do you take the best seat when there's the opportunity to give it to someone else? Do you pick the best piece of meat on the platter when it's passed around the table? Do you cut others off in order to get to the front of the line of traffic? Do you put others down get ahead at work? God says that's deserving of His indignation and wrath. You see that? And He will judge all people equally according to those deeds, regardless of their family heritage or their religious affiliation. God judges impartially.

Don't be confused by these verses. Paul is not teaching that we can earn eternal life by doing good and seeking--as he says in verse 7--for glory, honor and immortality. That would contradict the major thesis of this entire letter, and what he is about to teach us in Romans 3:20. The major point of the book of Romans is that salvation is by grace through faith.

Doing good is not the means of salvation but the evidence that we are saved, the fruit of our faith in Christ. Besides, Paul is not talking about how to get saved here. He's talking about judgment. And the point is that God will judge all people equally, fairly and impartially, on the basis of their works. He plays no favorites. Civilized or savage, religious or non-religious, all will be impartially judged by their works.

The unsaved will be punished in hell in accord with their works. Our reward in heaven will be in accord with our works.

Before Paul even finishes saying that, he's anticipating the next objection. That the way this entire passage is laid out. Paul is anticipating objections. He knows what they're going to be thinking. He's not a mind reader, but he knows the Jewish mind and what they're going to be thinking. "But how can God judge on the basis of our works? Don't some people know more about God's will than others?" And that leads to the next point about God's judgment.
God Judges on the Basis of Knowledge (Romans 2:12-16)

Romans 2:12-16. "For as many as have sinned without law will also perish without law, and as many as have sinned in the law will be judged by the law (for not the hearers of the law are just in the sight of God, but the doers of the law will be justified; for when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do the things in the law, these, although not having the law, are a law to themselves, who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves their thoughts accusing or else excusing them) in the day when God will judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ, according to my gospel."

There isn't any question about it--some people have more knowledge of God's will than others. Some have God's word, God's law. Some don't. But that doesn't make any difference, Paul says. God will still be fair in His judgment, and everybody will be judged on the basis of the knowledge he has.

The Jews have God's holy law, and they will be judged on the basis of their obedience to the law.

The Gentiles don't have the law but they have something else. Paul mentions it down in verse 15: "Who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness," accusing or excusing them. Conscience. And they will be judged on the basis of their obedience to that conscience. Conscience is not a completely reliable guide. It can be seared and defiled. But it is a sense of "ought," an awareness of right and wrong, and it testifies that there is a God above who makes certain expectations of us. Sometimes that conscience will reveal exactly what God's Word has said all along. In other words, even the heathen may have the truth of God written on their hearts.

Don Richardson has tried to show that every culture, no matter how primitive, has the stamp of God's truth on it. His own experience with the Peace Child in New Guinea was one example--where a warring tribe would give a baby to a hostile tribe, and the possession of that baby would require that they both honor a peace agreement. He showed them how Jesus was God's peace child, given by God to reconcile us to Himself, and those fierce natives responded to the truth and opened their hearts to the Savior.

God, in perfect fairness, will judge on the basis of whether we obey the knowledge that we have. And those who disobey are worthy of God's wrath. God's judgment. He judges on the basis of knowledge.

But Paul anticipates that the objections will continue to come. And here's the next one: "But we Jews have a special position and special privileges granted to us by God. Surely that immunizes us against God's wrath, doesn't it?" Not necessarily!

God Judges in Spite of Religious Privileges (Romans 2:17-24)

Romans 2:17-20. "Indeed, you are called a Jew, and you rest on the Law and make your boast in God and know His will and approve the things that are excellent, being instructed out of the Law. And you're confident that you yourself are a guide to the blind and a light to those who are in darkness, and instructor of the foolish, a teacher of babes, having the form of knowledge and truth in the law."

What a list! Ten glorious advantages which they had as Jews. So what did they do with them?

Well, he goes on to describe in the next few verses that they actually violated the very laws that they taught.
Romans 2:21-24. "You, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself? You who preach that a man should not steal, do you steal? You who say, 'Do not commit adultery,' do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who make your boast in the law, do you dishonor God through breaking the law? For 'the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you,' as it is written."

Isn't that incredible? They preached against stealing, yet they themselves stole. They insisted that a person should not commit adultery, but they were not above a little hanky-panky. They even pilfered treasures from pagan temples in the lands in which they lived and set them up in their homes to show off their wealth. And as a result, God's name was being dragged in the dirt. They were as guilty before God as the least religious person on earth.

Now I think it's possible to translate this indictment into our modern American context. And it goes beyond the hypocritical televangelists who do the very things they preach against. Some of us were born into Christian homes, attended Christian schools and churches, studied the Bible, taught it to others, even led people to Christ. And we're down on adultery and thievery, greed, and all those things. But we've also taken things that didn't belong to us, and even if we haven't committed adultery, we've probably lusted, and we've put material things before God. And as a result of our sin, some unbelievers who know us have been turned away from Christ and reproach has been brought on God's name. That makes us as guilty as the least religious people on earth.

That's the point of what the apostle is saying. Paul is knocking the props out from under the people who are trusting in their religious position to escape God's wrath. And he can almost hear the Jews who are reading his letter in Rome: "But we have circumcision—the sign and seal of our covenant relationship with God. God wouldn't condemn anybody who was circumcised, would he?" So he deals with it.

**God Judges in Spite of Religious Rituals (Romans 2:25-29)**

God judges in spite of religious rituals.

Romans 2:25-27. "For circumcision is indeed profitable if you keep the Law, but if you're a breaker of the Law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision."

As you well know, circumcision was a very important part of the Jews' religious experience. It was a sacred rite indicating that they were God's chosen people in a covenant relationship with God. But what good was it if by their disobedience they were demonstrating that their hearts had never been changed by God's grace?

Romans 2:28-29. "For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly nor is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh; but he is a Jew who is one inwardly and circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit, and not in the letter whose praise is not from men but from God."

God isn't so much interested in outward rituals as inward change--change that results in obedience to His Word.

It surely isn't difficult to see the application of that to the contemporary scene. In place of circumcision substitute baptism, confirmation or church membership, holy communion, or some other religious activity. You have the same situation.
We often ask someone, "Are you a Christian?" And someone will answer, "Oh, yes. I was baptized when I was blank years old." Or, "I went through confirmation class, and it was a wonderful experience." Or, "I've been a member of the church as long as I can remember." And it becomes obvious that they are counting on some such religious ritual to escape from God's judgment against their sin. The unmistakable truth of this passage is that all are guilty before God and deserving of His wrath, and that no religious ritual can remove our guilt or protect us from His judgment. God is looking for changed hearts and changed lives, not ceremonies and sacraments. Those things may have a place. They are important. Some of them are acts of obedience to God, but they don't change the heart. Only submission to the Spirit of God can bring about life changes.

But the objections keep coming. Paul visualizes a Jew standing up and saying, "Hold on now. If these things don't count for anything, then what good is it to be a Jew? God's promises to us mean nothing."

"Not so," says Paul. "God will faithfully keep His promises to the nation Israel, but God judges in spite of His own faithfulness to His own promises. And that's the message of verses 1 to 8 in chapter 3.

God Judges in Spite of His Own Faithfulness (Romans 3:1-8)

Romans 3:1-4a. "What advantage then has the Jew, or what is the profit of circumcision? Much in every way! Chiefly because to them were committed the oracles of God. For what if some did not believe? Will their unbelief make the faithfulness of God without effect? Certainly not! Indeed, let God be true but every man a liar. As it is written: 'That You may be justified in Your words, And may overcome when You are judged.'"

"What advantage then has the Jew? Or what is the profit of circumcision? Much in every way," Paul says. Chiefly because "to them were committed the oracles of God. For what if some did not believe? Will their unbelief make the faithfulness of God without effect?" He comes back to the answer to that one pretty quick. "Certainly not!"

You see, there are some people today, fine Christian people who love the Lord and love His Word, but who believe that God is finished with Israel as a nation, that the Jews have given up their right to enjoy God's promises because of their unbelief and disobedience, that those great Old Testament promises to the nation Israel are now being fulfilled spiritually in the church, or will be fulfilled by the church in heaven, but not literally on earth by the nation Israel. Evidently Paul didn't believe that. You see what he says here? "Will their unbelief make the faithfulness of God without effect? Certainly not!" That's pretty clear, isn't it? He insisted that Israel's unbelief could never cancel out God's faithfulness to the nation Israel as a whole.

But that presents another problem: Israel disobeys, yet God remains faithful. So in other words, Israel's unrighteousness shows off God's righteousness. Now there's one for you. Think about it. How can God justly judge people whose actions demonstrate His righteousness? That sounds to be totally unjust, and furthermore, maybe we even ought to take it a step further and say, "Let's sin it up, so God's righteousness can be shown all the more!"

Paul's got some things to say about that. Right here, and then later in this book as well.

Romans 3:5. "But if our unrighteousness demonstrates the righteousness of God, what shall we say? Is God unjust who inflicts wrath? (I speak as a man)"
Do you get the point? How can God justly judge people whose actions demonstrate His righteousness? Maybe we all ought to sin more so more of God's goodness will be seen! "That's ridiculous," says Paul. "A purely human point of view!" (verse 3:5b). "That's purely a human point of view! I speak as a man to even suggest such a blasphemous thing." And anybody who even suggests it deserves all the judgment he gets. That's what it means at the end of verse 8 when he says, "Their condemnation is just" (verse 3:8b). God will judge, even though He's faithful to his word, and will keep His promises, and His judgment will be just and it will be fair. You can count on it.

Paul introduces the last paragraph himself by asking his own question. I don't think he's anticipating one they're asking now; this one he wants to ask.

Romans 3:9a. "What then? Are we better than they? Not at all."

"Do we Jews, who have been elevated to a privileged position as God's chosen people and promised wonderful things, have any advantage over others when it comes to escaping God's wrath?" And he answers it himself. "Not at all."

**God Judges All Mankind (Romans 3:9-20)**

As a matter of fact, God judges all mankind. That's the point of verses 9 to 20.

Romans 3:9b. "For we have previously charged that Jews and Greeks are both all under sin."

The whole human race is under the dominion of sin and deserving of God's judgment. And in order to drive that truth home Paul quotes from six different Old Testament passages beginning with Psalm 14.

Romans 3:10-12. "As it is written, there is none righteous, no, not one. There is none who understands. There is none who seeks after God. They've all gone out of the way. They have together become unprofitable. There is none who does good, no, not one." What an indictment of the human race--the whole human race.

There is nobody who seeks a personal relationship with the one true God on His terms. And while lots of people do good things, they can ever do enough to make themselves intrinsically good people, or to atone for their sins, or to make them acceptable to an infinitely holy God. And there isn't one single exception to that, except for the Son of God--"...no, not one."

Paul illustrates the point with more Old Testament quotations showing that our sinfulness touches our entire being. This is what theologians call the doctrine of total depravity: that sin touches every part of our being. He starts with our speech.

Romans 3:13-14. "Their throat is an open sepulcher," or tomb; "with their tongues they practice deceit."

Deceit. Do you ever do that? Maybe you're saying, "Oh, no, not me." But maybe if you think hard enough you can probably remember when you shaded the truth just a little bit to make yourself look better or to relieve yourself of some unpleasantness--maybe you did it with your spouse, or your roommate, or your boss, or somebody. It wasn't wicked, you didn't think. It was just a little white lie. But it did shade some of the truth. It was deceitful; it did kind of pull the shades down over their eyes. And it illustrates our sinfulness.
Read on. "Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness." Bitterness. You say, "Well that's not me." Well, think a minute. Can you think of someone who has wronged you that maybe you've never fully forgiven. You thought you forgave them but just last week, you told somebody what they did to you. Why did you do that? Probably because there's still bitterness lingering there toward that person, through a lack of true and genuine forgiveness.

After speech comes conduct. Romans 3:15-17.

Verse 15: "Their feet are swift to shed blood. Destruction and misery are in their ways." You say, "I've never killed anybody." Well, I'm sure you haven't. But, I would imagine, if you're honest, you probably can think of somebody at some time or other in your life that you wished were dead, right? Maybe it was a boss, or a neighbor, or a teacher, or a rival in love, or somebody you'd just as soon had been taken of the earth.

Verse 17: "And the way of peace they have not known."

And you can probably think of times when you stirred up trouble instead of choosing to do what would bring peace and harmony. That may be one of the reasons so many marriages are crumbling in our day--because one or both are not choosing the way of peace.

Romans 3:18. "There is no fear of God before their eyes."

We all know people who live their lives in total disregard of God. They may claim to believe He exists, but in practice--for all practical purposes--they are atheists who pay no attention to Him at all.

But wait a minute; before we condemn others, maybe we should look at ourselves. How many times have we known what God wanted us to do, yet gone right ahead and done what we wanted to do anyway? Has that ever happened to you? Whew! It sure happens to me. I'm not going to tell you all my sins, but I'll tell you something I did a couple weeks ago. Boy, you all woke up on that one, didn't you? [Laughter.]

We had loaned one of our vehicles to somebody so we only had one, and I needed to come to church for the afternoon and Mary needed the car for something else. And so, I didn't want to give up my car, but I said, "Well look, why don't you drop me off at the church and when I'm finished after 5 [o'clock] sometime, I'll give you a call and you can come pick me up."

And she said, "OK, great."

So I finished what I was doing about 5:15 and I tried to call and the line was busy. Well, that could happen to anybody. She probably got a call and she'll wrap it up because she knows I'm going to call. Do you know how long--do you know how long she kept me waiting?! It was nearly an hour! Now, I know I could have had the operator interrupt but that costs money, you know, and besides, I wanted to see just how long she would do this, you know. Now I knew that I shouldn't get angry. I knew that. And I fought it. I mean, I knew, but, an hour, folks, I mean an hour! Be reasonable!

And so I got angry anyway. I knew God didn't want me to, but I did. And I made her pay! You know why I did that? Because even though I know the Lord and I love Him with all my heart and I want to do His will, I'm still basically a selfish, sinful person who deserves God's judgment. And so are you; don't look so pious! Ha!
And here's the finale. Romans 3:19-20. "Now we know that what the Law says it says to those who are under the Law, that every mouth may be stopped"--and here it is--"that all the world may become guilty." All the world may become guilty before God. "Therefore, by the deeds of the Law, no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the Law is the knowledge of sin."

Those of us who believe and respect God's law need to listen to what it says. It was never given to make us righteous. It can't do that, because there isn't one of us who can keep it perfectly. It was given to reveal our sinfulfulness. And that it does. Powerfully! Decisively. After being exposed to God's law, we have no option but to close our mouths, stop trying to excuse ourselves, bury our head in our hands and admit it: "I am guilty before God and I deserve His judgment." Guilty.

You know, there are some people seem to think that God grades on a curve. He takes all our scores and plots them out, and the highest get A's, the next get B's and C's, some get D's and the rest fail with F's. And while we may not think we deserve an A, we're sure not as bad as some others we know on the curve, so God will certainly give us a passing grade and let us into His heaven. But that isn't the way it is! According to this passage of Scripture, the only passing grade on God's exam is 100%. Even 99% is failing. You may be the most moral, ethical, and religious person on earth, but even one sin disqualifies you from heaven and guarantees you God's judgment. The whole world is guilty before God!

**Trusting Jesus as Your Savior**

Guilty, as charged. That's the teaching of Romans 2 and 3: guilty before God.

That's the bad news. The good news is that the righteousness we need to enter heaven has been provided for us as a gift, received by faith in God's perfect, sinless Son, the Lord Jesus, who died in our place and paid for our sin.

We're going to deal with verses 21 and 22 next week, but I can't stop at verse 20 here. We have to say, the good news is--verse 21--"The righteousness of God is revealed, apart from the law, being witnessed by the Law and the prophets, even the righteousness of God, which is through faith in Jesus Christ, to all, and on all who believe, for there is no difference. Religious or non-religious, pious or pagan, Jew or Gentile: no difference.

We need to acknowledge our guilt before God and receive from His gracious hand, the gift of His righteousness. And that's what fits us for heaven. Oh, it's not very pleasant to hear that we're guilty, but what a joyful thing to know that God offers us salvation freely, by His grace. Have you received it? Have you received God's Son, in Whom that salvation rests? If there is any question in your mind, why not settle it right now?

Let's bow our heads and our hearts together before God. With our heads bowed reverently--and sometimes it's a good idea to close our eyes just to shut out the distractions around us. May I ask you if you've settled this issue? Have you put your trust in the Lord Jesus Christ as your Savior from sin? Or were you counting on your religious activities, or your fine upstanding life? Why not settle it today? The truth of God's Word is so plain. It's hard to miss it. We're guilty. And there isn't any way we can erase that guilt. That's why Jesus had to come; that's why He had to die. That's why He rose again. So will you settle it right now? "Lord, I'm a sinner." Tell Him right in the quiet of your own soul right now.
Lord, I'm a sinner. I do believe that Jesus died for my sins and that He wants to impart to me His own perfect righteousness. And with that new position in Christ, I do believe that I shall enter heaven's glory. Lord Jesus, come into my life and save me from sin.

Closing Prayer

Oh, Lord, I pray, that those who have put off the decision will settle it today. Lord, give no peace, no rest until they have acknowledged their guilt and opened their hearts to the Lord Jesus Christ. And thank You for Your promise, that You will clothe us in the very righteousness of Jesus Christ and fit us for heaven's glory. Thank You. In Jesus' name, amen.