

Lesson 24 at StudyRomans.org

Romans 2:4, Continued

Romans 2:4 — 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?

We haven’t said much about Calvinism recently, but verse 4 is a perfect place to do so. As we have seen, Calvinists divide the world into the elect and the non-elect — even to the point of discussing “elect infants,” as we saw earlier.

The elect, they say, are saved without regard to what they think, do, or say, and the non-elect are lost without regard to what they think, do, or say. In fact, Calvinists argue that we cannot turn to God absent a supernatural change through some direct operation on us by the Holy Spirit prior to conversion — an operation that they say the Holy Spirit performs only on the elect. For example, I could pick up my Bible, read it carefully, believe what it says, and do what it says — and yet none of that would make any difference if I were not listed among the elect.

That is what John Calvin taught. But is that what the Bible teaches? Not at all. And we can see that right here in verse 4!

“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?”

What leads that person to repent? Is it a direct operation on them by the Holy Spirit? Or is it the kindness of God? And is that blessing for

everyone or only for the elect? Or are we saying that God is not kind to the non-elect?

And, to turn that around, if the elect are going to be saved no matter what they do, then why does it matter if God is kind and patient and forbearing toward them? They are already on the list and nothing and no one, not even God, can take them off that list — why does it matter whether God is kind and patient toward them? Under Calvin's theology, they would be saved even if God were unkind and impatient toward them.

And keep in mind, Calvin did not just say that God knew they would be saved because God could see into the future. Calvin said that God knew they would be saved because God elected them before they were born. That is what Calvin taught. There is no other way to interpret the phrase "elect infant," and that is the phrase Calvin used.

In short, is there anything in verse 4 that sounds anything like Calvinism? No, there is not. Instead, verse 4 is enough all by itself to show that Calvinism is false.

But we have more than just verse 4. We also have these other verses:

1 Timothy 2:4 — Who desires **all people** to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

2 Peter 3:9 — The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that **all** should reach repentance.

So which is it? Does God desire **all** people to be saved or not? Paul said it was "all people" in 1 Timothy 2:4, but John Calvin said otherwise.

Does God want **all** to repent or not? Peter said it was “all” in 2 Peter 3:9, but John Calvin said otherwise.

John Calvin saw God as someone with his hand on a trapdoor that dropped people, including some infants, into Hell without regard to what they did in this life. Calvin saw God as someone who allowed us to choose, but who then did not give us the ability to choose Christ.

Is that the God we find here in verse 4 and the other verses we just read? Or instead do we find a God who gives us the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience — not wanting anyone to perish, but wanting all to be saved? We know the answer to that question because we just read it straight from the word of God.

Romans 2:5

Romans 2:5 — 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.

“But wait,” some might say, “Don’t we see the harsh side of God here in verse 5? Don’t we see God storing up wrath so that he can finally unleash his wrath when the time comes?”

No. That is not at all what we see here. In fact, what we see here is the opposite. Verse 5 does not say that God is storing up wrath for people — instead, verse 5 says that people are storing up wrath for themselves.

If all I have in my spiritual bank account is the wrath of God, then it is because that is all I deposited into my spiritual bank account. And that was not because God was hard-hearted, but rather that was be-

cause I was hard-hearted. And because I failed to repent even though God had always been nothing but kind, forbearing, and patient toward me. That is what these verses are saying.

In short, if I am lost, then I should not blame God for that. I should blame myself. If all I have on the last day is the wrath of God, then it is because that is all I stored up for myself — not God, but me. That is something I did.

God has given us free will, and if we ever want to prove that, we can just turn to Romans 2 and the other verses we read just a moment ago. God does not want anyone to perish, and yet many people will perish. Why? Because that is the free will choice that they made.

And what is “the day of wrath when God’s righteous judgment will be revealed?” I think it is just what it seems to be — the final day when Jesus will return to claim his own and judge the world. Paul will refer to this day later in verse 16.

Romans 2:16 — On that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus.

And what else will happen on that final day?

- The trumpet shall sound at an unexpected time determined by God (1 Corinthians 15:52, Mark 13:32, Matthew 24:44, 1 Thessalonians 5:2-3)
- Jesus will descend from heaven with a shout (1 Thessalonians 4:16)
- Those who sleep in Jesus will God bring with him (1 Thessalonians 3:13, 4:14)

- The dead will be raised, with the dead in Christ rising first (John 5:28-29, Acts 24:15, 1 Thessalonians 4:16, 1 Corinthians 15:52)
- All will stand before the judgment seat of Christ to bow their knee and be judged, with some receiving eternal life and the others receiving indignation and wrath (2 Corinthians 5:10, Romans 2:6-8, Hebrews 9:27)
- Those righteous who are alive will not sleep but will be changed and will meet Christ in the air to join those righteous who were raised, and so shall we ever be with Jesus (1 Corinthians 15:51, 1 Thessalonians 4:17)
- The kingdom will be delivered to God (1 Corinthians 15:24)
- The earth will be destroyed (2 Peter 3:10)

That day is the day here in verse 5. And God's will is that everyone be ready for that day, and (as we will see in Romans 10) God has done everything and given everything so that we can all be ready for that great day. That is God's will, and there is no question about that. The only question is whether that is also my will. Am I storing up treasure in Heaven, or am I storing up wrath. I have free will — what is my choice? That is the question.

Romans 2:6

Before we examine the text of verses 6-11, let's look at the structure of verses 6-11. The structure that we see here is called a **chiasm**.

A chiasm is a rhetorical device in which a sequence of ideas is presented in a certain order and then immediately repeated in the reverse order. The Handout for Lesson 23 (from last week) shows how that occurs in these six verses.

And why is it called a chiasm? That name comes from the Greek letter Chi, which is also shown on that Handout and which looks like the letter X. A chiasm has a similar structure to that Greek letter — it makes the points in the forward direction, and then it makes the same points in the reverse direction — sort of like the letter X.

And why do we see a chiasm here? The short answer is that it was a common rhetorical device used at the time, and this is far from the only place where Paul uses it.

As we said when we looked at verse 2, Paul was a master at the art of persuasion, and this technique allows Paul to make the same point twice using different language and different perspectives. And, as with most such repetition, we should see the repetition in this chiasm simply as a way of emphasizing what Paul is saying here. Yes, it's all important, but this part is really important!

But why? What is it that is really important in these six verses? To answer that question, let's start with verse 6.

Romans 2:6 — He will render to each one according to his works:

What the Bible says here is that on that final day God will render to each person according to what that person has done. Not according to what God has done in electing that person prior to his birth, but on what that person has done after his birth. If there is any doubt

about that, let's just read the verse again: "He will render to each one according to his works."

And if there is any doubt about whether "his works" refers to the person's works or God's works, just keep reading. The next two verses list the specific works done by the person and show what will be rendered by God for the specific works done by the person.

Just a moment ago we asked the question of what was so important in these verses that Paul used a chiasm to repeat everything twice in different orders. I think we can now answer that question.

Back in my teaching days, I learned very quickly how to get a class's complete and undivided attention — I would just use the magic phrase "final exam." When I uttered that phrase, they would all look at me with their pencils ready to write. In fact, I would often begin each class with a hint about what they might find on that final exam just as a way of encouraging them all to show up on time! And it worked. Why? Because that information about the final exam was very important to them!

I think Paul is just doing the same thing here. I think that is why we see the extra emphasis in these verses through Paul's use of a chiasm. These verses are all about the final exam!

Why does anything Paul has said up to this point in Romans matter? It matters because of verse 6. It matters because someday I will have to stand before God and give account of what I have done in this life. If that is never going to happen, then what does it matter how I live in this life? If this is the only life I have, then why not just eat, drink, and be merry? (Paul asks that same question in 1 Corinthians 15:32.)

But let's talk now about the elephant in the room when it comes to verse 6. I thought we weren't saved by works, and yet right here it says that God will render his judgment according to our works. How do we explain that?

Well, if all we had was verse 6, then that might be a problem. But verse 6 is not all we have — we also have verse 7. And verse 7 will tell us the kind of works that we need to do and need to be doing if we want to receive the gift of eternal life from God on that last great day.

Romans 2:7

Romans 2:7 — to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life;

“We are not saved by works, and so there is nothing we need to do and nothing we can do to be saved.” We hear that a lot, especially when we teach people about baptism, but is that what the Bible says? Is that what verse 7 says? No, not at all.

To see that, let's just read verses 6 and 7 again: “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.”

Many teach that there is nothing I need to be doing to be saved — but what did we just read? “To those who by patience **in well-doing**.” There's that word — **doing**. It looks like Paul is telling me I need to be **doing** something if I want eternal life.

And Paul's focus is not just on **what** I am doing, but Paul is also focused on **how** I am doing it and **why** I am doing it. He speaks “to those

who by patience [which is **how** I am doing it] in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality [which is **why** I am doing it].”

And what is it that I am doing in this manner and for this purpose? It is well-doing. My well-doing is done patiently and for the purpose of seeking glory and honor and immortality. That is what verse 7 says.

The Greek words translated “well-doing” are *agathos ergon*. The first word means good, excellent, upright, and honorable. The second word means works or deeds.

The Handout for Lesson 24 shows every occurrence of six different Greek words for “work” in the letter to the Romans. The Strong’s numbers, the Greek words, and the definitions are listed at the bottom of the third column, and the color coding lets you know where each word is used in the text.

If we look at Romans 2:6-7 on that Handout, we can see that the word translated “doing” in verse 7 is the same Greek word translated “works” at the end of verse 6. They are both highlighted in yellow, which means that they are both the same Greek word “*ergon*.”

And what that means is that when Paul uses the Greek words translated “well-doing” in the ESV, Paul is just saying “good works.” In fact, that is precisely how the same phrase is translated by the ESV in Ephesians 2:10 — good works. We are to perform “good works” patiently and for the purpose of seeking glory and honor and immortality. That is what verse 7 is saying.

And Paul’s focus on good works here is not unique to Romans. We also see that same focus in other letters, starting with that verse from Ephesians that we just mentioned.

Ephesians 2:10 — For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for **good works**, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

Titus 2:14 — Who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for **good works**.

We were created in Christ Jesus for good works, and we were redeemed to be a special purified people who are zealous for good works.

So let me get this straight: Am I saying that my good works are somehow related to my eternal life? Yes, I am saying that. Why? Because Paul is saying that. There is no other way to understand verse 7.

To those who do this, God will give that. Isn't that what verse 7 says? "To those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life." To those who do this, God will give that. Is there any other way to read verse 7?

But I thought I was saved without regard to anything I do. I thought my good works were unrelated to my salvation. I thought I was saved based only on what I think, not on anything I do. I thought I was saved because God numbered me among the elect before I was even born. Well, if I thought any of those things, then clearly I was wrong. And verse 7 is enough to show that I was wrong. "To those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life."

Am I saved by works? The answer to that question depends on what we mean by works. If by "works" we just mean anything we do, then

clearly we are saved by works. Why? Because there are things we must do to be saved. If we call those things works, then we are saved by works. This verse teaches that there are things we must do to be saved, as do countless other verses in the Bible. For example, in Acts 2:37, what was Peter asked? “Brothers, what shall we do?” And then Peter told them what they should do in verse 38 — not just what they should think, but what they should do. “Brothers, what shall we do?” Many people today would answer nothing, but that was not Peter’s answer.

But what if we mean something else when we say “works”? What if by works I mean something I do to earn something else — as in going to work everyday to earn a salary. I have worked, and so you owe me something. Am I saved by works if that is what I mean by works? Absolutely not! Nothing I do could ever put God in my debt. My salvation is not a salary. My salvation is a free gift from God.

Romans 6:23 — For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

And what does verse 7 say? Does it say, “to those who by patience in well-doing seek to put God in their debt so that he owes them their salvation?” Is that what Paul says here? Of course not. But Paul does say in verse 7 that their good works have something to do with their salvation.

So where are we with regard to good works? Where we are is on a road with a ditch on either side, and we need to make sure we don’t fall into either of those ditches.

On one side of the road is the ditch that says God owes us salvation because of our good works. Let’s call that ditch the **Pharisee ditch**

because that is what the Pharisees believed. Some of them even kept a list of their good works so that they could prove how much God owed them.

We know that view is wrong because of how frequently salvation is described as a gift — and a gift is not something we are owed. A gift is not something that is earned. We do not earn our salvation.

Romans 6:23 — For the wages of sin is death, but the free **gift** of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Ephesians 2:8-9 — For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the **gift** of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

On the other side of the road is the ditch that says our good works have nothing at all to do with our salvation. We are not saved by our works, and so there is nothing we must do and nothing we can do to be saved. All that matters is whether God put us on the right list before we were even born. Let's call that ditch the **Calvin ditch** because that is what John Calvin taught.

We know that view is wrong because of how frequently the Bible describes the essentiality of good works and because of how frequently the Bible says that there are things we must do to be saved.

Romans 2:6-7 — 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.

Philippians 2:12 — Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.

So is that all we plan to say on this subject? Not at all. Paul will later have much more to say about it, and so will we also. But for now let's just try to stay out of those two ditches!

Before we leave verse 7, let's take a closer look at the phrase "seek for glory and honor and immortality." What does that mean? Paul answered that question elsewhere.

Romans 8:6 — For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but **to set the mind on the Spirit** is life and peace.

Colossians 3:1-2 — If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. **Set your minds on things that are above**, not on things that are on earth.

2 Corinthians 4:18 — **As we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen.** For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

These verses are all describing the focus of a Christian, and I think that is precisely what verse 7 is describing as well. In short, a Christian is not self-seeking, but rather a Christian is God-seeking. We are not focused on earthly matters but rather on spiritual matters. We are motivated by spiritual things rather than earthly things.

And, yes, we can seek for glory and honor — but not the glory and honor that come from man. We seek the glory and honor that come from God.

1 Peter 1:6-7 — In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith — more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire — may be found to result in **praise and glory and honor** at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

Christians yearn to hear only one thing — “Well done, good and faithful servant.” That is what we seek. That is what we desire. That is why we each carry our own cross daily. That is why we follow the footsteps of Christ. That is why we remain faithful unto death.

And that is what we will hear when we receive immortality and eternal life. “Well done, good and faithful servant.” And we will hear that from Christ, “who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel” (2 Timothy 1:10).

Romans 2:8

Romans 2:8 — but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury.

Verse 8 is the opposite of verse 7, and so verse 8 helps us understand verse 7 and helps us double check what we just said about verse 7. If we were right in what we said about verse 7, then we should see the opposite of what we said here in verse 8.

And it looks like we are off to a very good start! We said that verse 7 was describing someone who was God-seeking rather than self-seeking — and what is the first thing we see here in verse 8? Self-seeking. The people who are the opposite of those described in verse 7 are the people who are self-seeking.

And next? They are also the people who do not obey the truth. And what does that tell us about the people in verse 7? They must have been the opposite — they must have been the people who do obey the truth.

And, of course, that fits with what we said about them — they were described in terms of their good works. They were described in terms of their well-doing. They were described in terms of what they did. And what they did was obey God. And Paul described that obedience as “the obedience of faith” back in Romans 1:5.

So I guess that means that the people here in verse 8 are free from all of that, right? The people here in verse 8 don't answer to anybody, right? They don't obey anything, right? Wrong. Verse 8 says that they obey unrighteousness.

These descriptions remind me of the prodigal son. When he was walking away from his home and away from his father, I suspect that he had only one thought on his mind — free at last! Finally, I can have whatever I want when I want it! Finally, I can do whatever I want to do when I want to do it. Finally, I can go anywhere I want to go! Freedom!

But freedom is not what the prodigal son found. Instead, he found slavery. Far from having whatever he wanted, he found himself with

nothing. And far from doing whatever he wanted, he found himself doing the last thing he wanted — feeding pigs. And far from going wherever he wanted, he was stuck in that pigpen.

Peter described the sad situation of such people:

2 Peter 2:19 — They promise them freedom, but they themselves are slaves of corruption. For whatever overcomes a person, to that he is enslaved.

And Paul will have much more to say about such people later in this letter.

Romans 6:16 — Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness?

The people in verse 7 are slaves of obedience, which leads to righteousness. The people in verse 8 are slaves of sin, which leads to death. But they are all slaves. Yes, we all have the freedom to choose, but freedom itself is not on the menu. At least not freedom as the world views freedom.

And what lies ahead for those who are slaves to sin? Wrath and fury. We looked at those words earlier. The Handout for Lesson 17 showed all of the Greek words for anger in the New Testament.

And if you look at that Handout, one thing you will see is that, although the Greek word translated “wrath” is used many times in Romans, the Greek word translated “fury” here in verse 8 is used only this one time. And that Greek word translated “fury” describes a pas-

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sionate outburst. That is what people are storing up for themselves when they disobey God — wrath and fury from God on the last day.