



Text: Romans 2:1-16¹

Title: No Excuses: Four Strategies for Avoiding Spiritual Responsibility

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“Therefore you have no excuse....” Romans 2:1

In 1980 a Boston court acquitted Michael Tindall of flying illegal drugs into the United States. Tindall’s attorneys argued that he was a victim of “action addict syndrome,” an emotional disorder that makes a person crave dangerous, thrilling situations. Tindall was not a drug trafficker, merely a thrill seeker.

An Oregon man who tried to kill his ex-wife was acquitted on the grounds that he suffered from “depression-suicide syndrome,” whose victims deliberately commit poorly planned crimes with the unconscious goal of being caught or killed. He didn’t really want to shoot his wife; he wanted the police to shoot him.

Attorneys for Dan White, who murdered San Francisco mayor George Moscone, blamed the crime on emotional stress linked to White’s junk food binges. White was acquitted of murder and convicted on a lesser charge of manslaughter on the strength of what was called the “Twinkie syndrome.”

A few years ago the Supreme Court of Canada added the “Too-Drunk-To-Know-Better syndrome” to the defence arsenal of irresponsibility. The court acquitted a man of the charge of rape because he apparently was too drunk to control his behaviour or understand the consequences of his actions.

Just this week I read of a man in Ontario who is trying to appeal an impaired driving conviction by claiming that his dangerous driving wasn’t caused by drugs or alcohol, but by his use of a Blackberry. He attempted to argue that to be convicted of impaired driving a person must be impaired by either drugs or alcohol. Although he had had three drinks prior to being stopped by the police, the defendant claimed that his erratic driving was caused by his attempts to use his Blackberry device on his knee while driving his car. No drugs, no alcohol – just a Blackberry! Toronto lawyer Jonathan Rosenthal, who specializes in impaired-driving cases said, “There’s always a new defence, someone is always trying something.” His appeal, by the way, was not successful. (*Globe & Mail*, Feb 5, 2008)

It seems as if we’re increasingly becoming a people who refuse to take responsibility for our actions. We love to make excuses! We work hard at

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avoiding responsibility for our actions. But I don't think this is really a new phenomenon.

Let's face it -- if someone else can take the fall for us, we human beings are perfectly content to let them swing in the breeze! In fact, the human race began with two people who tried to shift responsibility for their actions onto someone else.

In the book of Genesis we're told that our ancestor Eve tried to shift responsibility for eating the fruit of the tree to the serpent who had deceived her. Adam tried to shift responsibility for his eating of the fruit to God because He had made Eve his wife. (Gen. 3:12-13)

“The man said, ‘The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate.’ Then the LORD God said to the woman, ‘What is this that you have done?’ The woman said, ‘The serpent deceived me, and I ate.’” Genesis 3:12-13

Ever since then, human beings have been very creative in finding ways to continue the family tradition of shifting the responsibility for our disobedience onto others.

In the passage we have before us this morning Paul encountered **four strategies** that were used by his contemporaries to try to avoid their responsibility for sin and their need to respond to the gospel of salvation that Paul preached. These strategies are still very much in use today!

The **first strategy** is found in verses 1 to 3 of Romans chapter two.

Paul's contemporaries tried to protect themselves from God's judgment by using a strategy we frequently employ...

We compare ourselves favourably with others

“At least I'm not as bad as....”

“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.” Romans 2:1

By the term “comparing” I mean to say that we take our responsibility for sin and try to get rid of it by finding someone we think is more worthy of God's judgment than ourselves.

A few years ago the boxer Mike Tyson lost his boxing license and was not allowed to fight professionally. In his application to regain his license, Tyson



argued: "I'm not Mother Teresa, but I'm not Charles Manson either." For those of you who don't know the 60s, Charles Manson is a convicted multiple murderer. By saying "I'm not Mother Teresa," Tyson was tacitly acknowledging that there was wrongdoing in his past, but he was using the age-old defence of comparison: "But at least I'm not as bad as...."

Last week we looked at the long list (1:24-32) of sins that Paul brought before the attention of the Romans: sexual immorality, homosexual practices, greed, murder, gossip, slander, disobedience to parents, etc. As a list, Paul's evaluation of the human race seems extreme and yet his point is clear -- every one of us has the ability to do any of these things. We are, he argued in chapter 1, verse 20, "without excuse."

But the problem was that in the church to which Paul wrote this letter there were two groups of people. One group came out of the pagan, Gentile world and they could relate to everything Paul wrote in chapter 1. The sexual immorality and gross wickedness that Paul highlights in his list of sins in chapter 1 marked to a high degree the life of the world from which they came. As the list of sins was being read from chapter 1, this group could easily say: "Yes, that is what we once were!"

But there was a second group in this church in Rome. They were believers in Jesus who had come from a religious, Jewish background. Their lives had not been marked by the sexual excesses and gross immorality that Paul listed in chapter 1. Their world had been shaped by God's Law revealed in the Old Testament. You can almost see them, sitting in the congregation, nodding their heads to the list of sins and in their hearts saying: "Go get 'em Paul! Preach it, brother! Tell it like it is!" But all the while, they were missing Paul's point.

There is a situation in the Old Testament that is similar to the one that Paul faced in this letter to the Romans.

One day God sent the prophet Nathan to speak to King David. David was a man whose life was generally lived with great integrity but there was a time when David failed. David had stolen another man's wife and then had had that man killed through an act of criminal negligence. Nathan was sent by God to arouse David's conscience and bring him to repentance. Nathan did it by telling David a story...

"There were two men in a certain city, the one rich and the other poor. The rich man had very many flocks and herds, but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. And he brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children. It used to eat of his morsel and drink from his cup and lie in his arms, and it was like a daughter to him. Now there came a traveler to the rich man, and he was unwilling to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the guest who had come to him, but he took the poor man's lamb and prepared it for



the man who had come to him.” Then David’s anger was greatly kindled against the man, and he said to Nathan, “As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die, and he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity.” 2 Samuel 12:1-6

And then Nathan brought home his story...

“Nathan said to David, ‘You are the man!’” 2 Samuel 12:7

What Paul is doing here in chapter 2 of his letter to the believers in Rome is saying to this fine group of religious people: “You are the man! Don’t point fingers at anyone else! You have no excuse!”

Jesus had to deal with people who thought like this. In Luke chapter 18 we read...

“He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: ‘Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.’” Luke 18:9-11

This type of judgmental attitude has come to be called by the name of the religious group this man belonged to: *Pharisaism*. Unfortunately, it has come to be a favourite method of dealing with sin among religious people.

A few years ago the comedian, Dana Carvey, made his character, "Church Lady," a regular hit on the Saturday Night Live comedy show. "Church lady's" main shtick was to waggle her self-righteous finger at someone and make judgmental comments about the person. The sad truth of his caricature was that it was prompted by his own real-life experience. Not a frequent church-goer, Carvey attended worship at his parents church one day and a woman, sitting just in front of him, turned to another and said, in a church voice just loud enough to be heard by her intended target: "Apparently some of us only come to church when it's convenient!"

And if I might add a personal note – regular church attendees find this an easy practice to fall into! “So-and-so hasn’t been out to church for a while -- sure glad I’m here every week! So-and-so doesn’t seem to be serving like they ought to be -- sure glad there are some of us who are holding down the fort! So-and-so doesn’t seem to be sharing their faith as boldly as they should -- sure glad the gospel is being preached from this pulpit regularly!”

In our twisted, sinful minds, perhaps we think that God will be more interested in bringing judgment against them and might just overlook us in the process! Maybe



by finding someone a little lower on the ladder of righteousness than we are, we somehow comfort ourselves with the hope that we're not so far from the top as we might have thought. We falsely think that because we're perhaps not as bad as so-and-so, we're good enough.

But unless this Pharisaical attitude of projection is destroyed, the saving gospel of Jesus Christ will never enter into our lives. Paul bursts the balloon of Pharisaism with a very penetrating question:

“Do you suppose, O man—you who judge those who do such things and yet do them yourself—that you will escape the judgment of God?” Romans 2:3

I love the story I read years ago about two men who came to church one day and kneeled side by side to receive communion at the rail of their church.

- One man, a judge of the high court; the other, a former criminal, now a saved and transformed man.
- The judge's friend, on the way out of church, asked the judge if he noticed the former criminal at this side. Yes, the judge had. “What a trophy of God's grace,” the friend said, meaning the converted criminal.
- “Yes,” the judge said, “a trophy of God's grace, but I'm not thinking of that former criminal, but of myself.” The former criminal had been told by society that he was a “sinner” – his conviction was clear. For him to see his need of forgiveness was not as great a journey as mine. I was raised as a church-going person; I'm considered a pillar of the community. For me to see my need for forgiveness required a monumental outpouring of God's grace – “I am the real trophy of grace.”

You see, it isn't whether or not we are good enough to receive God's grace and mercy. The real question is: “Are we bad enough?” Do we realize that we are sinners who need God's mercy – forget comparing ourselves with anyone else!

Like the old song says:

*“It's not my mother, not my brother, but it's me, O Lord,
Standing in the need of prayer.”*

There's a **second strategy** we often use to avoid dealing with our spiritual situation...

We minimize the seriousness of our failure

“Nobody's perfect. It's no big deal.”

Paul challenges his audience with a question...



“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?” Romans 2:4

We minimize the significance of our sin when we assume that God will forgive us. We somehow convince ourselves that God is “soft on sin” because for year’s we’ve gotten away with it!

Many years the ago the philosopher Voltaire said: “God will forgive, that’s his ‘business.’” He wasn’t being magnifying the greatness of God’s mercy; he was minimizing the seriousness of sin. In his mind, God was obligated to forgive – so go ahead and sin.

But Paul challenges us to realize that the kindness of God is meant to call us to repentance, not lull us into complacency. The rain that God sends upon the just and the unjust is NOT intended to indicate God’s approval of the behaviour of the unjust person. He intends that His kindness will lead us to repent and to respond to His love for us demonstrated in the death of Christ.

As long as we minimize the seriousness of our situation we’re going to fail to reach out for God’s mercy. Our “hard and impenitent heart” will keep us from receiving the only thing that can preserve us on the day when God’s wrath against sin is poured out – God’s mercy to those who confess their sin and their need of his forgiveness.

The Apostle Peter challenged people who had developed a complacent attitude regarding God’s attitude toward sin. In his day, people challenged Peter with the cynical claim that the good and the bad in life had gone on for years but where was God’s judgment against sin? Peter wrote...

“But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. 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. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed.”

2 Peter 3:8-10

Although God’s judgment against sin is delayed, it is certain. The reason God does not continually throw lightning bolts of judgment out of the heavens on sinful mankind is that it is His purpose that His kindness will lead us to repentance.



The **third strategy** for avoiding spiritual responsibility is found in verses 5 to 11.

Paul's contemporaries tried to protect themselves from God's judgment by doing something we frequently do.

We falsify our record

"I'm a good person."

Paul tells his readers...

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

If all you knew about what Paul thinks about the subject of being right with God was what you found here, you might think that Paul believed that good people go to heaven and that bad people go to hell. After all, he says...

"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 and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury." Romans 2:

It almost sounds as if Paul is saying: "if you do well you'll go to heaven; if you do badly, you'll go to hell."

Now don't get the idea that Paul has suddenly lost the train of his thought and is teaching that we can be saved by our good works. In chapter 1 verse 17 he makes it clear that righteousness is from God by faith, not by good works...

"the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, 'The righteous shall live by faith.'" Romans 1:17

The point that Paul is making here in chapter 2 is that God's standard of judgement is the same for all people. Whether we come from a religious or a non-religious background, God's judgment of our lives will be the same. Those who do good will receive eternal life; those who do evil will receive wrath. God's standard to measure us is the same; there are no excuses, no double standards. Either we are righteous and receive life; or we are wicked and receive death. Simple. God shows no favoritism; his judgment is consistent.

The question we have ask ourselves is this: **Am I good enough?** You might be tempted to answer: Yes. But that would be a mistake. Remember: Paul's word to us is that when we look at the record of humanity's sin...



“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.” Romans 2:1

The “very same things” = the very same kind of things:

- You might not be a murderer (1:29) but have you ever envied someone?
- You might not live in sexual immorality, but have you “gossiped” (1:29) about someone’s failure?

Without question, Paul’s message is that if you think your doing pretty well, you’re not! Your life and mine will be subjected to the very same judgment of God. He will put us up against his standard of perfect goodness and find out if we measure up.

As we follow Paul’s argument about our situation through into the next chapter he makes his point very clear...

“None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.” Romans 3:10-12

A father was approached by his son. “Dad,” the boy said, “I’m going to a friend’s house to watch movies. Dad, I know you don’t want me to watch movies that are immoral or vulgar, but this movie only has a little bit of wrong stuff in it. Can I go?”

His dad didn’t give him an answer but said he’d be back in a few minutes. He came back holding a pizza in his hands. He said, “Son you can go to your friend’s house but first I want you to eat this pizza. It’s made of the best ingredients: pepperoni, mozzarella cheese, green peppers, tomato sauce and just a little bit of manure – but just a little bit! You’ll hardly notice it.” The boy got the point.

How much sin renders our lives not good? God’s standard of good is good – completely, totally, without any taint of any kind. Do you match that standard of good?

The **fourth strategy** for avoiding spiritual responsibility is found in verses 12 to 16.

We claim ignorance of God’s standard

“But I didn’t know! How can God hold me to account?”



“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.” Romans 2:12

“How can God possibly judge me if I don’t know the rules? It’s not fair! God is certainly fair, isn’t He?”

The argument for the ignorance defence seems to run something like this:

- God is fair.
- It’s not fair to judge someone on the basis of something they’ve never heard.
- God’s standard of judgment has to make allowances for people who have never heard so that God will be fair.

Paul dismantles this defence.

God’s judgment is based on what we know, not on what we don’t know. He doesn’t judge the man in the deepest jungle because he hasn’t put his faith in a Jesus of whom he’s never heard. God judges those people on the basis of their conformity to “the work of the law ... written on their hearts” and declared to them by their conscience. (2:15)

God is fair, and in His fairness He has given to all people a conscience that jabs and pokes at us until we kill it!

One writer has said that the conscience is like a sharp square peg in our hearts. If we are confronted by a questionable situation, that square peg begins to turn, and its corners cut into our heart, warning us with an inward sensation against doing whatever it is that confronts us. If the conscience is ignored time after time, the corners of the square are gradually worn down, and it virtually becomes a circle. When that circle turns within our hearts, there is no inner sensation of warning, and we are left without a conscience.

A mother was helping her son with his spelling home work and she asked him if he knew the difference between “conscious” and “conscience.” “Sure, Mom,” he replied. “‘Conscious’ is when you are aware of something and ‘conscience’ is when you wish you weren’t.”

Paul won’t let the defence of ignorance stand. There is coming a day when the secrets of the hearts of all mankind will be laid bare. On that, the defence of ignorance will not be enough to save us from the judgment of God. God, who sees every twist of the peg in our hearts, will have plenty of evidence with which to convict us.



Comparing ourselves favourably with others won't deflect God's attention away from us on that day.

Minimizing the seriousness of our failure won't shield us from the day of God's wrath against sin.

Falsifying our record won't protect us from the searching light of God's judgment.

Claiming ignorance of God's requirements won't save us from responsibility for our sin.

There is only one defence that will stand on "that day when ... God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus." (2:16) That's the defence of the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ received by faith in Him.

In order to receive that gift of Christ's righteousness we need to come to the end of our excuses, our rationalizations, our minimizing, our falsifying. We need to realize that we are in danger and that we have no hope in ourselves.

In that great old hymn, Amazing Grace, there is a wonderful line and I wonder if you've noticed it. John Newton wrote...

**'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear
And grace my fears relieved.
How precious did that grace appear
The hour I first believed.**

"'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear..." What did Newton mean? He meant it was God's grace that opened his eyes to the desperateness of his situation. No more hiding. No more denying. No more minimizing and falsifying. No more excuses!

And the same grace that opened his eyes to the immensity of his sin also opened his eyes to the greatness of God's mercy. "And grace my fears relieved."

Does God's grace appear precious to you?
Have you believed?
Let me invite you to do that today.

- **Invitation to Prayer**
- **Final Song:** Amazing Grace
- **Benediction**