THE TRAP

Ethnic, racial, or religious superiority is a serious spiritual danger. It’s dangerous because it involves self-deception. It manipulates our perception of reality so that we can see acutely the errors of others, while simultaneously we become blind to our own faults. Then we come to believe that we don’t need God’s mercy and that others don’t deserve His mercy. Paul found that many Israelites and moralizing Gentiles had fallen into this fatal deception. He sought to overcome the deception with a brilliant rhetorical trap.

His trap involved talking about the wrath-generating, gross immorality of the Greeks (Romans 1:18–32). A Jewish and moralizing Greek audience would have been cheering him on with a chorus of hearty amens. At exactly the moment when Paul knew he had his audience on his side, he said, “Therefore you are inexcusable, O man, whoever you are who judge, for in whatever you judge another you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things” (Romans 2:1). Ouch! That hurts.

Paul knew the reality of human nature. He knew that hearing God’s law isn’t the same as fulfilling it and knowing what is right is different than doing right (Romans 2:13). He knew that God’s judgment isn’t based on our profession (Romans 2:2), and the truth is that all of us, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin (Romans 3:9).

Paul’s point in Romans 2:1–3:20 is that sin is a universal problem, and no group can hide from sin by claims of ethnic, racial, or religious superiority.
Write out Romans 2:12–29 from the translation of your choice. If you are pressed for time, write out Romans 2:12–16. You may also rewrite the passage in your own words, or outline or mind-map the chapter.
“BETTER THAN YOU” ISN’T GOOD ENOUGH

All humans feel conflicting thoughts that accuse or excuse their behavior (Romans 2:15). One common way people try to help themselves feel better when they experience accusing thoughts of guilt and shame is judging others. We judge to elevate ourselves so that we don’t have to deal with the uncomfortable reality of our moral weakness and failure. We convince ourselves that as long as we are better than our neighbor, then we are good enough. It is as if we are saying, “Surely God wouldn’t condemn me; I’m not like those horrible people over there.”

This self-elevating moral hierarchy is seen in every facet of society. The rapist consoles himself that he isn’t a child abuser. The child abuser consoles himself that he isn’t a racist. The alcoholic gloats that she isn’t a heroin addict. The dishonest CEO condemns the shoplifter. The shoplifter justifies herself by denouncing the corrupt CEO. And it goes on and on. Every person, away from genuine repentance and faith in Christ, uses this type of moral calculus to elevate their moral standing above others, to reduce their feelings of guilt and shame.

When religious people do this, it is particularly harmful. By using their supposed devotion to God as cover for their sin, they cause God’s name to be blasphemed and demonstrate that instead of being teachers, they still need to learn the basics of true religion (Romans 2:18–21, 24). Unfortunately, this was exactly the condition of many of the Jews Paul addressed in the book of Romans.

The book of Romans lays out a different vision for dealing with guilt and shame. In next week’s lesson, we will see that instead of allowing us to hide from our sin by condemning others, Paul points us to Jesus’ death as God’s way of condemning sin and releasing sinners from guilt and shame. Since we are all sinners, and we can all be saved by faith in Christ, we don’t have to condemn one another to make us feel better. Paul also reminds us that, instead of our external devotion to God and inward corruption, God has a better way. He desires to write His law on our heart (Romans 2:15) and that we fulfill the law by serving Him from the heart through the Holy Spirit (Romans 2:27–29). For Paul, the power of the Holy Spirit is the antidote for religious hypocrisy.
DIRECTION DETERMINES DESTINY

Both Christians and non-Christians are often confused by the biblical teaching about the relationship between salvation by faith and judgment according to works. People struggle to understand the plan of salvation when they learn that God saves those who put their faith in Jesus apart from what they’ve done and that God expects them to keep His commandments. They wonder, how can both be true? And if they are both true, how can these ideas be integrated into a coherent understanding?

They can both be true. Paul teaches that justification and salvation are by faith apart from works (Romans 3:20–22; 4:1–4; Ephesians 2:8). He also teaches that the judgment is according to works (Romans 2:6) and that the doers of the law are the ones who will be justified (Romans 2:13). Passionately, Paul teaches that salvation is by faith in Jesus apart from works and that there is a judgment according to works.

How can these ideas, which appear mutually exclusive, be harmonized? The solution can be found in a single word—direction. The judgment evaluates the direction of one’s life. In the judgment, God doesn’t weigh the good and the bad, and if the good outweighs the bad then you are saved, and if the bad outweighs the good then you are lost. Likewise, God isn’t looking to exclude you over the occasional misdeed and won’t include you because of the occasional good deed. The general direction determines the outcome in the judgment.

Paul lays out the two possible directions for a life. The goodness of God can lead to repentance, and hardness of heart can keep us from repentance (Romans 2:4, 5). Jesus’ death for our sins is the ultimate revelation of the love and goodness of God (Romans 5:6–8). When we believe the love and goodness of God revealed in the death of Christ, it leads to repentance. Repentance is making a U-turn from self-seeking and hardness of heart to God-seeking and tenderhearted trust in God. When we come to believe in the goodness of God revealed in Christ, we change direction.

In the judgment, God doesn’t look to see if we’ve made it far enough down the path of moral development to earn our place in heaven. He doesn’t look at how far down the wrong way we’ve gone. He looks to see if we’ve changed direction. Faith in Jesus alone changes the direction we are going. Our works won’t save us in the judgment, but they will undoubtedly give evidence that through Christ, we’ve made a U-turn and changed direction (Romans 5:4–11).
What relationship do the following verses have with the primary passage?

Proverbs 24:12
Ecclesiastes 12:6, 7, 13, 14
Jeremiah 31:31–34
Ezekiel 36:25–29
1 Corinthians 5:9–13

What other verses/promises come to mind in connection with judging others?

JUDGE RIGHTEOUS JUDGMENTS

Jesus’ teachings about religious hypocrisy and self-righteous judgments are very similar to Paul’s. Jesus warned us not to judge so that we wouldn’t be judged (Matthew 7:1). In His life and teachings, Jesus consistently modeled grace-filled life that was free from self-righteous condemnatory judgments. By becoming a human, Jesus was uniquely qualified to be our judge (John 5:27). By becoming a human, Jesus was prepared to sympathize with our weakness (Hebrews 4:15). As our sympathetic judge, His purpose in coming wasn’t to bring a judgment of condemnation; He came to save (John 3:17).

Jesus regularly confronted those who were engaging in self-righteous judgments. One time the scribes and Pharisees brought before Jesus a woman who was caught in the act of adultery (John 8:4). They wanted to stone her (John 8:5). Since the woman was caught in the act, justice would have required that both partners be brought for punishment, not just the woman (Leviticus 20:10). The fact that they only brought the woman demonstrates that the scribes and Pharisees were not genuinely interested in pursuing justice or faithfulness to Moses’ law. They were pursuing their own agenda to discredit Jesus (John 8:6). Jesus’ success in ministry was undermining their role as the religious leaders (John 12:19). They were willing to use a judgment of condemnation to kill a woman to protect their position in society. This perfectly illustrates how humans use the judgment of others to elevate themselves.

Jesus quietly stooped down and wrote in the sand as if He couldn’t hear their accusations (John 8:6). Then He rose and said, “He who is without sin among you, let him throw a stone at her first” (John 8:7). At these words, the religious leaders scattered like cockroaches when the lights turn on. Jesus didn’t hurl abusive condemnation at them as they had done to the woman. He quietly addressed their sin in a way that brought conviction without humiliation. And to the woman, in place of condemnation Jesus offered her the promise of no condemnation and the opportunity to change direction and pursue a new life not defined by her sin (John 8:11).

Jesus’ well-known warnings against judgment shouldn’t be understood as a denunciation of all evaluative judgments. Rather, Jesus cautions against self-righteous, self-elevating, censorious judgments of condemnation (Luke 6:37). Instead of judgments based on superficial appearances, Jesus encouraged His followers to embrace righteous judgments that accurately evaluate the evidence (John 7:24). It is right to acknowledge the hypocrisy of the religious leaders (Matthew 6:2, 5, 16; 23:1–39). Jesus encourages claims of religious superiority to be evaluated by the fruit displayed in the life (Matthew 7:15–20). Jesus does not condemn these evaluations as He does the self-righteous, condemnatory judgments of the religious leaders.

Meditate on Romans 2 again and look for where Jesus is.

What is He saying to you through the texts of the week?

How do you see Jesus differently or see Him again?

In what circumstances is it appropriate to evaluate the behavior of others?
HAVE I MADE A U-TURN?

“A person may not be able to tell the exact time or place, or trace all
the chain of circumstances in the process of conversion; but this does
not prove him to be unconverted. Christ said to Nicodemus, ‘The wind
bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst
not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is everyone that is
born of the Spirit.’ John 3:8. Like the wind, which is invisible, yet the
effects of which are plainly seen and felt, is the Spirit of God in its work
upon the human heart. That regenerating power, which no human
eye can see, begets a new life in the soul; it creates a new being in the
image of God. While the work of the Spirit is silent and imperceptible,
its effects are manifest. If the heart has been renewed by the Spirit of
God, the life will bear witness to the fact. While we cannot do anything
to change our hearts or to bring ourselves into harmony with God;
while we must not trust at all to ourselves or our good works, our lives
will reveal whether the grace of God is dwelling within us. A change
will be seen in the character, the habits, the pursuits. The contrast will
be clear and decided between what they have been and what they are.
The character is revealed, not by occasional good deeds and occasional
misdeeds, but by the tendency of the habitual words and acts.

“It is true that there may be an outward correctness of deportment
without the renewing power of Christ. The love of influence and the
desire for the esteem of others may produce a well-ordered life. Self-re-
spect may lead us to avoid the appearance of evil. A selfish heart may
perform generous actions. By what means, then, shall we determine
whose side we are on?

“Who has the heart? With whom are our thoughts? Of whom do we
love to converse? Who has our warmest affections and our best ener-
gies? If we are Christ’s, our thoughts are with Him, and our sweetest
thoughts are of Him. All we have and are is consecrated to Him. We
long to bear His image, breathe His spirit, do His will, and please Him in
all things.

“Those who become new creatures in Christ Jesus will bring forth
the fruits of the Spirit, ‘love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness,
goodness, faith, meekness, temperance.’ Galatians 5:22, 23. They will
no longer fashion themselves according to the former lusts, but by the
faith of the Son of God they will follow in His steps, reflect His charac-
ter, and purify themselves even as He is pure.

Ellen G. White, Steps to Christ, 57–58.
Share insights from this week’s memory verse and Bible study as well as any discoveries, observations, and questions with your Sabbath School class (or Bible study group). Consider these discussion questions with the rest of the group.

How does the good news of Jesus’ death and resurrection keep us from needing to judge others?

Describe a time when you contemplated the goodness of God and were led to repentance.

How have you been the victim of unjust judgment?

How can we work together to create churches that pursue faithfulness to God without becoming judgmental?

When have you experienced grace instead of a judgment of condemnation in your local congregation?

When have you had a positive experience of a friend evaluating your discipleship to help rather than condemn?

Since the judgment evaluates the direction of the life, which direction are you going?