

## MISUNDERSTANDING GOD'S MERCY ROMANS 2:4

### INTRODUCTION

Last Sunday we encountered an **abrupt change in Paul's argument**, specifically a **change in who he was focussing on** as he described God's punishment of sin.

In **chapter one**, Paul described **the wrath of God poured out** on the **predominantly pagan, Gentile sins** of sexual immorality, homosexuality, and depraved thinking that produces all manner of self-centred societal sins.

Knowing, though, that there were **many religious people**, especially Jews, who would enthusiastically support his argument against the pagans by joining in their condemnation while hypocritically overlooking their own sin,  
**Paul set something of a trap.**

In **chapter two**, **the trap sprung**, catching its **unsuspecting targets with an abrupt change** in focus that they never saw coming.

In that way, **Paul had learnt from the best** how to **confront self-righteous, hypocritical religious people** who use their knowledge of God's righteous standard to judge others while simultaneously excusing themselves.

**Nathan the prophet** is perhaps the first one of God's prophets to use this technique to trap his self-righteous target with his own words of condemnation for others.

**Turn to 2 Samuel 12** where we see **Nathan confronting King David** for his sin of adultery with Bathsheba and his sin of orchestrating the murder of her husband and his friend, Uriah.

Nathan tells a **heartbreaking story** in the **first 4 verses** of a wealthy man with many flocks and herds who nevertheless stole the beloved lamb of a nearby poor man who loved the animal like one of his own children.

In his selfishness, he chose to steal the poor man's lamb to feed to his guests instead of sacrificing one of the many that he owned.

**As Nathan intended, verse 5** records that **David's anger burned greatly** as he demanded that justice be done by offering restitution to the poor man and sentencing the rich man to death.

**Just as expected, Nathan's trap sprung** as he turned David's own words of condemnation against him as he said in **verse 7**, **"You are the man!"**

**What Nathan invented, the prophet Amos perfected.**

**Turn to** the **book of Amos** [Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Joel, **Amos**, Obadiah, Jonah].

Look at **chapter 1**, beginning in **verse 3** as the prophet **pronounces God's judgement** upon Israel's enemies—

**3 Thus says Yahweh, "For three transgressions of Damascus and for four I will not turn back its punishment Because they threshed Gilead with implements of sharp iron.**

**4 So I will send fire upon the house of Hazeel, And it will consume the citadels of Ben-hadad.**

**5 I will also break the gate bar of Damascus And cut off the inhabitant from the valley of Aven And him who holds the scepter from Beth-eden; So the people of Aram will go into exile to Kir," Says Yahweh.**

We see the **same pattern** again in **verses 6–8**—

**6 Thus says Yahweh, "For three transgressions of Gaza and for four I will not turn back its punishment Because they took away into exile the whole community of exiles To deliver it up to Edom.**

**7 So I will send fire upon the wall of Gaza, And it will consume her citadels.**

**8 I will also cut off the inhabitant from Ashdod And him who holds the scepter from Ashkelon; I will even turn My hand against Ekron, And the remnant of the Philistines will perish," Says Lord Yahweh.**

**Israel is loving this** as they hear the pattern continue with God's judgement of **Tyre and Edom, Ammon and Moab.**

Just then, **the trap springs** as Amos **catches the self-righteous, hypocritical, religious Jews** in their own jeering condemnation of the pagans.

Look at **chapter two and verses 4–6**—

**4 Thus says Yahweh, “For three transgressions of Judah and for four I will not turn back its punishment Because they rejected the law of Yahweh And have not kept His statutes; Their falsehood also has led them astray, That which their fathers walked after.**

**5 So I will send fire upon Judah, And it will consume the citadels of Jerusalem.”**

**6 Thus says Yahweh, “For three transgressions of Israel and for four I will not turn back its punishment Because they sell the righteous for money And the needy for a pair of sandals.**

**That is exactly the technique** that Paul uses against those who were **cheering him on** as he wrote about God’s judgement of the idolatrous and sexually immorally pagans.

In **chapter 2, verse 1** **the trap springs.**

As we learnt last week, Paul’s **immediate concern** is **self-righteous religious people** among both the Jews and the Gentiles.

While he **does not restrict his focus to the Jews exclusively**, at least not until later in the chapter, the Jews of Paul’s day are nevertheless **the clearest illustration** of this self-righteous hypocrisy that Paul is confronting and correcting.

Here at the **start of chapter two**, Paul wants his readers to understand that being a **“good person,”** or even a **religious person**, **does not exempt you from the judgement of God.**

Paul is **still making a larger argument** that **both Jews and Gentiles need the gospel** and the saving power of God which provides a righteousness by faith in Christ alone.

It's easy to see why **the pagan Gentiles** need God to save them from His judgement, but **many of the Jews in Paul's day** believed that even if they weren't perfect, they were **at least "good enough"** to escape the judgement of God.

That's the same problem that we face today as religious people of all kinds **see themselves maybe not as perfect**, but **at least as "good enough"** that they are anticipating God's favour not His fury in wrath.

For the Jews of Paul's day, they were relying on their **corporate election**—basically, since they were **descendants of Abraham** and they made **at least some efforts to obey** God's Law, they thought they were secure from God's judgement.

As we learnt from our study of **verses 1–3**, religious people falsely set their hopes on **God's favouritism and His leniency**.

There is a **remarkable similarity** in the way **religious people think today**, especially those who profess to be Christians.

As you remember, **Paul wasn't arguing against the Jewish Christians in the church of Rome**, but rather he was confronting religious people such as the Jews who **refused to believe in Jesus Christ**.

As **Tom Schreiner** notes, Paul was writing, “*both against Jews who believe that God will be lenient despite their disobedience and against Jews who believe that their obedience is sufficient to obtain righteousness.*”<sup>1</sup>

Simply put, these self-righteous people believed that since they **worshipped the right God, practiced the right religion, and tried at least to live the right way, they did not need God’s righteousness.**

They were **“good enough,”** which is exactly what many of the religious people today believe, especially if they are **professing Christians.**

Many today believe that since **they worship the right God, practice the right religion, and try at least to live the right way, they do not need God’s righteousness**—they are “good enough.”

In fact, if we consider this thinking for a moment we can **recognise at least six ways** in which we believe that we are **“good enough.”**

**First,** you convince yourself that **you are God’s favourite.**

**Ok, maybe not His absolute favourite** like Paul or the other apostles, but you are certainly **one of His favourites.**

Perhaps God **likes you more than others** because you come from the **right family.**

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, ed. Robert W. Yarbrough and Joshua W. Jipp, Second Edition, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic: A Division of Baker Publishing Group, 2018), 111.

Your parents are Christians and your grandparents are Christians, so you should get something of a **“legacy invitation”** to join God’s list of favourite people.

If it’s not the right family, maybe you’re banking on being from the **right ethnic group**.

That’s what the Jews did, but it’s also what many of us believe with the idea that **God has cut a covenant with our forefathers** too.

That is precisely what many **Afrikaner people** are setting their hopes upon—the covenant that they made with God on the **Day of the Vow following the Battle of Blood River**.<sup>2</sup>

The **first reason** people think they’re “good enough” is because they are **convinced they’re God’s favourite**.

**Second, you’re better than others.**

Just like those Paul was confronting in his day, many people today pin their hopes on a **relative righteousness**.

**You’re not perfect**—you cheat on your taxes, you lie to your spouse, you gossip about your friends, and you have an undeniable anger problem—**but at least you’re not as bad as those other people.**

You don’t look at porn or practice homosexuality, and you’re certainly not a pagan like those Muslims or Hindus or even those arrogant atheists.

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<sup>2</sup> December 16, 1838.

That's why many people, especially as professing Christians, think they're **safe from God's judgement**.

The **second reason** people think they're "good enough" is because they are **better than others**.

**Third, you do more good than bad.**

For those who are **hiding darker secrets of sins** they know they can't justify, many settle for the hope that **God's justice works like a balance scale**—if their good can outright their bad, then they should be fine to escape God's judgement.

Perhaps you do indulge in the perversion of pornography, or maybe you are securely attracted to the same sex, or you are abusive to your family at home when no one else can see.

People like this try to atone for their own sins by **counterbalancing their wrongdoing** with good deeds they think will earn God's favour.

You are generous with your time and your money, volunteering to serve at various charities and sponsoring every heartbreaking cause you see on social media, and hopefully you can **do enough to outweigh all that you've done wrong**.

The **third reason** people think they're "good enough" is because they **do more good than bad**.

**Fourth**, you believe that **God will let you off the hook.**

Some have convinced themselves that **God doesn't care THAT MUCH** about righteousness and obedience, so even though you know the Bible is full of commands, you also believe that God has the **same kind of heart as your grandpa or grandma.**

He talks tough, but at the end of the day you're never going to get into any real kind of trouble with Him—God is just a big old “softy.”

The **fourth reason** people think they're “good enough” is because they believe that **God will let them off the hook.**

**Fifth**, you think **you'll just get a slap on the wrist.**

For others who know that God will want some kind of reckoning, some kind of justice, they hold onto the hope that **God's sentence will be lenient** and the most they'll get is some kind of divine “slap on the wrist.”

You'll say you're sorry and you'll promise not to do it again, and after the initial sting of the slap wears off you'll celebrate **getting off easy.**

The **fifth reason** people think they're “good enough” is because they believe that **God will just give them a slap on the wrist.**

**Sixth**, you suspect that **you just need to wait for God's anger to pass.**

For those who know in their heart of hearts that **God really does hate sin and really does care about righteousness**, they are betting on the idea that however anger God may get, it will only be temporary.

You just need to weather the storm and wait for His anger to **“blow over.”**

Whatever that judgment may look like, you'll get through it and move on to enjoying God's favour in heaven in no time.

The **sixth reason** people think they're “good enough” is because they believe **they just need to wait for God's anger will pass.**

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**Now to be clear**, none of these **six reasons** for believing you're “good enough” to escape God's judgement **are legitimate.**

They are certainly **not biblical ideas** and they do not represent the thinking of true Christians.

However, for those who are **making false professions of following Christ**, these are six ways in which they've convinced themselves **they worship the right God, practice the right religion, and try at least to live the right way** so that they **do not need God's righteousness**—their righteous is good enough.

## They're safe from the judgement of God.

As Paul continues in his **diatribe**—his argument with a hypothetical debate partner—he wants to address the **wrong thinking of religious people** who don't recognise their need for the good news of the righteousness that God gives to those who place their **faith in Jesus Christ instead of themselves**.

In **the first three verses of chapter two**, Paul has already addressed the way in which religious people **misunderstand the JUSTICE of God**.

Now in **verse 4**, Paul argues that religious people also **misunderstand the MERCY of God**.

### PROPOSITION

With that in mind, let's turn our attention now to the details of **Romans 2:4**.

Here Paul explains **three ways in which people misjudge the mercy of God**:

1. Misjudging the **abundance** of God's mercy
2. Misjudging the **experiences** of God's mercy
3. Misjudging the **purpose** of God's mercy

## 1. MISJUDGING THE ABUNDANCE OF GOD'S MERCY

Look at **verse 4** as we pick up Paul's argument with his **hypothetical opponent**—

**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?**

Here Paul is **still trying to convince** those who are **self-righteous, especially the unbelieving Jews**, that they need the righteousness of God, not their own.

Since his **first rhetorical question** in **verse 3** was perhaps **insufficient to convince his skeptical opponent**, Paul decides to approach the issue from a **slightly different angle**.<sup>3</sup>

He is again working to **expose the false assumptions** of **religious people who reject the gospel**.

Though the hypothetical person Paul is opposing is an **unbelieving Jew**, he is using this scripted debate to teach the **BELIEVING Jews and Gentiles** in the church of Rome.

As he frames his **second rhetorical question**, he charges his unbelieving religious opponent with **"thinking lightly"** of God's mercy.

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Frank Thielman, *Romans*, ed. Clinton E. Arnold, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018), 127.

At this point, we need to **pause** to **clarify two matters.**

**First**, Paul is making a **serious allegation** with the words, “**do you think lightly...?**”

The Greek word behind this translation means **to look down** on someone or something with **contempt**, with the implication that one **considers the object of little value.**

So it means *to look down on, despise, scorn, or treat with contempt.*<sup>4</sup>

It's the same word that we find in **Matthew 6:24** when Jesus says, “**No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise (καταφρονέω) the other.**”

We could certainly argue that **religious people show contempt for God** and His righteous character so that they **actually despise Him**, regardless of what they might otherwise say.

However, **here Paul is arguing** that religious people, especially unbelieving Jews, **show contempt for God's mercy** specifically.<sup>5</sup>

To put that differently, Paul is confronting those who **think about God's mercy** as **something of little value.**

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<sup>4</sup> BDAG., καταφρονέω.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, ed. Ned B. Stonehouse et al., Second Edition, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2018), 143.

They **show contempt for it** because they **misjudge it as not worth much**.

**Second**, Paul is **piling up descriptions** here in **verse 4** to give a **comprehensive picture of the goodness of God**, and specifically His mercy.

**The key term** that explains the others is the **first** we find in **verse 4**—the “**kindness**” of God.

The Greek word here refers to *the quality of being helpful or beneficial, to goodness, kindness, or generosity*.<sup>6</sup>

**The goodness of God**, to which this word refers most broadly, is the **attribute or perfection of God** that describes His benevolence (kindness) and **includes His grace and mercy**.<sup>7</sup>

As we **consider mercy specifically**, it is God’s goodness towards those who bear the consequences of their sin and as such are in a **pitiable condition in need of God’s help**.<sup>8</sup>

In other words, **mercy is the goodness of God** as He **acts with compassion on sinners** to relieve the misery that sin causes.

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<sup>6</sup> BDAG., χρηστότης.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Alan Cairns, *Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Belfast; Greenville, SC: Ambassador Emerald International, 2002), “Goodness,” 198.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Tim Shenton, *Our Perfect God: A Summary of the Attributes of God* (Leominster, UK: Day One Publications, 2005), 48–49.

While **'goodness'** is the **broader term**, the context in which Paul also refers to God's forbearance and patience towards sin clarifies that he is specifically referring to the **narrower aspect** of God's **'mercy'**.<sup>9</sup>

In **Psalm 119:68**, we find that the Psalmist refers to **God's goodness** as **both His attribute and His acts**, when the author declares, **"You are good and do good."**

Following that distinction then, Paul is focussing not so much on the goodness of God **as an attribute or perfection**, but on His goodness **in His acts of mercy and kindness** towards sinners.<sup>10</sup>

That is, he is not thinking of "goodness" as having to do **primarily with what God is in Himself**, but as having to do **with God's actions toward us**.<sup>11</sup>

So then, there are **two important clarifications** that we need to keep in mind:

**First**, Paul is speaking to those who **"think lightly"** of God's mercy by **misjudging it** or treating it with contempt.

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<sup>9</sup> "Goodness extends to more objects than mercy, goodness stretcheth itself out to all the works of his hands; mercy extends only to a miserable object, for it is joined with a sentiment of pity, occasioned by the calamity of another. The mercy of God is exercised about those that merit punishment, the goodness of God is exercised upon objects that have not merited anything contrary to the acts of his bounty." Stephen Charnock, *The Complete Works of Stephen Charnock*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh; London; Dublin; James Nichol; James Nisbet and Co.; W. Robertson; G. Herbert, 1864–1866), 283.

<sup>10</sup> Konrad Weiss, "Χρηστός, Χρηστότης, Χρηστεύομαι, Χρηστολογία," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964–), 490–491.

Cf. Robert H. Mounce, *Romans*, vol. 27, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995), 89, fn. 66.

<sup>11</sup> James Montgomery Boice, *Romans: Justification by Faith*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1991–), 210.

**Second**, the “**kindness**” of God that he has in mind is not so much the **attribute of God’s goodness** as the **acts of God’s goodness**—that is, the acts of His mercy towards sinners.

In short, **unbelieving religious people misjudge God’s mercy**.

Paul gets into more specifics, though, as he refers to **the first way** in which we misjudge God’s mercy by **misjudging the abundance of God’s mercy**.

That point is found simply in the **description Paul gives**, asking whether his opponent thinks lightly of the “**riches**”—as you see in **verse 4**—of God’s mercy.

Paul is here describing the **plentiful supply of something**, which is specifically the **wealth or abundance** of God’s goodness and mercy.

Once again, we can see Paul’s point that we **misjudge the abundance of God’s mercy** when we **reject it in self-righteous unbelief**.<sup>12</sup>

Scripture declares that **God is not miserly or begrudging** in His goodness and mercy, but rather He is **abundant in His generosity**.

God is **lavish in pouring out the riches** of His goodness.

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<sup>12</sup> BDAG, πλοῦτος.

**Psalm 86:5**—For You, Lord, are good, and by nature forgiving, and abundant in lovingkindness to all who call upon You.

**Ephesians 2:4**—But God, being rich in mercy because of His great love with which He loved us...

As these verses indicate, though, **God's chosen people** enjoy the **specific goodness and mercy of salvation** and all its benefits.

**That does not mean**, however, that unbelievers such as Paul's hypothetical religious opponent **do not experience God's mercy**, or that God is begrudging in how much of His mercy He **demonstrates towards unbelievers**.

**Psalm 145:9** declares that, "**Yahweh is good to all, and His compassions are over all His works.**"

**Theologians** refer to God's goodness to all His creation as His "**common grace**" which distinguishes it from His saving grace.

**Common grace** is the **universal favour of God on all people**, both believers and unbelievers.

It is the goodness of God **demonstrated to all people** and it includes **intellectual** blessings such as scientific and medical discoveries, **artistic** blessings such as music, **social** blessings such as conscience and government to restrain evil, **relational** blessings such as family, and the **physical** blessings such as rain for crops.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. Gregg R. Allison, "Common Grace," in *The Baker Compact Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books: A Division of Baker Publishing Group, 2016), 42.

As Jesus said in **Matthew 5:45**, God “**causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.**”

Paul referred to the same **providential goodness of God** in **Acts 14:17** when he said, God “**did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good and gave you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, filling your hearts with food and gladness.**”

**So the first way** in which we misjudge the goodness, and **specifically the mercy of God**, is by **misjudging the abundance of God’s mercy**.

**The second way** we misjudge God’s mercy has to do with the **daily demonstration of His mercy** in the lives of both believers and unbelievers—a demonstration which **religious people rejection in unbelief**.

## 2. MISJUDGING THE EXPERIENCES OF GOD’S MERCY

Look again at **verse 4** and notice the descriptions that Paul piles up—

**Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and forbearance and patience...?**

As Paul describes the **wealth of God’s goodness** towards **unbelieving sinners in particular**, **the first term** he uses is the “**kindness**” of God.

**We've already considered that term** so that we know Paul uses it to describe not primarily with what God is in Himself, rather to describe **God's actions toward us**.

That is, Paul is **not emphasising** the goodness of God as an attribute or perfection, but is **rather placing the emphasis** on His goodness in His acts of mercy and kindness towards sinners.

In short, this is the mercy of God expressed in His **acts of kindness, even to unbelievers**.

**The second term**, "**forbearance**," clarifies this.

The Greek word means to **hold back or stop hostilities** so that one is patient with another and endures their opposition.<sup>14</sup>

Paul is referring to God **withholding His punishment of sin**.

We should be clear, however, that God's forbearance is **not the same as His forgiveness** because in His forbearance He is only **temporality suspending** His judgement of sin.

Paul will later explain how God's forbearance **does not contradict His justice**, as he writes in **Romans 3:25–26**—

<sup>25</sup> **...God displayed publicly [Christ] as a propitiation in His blood through faith, for a demonstration of His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed;**

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<sup>14</sup> LSJ, ἀνοχή; Louw & Nida, 25.171, ἀνοχή.

**26 for the demonstration of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.**

The **third term** that Paul uses is “**patience**.”

The Greek word refers to the state of **being able to bear up under provocation**.<sup>15</sup>

It can be translated as “**long-suffering**” or having a “long-temper.”

**If there is any distinction** that Paul intends between **the second and third terms**, it would be that forbearance refers to a **delay in executing judgment**, while patience refers to the **particular disposition** which delays it.<sup>16</sup>

However, we **shouldn't try to force a strict distinction** here because it is typical of both Greek and Hebrew style to **pile up generally synonymous terms** to make a point.

So then, God's “**forbearance**” and “**patience**” describe God's goodness and mercy as **He patiently withholds the judgment that the sinner rightfully deserves**.<sup>17</sup>

As Paul understands, however, the **mercy of God that patiently delays His judgement** of sin **can be misjudged** by both believers and unbelievers alike.

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<sup>15</sup> BDAG, μακροθυμία.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. W. E. Vine, *Romans & 1 Corinthians: A Verse-by-Verse Commentary* (Nashville, TN; Bath, England: Kingsley Books, 2022), 41.

<sup>17</sup> Moo, *Romans*, NICNT, 143.

**For unbelievers**, God's delayed punishment of sin is often **misunderstood** to mean that **they will never face His judgement**.

As Solomon states in **Ecclesiastes 8:11**, "**Because the sentence against an evil work is not executed quickly, therefore the hearts of the sons of men among them are given fully to do evil.**"

**For believers**, God's delayed punishment of sin is often **misunderstood** as **injustice** because the righteous suffer while the unrighteous prosper.

Turn to **Psalm 73** as we look briefly at the **words of Asaph** who **struggled to reconcile these experiences** of God's mercy with His justice.

Follow along in the **first 5 verses**—

- 1 **Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart!**
- 2 **But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled, my steps had almost slipped.**
- 3 **For I was envious of the boastful, I saw the peace of the wicked.**
- 4 **For there are no pains in their death, and their body is fat.**
- 5 **They are not in trouble as other men, and they are not stricken along with the rest of mankind.**

He continues on the **same theme** and even says in **verse 12**—  
**Behold, these are the wicked; and always at ease, they have increased in wealth.**

However, Paul is insightfully pointing to a **slightly different way** in which we can **misjudge the daily experiences** of God's merciful delay in punishing sin.

It is true that we often stumble when we **wrongly think that the wicked have escaped** God's justice, especially the pagans of **Romans 1** with their idolatry and sexual immorality.

But Paul knows that we can **equally stumble** when we wrongly think that the **religious have escaped God's justice**.

You see, just as the wicked pagans are **emboldened** by God's delayed justice, so also **unbelieving religious people are emboldened** by the same.

Through the **daily experiences of God's mercy**, the religious **convince themselves** that they are right with God and are enjoying His favour.

As they **misjudge their experiences of God's mercy**, they **convince themselves**,

*"I don't need to repent because I am already right with God, and the most compelling proof I have of that is that I don't experience His present wrath but His present kindness."*

**Unbelieving religious people** believe that **God's mercy vindicates their self-righteousness**.

**To illustrate this**, let me ask you why God sovereignly ordered the circumstances of **Donald Trump's failed assassination** so that he turned his head at the precise moment that would save his life?

Many people, including Trump himself, believe it is because his **professed faith and religious activities** make him right with God.

The **most compelling evidence** for Trump that his self-righteousness is valid is that he has such profound experiences of God's mercy.

That said, the **best illustration** of this misjudgment is still the **unbelieving Jews of Paul's day**.

To see this, **turn with me** to **Matthew 3:7-10**.

Here **John the Baptist** encounters the **most self-righteous** of all the unbelieving Jews, as we read—

**7 But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for his baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?**

**8 Therefore bear fruit in keeping with repentance;**

**9 and do not suppose that you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham for our father’; for I say to you that from these stones God is able to raise up children to Abraham.**

**10 And the axe is already laid at the root of the trees; therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.**

For these religious Jews, being Abraham's descendants and making efforts to observe their religious rituals and laws meant that they **didn't see the need for repentance** in order to receive a **righteousness from God through faith**.

They believed they were **“good enough”** and had been sufficiently obedient to have a **righteousness of their own**.

The most **compelling proof** they had was their **social elevation** and the fact they they were **not enslaved in exile**.

As other self-righteous Jews argued in **John 8:33**,

**“We are Abraham’s seed and have never yet been enslaved to anyone.”**

They then proceeded to tell Jesus He had a demon and tried to kill Him.

That is the **same attitude** that Paul was **confronting and correcting** here in **Romans 2**.

Religious people believe they are **“good enough”** that they don’t need the gospel and **the righteousness that God** provides by faith alone in Christ alone.

Even today, many people **misjudge their experiences of God’s mercy** as **evidence that they are right with God** and will escape His judgment.

Countless people in our culture harden their hearts as they **reject the gospel’s call** to repent and receive God’s righteousness through faith alone because they are **convinced they don’t need it**.

That is especially true of **“cultural Christians”** who do the **external religious activities of Christianity** such as attending church or behaving like a good moral person.

They are convinced that they are right with God because they are **enjoying God's kindness** in the form of **a good job and a nice house and good health and a happy family**.

However, Paul **exposes that as wrong thinking** that will have devastating consequences when God's patience is exhausted.

**So the second way** in which we misjudge the mercy of God is by **misjudging our experiences of God's mercy**.

**The third way** has to do with **misunderstanding the reason** why God is **mercifully patient with unbelievers**.

### 3. MISJUDGING THE PURPOSE OF GOD'S MERCY

As you **look once more** at **verse 4**, you'll see that Paul's rhetorical question points to God's purpose in mercifully delaying His judgement—

**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?**

As Paul **uses the question to confront** and correct his hypothetical opponent and **all the real religious people** who **reject Christ in self-righteous unbelief**, he explains that the reason people "**think lightly**" of God's mercy is that they **don't know its true purpose**.

That is, people **show contempt for God's mercy** because they **misjudge the reason He temporality restrains** His judgement.

**The purpose of God's mercy** is to provide people, both wicked pagans and self-righteous religious people, an **opportunity to repent and receive the righteousness** He provides through faith.

**God's patient restraint** of His punishment of sin is **designed to give people an opportunity** to turn from sin to God in order to be saved from His judgement.

As **FF Bruce** paraphrases **verse 4**, "*Do you not know that God's kindness is intended to give you opportunity to repent?*"<sup>18</sup>

By **mercifully withholding punishment**, God is **trying to lead you to repentance**.

That is the **sense of Paul's grammar here** as he puts the verb "**leads**" into a **present tense** that highlights the intention of achieving a goal.<sup>19</sup>

In other words, Paul is speaking of those who are ignorant that the goodness and mercy of God is "leading you to repentance."

**Peter** makes the **same point** in **2 Peter 3**.

In **verse 7** he refers to the **future** "**day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men.**"

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<sup>18</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Letters of Paul: An Expanded Paraphrase* (Nashville, TN; Bath, England: Kingsley Books, 2017), Ro 2:1–16.

<sup>19</sup> Heinrich von Siebenthal, *Ancient Greek Grammar for the Study of the New Testament* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2019), §197a, 318; Herbert Weir Smyth, *A Greek Grammar for Colleges* (New York: American Book Company, 1920), 421; Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 534–535.

Recognising that some will **misjudge God's merciful delay** of judgement, he then writes in **verse 9**—

**The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some consider slowness, but is patient toward you, not willing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance.**

Both Paul and Peter agree that no one, not even self-righteous religious people, **should mistake God's mercy** to mean they will **escape His judgment for their sin and rejection of the gospel.**

**Every moment, hour, day, week, month, year** that God gives to unbelieving sinners is a **gift of His goodness that is intended** to give them another opportunity to repent.

However, this is a **limited opportunity** and represents **only a delay in God's judgement**, not an escape from it.

As **Hebrews 9:27** warns, **"It is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment."**

**When you die outside of Christ**, there is no longer any mercy for you—**only judgement and wrath for all eternity.**

Paul is therefore using **verse 4** again to demonstrate **everyone's need for the gospel** and the salvation from God's wrath that it provides **through the righteous that God gives** through faith alone in Christ alone.

As he wrote in **Romans 1:17**, **"In [the gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith..."**

That is, the **right response to the gospel** is faith in Jesus Christ.

Here in **verse 4**, though, Paul **emphasises the other aspect** of a right response by which we receive the salvation promised in the gospel—**repentance**.

**Repentance is changing one's mind** and life so that you **turn from sin and self-righteousness to God** in order to live a life of faith and obedience.

This is the same “**obedience of faith**” that Paul referred to in **chapter one, verse 5**.

**So the third way** that people misjudge the mercy of God is by **misjudging the purpose of God's mercy**.

Though Paul makes his point by **engaging in diatribe** with a hypothetical opponent, his **pastoral concern** for real unbelieving religious people is evident.

Paul wrote **verse 4** to help us understand that **being religious does not exempt you** from the judgement of God.

Too many people believe they're “**good enough**” and don't realise that their present experience of God's mercy **doesn't prove that they're right with God**, only that He is **patiently offering an opportunity** to become right with Him through the righteousness He gives through faith alone in Christ alone.

So instead of **misjudging the abundance, experiences, and purpose of God's mercy**, **recognise your need to be saved** from God's judgement according to the good news of the gospel.

God wants you to **repent and put your faith in Christ**, as Paul said here in **verse 4** and similarly in **Acts 17:30-31**—

<sup>30</sup> **“Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now commanding men that everyone everywhere should repent,**

<sup>31</sup> **because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He determined, having furnished proof to all by raising Him from the dead.”**

## CONCLUSION

**As we conclude**, Paul certainly **aimed to call unbelieving religious people**, especially his fellow Jews, to **repentance in order to be saved** from God's judgement through faith in Jesus Christ.

However, as he wrote to the **church in Rome** he was **not writing primarily to correct them**, as if he suspected that the Jews among them were rejecting Christ.

Rather, Paul **aimed to convince the church** of both Jews and Gentiles that we should be **enthusiastic about proclaiming the gospel** because it is the power of God to save from the judgement of God.

He aimed to **stoke the fires** of their enthusiasm by **demonstrating convincingly** that the **gospel is for all people**, both Jews and Gentiles, **both “good” religious people and immoral pagan people**.

We need to be **thoroughly convinced** that **everyone’s greatest need is the righteousness** that God provides through faith alone.

Therefore, we need to be **convinced** that no one is **“good enough” to escape God’s judgement**, and that God’s patience in punishing sin **only proves His willingness to save** those who repent.

If we understand that, **then we won’t misjudge God’s mercy to us or to anyone else**,

and we **won’t overlook anyone** in our evangelism because we think they’re right with God even though they reject Christ.

## BENEDICTION

*Now the God who is mighty,  
the Lamb who is worthy,  
and the Spirit who is near,  
fortify you to live faithfully in these days  
and all the days until Jesus comes.  
Amen.<sup>20</sup>*

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<sup>20</sup> Dale Ralph Davis, *Grace Be with You: Benedictions from Dale Ralph Davis*, New Edition (Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2019), 43.

2:1	Therefore you are without excuse, O man, ↳ everyone who passes <b>judgment</b> , <b>for</b> [...] you <b>condemn</b> yourself; ↳ in that which you <b>judge</b> another, ↳ <b>for</b> you who <b>judge</b> practice the same things.	Inference of 1:18–32 Describes 1a Reason for 1a–b Location/ instrument of 1c Reason for 1c Develops 1; sets up 3 Content of 2a Rhetorical question (+3d) Describes 3a Content of 3a Rhetorical question Describes 4a Reason for 4a–d Reason for 5b Contrast to 3–4 Time of 5b
2:2	And we know that ↳ the <b>judgment</b> of God rightly falls upon those who practice such things.	
2:3	But do you <b>presume</b> this, O man— ↳ who passes <b>judgment</b> on those who practice such things ↳ and does the same — ↳ that you will escape the <b>judgment</b> of God?	
2:4	Or do you <b>think lightly</b> of the riches ↳ of His kindness ↳ and forbearance ↳ and patience, ↳ <b>not knowing</b> that the kindness of God leads you to repentance? ↳ But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart ↳ you are storing up wrath for yourself ↳ in the day of <b>wrath</b> ↳ and revelation of the righteous <b>judgment</b> of God,	
2:5		



**STEADFAST**  
BIBLE CHURCH

## Sermon Notes

### Introduction

In Romans 2:4, Paul explains three ways in which people misjudge the mercy of God:

1. Misjudging the abundance of God's mercy
2. Misjudging the experiences of God's mercy
3. Misjudging the purpose of God's mercy

### 1. Misjudging the abundance of God's mercy

### 2. Misjudging the experiences of God's mercy

### 3. Misjudging the purpose of God's mercy

### Conclusion