

Is It Only the Goodness of God That Leads Us to Repentance?

In Romans 2:4, Paul explains that it is God's kindness (ESV; or, in the KJV, God's goodness) that leads us to repentance. But does that mean we are not to mention God's wrath when we preach to the lost? Does it mean we are not to warn people of the dangers of sin? Certainly not.

Unfortunately, the idea that we are only to speak to the lost about God's goodness has become widespread today, ultimately dishonoring the Lord and hurting those we want to help.

Commenting on my article, "Os Hillman Got It Totally Wrong About the Christian-Owned Bakery in Oregon," one reader wrote, "I agree with Hillman 100%. When this Church of the One, Almighty God grows up, gets off their self-righteous, religious, legalistic, high horse, and realizes it's the GOODNESS OF GOD THAT BRINGS MAN TO will happen. I would have served them, loved them, and shown them Jesus Christ. Instead, they threw their bibles at them, and closed all doors for future freedom for them. If I saw that couple today, I would apologize to them and let them know God loves them, maybe not their sin, but He does love them."

Of course, this commenter completely misrepresented what happened at the Sweet Cakes bakery, since the Christian owners did not act in a self-righteous, legalistic manner, nor did they "throw their Bibles" at the lesbian woman who wanted a cake baked for her "wedding" to her lesbian partner.

But what about Romans 2:4? Wasn't Paul teaching there that we are only to share God's goodness with the lost and that it is only His goodness that leads people to repentance?

Absolutely not. Paul is speaking to a nonbeliever, someone who deserved God's judgment but had not yet received it. He writes, "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?" (Rom. 2:4, ESV).

In other words, the reason God has not yet judged you and given you what you deserve is because He is giving you time to repent. His kindness—meaning, the fact that He is so long-suffering with lost sinners—is meant to bring you to repentance. So, don't despise His goodness, as if He is giving you a license to sin or is looking the other way. No. He is being kind to you with the hope that you will turn from your sin and turn to God.

That was Paul's point in Romans 2:4.

And while it is true that a revelation of God's love and goodness is often the very thing that brings us to repentance, the entire New Testament is against the idea that we are only to preach about God's goodness to the lost, never mentioning His wrath or judgment.

Just look at the preaching in Acts. In Acts 2, Peter calls on his fellow Jews to repent for crucifying the Messiah, culminating with this summary in 2:40: "He pressed his case with many other arguments and kept pleading with them, 'Save yourselves from this perverse generation!'" (Jewish New Testament).

It's the same thing in Acts 3, where Peter's preaching ends with a warning and a promise (vv. 19-26), while in Acts 4:12, Peter boldly proclaims to the Jewish leadership that there is salvation in no name other than the name of Jesus. (Isn't it interesting that he didn't start any of his messages with "Jesus loves you"?)

In Acts 5, Peter rebukes the Jerusalem leadership for crucifying the Messiah, stating plainly that repentance and

forgiveness of sins has been granted to Israel through Jesus.

And on and on it goes in Acts, with Paul preaching similar messages too, calling for repentance (Acts 17:30; 20:21; 26:20—and notice carefully that *repent* means “to turn away from sin and to turn to God”), talking to Felix about “righteousness and self-control and the coming judgment” (Acts 24:25, ESV) and even bringing this warning in the synagogue: “Beware, therefore, lest what is said in the Prophets should come about: ‘Look, you scoffers, be astounded and perish; for I am doing a work in your days, a work that you will not believe, even if one tells it to you’” (Acts 13:40-41).

This is how Jesus preached too, often warning about the wrath to come and always calling for repentance.

Why then do we think we know better than Jesus or Paul? And why do we think we know better than the greatest revivalists and evangelists in history—men and women who proclaimed God’s incredible goodness, mercy and love through Jesus but who also thundered warnings about the consequences of sin and the coming wrath?

And why do the New Testament writers speak so often about God’s coming judgment if we are not supposed to speak about it at all today, especially to the lost?

And why did Paul tell the believers in Rome to “consider the goodness and severity of God” (Rom. 11:22, NKJV)?

By all means, let us proclaim John 3:16-21, and let us exalt the love of God. But let’s remember that those verses contain a warning as well as a promise: Those who do not believe are condemned already and will one day perish.

Love compels us to tell them the whole truth.

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