

Making Excuses to Yourself

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Preacher: Nick Louw

[0 : 0 0] Well, I saw an article recently, and this article was entitled, How to Come Up with a Good Excuse. Now, the strange thing is this article wasn't a joke. It was genuine.

It claimed to give you a three-step process for any situation of how to come up with a good excuse. You know, whether it was being late for work, or whether it was not doing your homework, or keeping someone waiting at a restaurant.

Whatever it was, it claimed that following the simple three-step process would make you an expert at excuses. Which is quite a disturbing article that there's things out there that are training people in excuses.

So, disturbing as that article is, what's even more disturbing is the reality that actually we don't need an article to tell us how to make excuses, do we? We do it all the time. We're naturals at making excuses.

We've been doing it since we could talk. It's second nature. We all make excuses. And it's almost impossible, if you think about it, to say sorry for something without attaching an excuse at the end.

[1 : 0 5] You notice that? You know, sorry I shouted at you, love, but I had a really stressful day. You know, we always tend to, whatever apology it is, we always tend to put an excuse at the end.

And there's always a but. There's always an excuse. The real problem, though, with this instinct of ours to make excuses is that not so much we make excuses to others. The real problem is when we make excuses to ourselves, which we tend to do without even noticing it.

When we convince ourselves that certain behavior is justified when it's really not. We do that especially when it comes to our failure to obey God.

You see, the world is full of people making excuses for living our own way and not God's way. It is second nature to us. And Paul, in Romans chapter 1 and 2 and 3, is addressing people's excuses. He's dismantling various excuses that people come up with for ignoring God, for not living God's way. Last week, we looked at the excuses of people who don't believe in God.

[2 : 1 0] You know, those who say, oh, well, science can't prove God, so I don't really have to pay any attention to him. And we saw last week that that's no excuse at all because God has made his presence plain to us without science.

And if you missed last week's sermon, it's available on the website to look into that. There's also a blog post about that on our website, just looking at that excuse and how it doesn't really work. But this week, we look at some more excuses.

And this week, I must warn you, we come much closer to home. Because now in chapter 2, Paul turns to the people who would have been right with him up until this point, you know, condemning with him, criticizing all the godless people in chapter 1.

And then he turns to them and says to them, wait a minute, wait a minute, you're no better than they are. You know that? Because you might acknowledge God, but you also make excuses for living your own way and not his way.

And so then he goes on in the passage we're looking at this morning to dismantle those excuses of people who do claim to follow God or at least acknowledge him.

[3 : 1 0] And there's three types of people that Paul addresses in this passage. And what I want us to do is examine each of these people and their excuses and how I think that we have a little bit of each of them in us.

And so first, I want to introduce you to the first of our three people this morning. Her name is Self-Righteous Sally. All right, now let me tell you about Sally. All right, there's a picture of her behind me.

Sally is retired. She lives at home alone. Her husband passed away, sadly, two years ago. And Sally has a small group of friends who she visits regularly for tea.

And often the conversation goes on to the good old days. They reminisce over the good old days when they were all young and when the country was so much better than it is now.

They talk about how the culture has really degenerated. You know, the young people of today have no respect anymore. Not to mention the taxi drivers. And they go on like this as they're drinking their tea, complaining and criticizing.

[4 : 12] But strangely, it makes Sally feel better to get together with like-minded people and just share her frustrations with the world. When it comes to church, Sally's not that interested.

She used to go to church. But, you know, church is not what it used to be in the good old days. They have drums now. And she also doesn't like being told to amend her ways, especially by that young new whippersnapper of a preacher in the local church.

Besides, she doesn't really need to go to church. She lives a decent life. She doesn't really do anything that bad. And she tries to be nice to people most of the time. Well, you see, Sally represents a lot of people in our world.

People who generally see themselves as better than others. And that's a view that's constantly reinforced by their criticizing other people. Just as second nature.

And because of that, if you had to ask Sally, Sally, do you think you're a good person? Her answer would naturally be, yes, of course I'm a good person. Look at all the bad people out there. I'm a good person. You see, Sally is a person who compares herself to others to judge her own goodness.

[5 : 21] And if you asked Sally what's going to happen to her when she dies, she'd say, Well, I'm sure God will look at my life and be fair. I'll certainly be better off than most people.

I've lived a decent life. I'm sure I'll be okay. Well, I want you to listen to what Paul has to say to someone like Sally. This is the first type of person he addresses in the passage.

And he says from verse 1, Now, we know that God's judgment against those who do such things is based on truth.

So when you, a mere human being, pass judgment on them and yet do the same things, do you think that you will escape God's judgment? Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, forbearance, and patience, not realizing that God's kindness is intended to lead you to repentance? So here Paul is saying to Sally and to many like her, he's saying, Sally, you know, whenever you judge someone else, even for something small, you know you're actually condemning yourself.

[6 : 29] Because by judging someone else, you're claiming that a standard exists by which people are expected to live, a standard of behavior. And you criticize them when they don't live by that standard.

But the thing is, Sally, do you keep that standard that you impose on others? Think about it. You know, you criticize the young people for having no respect, but how much respect do you have for the young people?

You complain that the taxi driver's cutting in, and yet if you had a chance to cut in front of a taxi driver, you would do it without any hesitation. There are silly examples, but the principle is true, isn't it?

That we have no right to impose any standard on someone else unless we keep that standard perfectly ourselves, which we never do. And so we actually have no right to judge others, even if they are wrong.

Listen to what Jesus says in Matthew. He says, Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.

[7 : 37] But we do, don't we? It's part of our instinctive nature to judge other people, to point the finger, to criticize other people. And we do that not to help them.

Let's not fool ourselves into thinking that we judge them to help them. I mean, there's nothing wrong with pointing out someone's faults to them to help them in a helpful, loving way.

But when we judge people, we generally do it behind their backs, not to help them. But you know why we do it? Well, it's because like self-righteous Sally, it makes us feel better about ourselves. It makes us feel righteous to highlight the faults of others, so that we can have an excuse to keep living the way we want. That's what it comes down to. We highlight the faults of others to make

ourselves feel good, so that we can keep living the way we want without feeling guilty. And fooling ourselves into thinking, like Sally, that we're decent enough to be in God's good books. But look again at verse 4. Do you show contempt for the riches of His kindness, forbearance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness is intended to lead you to repentance? [8 : 44] Repentance. That word repentance, it means change. It means a change of life, a change of the way we live, a change of what we live for. A way from living my way towards living God's way. But you see, if I think I'm a pretty decent person, then I'll never repent, I'll never change, because I'll never have a need to. And I'll get a nasty surprise when God comes to judge one day. And so that's the first type of person that Paul wants to warn in this passage. And I think we all have a little bit of self-righteous Sally in us. But here's the second person that Paul warns. And this is, I want to introduce you to devout Dave. Here's devout Dave. Okay, Dave, let me tell you about Dave. He loves to go to church. He loves church because he loves the Bible. In fact, he needs church because he needs to hear the truth and to listen to God's words, the words of the creator of the universe. It stimulates him to be able to come to church and hear the preaching.

[9 : 44] He's also big into reading Christian books, is Dave. Whenever he's got a spare moment, you'll find him reading some theological book. And he even makes an effort to share his faith with the people at work.

And the thing is, very different to Sally, Dave knows that he's a sinner. He actually can't escape the fact he lives with his girlfriend still. And he knows he shouldn't, but he does. And it's just he's been doing that for years. He often has one too many beers and loses control when he's out partying with his friends. And he knows he shouldn't. In fact, he should be setting an example to them. But, you know, it's just so much fun. But he also knows that God is merciful. So he doesn't worry too much. God knows his heart. And God knows his devotion to his faith. And he still reads the Bible and prays every day. And he's confident that God is pleased by that. Well, Paul has some shocking news for devout Dave. That's the same news that he had for the devout Jews of his own day.

[10 : 41] And you see it in verse 17 onwards. He says, listen to what he says to people like devout Dave. Now you, if you call yourself a Jew, if you rely on the law and boast in God, if you know his will and approve of what is superior because you are instructed by the law, if you are convinced that you are a guide to the blind, a light for those who are in the dark, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of little children, because you have in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth, you then who teach others, do you not teach yourself?

You who preach against the ceiling, do you steal? You who say that people should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who boast in the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law?

As it is written, God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you. You see, the Jews in Paul's day were very much like devout Dave is today.

They were very devout. They knew the right way to live. They loved the Torah, God's law. They even taught others. And yet they still didn't practice what they preached.

And that was their problem. They still often gave in to their sinful desires, but that didn't really bother them because they thought they had God's favor through what they believed and how devoted they were to it.

[12 : 00] They thought they were safe because of their devotion. But here, you see, Paul says, it doesn't matter how devoted you are to your religion. What matters is what you actually do, how you actually live day by day.

That's what matters. And the reason is in verse 6. Just go back to verse 6 and look at this reason. Listen carefully to this. God will repay each person according to what they have done.

And verse 9, it goes on. There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil, first for the Jew and then for the Gentile, but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.

For God does not show favoritism. Now, this is something we need to hear. God doesn't have favorites. He won't pardon people just because of their devotion to Him. One day, when He comes to judge the world, everybody, everybody will be on an equal footing.

God will not look with favor on some. Everybody will be judged equally. He's just and He will judge everybody according to what they have done, which is the only right and fair way to judge people. [13:13] And too often, I think, Christians forget that. You know, with all our talk of being saved by grace, which is right enough, we forget, however, we forget the need to live out our salvation with fear and trembling.

You know, we rest on our laurels far too easily and forget that unless our lives are marked by holiness and good works, then there's no reason to believe that we're saved at all. The Bible tells us faith without works is dead.

And there are too many Christians, I think, today with a dead faith. It might seem alive like devout Dave's faith, but, you know, it seems alive because we're interested in the Bible and singing loudly on a Sunday and praying every day.

But the problem is it's dead. Because people like that, when they leave church, they're still quite comfortable with the sin in their lives. There's no effort to change it. There's no effort to combat it and repent.

And they're all the more comfortable with that sin because they've gone to church on Sunday. And so they think they're okay. And it's people like that who are going to get the shock of their life on Judgment Day when they thought they were okay because of their devotion, and yet they realize that it's not good enough.

[14:27] Listen to Jesus' words from Matthew. He says, We all need to be reminded of those words.

And I don't want anybody sitting in this church this morning, I don't want anybody in St. Mark's to be in Dave's predicament on Judgment Day. And so I warn you, with all my heart, turn from your sin. Turn from it. Put it away. If you're getting drunk, stop it. If you're caught in sexual immorality or pornography or having sex outside of marriage, stop it.

It's far too dangerous to play with. God does not show favoritism. And He will judge each person according to what they have done. Make no mistake.

Just like self-righteous Sally, devout Dave has no excuse for not obeying God. There's one final person I want us to consider this morning. I want to introduce you to ignorant Ipshi.

[15:37] Here's a picture of Ipshi from the Zatanawa tribe of the Amazonian rainforests behind me. You see, Ipshi, you think about him, he's had no contact with the outside world. He grew up in the tribe and he learned to hunt as a child.

And now he's the provider for his wife and eight children. And he's very well respected in his tribe. He's a well respected member of the tribe. He's a great hunter. He's a good father to his children. And every day he takes his family to the tribal idols and venerates them as he knows he should, as his father did and his father before him. And he's never questioned his belief in the gods because he's never really known anything else.

And you see, Ipshi, he represents a lot of people in our world. You know, who've been brought up in cultures who have had no exposure to the Christian Bible.

And it's the age-old question that we've all asked, isn't it? How can a god hold responsible people who have never heard his word? Isn't that unfair? And so Ipshi's excuse, like many people's excuses, is pleading ignorance.

[16:41] I've never heard anything better. And it's a pretty good excuse. Although what we learn in our passage is that Ipshi's not as ignorant as we think he is. Look at verse 14 towards the end.

Paul says, When Gentiles, nations, people of other nations, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts sometimes accusing them, and at other times even defending them.

You see what Paul's talking about here? He's talking about each person's, each human being's God-given conscience, the innate ability that we have to know right from wrong, no matter what we've heard.

The word conscience is an interesting word in and of itself. I don't know if you know its etymology, but the word conscience is made up from two Latin words, con and science. We know the second word means knowledge.

[17 : 43] Con means with. And so to have a conscience means you have knowledge of what is right and wrong. Each person is with knowledge, a God-given knowledge of right and wrong.

And Ipshi has knowledge of what is right and wrong. And here's the thing. Ipshi still does the things that he knows are wrong, that his conscience tells him are wrong.

When he shouted at his wife this morning, he knew it was wrong. When he took Pashak's bowl the other day without telling him, he knew it was wrong. You know, Ipshi might not have God's explicit instructions in Scripture, but he still breaks the law that God has put on his heart.

And besides, he also knows deep down inside that these little idols that he venerates, they didn't make the world. He knows that, but he doesn't really care that much. As long as he worships them, then he can live how he wants. He knows that.

And so Ipshi will stand before God, like everyone else, to answer for the things that he has done. his sins, which he knew were wrong.

[18 : 45] Not the sins done in ignorance, but the sins done with knowledge that they're wrong. And so you see, Ipshi, like Sally, and like Dave, has no excuse for his sin.

No excuse. And the truth is, none of us do, either. None of us have an excuse for our sins. This passage is a sobering wake-up call, to all who hear it, that God will judge us for what we've done. And there's no getting out of that. And that should scare us. That should scare us, silly, because we've all, like Self-Righteous Sally, we've all judged others with the standard that we ourselves don't keep.

Like Dave, we've all lived lives that are not consistent with what we say we believe. And like Ipshi, we all have a conscience that reminds us every time we do wrong, and yet we do it anyway.

And God will repay us according to what we have done. That's what the Bible says. So the question we should all ask is, well, how good do we have to be then?

[19 : 53] How good do we have to be to be saved, to be in God's good books? Well, you know, God showed us how good he expects us to be in his son, Jesus Christ.

Jesus, you see, is the benchmark. Jesus was the man who always obeyed God, like he should, who always did good in every situation, who lived how God wanted every day, to show us how we're supposed to live.

It's no wonder that so many people don't like him. Because he shows us up. He shows us what God expects of us. But then he did something else that no one expected.

He got punished for not living that way, on the cross. Even though he did live that way. And you know why he did that? He lived an entire life of good works, and then still took the punishment for bad works.

You know why he did that? It was to let you swap your bad works for his good works. So that when judgment day comes, and God judges and rewards all people according to what they have done, you can be rewarded for Christ's works, because he was punished for yours.

[21 : 08] If you belong to him. If you are in him. And so the real question we've all got to ask this morning is, do we belong to him? We might be devout. We might come to church. We might think we're decent people.

Do we belong to Christ? Is he our master? Is he our Lord? Am I in Christ? That is the most critical question any of us can ask. Will his works count in your favor on judgment day?

Because let me tell you, that is the only hope you have. You have no excuse for your sins. You need Christ's work to count in your favor. Will they? Will his works count in your favor on that day? Well, you know how you can know that? The only way you can know that is if his works and his life are evident in your life today, in the way you live, in your turning from sin, and in your living for God. And so let's pray that we would truly be in Christ, and that his works would count for us on the day God returns.

[22 : 08] Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we're reminded once again in your word this morning that we have no excuse for our sin. We might think ourselves decent people.

We might try to justify our behavior, but we're reminded that there is no excuse. And we're reminded that you are a fair God who judges all people according to what they have done.

O Lord, we desperately need Christ's good works to count for our salvation when you come to judge. And so I pray for anybody here who has not yet followed Christ, who has not put their trust in Christ.

I do pray, Lord, that you would help them before it's too late to turn to Christ, to repent of their sins, and to follow and obey you in all things.

Lord, we know that through Christ, we now have the power to obey you. So help us to do that. Help us to live out our salvation. Help us, Lord, to do the good works that you've prepared in advance for us to do through the power of Christ, to the glory of your name, and in anticipation of a perfect new world to come where we can be not by our own merit, but by Christ's.

[23 : 24] We thank you for this, and we pray that you help us. In Jesus' name. Amen.