

A Study in Romans

Chapter 2

A Warning Not to Judge

(Romans 2:1–11) ¹ 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. ² But we know that the judgment of God is according to truth against those who practice such things. ³ And do you think this, O man, you who judge those practicing such things, and doing the same, that you will escape the judgment of God? ⁴ Or do you despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance? ⁵ But in accordance with your hardness and your impenitent heart you are treasuring up for yourself wrath in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, ⁶ who “*will render to each one according to his deeds*”: ⁷ eternal life to those who by patient continuance in doing good seek for glory, honor, and immortality; ⁸ but to those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness—indignation and wrath, ⁹ tribulation and anguish, on every soul of man who does evil, of the Jew first and also of the Greek; ¹⁰ but glory, honor, and peace to everyone who works what is good, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. ¹¹ For there is no partiality with God.

The opening line of this new section begins with “Therefore,” indicating that it’s connected to the content in the previous section, aka the list of sins found amongst unbelievers.

(1) “you are inexcusable”

Paul shifts his attention to a new group in this first passage of chapter two. He ceases use of the third person plural in the first chapter (“they knew God”; “they exchanged”) in favor of the second person singular (“you are inexcusable”).

The group Paul is speaking to are the Jewish believers (see 2:17). They were thinking of themselves as being better than the people who commit the sins in Paul’s list, so he exposes their false presumption of superiority. This was a repeating problem throughout the early Christian churches, and one Paul meets head-on in several letters.

His conclusion is that Jews, like Gentiles, are “inexcusable” and are no better standing than Gentiles in the sight of God.

(1) “whatever you judge another you condemn yourself”

Whenever we judge a member of the church, we condemn ourselves. Why? Because we “practice the same things.” Maybe not in the same way, but we succumb to the same appetite of the flesh.

The admonition not to judge is speaking directly to condemning our brothers/sisters for their actions. Paul is not saying that we should not discern between what someone does is right or wrong.

(1 Corinthians 6:1–3)¹ Dare any of you, having a matter against another, go to law before the unrighteous, and not before the saints? ² Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world will be judged by you, are you unworthy to judge the smallest matters? ³ Do you not know that we shall judge angels? How much more, things that pertain to this life?

We cannot judge motives. By judging others, we condemn them for their sin—sometimes the very sin that we ourselves have committed. This is why we condemn ourselves when we judge others.

(2) “the judgment of God is according to truth”

God judges righteously because He has the truth about the whole situation. Rarely do we have all, let alone half, of the information necessary to make a solid judgment of someone.

More than this, Paul is saying that people who judge others “do not obey the truth” (v8). When we judge others, we fail to live by the truth.

(4) “do you despise the riches of His goodness”

In judging others, we forget God’s goodness toward us. It is only because of His “goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering” that we have been reconciled to Him by your “repentance” of the same sins.

(5) “in accordance with your hardness and your impenitent heart”

Judgment comes from an “impenitent heart” (stubbornness). When this “hardness” takes root, it is impossible to soften without a renewed appreciation for God’s mercy toward us and an understanding that He alone is righteous.

We live in a culture of judgment today. Our judgment is most often negative. But in the “day of wrath,” everyone whose heart has not been softened by the goodness of God will discover too late that they themselves have been judged fairly.

(7) “eternal life to those who by patient continuance in doing good”

“Doing good” is held in contrast to judging others. Our focus must be on seeing the good in others rather than judging them (repeated in v10). This attitude is “patient” toward others.

(8) “those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth”

Judgment of others is a self-seeking enterprise. Whenever we seek self and refuse to extend mercy to others, we are not living God’s truth. His truth is other-centered.

(Philippians 2:1–3)¹ Therefore if *there is* any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and mercy, ² fulfill my joy by being like-minded, having the

same love, *being* of one accord, of one mind. ³ *Let nothing be done* through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself.

(11) “there is no partiality with God”

The word for “partiality” (*prosopolempsia*, “receiving the face”) was likely coined by early Christians to translate a Hebrew expression that vividly conveys the idea of treating someone on the basis of outward appearance. This is not the way God judges.

Paul reminds the Jews in verse six that God will judge each person “according to his deeds.” This is an objective judgment that levels the playing field.

Peter taught the impartiality of God to Cornelius’ household:

(Acts 10:34–35) ³⁴ Then Peter opened *his* mouth and said: “In truth I perceive that God shows no partiality. ³⁵ But in every nation whoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him.”

For the Jews, Paul’s application of the “partiality” principle to them ran contrary to their understanding of covenant privileges as a race. He is pointing out the abuses of their covenant status by viewing it as a guaranteed protection from God’s wrath, no matter what they do. This was a new and radical concept, the idea that God would judge both Jews and Gentiles on the same basis.

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Gentiles Without the Law

Paul continues his address to the Jews on the subject of judgment. The difference is that he now introduces God’s law.

(Romans 2:12–16) ¹² For as many as have sinned without law will also perish without law, and as many as have sinned in the law will be judged by the law ¹³ (for not the hearers of the law *are* just in the sight of God, but the doers of the law will be justified; ¹⁴ for when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do the things in the law, these, although not having the law, are a law to themselves, ¹⁵ who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves *their* thoughts accusing or else excusing *them*) ¹⁶ in the day when God will judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ, according to my gospel.

(12) “as many as have sinned without law will also perish without law”

The point of verses 12 is that all sinners, whether Jew or Gentile, will perish. While they may be judged differently, they are nonetheless judged equitably (without “partiality,” v11).

The first group pertains to the Gentiles, while the second group pertains to the Jews.

(12) “as many as have sinned in the law will be judged by the law”

The Jews were judged by God's law. So, in some respects they were not in the same situation as Gentiles. They had the Ten Commandments and were also given the ceremonial law to teach them about the coming Messiah and His work. They were held to a high standard because of the many privileges and blessings.

James wrote on the same subject:

(James 2:10–12)¹⁰ For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one *point*, he is guilty of all. ¹¹ For He who said, "*Do not commit adultery*," also said, "*Do not murder*." Now if you do not commit adultery, but you do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. ¹² So speak and so do as those who will be judged by the law of liberty.

The Gentiles were now learning the way of Christ and the principles of God's law. Paul was making an appeal to the Jewish believers to show patience and mercy to those who had yet to understand the things of God.

(13) "the doers of the law will be justified"

Possessing the law of God entails more than receiving it with willing ears. We must become "doers." While the Gentiles do not have *the* written law of God, their frequent conformity to many of the commands of that law shows that they have a knowledge of God's basic moral requirements and they obey them.

(14) "by nature do the things in the law"

God wants us to live according to His law, which is a revelation of His character. In that the Gentiles obey the law by following their conscience, they are living in harmony with the principles of God's kingdom. "By nature" is not a reference to any innate ability to live up to God's law, but that their nature is being led by the Spirit of God.

(The Desire of Ages, p. 638) Those whom Christ commends in the judgment may have known little of theology, but they have cherished His principles. Through the influence of the divine Spirit they have been a blessing to those about them. Even among the heathen are those who have cherished the spirit of kindness; before the words of life had fallen upon their ears, they have befriended the missionaries, even ministering to them at the peril of their own lives. Among the heathen are those who worship God ignorantly, those to whom the light is never brought by human instrumentality, yet they will not perish. Though ignorant of the written law of God, they have heard His voice speaking to them in nature, and have done the things that the law required. Their works are evidence that the Holy Spirit has touched their hearts, and they are recognized as the children of God.

(15) "their conscience also bearing witness"

Their "conscience" bears witness to the reality that God is working in those who do not have the written law. God's Spirit has given all people a basic sense of right and wrong. People generally know

what is good, until they ignore that conscience and fall away from Him. This is what happens when the society becomes totally depraved and unable to hear the voice of God, like in Noah's day when "every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (Genesis 6:5).

Gentiles sometimes obey the law and sometimes they do not, which is when their thoughts are either "accusing" or "defending" them.

The Hypocritical Attitude of the Jewish Believers

(Romans 2:17–24)¹⁷ Indeed you are called a Jew, and rest on the law, and make your boast in God,¹⁸ and know *His* will, and approve the things that are excellent, being instructed out of the law,¹⁹ and are confident that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness,²⁰ an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of babes, having the form of knowledge and truth in the law.²¹ You, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself? You who preach that a man should not steal, do you steal?²² You who say, "Do not commit adultery," do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples?²³ You who make your boast in the law, do you dishonor God through breaking the law?²⁴ For "*the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you,*" as it is written.

While Paul may have used a bit of sarcasm in this passage, He is drawing attention to some very real issues. The Jews hold a superior view of themselves. But the reality is that they don't act or think as converted Christians. This is hurting their witness to the Gentiles.

After providing a list of what they think about themselves, Paul asks the Jews a series of questions. Each reveals the hypocritical nature of their thinking in that the answer to each of the questions is *Yes*.

(24) "the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you"

The Jews were very careful not to blaspheme the name of God. They held it in reverent awe saying, "Blessed be Your glorious name, Which is exalted above all blessing and praise!" (Nehemiah 9:5).

Paul is essentially exposing their behavior as damaging to His kingdom work. Because names are a window into a person's character, blaspheming God is giving a false testimony of who He is.

How serious is this blasphemy?

(Leviticus 24:16)¹⁶ And whoever blasphemes the name of the Lord shall surely be put to death. All the congregation shall certainly stone him, the stranger as well as him who is born in the land. When he blasphemes the name *of the Lord*, he shall be put to death.

The Meaning of Circumcision

Circumcision was one of the most important distinguishing marks of Jewishness. It is a natural progression for Paul to address it along with the law (see previous section). In this, he attempts to erode the Jews' confidence in any inherited religious advantages that they might perceive.

(Romans 2:25–29)²⁵ For circumcision is indeed profitable if you keep the law; but if you are a breaker of the law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision.²⁶ Therefore, if an uncircumcised man keeps the righteous requirements of the law, will not his uncircumcision be counted as circumcision?²⁷ And will not the physically uncircumcised, if he fulfills the law, judge you who, *even with your written code and circumcision, are a transgressor of the law?*²⁸ For he is not a Jew who *is one outwardly*, nor *is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh;*²⁹ but *he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter; whose praise is not from men but from God.*

(25) “if you are a breaker of the law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision”

It is silly to think that a man can become uncircumcised, but Paul uses this analogy to further his discussion about keeping the law. To be circumcised physically in accordance with the law means nothing if we are transgressors of the law. We are a walking contradiction.

Paul's main point is that “he is not a Jew who is one outwardly ... but he is a Jew who is one inwardly” (28–29). Our outward performance of the legal requirements of the law is not what matters to God. He cares about inner transformation.

(29) “circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit”

Spiritual “circumcision” is a symbol of the inner transformation of the heart. Only the Holy Spirit can convert the sinner into a saint and make him/her a true disciple of Jesus.

(29) “not in the letter”

The circumcision of the heart is directly tied to the law of God being written on our heart. This is conversion that causes us to walk in harmony with the commandments of God; not in opposition to them. [Paul will address the meaning of circumcision in more detail in chapters four and seven.]

(Colossians 2:11–13)¹¹ In Him you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ,¹² buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with *Him* through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead.

Paul also equates the symbol of circumcision to dying to the flesh and living in the righteousness of Christ.

(Philippians 3:3) For we are the circumcision, who worship God in the Spirit, rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh.

Circumcision and Living in the Truth

(Romans 3:1–8) ¹ What advantage then has the Jew, or what *is* the profit of circumcision? ² Much in every way! Chiefly because to them were committed the oracles of God. ³ For what if some did not believe? Will their unbelief make the faithfulness of God without effect? ⁴ Certainly not! Indeed, let God be true but every man a liar. As it is written: *“That You may be justified in Your words, and may overcome when You are judged.”* ⁵ But if our unrighteousness demonstrates the righteousness of God, what shall we say? *Is* God unjust who inflicts wrath? (I speak as a man.) ⁶ Certainly not! For then how will God judge the world? ⁷ For if the truth of God has increased through my lie to His glory, why am I also still judged as a sinner? ⁸ And *why* not say, “Let us do evil that good may come”?—as we are slanderously reported and as some affirm that we say. Their condemnation is just.