

THE ROAD OF THE RIGHTEOUS

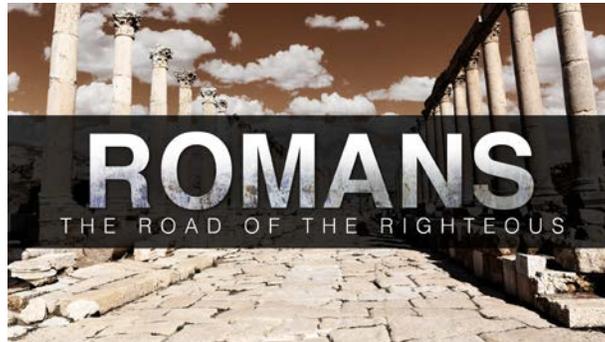
Expositional Study Of Romans

Romans 2:12-16

Written By

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Spiritually deceived. These two words effectively describe Israel prior to their divinely ordered discipline at the hands of the Babylonians starting with the first invasion in 605 B.C. How were they deceived? Good question. Jeremiah supplies the startling answer in chapter 7 of his powerful, penetrating prophecy:

² Stand in the gate of the LORD's house and proclaim there this word, and say, 'Hear the word of the LORD, all you of Judah, who enter by these gates to worship the LORD!' ³ Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, "Amend your ways and your deeds, and I will let you dwell in this place. ⁴ Do not trust in deceptive words, saying, 'This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD.' ⁵ For if you truly amend your ways and your deeds, if you truly practice justice between a man and his neighbor, ⁶ if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, or the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place, nor walk after other gods to your own ruin, ⁷ then I will let you dwell in this place, in the land that I gave to your fathers forever and ever. ⁸ Behold, you are trusting in deceptive words to no avail (Jer. 7).

Judah believed that they could flaunt the Law of Moses, worship false gods, live wickedly, and God would still accept them into His presence because His Temple stood among them, the chosen people (Deut. 7). As Jeremiah warns, they thought wrong. God is always more concerned with strict obedience than mere lip service. They should have known this much from the words of Samuel to King Saul. When confronted over not completely obeying, but picking and choosing what parts of God's command he wanted to follow, Samuel confronted him with these spine stiffening words,

“²²Has the LORD as much delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams.²³For rebellion is as the sin of divination, and insubordination is as iniquity and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, He has also rejected you from being king (1 Sam. 15).

God's Temple was glorious and awe-inspiring; however, it was not some magic talisman which would keep Him from judging His people for living lawlessly. They had deceived themselves into thinking the Temple's presence shielded them from God's ultimate wrath against their wicked ways. They should have awakened from their spiritual stupor, but the majority did not.

Fast forward some six hundred years to the time of Paul writing his letter to the church in Rome. With verse 32 of chapter 1, Paul closes out his argument concerning how the Gentile world typically rejects the natural evidences of God's existence, resulting in a downward spiral of unimaginable wickedness. To the Jews in the Roman church, and who might read his letter, Paul turns in chapter 2 and, like Jeremiah and Samuel of old, he attempts to wake them up to the fact that being a Jew and having the Law of Moses, viz., the Torah, does not shield them from God's judgment against sin.

Interesting. Some sinful dispositions die hard don't they? The Temple was long gone, but now the Jews hid behind their Jewishness and love of the Torah instead of coming to God and following Him on His terms (Rom. 1:16-17). I'm sure they were outwardly fine, moral, loving people; however, none of this could, or would, count in their favor on Judgement Day (Rom. 2:5). What would count is a man's faith relationship to the Messiah, Jesus.

In his quest to wake up his Jewish brethren to their real spiritual standing, Paul gets real with them by answering a question which naturally arises from the chapter 2:

How Does God Respond To Moral/Religious People Who Appear Spiritual? (Rom. 2:1-16)

He, like a loving father with an errant child, minces no words. He methodically and systematically moves down through the sobering answers:

- *God Supplies The Reason For Divine Judgment* (Rom. 2:1). If you, as a Jew, judge others for being truly godless, while you think you are quite godly based on your devotion to religion and ritual, be what it may, you really do not have a proverbial leg to stand on because you are guilty of committing the same type of sins . . . just in a cleverer, internal fashion.
- *God Supplies The Rightness of His Judgment* (Rom. 2:2-4). God's judgment will rest upon the facts of your real acceptance or rejection of Him.
- *God Supplies The Road Of Divine Judgment* (Rom. 2:5-11). Each man's sin will eventually fill the vault of wrath God has created, and one day that vault will be full, resulting in God moving in judgment. And when He judges He will be completely impartial. He won't care if you were a Jew or a Gentile, rich or poor, educated or uneducated, articulate or inarticulate, a nice person or a bad person, or a devoutly religious person or an outright pagan. He will only consider the facts of your life. Did you live for Him or for yourself? Did you embrace His gospel (Rom. 16-17) or your gospel?

With verse 12, Paul turns and adds another answer to the question at hand:

God Supplies The Reality of Divine Judgment (Rom. 2:12-16)

What is that reality? To answer that question, let us first read the verses before us:

¹² For all who have sinned without the Law will also perish without the Law, and all who have sinned under the Law will be judged by the Law; ¹³ for it is not the hearers of the Law who are just before God, but the doers of the Law will be justified. ¹⁴ For when Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves, ¹⁵ in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them, ¹⁶ on the day when, according to my gospel, God will judge the secrets of men through Christ Jesus (Romans 2).

Here is the high definition reality with it comes to divine judgment for rejecting God's gospel: *The mere possession of the Mosaic Law does not give the Jew a spiritual leg up on Gentiles who did not have the Law.* Put differently, possession of the Mosaic Law did, and does not, give a Jew, *ipso facto*, an inexorable possession of a spiritual standing with God. They thought it did, but they thought wrong, according to Paul, who prior to his magnificent conversion used to think in this unfounded, ungrounded fashion.

Paul's words also served to address Gentile concerns that the Jews might have been given a special redemptive edge over them by the presence of the Torah. Paul lays all of this erroneous thinking to rest in these verses before us. The Apostle is quite clear here that God's final judgment of sinners will be fair and impartial because they both ample revelatory evidence to worship Him by trusting in His gospel of good news. He reveals this dichotomy between Gentiles and Jews in verse 12:

¹² For all who have sinned without the Law will also perish without the Law, and all who have sinned under the Law will be judged by the Law;

Those "without the Law" are clearly Gentiles, for this is how they are denoted in New Testament times (Eph. 2:11-18), and those with the Law are contextually Jews. When it comes to divine judgment, both groups will be judged by their response to the revelation given to them. No Gentile could say, "I deserve heaven because I had no idea how God wanted me to behave, so I did the best I could," and no Jew could argue, "I deserve heaven because I'm a Jew who had possession of God's Law, His glorious Torah." Remember, in judgment God is fair, balanced, and highly impartial, and He deals with the facts from a person's life.

How can God judge Gentiles who were not initially given His Law? Simple. They, like the Jews, have access to God's Law. No, Paul is not talking about the Torah (i.e., the Ten Commandments and the 613 additional commandments) but about natural law which is built into each person by God Himself. Couched differently, the Gentiles were not given the Torah, viz., special revelation, but that does not mean they do not internally possess the moral norms of that Torah.

Let's skip over verse 13 for a moment and jump right into what Paul says in verses 14 through 15:

¹⁴ For when Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves, ¹⁵ in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them, . . .

Hold it right there. Let's be clear about what Paul is teaching here to the Jew and the Gentiles.

Paul just said that God will judge the Gentiles on Judgment Day. Actually he said they would perish, *apollumi* (ἀπόλλυμι), which is a Greek word denoting eternal punishment.¹ How can this be fair? Because they, like the Jews, have access to a certain level of God's Moral Law. It is built into their bodies so they *instinctively* know that things like murder, lying, stealing, and so forth are just universally wrong. Mankind has different customs and cultural differences. For instance, some may want to bury grandma the day she dies, while others will wait a week or two to do it, but nobody believes it is permissible to eat grandma. The aversion to cannibalism just comes with our human equipment from God. There are, therefore, overarching absolute laws which bind man together, laws all mankind just knows in his gut are just wrong to transgress.

C. S. Lewis, a former committed atheist, came to a saving faith in the living God based on the presence of this Natural, Moral Law. As an atheist, he wasted no time demolishing Christians with the concept of evil. You know the drill. He'd throw out an explosive statement like, If God is a God of love, then why is there so much evil in the world, in order to shut Christians down. But then upon closer reflection he realized his defeater question defeated his atheism:

My argument against God was that the universe seemed so cruel and unjust. But how had I got this idea of just and unjust? A man does not call a line crooked unless he has some idea of a straight line. What was I comparing this universe with when I called it unjust? . . . Of course I could have given up my idea of justice by saying it was nothing but a private idea of my own. But if I did that, even my argument against God collapsed too—for the argument depended on saying that the world was really unjust, not simply that it did not happen to please my private fancies. . . . Thus in the very act of trying to prove that God did not exist—in other words, that the whole of reality was senseless—I found I was forced to assume that one part of reality—namely my idea of justice—was full of sense. Consequently atheism turns out to be too simple. If the whole universe has no meaning, we should never have found out that it has no meaning: just as, if there were no light

¹Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. Frederick William Danker, 3rd ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 115-116: **ἀπόλλυμι** for its conjug. s. B-D-F §101 (s.v. ὄλλυμι); W-S. §14, 18; Rob. 317; fut. ἀπολέσω Hs 8, 7, 5; Att. ἀπολώ I Cor 1:19 (Is 29:14; ParJer 1:1, 8); 1 aor. ἀπόλεσα; 1 pf. ἀπολώλεκα. Mid.: fut. ἀπολοῦμαι Lk 13:3; 2 aor. ἀπολόμην; the 2 pf. ἀπόλωλα functions as a pf. mid.; ptc. ἀπολωλώς (Hom.+).

① to cause or experience destruction

② act. **ruin, destroy**

a. of pers. (Sir 10:3) Mk 1:24; Lk 4:34. W. ref. to eternal destruction μη ἐκείνον ἀπόλλυε do not bring about his ruin Ro 14:15. Esp. kill, put to death (Gen 20:4; Esth 9:6 v.l.; 1 Macc 2:37; Jos., C. Ap. 1, 122; Mel., P. 84, 635 [Ch.] τὸν ἐχθρόν σου) Hs 9, 26, 7. παιδίον Mt 2:13; Jesus 12:14; 27:20; Mk 3:6; 11:18; Lk 19:47; B 12:5; the wicked tenants κακοὺς κακῶς ἅ. (s. κακός 1a) he will put the evildoers to a miserable death Mt 21:41. τοὺς γεωργούς Mk 12:9; Lk 20:16; τ. φονεῖς Mt 22:7; τ. μη πιστεύσαντας those who did not believe Jd 5; πάντας Lk 17:27, 29. W. σώσαι (like Chariton 2, 8, 1) Js 4:12; Hs 9, 23, 4. Of eternal death (Herm. Wr. 4, 7; Tat. 11:2 ἀπόλεσεν ἡμᾶς τὸ αὐτέξουσιον) ψυχὴν κ. σῶμα ἅ. ἐν γεέννῃ Mt 10:28; ψυχὴν B 20:1; τ. ψυχᾶς Hs 9, 26, 3 (cp. Sir 20:22).¹

in the universe and therefore no creatures with eyes, we should never know it was dark. Dark would be without meaning.”²

The presence of an absolute standard of morality is what arrested the spiritual mind of Lewis and led him to God.

Dr. Norman Geisler puts the argument for the existence of Natural, Moral Law into this syllogistic format:

- 1. Major Premise: Every moral law has a moral law giver.
- 2. Minor Premise: There is an objective moral law.
- 3. Final Conclusion: There must be an objective Moral Law Giver.

Point well-taken: Absolute moral law logically implies an absolute moral Law Giver, God.

If we do, however, live in evolutionary world, there is simply no logical way to account for the fact absolute moral laws exists. Paul Copan does an excellent job dispelling this illogical notion when he writes,

[The] affirmation of human dignity, rights, and duties is something we would readily expect if God exists—but *not* if humans have emerged from valueless, mindless processes. . . . The naturalist’s context of a series of impersonal, valueless causes and effects producing valuable beings is shocking—an utterly incongruous outcome given the context. . . . If intrinsic value does not exist from the outset, its emergence from nonvaluable processes is difficult to explain. It doesn’t matter how many nonpersonal and nonvaluable components we happen to stack up: from valuelessness, valuelessness comes. . . . In the case of morality, we are still left wondering how value and obligation came to be thrust upon a valueless context of unguided matter in motion to have a context for the truth of ‘Murder is wrong.’”

If moral facts are just givens and necessarily true, there is left unexplained a huge cosmic coincidence between the existence of these moral facts and the eventual emergence of morally responsible agents who are obligated to them. That this moral realm appears to be anticipating our emergence is a staggering cosmic concurrence that begs an explanation. . . . How do we move from a universe that originates from no prior matter into a universe of valueless matter and energy, eventually arriving at moral values, including human rights, human dignity, and moral obligation? It is hard to see how the naturalist could bridge this chasm. Matter just does not have moral properties, let alone mental ones. . . . If humans are simply more developed animals, why think there are moral duties to which they must subscribe—or that they are even morally responsible? . . . Naturalism’s inability to get beyond descriptions of human behavior and psychology does not inspire confidence for grounding moral obligation. At best, one should remain agnostic about it—which doesn’t do much to encourage the pursuit of virtue. . . . We should prefer the theory that affords the more natural (that is, less ad hoc) transition from the overall theory to the entity in question. Theism offers a more suitable context for objective moral values, which flow readily from a wise,

²C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: The Ma Millan Company, 1952), 31).

supremely valuable Being to that Being's valuable image-bearers. Naturalism affords no such smooth transition from a context of undirected valueless processes to objective moral values and human dignity.³

Sorry for the lengthy quote(s) but it is necessary because too many people, especially young people, either reject theism outright or throw it to the wind when they get "educated" and "enlightened" by the public school system. The presence of Moral Law is best answered from a theistic worldview, as proposed by Paul. We are called to be moral because God is moral.

Again, Geisler, does an excellent job driving home the reality of the presence of Moral Law when he surmises (with my notational expansion after each period),

1. *The Moral Law is undeniable.* To say that it is not absolutely exist and that morals are merely relative is to make an absolute statement and thereby validate the truth of the premise.
2. *We know it by our reactions.* If you believe truth is relative, then just let somebody cut in front of you and the DMV line? Automatically you will feel like an injustice has been committed and needs to be immediately corrected. That's why you will be tempted to tap the guy on the shoulder.
3. *It is the basis of human rights.* Our constitutional framers believed we all have unalienable rights which derive from our Creator. If he does not exist, that ultimately human rights are up for grabs.
4. *It is the unchanging standard of justice.* Translated, we cannot know injustice unless we absolutely know what constitutes justice.
5. *It defines a real difference between moral positions.* For instance, how can we know there is a difference between ISIS soldiers and our soldiers unless there is an inexorable moral absolute by which to measure?
6. *Since we know what's absolutely wrong, there must be an absolute moral standard of rightness.* Moral relativists are gifted at claiming it is wrong for Christians to believe they have moral truth when they, in turn, absolutely believe in their ever-changing moral paradigm.
7. *The Moral Law is the grounds for political and social dissent.* Think about it. If there is no such thing as absolute, unchanging, timeless Moral Law, then how could a person ever demonstrate for PETA, or for gun control, or for Pro Life, or for whatever. People demonstrate because they innately believe absolute moral truth exists, whether they want to admit it or not.
8. *If there were no Moral Law, then we wouldn't make excuses for violating it?* True. It is interesting how people tend to make excuses for immoral behavior. Why do they do this if absolute Moral Law does not exists?⁴

I couldn't agree more. Common sense tells us these eight points are true. Common sense tells us that we all know moral truths which transcend culture, customs, and time.

³Khaldoun A. Sweis and Chad V. Meister, *Christian Apologetics: An Anthology of Primary Sources* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 176-180.

⁴Norman L. Geisler and Frank Turek, *I Don't Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004), 172.

To Geisler's list Paul adds a ninth concept in verse 14: Our conscience, which either convicts or affirms our activities and choices, underscores the presence of absolute Moral Law. The conscience is not the originator of what is right. On the contrary, it is that little "voice" in your head which tells you to either go ahead or to stop. It is, according to Budziszewski, "teacher, judge, or executioner, depending on the mode in which it operates: cautionary, accusatory, or avenging."⁵ This definition is readily played out every day. Here is one illustration.

You are flying Southwest Airlines, but you forgot to check in to obtain a low number for boarding so you can secure a good seat. Yet you do not sweat the unfavorable situation because you know the person who takes the tickets by group numbers typically doesn't look too closely at those tickets. Your plan is, therefore, simple. When group "A" is called, you with a group "C" ticket will merely and innocently walk with all the other group "A" ticket holders and see if you can just slip in unnoticed.

As you're standing in line waiting your turn is when the voice of conscience attempts to get your attention, again. Yes, that same voice spoke to you when you first thought up your plan, but you disregarded the voice because your comfort and ability to get off the plan are highly important to you. But now that voice speaks again in the sound system of your mind. What does the voice say, "What you are doing is not right, nor is it fair. You need to get out of line and wait your turn." Why is the voice in your head saying this? Because it's a universal, unwritten moral law that cutting in line is, well, completely inappropriate.

Question. Where do moral prescriptions like this come from? God. Your conscience is one key proof these prescriptions originate with Him because we all have one which starts speaking as we navigate through life. If you like to read further and more in depth on the topic, I'd direct you to *What We Can't Not Know* by J. Budziszewski, a professor of government and philosophy at the University of Texas at Austin.

Now, with all of this in mind, let's turn back to verse 13.

¹³ for it is not the hearers of the Law who are just before God, but the doers of the Law will be justified.

Whether a person is a Jew, who has God's Law, or is a Gentile, and has God's innate law, both will be judged by God for how they have responded to their respective version of the Law. It will not suffice for the Jew or Gentile to boast in the fact they knew they possessed God's Law. If a sinner wants to obtain justification and right standing before a holy God, then what counts is his obedience to the Law.

This is the first time Paul employs the word "to justify," *dikiaoo* (δικαίω). In the rest of the letter he uses it to speak of how the only way a sinner is justified is to be justified by his faith in the Messiah and Savior, Jesus (Rom. 3:20, 24, 28, 30; 4:2, 5; 5:1, 9; 8:30, 33). On this point Paul is most clear. By employing this unique legal word here, Paul lays the groundwork, especially for the Jew, that justification cannot ever come from the fact God gave them the Torah, or from their allegiance to and observance of the Torah. For that to occur, perfect obedience is necessary because God is perfect, and since that is impossible because of man's sinful standing (Rom. 3), we must look to Jesus who is the only one who could and did fulfill the demands of the law.

For those who reject Jesus and seek to come to God on their own terms, His judgment will be most ominous and precise.

⁵J. Budziszewski, *What We Can't Not Know* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2003), 150.

¹⁶ on the day when, according to my gospel, God will judge the secrets of men through Christ Jesus.

What day is this? This is the Great White Throne judgment of the unbelievers of all time (Rev. 20:7ff). At this time, God will call each unbelieving Jew and Gentile before Him and render impartial, fair, and factual judgment. Put differently, they will all experience eternal judgment; however, that judgment will be based on how they responded to the Law they received, whether it was Natural Law or Mosaic Law.

Yes, on that sobering “day,” God will take into account not only the outer actions of unbelievers, but He will take into account the “hidden things” (τὰ κρυπτά), which, based on the context, probably denotes how they internally chose repeatedly to trash the voice of conscience and plow ahead with their love of sin in its various forms. It probably denotes also all the immoral things people did which nobody else was privy to. God, however, is privy to all of our thoughts and actions, and nothing will get by Him on Judgment Day (1 Sam. 16:7; Ps. 139:1–2; Jer. 17:10; ἐν κρυπτῷ; Matt. 6:4, 6, 18). He will not be swayed by Gentile’s who argue, “Hey, I had no clue what you wanted from me? Hey, I had no idea that what I was doing was sinful because it felt so right at the time.” And He certainly won’t be swayed by the fact you were a Jew who had the Law. The mere presence of the Law won’t make you holy, nor will obedience to it because, as I said, you cannot fulfill all of the dictates and demands of the Law all of the time. Only Jesus, the Messiah did that.

The question of the day couldn’t be clearer: What are you going to do with Jesus? Will He be your Judge or your Savior? Will He judge you based on the light you rejected and failed to live up to, whether it is Natural Law or Torah Law, or will He welcome you into His heaven because you embraced Him as the Lord of Light? He is going to want to know how you responded to Natural Law and Torah Law. How have you responded, typically?

- Do you rationalize your behavior?
- Do you surround yourself with moral compromisers like yourself so you can feel good about yourself and your life choices?
- Do you teach your version of twisted morality to others so you can live with your stained conscience?
- Did you re-write the ninth and tenth commandments not to have certain types of evil desire to say that all desire is good so you can enjoy your devious desire?
- Have you committed yourself to lesser moral issues so you don’t have to face the bigger moral issues you have compromised?
- Do you think that the evasion of God’s Law will eventually cause it to be eradicated because it is old and outdated?
- Because you won’t reconcile with the Law Giver, God, are you forcing others around you to reconcile with you because you are simply enjoying the lifestyle you have chosen based on human freedom?
- Are you living as if an occasional or selective observance of the Mosaic Law will be sufficient for entrance into God’s presence?

Note: All the games you play with Natural and Mosaic Law will be your accusers on Judgment Day. God, on the contrary is not playing games. He’s seeking to wake you up from your spiritual

stupor right now and point you to the Christ of the cross and th empty tomb. Why? Because only He can save to the uttermost. So, I'll say it again: What are you going to do with Jesus?