

SECTION II: JEWS AND GENTILES ALIKE ARE SINFUL AND IN NEED OF SALVATION (1:18–3:20)

Paul's letter to the Romans is the first well-written document on evangelism. He systematically explains the sinfulness of both Jews and Gentiles (1:18–3:20), the provision of righteousness through the atoning work of Christ to all who believe (3:21–5:21), and the implications of this righteousness to sin, law, the Holy Spirit's indwelling, election, and renewed life (6:1–15:13).

In this first section (1:18–3:20), Paul explains that *all people*—Gentiles or Jews—are equally sinful, under the wrath of God, and in need of God's righteousness. Paul divides the people into four groups: (a) sinful people (1:18–32), (b) the morally upright (2:1–16), (c) the Jews (2:17–3:8), and (d) humanity (3:9–20). The first two groups do not have the law but are judged on the basis of general revelation, that is, Creation. The third and fourth groups are judged on the basis of the revealed law of God. The conclusion is evident: "every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God" (3:19), which forms a bookend-like structure to the opening words, "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against *all* the godlessness and wickedness of men and women" (1:18). Humanity as a whole is accountable to God and under his wrath; so they are in desperate need for the righteousness of God to rescue them.

The sinful people (1:18–32)

Paul's opening remark is alarming: "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven" (1:18a). Modern society shuns the concept of a wrathful God but the Bible vividly portrays that wrath. Moses witnessed God's wrath while the Israelites worshipped a golden calf (Exod 32:9–10a). David witnessed God's wrath when Uzzah reached out and touched the Ark of Covenant without God's explicit permission (1 Chr 13:10). Even in the New Testament, the disciples were aware of God's wrath (John 3:36). So Paul isn't afraid to speak about God's wrath.

Structurally, Paul first states the *crimes* people have committed against God (1:18b–23) and then explains the *punishments* (1:24–32). Both show that sinful people are under God's wrath.

The crimes (1:18b–23)

Paul categorizes the first group of people as ungodly and wicked. They are ungodly because they do not pay homage to the true God; they are wicked because they suppress the truth about God (1:18). How could they be held accountable if they have never heard about God? Paul answers: "What may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them" (1:19). None can say they did not know the true God existed.

God makes himself known through Creation: "Since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made" (1:20; cf. Acts 14:15–17; 17:22–31; 2 Pet 3:5). Any time a person witnesses thunder or lightning, a desert or a waterfall, a mountain or a canyon, a whale or an ant, that person is witnessing the awesomeness and mightiness of the Supreme God who created all things, as David said (Psa 19:1–4a; cf. Psa 8). Even destructive forces such as hurricanes, earthquakes, floods, tsunamis, volcanic eruptions, tornadoes, and typhoons declare God's sustaining power of protecting humanity from such fierce dangers being daily occurrences. Yet the wicked in their wickedness—a double reference to their wickedness, stressing the fact this wasn't an innocent act—suppress this truth and fail to pay homage to him. That is, they act ungodly. Their actions, however, do not cause the true God to cease to exist. They are unsuccessful in their attempts, but their actions find them guilty.

Paul then explains how their ungodliness and wickedness are expressed: “They neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him” (1:21a). Their lives and actions reflect ingratitude to God for creating all things; they fail to glorify him and thank him. Such thanklessness drives them to foolishness: “Their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools” (1:21b–22).

Folly begets folly. Their *presumed* wisdom that there is no Almighty God drives them to their *realistic* foolishness, they create idol-gods and worshipping them: “[They] exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles” (1:23). Instead of worshiping the immortal, imperishable, and incorruptible God, they follow cheap imitations or imaginations—idols that are mortal, perishable, and corruptible. Idolatry is evidence of foolish hearts that are under the wrath of God.

The punishments (1:24–32)

God has appropriate punishment for them, evidence that they are under his wrath. Paul expresses these punishments with the term, “gave them over” (*paradidōmi*, 1:24, 26, 28) which means *handing over someone to a punishment* (such as John the Baptizer being handed over to imprisonment, Matt 4:12; cf. Matt 5:25). These severe punishments are meant to drive the people to God’s mercy, but the people don’t understand it.

Punishment #1

The first punishment is that God has given them over (*paradidōmi*) to a situation where the normal desires of their hearts became unclean, resulting in their degrading their bodies (1:24). The word “desire” is neutral: it could be a good desire (e.g. when the Lord *desired* to eat the last supper with his disciples, Luke 22:15) or an evil desire (e.g. the devil *desiring* murder, John 8:44). Because the people have set aside God, he has handed them over to a state where their neutral desires turned into unclean desires. Paul says, “their desires have led them to uncleanness that brings dishonor to their bodies.” Most likely it means natural passions that have gone awry, such as drunkenness (which is the natural desire of drinking gone astray), fights (which is the natural desire of preservation gone astray), or slavery (where the natural desire of ruling has gone astray so that someone dominates another). These are acts that dishonor and abuse physical bodies (cf. Eph 4:19). In simple terms, the foolishness of their idolatry leads them to abusive living. Paul concludes by repeating why they were in such disarray: they “exchanged the truth of God for [the] lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator” (1:25a). This lie is *the* supreme lie. They substitute *the* Truth (God exists and he is to be worshipped) for *the* lie (worshipping idols), and as a result abuse their bodies, proving they are under God’s wrath and in need of his righteousness.

Unlike the wicked who refuse to praise God, Paul praises him: “Creator—who is forever praised. Amen” (1:25b).

Punishment # 2

The second punishment is that God has given them over (*paradidōmi*) “to shameful lusts” (1:26a). Paul combines the word “lust” (*pathos*) that has sexual innuendos (cf. Col 3:5; 1 Thess 4:5) with the word “shameful” or “dishonorable” to stress the fact that he is referring to dishonorable lusts or illegitimate sexual relationships that are the results of sin. His descriptions make it even plainer: “Even their [female] exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the [male] also abandoned natural relations with [female] and were inflamed with lust

for one another. [Male] committed indecent acts with other [male]” (1:26b–27a). Paul is deliberately using words that refer to gender (male and female) rather than personhood (man and woman). Paul is undoubtedly referring to lesbianism and homosexuality. Lesbianism and homosexuality are females having unnatural sexual relationships with females and males having unnatural sexual relationship with other males, both signs of God’s abiding wrath. They are not the *cause* of God’s wrath. Rather they are the result of God’s wrath.

Such unnatural passions have consequences: “[They] received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion” (Rom 1:27b). Some are quick to say that this penalty is sexually transmitted diseases that are prevalent among people who indulge in frivolous sexual conduct outside of marriage. But caution must be exercised before condemning any particular disease as part of God’s judgment. However, two penalties are evident within the text: their inability to recognize their own fallacious lifestyle, and their inability to know that they have been *handed over* to that lifestyle.

Punishment # 3

The third punishment is that God has given them over (*paradidōmi*) “to a depraved mind” (1:28b). Some examples of such depravity are “wickedness, evil, greed and depravity . . . envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice . . . gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless” (1:29–31; cf. Matt 15:19; Gal 5:19–21; 1 Tim 1:9–10; and 1 Pet 4:3). Similar to their exchanging natural desires and sexual relationships for unnatural desires and sexual relationships, now they are doing acts that should not be done, such as hating parents and God.

God allows such a degradation of mind for two reasons, which Paul lists like bookends: one at the beginning of this section (1:28a), and the other at the end (1:32). First, “they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God” (1:28a). Secondly, “although they know God’s righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them” (1:32). So God punishes them by handing them over to even further wickedness. This is an ironic twist: whereas they ignore God’s existence, it is God who hands them over to wickedness; whereas they knowingly disobey his righteous decree, they end up living a wicked life, full of sinfulness. Their state proves that they are under the wrath of God, whether or not they acknowledge or realize it, and they are in need of the righteousness that the gospel provides.

Summary

Creation (i.e. “natural revelation”) has a purpose. It teaches the existence of an Almighty God who expects reverence and worship. God abhors substitution -- cheap imitations of himself in the form of idolatry. The “sinful people” are guilty of suppressing, exchanging, and ignoring the truth about the Supreme God who has revealed himself clearly through Creation. Their wickedness and godlessness leads them to idolatry. Since they have set God aside, he has given them over to three punishments: (a) the desires of their hearts have become corrupt and led them to abuse each other, (b) their passions have become dishonorable so that they indulge in unnatural sexual relationships such as lesbianism and homosexuality, and (c) their minds have become depraved where every interpersonal relationship is affected and they become evil, greedy, full of envy, murderous, deceitful, malicious, disobedient, senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless, and haters of God. Their *desires*, *passions* and *mind* are all corrupt, proving they are under the wrath of God and need the righteousness the gospel offers.

The morally upright (2:1–16)

The second group under God’s wrath is the morally upright (2:1–16), both Gentiles (2:1–11) and Jews (2:12–16). Paul may have been imitating Amos (1–2) who recounted the sins of the Gentiles and those of Judah and Israel.

Paul often uses a literary device known as *diatribe* in which “questions or objections are put into the mouth of an imagined critic in order to be answered or demolished” (Bruce). In this section he utilizes such a device, when he writes “O man” (2:1 in Greek), “mere man” (2:3), and the repeated presence of “you” singular (2:3–5). If Paul were addressing his Christian audience, he would have addressed them with the plural “you.” Instead, he is addressing an imaginary opponent, a morally upright person who would respond to Paul’s letter by saying, “But I am not as sinful as the others; I don’t need the gospel.” Paul’s reply is, “Yes, even *you* need God’s righteousness.”

Morally upright by one’s own standard (2:1–11)

Paul begins with a statement of inexcusability: “You, therefore, have no excuse, [O person]” (2:1). Then, he states their crime and punishment.

Crimes

Their first crime is *hypocrisy*: “... at whatever point you judge the other you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things” (2:1). They honor the rules by imposing them on others, but they themselves fail to keep them. What they don’t realize is that they will be judged by the same measure that they use on others. The problem is not in their judging but in their failure to live by their own teachings.

Whereas they ignore their own sinfulness, God does not. “Now we know that God’s judgment against those who do such things is based on truth” (2:2). Since God’s judgment is based on truth, no one can hope to escape: “So when you, [O person], pass judgment on them and yet do the same things, do you think you will escape God’s judgment?” (2:3). Absolutely not!

Their second crime is *contempt*: “Do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that God’s kindness [is trying to lead] you toward repentance?” (2:4). They know of God’s kindness; they are the recipients of God’s kindness, tolerance (holding back immediate retribution), and patience (“ability to bear long in the face of disappointment and opposition” (Morris)). All these gifts—kindness, tolerance, and patience—are to draw them to God. Instead, they show contempt, that is, they consider those mercies as valueless or meaningless because they have calloused and unrepentant hearts (2:5a; cf. Deut 9:27; Ezek 3:7).

Punishment

Since God is impartial and his judgment is truthful, punishment awaits: “You are storing up wrath against yourselves for the day of God’s wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed” (2:5b). The word translated “storing up” is literally “treasuring,” that is, these people “treasure” the wrath of God. Whereas the wrath of God was immediately evident against the first group (1:18–32), the wrath against the second one will be revealed in a future judgment (2:5). To the surprise of these moralists, the Day of the Lord will also bring judgment upon them because they command others to be upright while they themselves are not. So they will not be judged according to their *teachings*; instead, “God will give to each person according to what he [or she]

has done” (Rom 2:6). God’s judgment is based on righteousness and truth, and he will reward or punish each person according to *obedience* rather than mere *knowledge* of truth.

Summary

Morally upright people know a principle about God—he rewards people who seek him. What they don’t realize is that knowing the laws and using the laws to judge others don’t excuse them from his judgment. God judges fairly: “To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life. But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger” (2:7–8).

What Paul stresses here is that God is *impartial*. If someone were to persistently do good, seeking glory and immortality, God would grant that person eternal life. Likewise, if someone were to self-seek, reject truth, and follow evil, he would punish that person (cf. Isa 13:9; cf. 30:30; Deut 29:27; Ps 78:49; Jer 7:20; 21:5). Whereas those who judge others but do not keep the laws themselves are partial, God is not. His judgment is fair. Whether there are such people who seek after glory and immortality, Paul is not keen to answer, although the whole section (1:18–3:20) implies there are no such people.

Before concluding this section, Paul restates his point: “There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil: first for the Jew, then for the [Greek]; but glory, honor and peace for everyone who does good: first for the Jew, then for the [Greek]” (2:9–10). The Jews’ priority for salvation (1:16) also places them in priority for God’s wrath. Judgment, however, is the same for all: reward and punishment are based upon their works. Such a uniform evaluation is because “God does not show favoritism” (2:11). The term for favoritism is literally “taking of face,” the translation of a Hebrew idiom, “recognize the face.” Early Christians coined this term. It came from one of the laws that warned against judging partially: “Do not pervert justice or [recognize the face]. Do not accept a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and twists the words of the righteous” (Deut 16:19; also Lev 19:15; Deut 1:7). The imagery is that of a judge looking at the face of the plaintiff or defendant or taking a bribe so that his or her judgment is affected. This concept is often portrayed in contemporary courts with the “lady justice” blindfolded. God does not look at someone’s face or take a bribe so that he judges unfairly (Deut 10:17; 2 Chr 19:7). His judgment is always fair, truthful, and without partiality.

So the Jews as well as the Gentiles are rewarded according to their works—eternal life for seeking immortality, punishment for doing evil. Judging others while practicing the same wrong is detrimental. God is not partial or unfair.

Morally upright by God’s precepts (2:12–16)

The second group of morally upright people is those who have the law of God. Paul uses *diatribe* and places objections in the mouth of an imaginary character. There is no need to draw anti-Semitic conclusions from this passage (2:12–3:8) any more than drawing anti-Gentile conclusions from the previous passage (1:18–32). Paul does not portray Judaism, law or circumcision negatively or imply that God has forsaken Jews. Instead, he clarifies that *possession* of the law is not the same as *practicing* the law; and that by failing to practice the law the Jews have become as guilty as the rest of humanity (3:23).

Some Jews thought of themselves as righteous because they had the law, the *Torah*. The Lord Jesus illustrated such a sentiment in his parable of a Pharisee praying, “God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector” (Luke

18:11; cf. also 7:39). Likewise, possession of the law distinguished Jews from the rest for they knew the mind of God, whereas others did not. Having the law, however, wasn't enough as the Jews thought. Paul gives three correctives.

Corrective # 1

The first corrective is that the true difference between Jews and Gentiles is not the *possession* of the law but the *practice* of it. One positive and one negative principle come from this corrective.

The negative principle is that condemnation comes equally to both groups: "All who sin apart from the law [*anomōs*] will also perish apart from the law, and all who sin under the law [*en-nomōs*] will be judged [through] the law" (2:12). Paul makes a play on words to make the proximity between Gentiles and Jews as close as possible: Gentiles are *a-nomōs* (without-the-law) and Jews are *en-nomōs* (within-the-law). The Gentiles sin because they do not have the law. But the Jews sin even *with* the possession of the law and will be judged through the law which they possess.

The positive principle is that *justification* comes equally to both groups: "It is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God's sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be [justified]" (2:13; cf. Lev 18:15). The law repeatedly told them: "Hear now, O Israel, the decrees and laws I am about to teach you. Follow [i.e. obey] them so that you may live" (Deut 4:1a). They knew one must *hear* and *follow* (obey).

The Gentiles, on the other hand, hardly heard the law (although they were not prevented from hearing it -- Deut 31:12). But "when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law," (2:14a) they are justified. Rahab is a prime example. Although she didn't know the Jewish law, by protecting God's spies she was rescued, justified (James 2:25), and is listed among the "righteous" (Heb 11:31). In such cases, Gentiles prove that "they—not having the law—are the law for themselves" (2:14b, mine). Although they don't have the Mosaic law in their possession, they have the law of God in themselves. (Later Paul will explain God had placed three "watchmen" in the Gentiles to guard them). Partly this is true because God has revealed himself to them (1:19). There is something innate in humanity that affirms that God created them. That is because even *lost* Gentiles are made in God's image and have his knowledge in them. Basically, Gentiles and Jews are on an equal footing.

Corrective # 2

The second corrective is that the Gentiles "show that [the work] of the law [is] written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts" (2:15a). These are like three "watchmen" that guard a person. The first watchman is the heart where God has written "the work of the law." In other words, somehow God's moral laws written in their hearts of Gentiles enable them to keep some of law's requirements and demands. For example, all societies have some definition of adultery or murder which they loathe to see broken.

The second watchman is *conscience*. Paul adds the preposition "together with" (*sun*) to the verb "witness," which gives a beautiful alliteration (*summarturousēs . . . suneidēseōs*) and the meaning, "their conscience testifies together with their heart" (2:15). Conscience is fickle and can be either positive or negative: "A conscience may be oversensitive (1 Cor. 10:25) or not sensitive enough (1 Tim. 4:2); it pronounces on other people's activities (2 Cor. 4:2; 5:11) as well as one's own (2 Cor. 1:12)." But when it cooperates along with heart that has the "work of the law" written in it, it is able to do what is right.

The third watchman is *thought*. This is like the glue uniting heart with conscience. When heart and conscience and thought are united, the Gentile is able to keep the precepts of the law.

So God has given three “watchmen” to Gentiles: *hearts* that have the work of the law written on them, *conscience* that testifies together with the heart, and *thought* that glues the heart to the conscience. Even “fallen” humankind have God’s watchmen in them, as feeble as they may be, to guard them and to guide them to do the work of the law.

Corrective # 3

The third corrective is that everyone will be either accused or defended on the judgment day when God will judge all people’s hidden acts (**2:15b–16**). Anyone’s failure to fulfill the law (“accusing”) or success in keeping the work of the law (“defending”)—both being legal terms—will be revealed only in the future, on the day of judgment when God will judge the hidden acts of all people. A person might be able to fool those around him or her by a secretive life that looks holy and righteous, but the judgment day will reveal the secret acts of every heart and God will judge impartially (**2:16b**).

But there is a surprise—the ultimate evaluation is “according to the gospel that I proclaim about Jesus Christ” (**2:16b**, mine). Although doing the work of the law might initially vindicate a person as justified, it is only the first step. The true evaluation is based on the gospel. God ultimately judges all people based upon the gospel of his Son Jesus Christ.

The message of this passage is “all who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who sin under the law will be judged by the law” (2:12). The morally upright Gentile and the morally upright Jew are guilty in God’s sight. By establishing that Gentiles could be justified apart from the law, Paul removed the covenantal protection the Jews felt—so Gentiles could be righteous and Jews could be guilty. God is never partial and will grant eternal life to anyone (Jew or Gentile) who seeks him. But, as Paul would explain, none sought God (3:9–20) and therefore everyone was under his wrath in need of his righteousness through Christ.

The Jews (2:17–3:8)

The third group under the wrath of God is the Jews. Paul has been addressing the morally upright, some of whom have the law. But in this section he specifically addresses them as “You Jew” (**2:17**). He uses the singular “Jew” since he is addressing a Jew in his diatribe and not necessarily the Jewish audience in Rome. Jews were Abraham’s descendants. In the time of Paul, the name “Jew” referred to the special status enjoyed by the covenant people of Israel, in distinction from other peoples (cf. 1:16; 2:9, 11). Paul holds them more accountable because they have more privileges but fail to follow God’s ways. He specifically addresses the two distinctive markers (“badges”) that the Jews have, the possession of the law and circumcision, and explains that neither will prevent them from facing the wrath of God.

Reliance on the law is of no value (2:17–24)

Their first distinctive marker is the possession of the law, a synonym for the Old Testament. Jews have the law, and as such they have four privileges.

First, they are able to boast in God, since the law reveals him to them (**2:17**). The Old Testament reveals who God is and what his attributes are. Jews who have the law are able to discern these and boast in their God. Boasting about God is a clear teaching of the Bible (1 Chr 16:34–35; Jer 9:24). They have a right to boast: He is Almighty. This is a privilege.

Secondly, the law tells them God's will (**2:18a**). For example, it tells them his will is not to steal (Lev 19:10; cf. Rom 2:21–23).

Thirdly, the law helps them to know how to “approve of what is superior” (**2:18b**). Paul is referring to the Jews' ability to discern and choose the best (cf. Phil 1:10).

Fourthly, the law helps them instruct others, to be “a guide for the blind, a light for those who are in the dark, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of infants -- because you have in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth” (**2:19–20**). From the beginning of salvation history, Jews were to be channels of blessing for the nations around them (Gen 12:1–3; Exod 19:5–6).

Messiah, the ideal Jew, for example, would “lead the blind by ways they have not known, along unfamiliar paths” and would “turn the darkness into light before them” (Isa 42:16; cf. 9:2; 42:6–7; 49:6; 60:3). Since they have the law— “a light for my path” (Ps 119:105)—they can direct others' paths.

Despite these privileges, Jews are still under the wrath of God because their *actions* betray them: “You, then, who teach others, do you not teach yourselves? (**2:21**). They fail to practice the teachings they know and teach. They have become those who take out the speck from others' eyes while having a plank in their own (Matt 7:3–5). So Paul lists their crimes—areas where they have broken the very law that they have.

Crime #1

Their first crime is stealing. Whereas they teach others not to steal, they themselves steal (**2:22**). They preach against stealing in light of explicit law: “Do not steal” (Exod 20:15; Lev 19:11; Deut 5:19). But in their actions they steal—maybe literally (as in wealth and property) or figuratively (as in robbing someone's honor or respect).

Crime #2

Their second crime is committing adultery. They teach people not to commit adultery just as the law demanded (Exod 20:14; Deut 5:18), but they themselves commit adultery (**2:22**), either literally or figuratively (cf. Matt 5:28).

Crime #3

Their third crime is idolatry, through temple robbing. “They abhor idolatry, yet rob temples” (**2:22**). It refers to figurative robbing— “withholding of what is due to God” (Mal 3:8).

Crime #4

Their fourth crime is lip service. Although they brag of the law, they dishonor God by breaking it (**2:23**). Their boasting about the law is good (Ps 1:2; 119:17; cf. 119:77, 92, 174; Rom 7:22) but their actions trouble Paul. Violating the law is “transgressing” against it.

Their transgression mocks God: “As it is written, ‘God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you’” (**2:24**). Paul quotes the prophet Isaiah where God laments over Israel's captivity, which dishonors him: “For my people have been taken away for nothing, and those who rule them mock,” declares the LORD. “And all day long my name is constantly blasphemed” (Isa 52:5; cf. Ezek 36:22). Similarly, Jews blaspheme God's name among the nations by disobeying God's law.

Paul sees no difference between the actions of the Gentiles who do not have the law and the actions of the Jews who have it. Having the law or knowing it doesn't exempt the Jews from

God's wrath. Only *abiding by the law* can justify one as a "law-keeper," or "righteous according to the law." The law says, "Do and live; or don't do and die."

So far Paul has been speaking about their dependence on the law that separates them from the rest of the people. But their failure to abide by the law doesn't set them free. Instead it places them under condemnation. Having the law is the Jews' proudest privilege; but only *obeying* the law benefits them.

Circumcision is of no value (2:25–29)

Their second distinctive marker (or "badge") is circumcision. Circumcision separated Jews from other nations. God commanded Abraham to circumcise all his descendants as a sign of the covenant that he had made with him (Gen 17:11–14). As such, all Jews were circumcised, including the Lord Jesus and Paul (Luke 2:21; Phil 3:5).

Paul's opening words, "Circumcision has value" (2:25a; cf. also 3:1b–2a), is soothing to Jews who know who first commanded it (Gen 17:11). Paul would not undermine this observance (cf. Acts 21:18–26). But its value is conditional: "If you observe the law" (2:25b; cf. 5:3). In the context, Paul had given ample evidence that they had been violators of the law—they stole, committed adultery, and robbed temples. So Paul is saying that their circumcision had become of no value to them. They had become like the uncircumcised sinners, the Gentiles.

Paul concludes, "But if you break the law, you have become as though you have not been circumcised" (2:25c). Elsewhere he calls those who took pride in circumcision, without obeying the law, as "under-cutters" or "mutilators of flesh" (Phil 3:2). If a Jew failed to keep the law, then his circumcision was of no merit to him. Therefore, Paul gives three correctives.

Corrective # 1

First, "If those who are not circumcised keep the law's requirements, will they not be regarded as though they were circumcised?" (2:26). Paul's accusation is harsh but true. He is calling the Jews with the law and circumcision as "uncircumcised," and the Gentiles without the law and circumcision as "circumcised."

Corrective # 2

The second corrective is that the one who was not circumcised physically and but obeyed the law would condemn the Jews as lawbreakers although they had the written code and circumcision (2:27). It was normally assumed the righteous would judge the unrighteous (e.g., 1 Cor 6:2), that is, the Jews with the law would judge the Gentiles (who were automatically considered as "sinners" because they lacked the law). But Paul reverses it: the Gentiles (uncircumcised) would judge the Jews as "transgressors of the law" when the Gentiles themselves kept its precepts.

Corrective # 3

The third corrective is that a person "is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical" (2:28). The Jews knew their identity came from their ancestry: from Judah, Jacob, Isaac, and Abraham. As evidence, they circumcised (Gen 17:11). Paul downplays the external circumcision and emphasizes the internal circumcision: "A man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code" (2:29a). The Jews were aware of this "internal circumcision." "Circumcise your hearts, therefore, and do not be stiff-necked any longer" (Deut 10:16; cf. Jer 4:4; Ezek 44:9). Paul appeals to that belief and says a true Jew is one who is circumcised in the heart. Paul wants

the Jews to take pride in what God values: a spiritually renewed, circumcised heart. (Paul is also foreshadowing the renewed life in Christ enabled by the Holy Spirit, chapter 8.)

When a person is truly circumcised in the heart, then, such a person's praise is "not from men, but from God" (2:29b). This is a play on words because the words *Jews* and *Judah* mean "praise" (cf. Gen 29:35; 49:8). Paul is saying it is not the physical descendants of Judah whom God praises; instead, the spiritually circumcised people are those God praises as his people. In this way Paul calls the Gentiles who obey the law "Judahs."

In summary, Paul wanted the Jew in his diatribe -- one who was quick to judge others but did not keep the laws himself -- to realize that neither having the law nor being circumcised automatically exempted him from the wrath of God. God was impartial. Only those who kept the law—written or unwritten—would receive a judgment verdict of "not guilty." Justification by the law was based on works: those who obeyed the law would be acquitted and those who disobeyed would be condemned. Mere possession of the law or circumcision did not exempt anyone from God's judgment. The final judgment was based on the gospel and the circumcision of the heart done by the Spirit. Such people were truly praiseworthy in God's sight.

God is faithful (3:1–8)

Paul's accusations against the Jews and his reassessment of the value of the law and circumcision would provoke anger among the Jews and puzzlement among the Gentiles, and they would ask, "What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew, or what value is there in circumcision?" (3:1). So, is there any advantage in being a Jew?

Paul answers: "Much in every way!" (3:2a). He doesn't want them to conclude, based on 2:25–29, that there isn't anything special about the Jews since such a conclusion would undermine important doctrines such as God's faithfulness to the covenant people (3:3; cf. chap. 9–11). So he lists these blessings (3:2; 9:45). But, such blessings do not exempt them from judgment.

Then Paul states the blessings. "[Of single most importance], they have been entrusted with the very words of God" (3:2b). The Old Testament affirms this. Abraham, their forefather, heard the word of God and followed God, leaving Haran (Gen 12:1–4). Moses, their leader, heard the voice of God (Exod 3:2–22) and received his commandments on Mount Sinai (19:1–25). All prophets were Jews and they heard the very words of God. Receiving God's Word set them apart from the rest of the nations. So, yes, there were advantages in being Jews.

Instead of explaining all the benefits immediately (he will wait till chapters 9–11 to talk about these), Paul talks about God's faithfulness in the midst of Jews' faithlessness. Paul phrases it as a question: "What if some did not have faith? Will their lack of faith nullify God's faithfulness?" (3:3). Paul himself answers: "Absolutely not!" He then refers to God's trustworthiness: "Let God be [trustworthy], and every man a liar" (3:4a). God is trustworthy even when all of humanity has proven untrustworthy. Since he is trustworthy, God can boldly proclaim judgment on them: "As it is written: . . . 'You may be proved right when you speak and prevail when you judge'" (3:4b). Paul is citing David who, realizing his sin, proclaimed God's uprightness and faithfulness: "Against you, and you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge" (Ps 51:4).

God's holiness and justice are not contingent upon Israel's faithfulness. Since Paul argues that God has remained faithful in spite of the Jews' unfaithfulness, an opponent might conclude, "If our unrighteousness brings out God's righteousness more clearly . . . [then] God is unjust in

bringing his wrath on us” (3:5a). This is actually a twisted argument. It goes something like, “The more we sin, the more punishment God has to inflict upon us; and the more punishment he inflicts upon us, the more he proves himself to be righteousness, i.e., faithful to his word of punishing us. So our sins only glorify God.”

Instead of answering this illogical reasoning, Paul basically dismisses it as “human” (3:5b) and “faulty” (3:6a) and apologizes for mentioning it. Then he explains God’s impartiality in imposing wrath on them, the Jews, and affirms that God will impartially judge the world (3:6b).

Paul then explains that God’s truthfulness is not contingent upon the Jews’ falsehood. Paul impersonates the interlocutor (opponent), using first person singular, and says, “If my falsehood enhances God’s truthfulness and so increases his glory, why am I still condemned as a sinner?” (3:7). This logic, too, is twisted, and Paul doesn’t answer it. Instead, he pronounces a judgment: “Their condemnation is deserved” (3:8b). Anyone who comes to this bizarre conclusion— “my sinfulness increases God’s glory” — deserves only condemnation, and not an answer or an argument. Ironically, some slanderously accuse Paul of promoting this teaching: “Let us do evil that good may result” (3:8a), which he vehemently opposes (chapter 6). Paul’s doctrine of grace is never an excuse for licentiousness (6:18–22; Gal 5:1). God doesn’t need the falsehood of humanity for his glory to shine. As such, the Jews’ falsehood only condemns them. Such foolish thoughts are not worth entertaining.

In summary, the Jews are as sinful as the Gentiles because although they have the law, they don’t live by it. They teach others the law and boast in it, but don’t obey it. They think they are exempt from the wrath of God because they have the law, but God’s judgment is impartial and based on truth. Similarly, circumcision is of no value when those who are circumcised don’t keep the requirements of the law. God cares neither about the possession of the law nor physical circumcision; instead he cares about a spiritually circumcised heart, a life lived in faith in the gospel concerning the Son, and a renewed life by the Holy Spirit. There are advantages to being Jews, such as possessing the words of God. Such advantage should lead them to repentance. Since they don’t repent, they are as condemned as the Gentiles, are pronounced “sinners,” are under the wrath of God, and are in need of the justification of God that is offered in the gospel of the Son.

Humanity as a whole (3:9–20)

Paul has been proving the guiltiness of sinful people (1:18–32), the morally upright (2:1–16), and those who call themselves “Jews” (1–3:8). In this concluding section, he places all humanity under guilt and under God’s wrath. Paul combines several Old Testament scriptures to draw one verdict: *all of humanity is sinful in God’s sight*.

Paul begins the section with an astounding question, “What then, have we become so unacceptable?” (3:9, mine). Paul uses a rare word, “acceptable” (*proechō*), that occurs only one other time in the Bible, in Numbers 16:15, to make his point clear. Paul asks “Have we Jews become so unacceptable?” and answers, “Not at all!” Instead, they are part of sinful humanity: “We have already made the charge that Jew and Gentile alike are under sin” (3:9b). In other words, the Jews are no more disadvantaged or advantaged than the Gentiles; both groups are on same footing. In fact, the whole of humankind is on same footing, as the rest of the Old Testaments quotations will illustrate.

Paul's conclusion might sound contradictory to his previous answer to the question, "What advantage is there in being a Jew?" "Much in every way!" he says (3:2). All privileges cease when people sin.

In order to strengthen his argument that all of humanity is equally sinful, Paul cites seven quotations from the Old Testament. All together form three accusations: (a) there is no one who is righteous (vv. 11–12), (b) all are guilty of the sin of speech (vv. 13–14), and (c) all are guilty of violence against others.

No one is righteous

After beginning with the words, "As it is written" (**3:10a**), a formula for citing the Old Testament scriptures, Paul paraphrases the first three verses of Psalm 14, a psalm of David, as, "There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one" (**3:10b–12**).

All are guilty of sinful speech

Then Paul cites another psalm of David that attests to the falsehood of people who suppress the truth with their falsehoods, the same accusation Paul has against the morally upright (Rom 2:8). Paul cites the last line of Psa 140:3, "Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit. The poison of vipers is on their lips" (Rom **3:13**), to make the point that their speeches repeatedly prove their sinfulness and need for God's righteousness. Paul quotes another passage from the OT (Psa 10:7) to confirm his claim: "Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness" (Rom **3:14**), meaning "deceptive flatteries." These crimes, originally accusations against Jews, are charges against all humanity, both Jews and Gentiles. None is righteous and none is exempt from sinful tongues.

All are guilty of violence

People's actions, too, prove they are equally guilty. Paul cites Isaiah as his witness (59:3–8a). Paul quotes a portion of this long charge against Judah ("Their feet are swift to shed blood; ruin and misery mark their ways, and the way of peace they do not know," Rom **3:15–17**) and applies it to all of humanity. Everyone is quick to shed another's blood.

The basic conclusion is "there is no fear of God before their eyes" (Rom **3:18**). Paul cites David to affirm this (Psa 36:1).

After citing various OT scriptures to form his conclusion, Paul addresses the Jews one more time by saying, "Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God" (**3:19**).

To say it differently, "No one is justified before God by the *works of the law* because by the law comes only the knowledge of sin" (**3:20**, mine). The law doesn't justify anyone; it only condemns those who disobey. As such, having the law (which the Jews took pride in) is actually a disadvantage; it is quick to point out the sinfulness of the people. But the *absence* of the law is no deliverance either. The law condemns all violators—those who know the law and those who do not—as "sinners." As such, all humanity is equally condemned before God.

Both the Gentiles (whom Jews thought of as "sinners") and the Jews (who had the law and circumcision) were equally guilty and in need of the righteousness that God alone provides in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

Paul explains that everyone is in need of God's righteousness because all are sinful. The sinful and upright people have natural revelation. Yet they sin against God and are under his wrath. The morally upright people know the law, either through their God given heart (plus conscience and thought) or they have the precepts of the law. Yet they sin and are under God's wrath. The Jews have the law to guide them and circumcision to set them apart. Yet they sin against God and are waiting to receive his wrath. Basically all of humanity has sinned against God either knowingly or unknowingly. The law condemns all and holds them accountable. Since there is no partiality with God, who judges all people fairly, all are equally guilty. Since all—Jews and Gentiles alike—are equally guilty, they are also equally in need of God's righteousness provided in the gospel of the Son. No exceptions!