

2:12 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;

2:13 for it is not the hearers of the Law who are just before God, but the doers of the Law will be justified.

2:14 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,

2:15 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,

Verse 11 had said that there is no partiality with God. Verses 12–15 tell us how we know that God is impartial. To understand how verses 11–15 fit together, it helps to see that verses 14 and 15 explain the first half of verse 12 and verse 13 explains the second half of verse 12. In other words, verses 14 and 15 tell why those without the law will perish (2:12a), while verse 13 tells us why those with the law will perish (2:12b).

2:12a For all who have sinned without the Law will also perish without the Law. . .

(why?) 2:14 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,

2:15 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,

2:12b . . . and all who have sinned under the Law will be judged by the Law;

(why?) 2:13 for it is not the hearers of the Law who are just before God, but the doers of the Law will be justified.

In these verses we see that God is fair because He judges men according to the information that is available to them, not on the basis of what they have never heard. Those who have the law will be judged by their response to the law. Those who don't have the written law won't be judged by it. Rather, God will use other criteria to judge them; they will be judged by the law of God written in their hearts (2:15).

All people have the work of the law "written in their hearts" (2:15); that is, all have an internal standard of righteousness (a moral sense) imprinted in their being that parallels what is written in the Scriptures. This is because God is moral by nature and people are made in the image of God; therefore, people also do moral acts "by nature" (φύσις); they have an instinctive moral sense. The man who pays his debts, honors his parents, and is kind to the poor does the things of the law (Hodge, 55). Thus, it isn't necessary for the Gentiles to have the law written out precept by precept in order for God to judge their actions, for they already have the moral precepts that underline the law within them (Philips, Romans, 43). One could say, men are "a law to themselves" (2:14). That is, in a limited way, they reveal the law of God to themselves when they naturally do the moral and ethical requirements the Law of Moses prescribes.

Verse 15 explains how we know that all people have the law of God written in their hearts, namely, because they "show the work of the Law written in their hearts." How do they show it? In that everyone has a conscience that testifies of this law; all have an inward voice that accuses them of evil and vindicates them when they do what is right.

If there was no standard of righteousness within us, there would be no guilt associated with sinful actions. Everything would be amoral. The inward debate of accusations could not take place unless men have a standard of right and wrong by which they judge things (Stifler, 42). Or, to state it differently, if our consciences tell us that we have broken a standard or a moral law, then there must be a moral law inside of us. If there was no moral law built into us, we would have no reason to feel guilty. If the work of the law wasn't written in the human heart, the Israelites wouldn't have responded to the Mosaic Law when it was given (Newell, Romans, 64).

Conscience is God's watchdog of the soul, but it is to be a guard, not a guide, for the conscience can be silenced or seared. It is possible to obtain the approval of your conscience even when we do something wrong (Newell, Romans, 43).

In other words, both human conduct ("by nature" doing the things in the law—2:14) and the consciousness of right and wrong (2:15) demonstrate that man is a moral being, that he has the law written in his heart. This in itself provides an adequate basis for judgment for men who do not have the law. Men without the law are not judged by the revelation that they have never heard; they are judged by the moral law that they possess in their own hearts and fail to keep.

The Jew, on the other hand, had two witnesses of what was right and wrong—the witness of his conscience and the written law itself. He will therefore be judged by his response to law as well as his conscience; "for not the hearers of the law are just in the sight of God, but the doers of the law will be justified" (2:13; Ja. 1:22–24).

In conclusion, we see that God's judgment is impartial (2:11). It is impartial because there is one standard to judge everyone—the law. The Jew is responsible to the law that was given to him in written form; the Gentile is responsible to the law as it is found in his heart. Judgment is also impartial because God only holds men accountable to the light they possess: the Jew is not given an advantage because he has the law; the Gentile is not excused for being ignorant of it. Both are judged in relation to their response to the revelation they have.

2:16 "on the day when, according to my gospel, God will judge the secrets of men through Christ Jesus."

Verse 16 is the conclusion of the section that began in 2:1 and gives the last aspect of God's judgment. Judgment is according to the gospel and will include the secrets of men's hearts (Ro. 2:16).

The searching character of the judgment is not solely based upon external appearances as it is done by men (Hodge, 57). Day by day, men's consciences will accuse and excuse them, but God is aware of this daily dialog and will judge them in light of the secrets in their hearts (Newell, Romans, 65). He will judge both the sins we hide from others (II Cor. 4:2; Eph. 5:12) and the sins we hide from ourselves (Ps. 19:12), for God judges according to the truth (2:2).

In what sense is God's judgment *according to the gospel*?

In this context it cannot mean that the gospel is the criteria for judgment or Paul would be contradicting what he just said about the law being the criteria (see above discussion). It probably means that (1) God appointed Christ to judge men at the final judgment (Matt. 25:31–46; Jo. 5:20; Acts 17:31; II Cor. 5:10; II Tim. 4:1), which is in accordance with the gospel, or (2) that judgment is a part of the gospel message that Paul was commissioned to deliver (Hodge, 57). The latter seems preferable since the judgment is “through the Son” (2:16) and the gospel is concerning the Son (1:1–2); the judgment is naturally part of the gospel that Paul preaches. Just as the gospel is good news for those who believe, rejection of the good news has its implications (cf. Jn. 3:16–21).

The Jew Condemned (2:17–3:8)

Paul had addressed the irreligious man in Romans 1:18–32 and the moral man in 2:1–16. He now addresses the Jew (2:17, 28, 29; 3:1). The Jews assumed that they were exempt from judgment for three main reasons: (1) they were descendants of Abraham, (2) they had the law, and (3) they were circumcised. Each of these claims had a basis of truth, but they did not ensure salvation as was believed.

***2:17 But if you bear the name "Jew" and rely upon the Law and boast in God,
2:18 and know His will and approve the things that are essential, being instructed out of the Law,
2:19 and are confident that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness,
2:20 a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of the immature, having in the Law the embodiment of knowledge and of the truth,***

In verses 17–20 Paul lists five advantages upon which the Jew placed his hope. Although we cannot help but read “latent irony” in Paul’s words, nevertheless, the Jewish claims did place them in a position of dignity and privilege. “The more enhanced the privilege the more heinous become the sins exposed” (Murray, 81).

- a. His name; “you are called a Jew.” The name “Jew” comes from the word “Judah” and means “one who is praised.” (McClain, 82). It was a title specifying nationality and identified the one who bore it as a member of the theocracy and rightful heir of its promises. The Jew believed that anyone who bore that name was blessed of God.
- b. His trust; “you . . . rest on the law.” Although obedience to the revealed will of God which was expressed in the law resulted in salvation, the Jews had come to have a blind and mechanical trust that mere possession of the law, not perfect adherence to it, was sufficient.
- c. His boast; “you . . . make your boast in God.” The Jew also had the privilege of knowing the One True God. Isaiah 45:25 says, “In the LORD all the descendants of Israel shall be justified, and shall glory.” Glorifying (boasting) in God was the epitome of true worship. “That the apostle should have referred to this in connection with what is by implication an indictment demonstrates perhaps more than any other prerogative enumerated how close lies the grossest

vice to the highest privilege and how the best can be prostituted in the service of the worst” (Murray, 82).

d. His knowledge; “you . . . know His will and approve the things that are excellent, being instructed out of the law.” (2:18). The Jew relied on the law given by God to Moses. The reception of the law was the result of possessing a relationship to God that no other people enjoyed. Through the law men could know the will of God. The law was filled with excellent things. The Jews had an advantage over the rest of humanity in that they knew what pleased God, but they did not capitalize on that knowledge.

e. His confidence; “you . . . are confident that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of babes, having the form of knowledge and truth in the law” (2:19). As a possessor of the embodiment of knowledge in the law, the Jew could well have been a light to the spiritually blind, a corrector of the foolish, and a teacher of babes. “That he should have been convinced of this responsibility would in itself have been a virtue rather than a vice” (Murray, 83). But the Jew thought that his superior knowledge was ample reason to look at Gentiles in disdain.

2:21 you, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself? You who preach that one shall not steal, do you steal?

2:22 You who say that one should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples?

2:23 You who boast in the Law, through your breaking the Law, do you dishonor God?

In verses 21–23 Paul turns to sharply rebuke the Jews for their inconsistency between profession and practice. Even though the Jew taught, preached, and told others what they needed to do to obtain righteousness, Paul asks, “You, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself? You who preach that a man should not steal, do you steal? You who say, ‘Do not commit adultery,’ do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who make your boast in the law, do you dishonor God through breaking the law?” (2:21–23). Paul does not accuse every Jew of doing such things, nor does he say, “You are all thieves!” Rather, he arouses the conscience and asks, “Are you a thief?” The same questions can be asked of us today. Are we zealous about telling others what they need to do but don’t do it ourselves?

2:24 For “THE NAME OF GOD IS BLASPHEMED AMONG THE GENTILES BECAUSE OF YOU,” just as it is written.

Isaiah 52:5 (quoted in verse 24) applied as much to Paul’s contemporaries as it did to their ancestors hundreds of years earlier; “the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.” Those who possess the knowledge of God should radiate His glory and goodness to others. When they don’t, the result is blasphemous. “The reasoning of the Gentiles is to the effect that a people are like their God, and if the people can perpetuate such crimes, their God must be of the same character and is to be execrated accordingly” (Murray, 85). That is, as the Gentiles observed the Jew’s hypocrisy, they looked at them and the God of their beliefs with contempt. God’s reputation among the nations is

contaminated by those who believe in Him. The nations look at God's people and think little of their God. In that sense God was blasphemed.

2:25 For indeed circumcision is of value if you practice the Law; but if you are a transgressor of the Law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision.

2:26 So if the uncircumcised man keeps the requirements of the Law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision?

2:27 And he who is physically uncircumcised, if he keeps the Law, will he not judge you who though having the letter of the Law and circumcision are a transgressor of the Law?

Circumcision was a sign of the covenant that God had established with the nation of Israel (Gen. 17:10–11), but over time the Jews became over-confident in the rite. But it wasn't the possession of circumcision or the lack of it that determined salvation. The whole question rests on the law. Of what value is it to possess the symbol of Judaism but lack the substance of it? Circumcision did not help the lawbreaker, nor was the lack of circumcision a basis of condemnation for the Gentile. In reality, the very fact that the Jew was a circumcised man only heightened his guilt because it identified him as one who had the law (Gal. 5:3). Though he possessed the law and the sign of it, his failure to keep the law made his circumcision uncircumcision (Ro. 2:27; Jer. 9:25; Deut. 10:16). He was, therefore, subject to both God's and the Gentile's condemnation.

2:28 For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh.

2:29 But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God.

Verses 28 and 29 show who is a true Jew and what true circumcision really is. Paul is not saying that Christians become Jews, but rather that not all Jews are true Jews.

A true Jew is one who has had his heart transformed by the Spirit of God and is primarily a Jew inwardly (Deut. 30:6; Jer. 4:4; 9:25, 26). He must both be born of a descendant of Abraham and be born of the Spirit. He would then live up to the name "Jew." It's one thing to be called a Jew (2:17; i.e. "one who is praised," see 1.a. above) and another to really be praiseworthy in God's eyes.

As creatures of darkness immediately seek shelter when exposed to the sun, so man seeks a new refuge to hide under once he has been uncovered. Knowing this, Paul anticipates objections to what he has already discussed. Each objection focuses on the main concern, that if a Jew is condemned along with everyone else as Paul has said, what good is it to be a Jew?

The objections and Paul's answers are as follows:

(1) Objection: What advantage then has the Jew, or what is the profit of circumcision? (3:1)

3:1 Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the benefit of circumcision?

3:2 Great in every respect. First of all, that they were entrusted with the oracles of God.

The objection restated: The OT clearly promises many blessings to the nation of Israel. If what Paul says is true, namely, that the Jew is condemned, what did it matter if someone was a Jew or not? In fact, it could be argued that circumcision was actually a liability and, therefore, a disadvantage since it held men to a higher standard than the Gentiles.

Paul's answer (3:2): The advantage that the Jew had was that he was the recipient and custodian of revelation given by God that allowed him to understand sin, grace, and salvation in a way that the Gentiles could not. The law could potentially lead the Jew to Christ once He was revealed as Scripture had predicted. Possessing the law was a great honor, but such an honor carried with it the correspondingly great responsibility of obedience through faith.

In other words, Paul is not denying the advantages the Jew had by saying that they are under God's wrath. Though mere possession of the law could not save, it was a great advantage to possess the law when it was accompanied with faith.

(2) Objection: For what if some did not believe? Will their unbelief make the faithfulness of God ineffective or cause God to change His promises? (3:3)

3:3 What then? If some did not believe, their unbelief will not nullify the faithfulness of God, will it?

3:4 May it never be! Rather, let God be found true, though every man be found a liar, as it is written, "THAT YOU MAY BE JUSTIFIED IN YOUR WORDS, AND PREVAIL WHEN YOU ARE JUDGED."

The objection restated: Even though Israel was entrusted with the Scripture, the Jews did not believe God; nevertheless, their unbelief could never frustrate the plans of God or alter His purposes. In other words, even if the Jew didn't believe, doesn't God keep His promises to the nation anyway?

Paul's answer (3:4): God's promises will never fail no matter how man responds to Him. Israel was still a recipient of "adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the service of God, and the promises" (Ro. 9:4). Even in unbelief, God did not forsake His covenant. The promises were, and are still, available to every Jew. However, that does not mean that every Jew will benefit from them. Reception of the promises involved faith in the God who offered them. The fact that the Jews are under God's wrath does not prove that God is faithless in His promises toward them, it simply testifies to the unbelief of man.

The fact that a Jew is under God's wrath is not a denial of the faithfulness of God, it is a testimony of the unbelief of man.

(3) Objection: But if our unrighteousness demonstrates the righteousness of God, what shall we say? Is God unjust who inflicts wrath? (3:5)

3:5 But if our unrighteousness demonstrates the righteousness of God, what shall we say? The God who inflicts wrath is not unrighteous, is He? (I am speaking in human terms.)

3:6 May it never be! For otherwise, how will God judge the world?

The objection restated: The objector might reason that since the unrighteousness of man serves to display the righteousness of God more clearly, then God would be unjust in inflicting wrath on the sinner, for the unrighteousness of man would be bringing glory to God.

Paul's answer (3:6): Paul makes it clear that he doesn't believe this to be a valid objection in his mind; he is just speaking as a man might (3:5c). He counters by saying that if God unjustly inflicted punishment, He would be unfit to judge the world. If He didn't judge sin, He would also be unjust. Since every Jew knew that God is just, the objection proves to be illogical.

The fact that unrighteousness reveals God's righteousness by way of contrast does not mean that judgment will be overlooked. As Romans 9 will show, it is through the judgment of the unrighteous that God demonstrates His righteousness.

(4) Objection: But if through my falsehood God's truthfulness abounds to his glory, why am I still being condemned as a sinner? (3:7—RSV)

3:7 But if through my lie the truth of God abounded to His glory, why am I also still being judged as a sinner?

3:8 And why not say (as we are slanderously reported and as some claim that we say), "Let us do evil that good may come"? Their condemnation is just.

The objection restated: The fourth objection is of the same nature as the third one. If falsehood causes God's glory to abound, then why would God judge the sinner when his sin only magnifies the excellence of God's attributes?

Paul's answer (3:8): Paul takes the argument to its logical conclusion. If evil is good because it shows God's holiness, then we may as well do evil so that good will come. Or, in modern terminology we would say, "if the end justifies the means, then behavior doesn't matter."

It is easy to see how Paul's doctrine of justification could be interpreted in this way. If man can be declared righteous (i.e. be justified) apart from the law, morality, or religion, then he may as well continue to sin. The apostle's response to those who draw such conclusions is, "Their condemnation is just." If anyone thinks that he should not be condemned because his lies and falsehood magnified the truthfulness of God, let him ponder this—"his condemnation is deserved."

Two very important truths can be learned from this section:

(1) There are believers who want to impose the law on Christians. They say, "If we aren't under the law, then we will freely sin." But imposing the law is not the answer to controlling sin. The Jews had the law, but they still couldn't see their own sinfulness. They trusted in their own faulty obedience to save them and it was that that led them away from the gospel and the grace of God.

(2) There are many professing Christians that are trusting in similar things today. They believe that their baptism, church affiliation, or obedience to the Ten Commandments are enough to get by, though they also readily admit, "No one's perfect." They need to read Romans 1–3 and see that being a

moral or religious person is not enough. Unless they have been perfect their entire lives they must be judged for their sins.

All need the gospel.