



Self-righteous Sinners Need the Gospel Romans 2:1-16

Introduction

In Romans 1:18-32, Paul's subject was *the wrath of God...revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness* (verse 18). He explained how the person who refuses to acknowledge God is given over to his or her own debased mind and becomes caught in a downward spiral of sin. Paul graphically described the moral depravity of the unbeliever.

Paul now turns to confront the self-righteous religious moralist. In Romans 2:17, he pointedly addresses the Jew; however, some believe that he is speaking to Jews from the beginning of the chapter. Others see verses 1-16 as addressing morally superior Gentiles or any person who thinks himself or herself to be a morally superior person and has an inclination to judge others. Since it seems to be a tendency of human nature to judge others from time to time, it may be best to view the passage in a general sense as addressed to all who read this letter.

The teaching of this passage is that people are not to judge one another because we are all sinners in need of the gospel. God alone is the righteous judge.

Outline of Romans 2:1-16

- I. God's Judgment is Right - Romans 2:1-5
- II. God's Judgment is Impartial - Romans 2:6-15
- III. God's Judgment is Mediated through Jesus Christ - Romans 2:16

I. God's Judgment is Right - Romans 2:1-5

Paul begins by pointing out the folly of sinners judging one another. He then establishes God as the right, true, and merciful judge.

- A. Those who judge others are inexcusable - Romans 2:1

The one Paul addresses is *O man*, but perhaps the reader would do well to insert his or her own name into this passage. The one whom Paul singles out is *whoever you are who judge*. If you are that person, you have no excuse. You have no reasonable defense for what you do.

1. You are a sinner also - 2:1

You have no defense in judging others because you also are a sinner standing before the Judge. You are involved in the same sins (listed in Romans 1:29-31) as the unbelievers and God judges those who practice such things (Romans 2:2). A sinner who judges another sinner is a hypocrite and will come under judgment.

2. You condemn yourself - 2:1

When a sinner passes judgment on another sinner, it is a matter of self-condemnation, because the one who judges does the same things. Who can honestly make their way through the sins Paul lists in Romans chapter 1 without seeing at least a glimpse of oneself there somewhere?

- B. God's judgment is *according to truth* - Romans 2:2

God is truth (Romans 3:4). His judgment *rightly falls* (NASB) because he knows all the facts in the case. He knows the *secrets of men* (Romans 2:16) and will judge rightly, in accordance with what is true. Sinners cannot judge rightly because we are the ones who deserve judgment.

1. Sinners deserve judgment - 2:2

Those who *practice such things* will receive the righteous judgment of God.

2. Hypocrites will not escape judgment - 2:3

Paul calls his readers to *think*, to be reasonable, and consider this thought. Do you think that a person who judges another while committing the same sin himself will escape God's judgment? The answer is obvious and Paul does not even need to give the answer!

3. God is merciful - 2:4-5

This passage reveals God's mercy, even in judgment. He is rich in *goodness* (kindness), *forbearance* (tolerance), and *longsuffering* (patience). "The Greek word translated *goodness* refers to a goodness of heart, kindness, or graciousness. *Forbearance* and *longsuffering* refer to a quality of self-restraint in the face of provocation which does not hastily retaliate or promptly punish" (Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words,

W.E.Vine). It is a picture of God holding back His final judgment to give an opportunity for repentance. If there is no repentance, judgment will come.

- a. The goodness of God is not to be taken lightly - 2:4

Paul asks, *do you despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance?* It should be clear to all that God's goodness is meant for our own good. It is meant to lead sinners to repentance. Above all, the Jewish readers should have known that. It was evident throughout the history of their nation. For example, *the patience of God kept waiting in the days of Noah, during the construction of the ark* (1 Peter 3:20). Noah preached to the wicked generation for 120 years before God sent the flood. Also, God put up with the people of Israel for 40 years in the wilderness (Acts 13:18). Stephen's powerful speech in Acts 7 reveals the forbearance and longsuffering toward the Jews even further. God's goodness toward Israel had also been the subject of the prophets, as in Amos 2:9-13 and 7:1-6. The fact that they would feign ignorance of His goodness showed contempt for God.

- b. *The goodness of God leads you to repentance* - 2:4

God shows goodness to sinners that they might repent. Repentance involves a complete change of mind and direction. It means coming into agreement with God that you are going the wrong way, which is your own sinful way, and then making a 180 degree turn, leaving the old way behind to go God's way. Repentance is not just a one time decision made with the mind. It is a continual directing of the mind toward God. It is a whole new way of life.

- c. Hardened hearts treasure up wrath - 2:5

Hardness is a refusal to repent and turn from sin to God. The heart of a hardened person is impenitent and does not treasure the riches of God's goodness, forbearance, and patience (2:4). Hardened hearts are *treasuring up...wrath*. The picture Paul presents in Romans 2:5 is of a very greedy person hoarding wealth which in the end will not make him rich, but destroy him. Robert Haldane ([Exposition of Romans](#)) comments "A man is rich according to his treasures. A sinner who treasures up wrath will reap the just reward in the day of wrath."

- d. God's righteous judgment will be revealed - 2:5

The day of wrath is described as a day of judgment when

God's righteous judgment will be revealed. Romans 1:18-32 depicts the present revelation of God's wrath upon sinners. There the "wrath of God is revealed to us chiefly in the debilitating downward drag of sin upon our lives" ([Romans, Volume 1](#), James Montgomery Boice). In Romans 2:5 Paul speaks of a future revelation when the full extent of God's wrath will be known and everyone will fully realize the truth and existence of God's righteous judgment. It is *the day when God will judge the secrets of men* (Romans 2:16).

II. God's Judgment is Impartial - Romans 2:6-15

Whereas human judges are subject to bias, God has no favorites or prejudices.

- A. God's judgment is based on deeds - Romans 2:6-11

Paul quotes from Psalm 62:12. *God will render to each one according to his deeds* (Romans 2:6). The word *render* means that He will "pay what is due." He will render to *each one*, that is personally to each and every individual. The payment to each will be *according to his deeds*. Scripture plainly teaches that judgment will be on the basis of deeds or works. Good works are the evidence of salvation. *We are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works* (Ephesians 2:10). Good works are not the reason for salvation because salvation is purely on the basis of God's grace. "But works are important. They are the outward expression of what the person is deep down. In the believer, they are the expression of faith, in the unbeliever the expression of unbelief" ([The Epistle to the Romans](#), Leon Morris). Other Scripture passages which teach that judgment is on the basis of works include Isaiah 3:10-11; Jeremiah 17:10; 2 Corinthians 5:10; Galatians 6:7-9. Paul goes on to explain this truth.

1. Those who patiently continue to do good will reap eternal life, glory, honor, and peace - 2:7 and 10

The term *patient continuance* in verse 7 means "persistence" and refers to those who are persistent in doing good. The picture is of a soldier in the midst of battle, never giving up but continuing to fight in the face of any opposition. The persistence is not for worldly glory, happiness, or success but for glory, honor, and immortality which belong to God and are only bestowed by His grace. The good works done by this person are not seen as an end in themselves. They are an expression of one's hope in God.

Those who do good will reap eternal life (verse 7), glory, honor, and peace (verse 10). Eternal life is life with Christ (1 John 5:12). It is life now and forever in the presence of God. See also John 10:27-28; John 17:2-3;

Romans 5:21; Romans 6:23. Eternal life carries with it a share in the glory and honor of God, and peace with Him throughout eternity.

2. Indignation, wrath, tribulation, and anguish to those who do evil - 2:8-9

Verse 8 gives three characteristics of the *man who does evil* (Romans 2:9). First, those who are evil are self-seeking, a term which embodies selfishness and also an attitude rooted in a contentious spirit which is against God and His laws. Secondly, this kind of person does not *obey the truth*. As described in Romans 1:18-21, although the truth of God is evident to them, they do not honor nor give thanks to Him. Instead, they *exchange the truth of God for the lie* (Romans 1:25). Consequently, those who do evil *obey unrighteousness*. They become slaves to sin.

Those who do evil will reap *indignation*, which refers to the anger of God with an emphasis upon the violence of it. The Greek root word conveys the idea of boiling up. They will also reap *wrath*, referring to the unrestrained wrath of God meted out on *the day of wrath* as in Romans 2:5. Furthermore, they will reap *tribulation*, which is trouble or pressure to the point of breaking. Leon Morris (*The Epistle to the Romans*) calls it "dire calamity". Finally, they will reap *anguish* which is extreme affliction. This is the just payment to *every soul of man who does evil*, that is, every person who practices evil habitually.

B. God's judgment is not based on national or ethnic background - Romans 2:9b, 10b, 11

Both the *Jew* and the *Greek* (Gentile) are under judgment. Whether good or bad, they both will reap what they have sown. *Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life* (Galatians 6:7-9). However, Paul states that the Jew will be judged first. The Jews had been chosen by God as His covenant people (Exodus 19:5-6 and Amos 3:2). They were the ones to whom He had given the law. (See 1 Kings 2:3 and James 4:12 concerning the law which is referred to in this passage of Romans.) To them, He had sent His prophets (Amos 2:11). Therefore, having greater privilege, they also had greater responsibility and would be judged according to the greater light they had been given (Luke 12:47-48). Even this shows the impartiality of God. *In truth I perceive that God shows no partiality. But in every nation whoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him* (Acts 10:34-35). *But he who does wrong will be repaid for what he has done, and there is no partiality* (Colossians 3:25).

C. God's judgment is not based on knowledge of the law - Romans 2:11-15

For there is no partiality with God (Romans 2:11). *For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality nor takes a bribe* (Deuteronomy 10:17). God has no favorites. He does not favor the strong or the weak, the rich or the poor, the great or the small, or one ethnic group over another. With God, all are on equal ground and are judged fairly. In Romans 2:12-15, Paul explains the equality of judgment. All sinners suffer the consequences of their sin with or without the law. Persons are not justified because they have a law, but because they keep it. This applies to Gentiles and Jews alike. The fact that some Gentiles do good deeds shows that they have an inner conviction of what is right and are *a law to themselves*.

1. Sinners under the law - 2:12-13

Jews will be held accountable for the greater knowledge they have because they know the demands of the law. Those who have been hearers of the law and not doers of the law are sinners and will be judged. In Paul's day, the law was read aloud by scribes in the Jewish synagogues for the people to hear. But hearing was not enough to justify them. To be justified, they had to obey the law (Leviticus 18:5).

NOTE: The word *justified* (2:13) comes from the Greek word which means "righteous." It means to be "declared righteous" or "acquitted." It was a word used in a court of law to declare a person "not guilty." See Deuteronomy 25:1. A justified person is still a sinner; justification does not change one's moral character, but a justified person is free from judgment. The Book of Romans teaches the following truths about justification. Romans 3:20: justification is not by works. Romans 3:24: justification is a gift by God's grace. Romans 3:26: justification is by faith in Jesus. Romans 4:25: justification is by the resurrection of Jesus. Romans 5:8-9: justification is by the blood of Christ. Romans 8:30: all who are justified have been predestined and called and will be glorified. Romans 8:33: God is the one who justifies.

2. Sinners who do not have the law - 2:14-15

Paul has shown that for the Jew justification requires doing (obeying) and not merely hearing the law. Now he turns to the problem of the Gentiles who do not have the law and shows that Gentiles are justified in basically the same way as Jews. When Gentiles, by instinct, obey God's law, they are fulfilling the requirement of law by being a law to themselves. They are also demonstrating that what the law requires is written on their hearts.

a. They have *the work of the law written on their hearts* - 2:14

Notice that Paul does not say that the law itself is written on their hearts, but *the work of the law* (verse 15). *The work of the law* is to teach right and wrong and what is required by God. This means that there is an inner conviction of what is right and required by God in each one of us. Every person then is a law to themselves because, to some extent, each one has a discernment of what is right and wrong in God's eyes. It is this work of the law written on their hearts which condemns the Gentiles when they do not obey it.

b. They have *their conscience* - 2:15

"Conscience is the built-in power of our minds to pass moral judgments on ourselves," (New Geneva Study Bible, Thomas Nelson Publishers). It is the "processor" of the knowledge we have written on our hearts. In Paul's words, the conscience "bears witness" to that knowledge. The conscience tells us that we ought to do what is right and not do what is wrong. The conscience encourages us to do what is required by God.

c. They have *their thoughts* - 2:15

"They know what they have done and *their thoughts* fight the battle of accusation against excusation," (The Epistle to the Romans, John Murray).

Paul's argument clearly shows that neither Jews nor Gentiles have any excuse for their sin. The Jews had the law but they were not doers of it. The Gentiles had no written code of law, but God had provided them with everything they needed (knowledge, conscience, and thoughts) to do what was right and required by Him.

III. God's Judgment is Mediated through Jesus Christ - Romans 2:16

Romans 1:16 depicts the certainty of final judgment. *The day* Paul refers to is the *day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God* (Romans 2:5). It is the day upon which God *will render to each one according to his deeds* (Romans 2:6). That is the day when *God will judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ*. This news is part of the gospel which Paul was called to preach and embraced as His own. Romans 2:16 teaches two important truths about that day.

A. *God will judge the secrets of men* - Romans 2:16

Not only will God judge according to each one's deeds, He will judge the secret motives behind those deeds. *I, the Lord, search the heart, I test the mind, even to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his doings* (Jeremiah 17:10). *For nothing is secret that will not be revealed, nor anything hidden that will not be known and come to light* (Luke 8:17). In the meantime, there are those who fool the world and perhaps even themselves with their display of good deeds, but in the end every thought, intent, and hidden desire will be judged.

B. *God will judge...by Jesus Christ* - Romans 2:16

He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained (Acts 17:31). The one who judges will be the one who gave His life. He will pronounce the condemnation or absolution of all creatures. "Covered over with reproaches and pierced with the arrows of Divine Justice, He was exposed on the cross as a spectacle to the whole city of Jerusalem....in (the last judgment), arrayed in glory and majesty, He will appear before the whole universe, in the glory of His Father, who commands all the angels to worship Him" (Exposition of Romans, Robert Haldane).

Applications

1. What kinds of judgments do you make of others while overlooking your own sin?
2. Romans 2:4 shows that there are two ways to go in response to God's goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering: repentance or despising. Which way will you choose?
3. From James 1:22-25, are you a *doer* of the word, or merely a *hearer*?
4. What are your motives for serving in your church and other good deeds you do? Are your works an end in themselves, or do you work to the glory and honor of God with the vision of eternal reward?
5. What do your conscience and your thoughts tell you about the way you are presently living your life?
6. What secret motives would you be embarrassed for the world to know? *If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness* (1 John 1:9).

QUESTIONS

Questions are based on the New King James Version of the Bible.

Day One: Real all notes and references.

1. What do you remember about God's judgment?

2. What did you learn about being justified?

Day Two: Read Romans 2:17-20.

3. Who does Paul address in this passage, and what religious privileges did they possess?

4. a. Of what were the Jews confident?

b. What kind of attitude does this reveal toward other people?

5. Give a phrase from verse 20 which reveals the Jews' reason for confidence.

Day Three: Read Romans 2:21-24.

6. a. List the four questions Paul asks the Jews in verses 21-22.

b. What was the purpose of these questions? See Matthew 23:24-28 for help.

7. a. In verse 21, what do you think Paul means when he asks "*do you not teach yourself?*"

b. From 1 Timothy 1:5-7 and James 3:1, why is it important for teachers to teach themselves?

8. What laws had the Jewish teachers and preachers apparently broken? Use Exodus 20:1-17 as reference.

9. a. What had the Jews done by boasting in the law and then breaking it?

b. How did the Jews' conduct affect the world around them?

- c. ♥ (Heart Question) As a Christian whose boast is in Christ, can you think of some ways your actions may do the same thing?

Day Four: Read Romans 2:25-29 and Genesis 17:9-14.

10. a. From the Genesis passage, why was circumcision important to the Jews?
- b. From Romans 2:25, what was required for circumcision to be of value?
- c. If a person did not do this, what was the consequence?
11. What two things would result from an uncircumcised man keeping the requirements of the law?
12. a. Who is a true Jew?
- b. What is true circumcision?

Day Five: Read Romans 3:1-4.

13. a. Is there any advantage to being a Jew? If so, what is the chief advantage?
- b. What do you think Paul means by the *oracles of God*?
- c. What do the following Scripture passages teach about the *oracles of God* and their importance to the Jew?
Deuteronomy 4:1-2 and 6

Deuteronomy 32:45-47

John 5:39

1 Peter 1:24-25

14. a. What rhetorical question does Paul ask in Romans 3:3?
- b. What aspect of God's character does this call into question?

- c. What do you learn about God's faithfulness from the following Scripture passages?
Deuteronomy 7:9

Psalm 119:89-90

2 Timothy 2:13

15. a. What is Paul's answer to the question posed in Romans 3:3?
- b. What passage does Paul quote from the Old Testament to support his answer? Give the Scripture reference as well. (See references in the margin of your Bible).
- c. ? (Thought Question) Read Psalm 51:1-4 to put Paul's quote into context. How does the quotation he uses help explain his answer?

Day Six: Read Romans 3:5-8.

16. a. What argument does Paul present in verse 5?
- b. What characteristic of God's judgment is questioned?
- c. How does Abraham answer the question in Genesis 18:25?
- d. How does Elihu answer the question in Job 34:17?
- e. What answer does Paul give in Romans 3:6?
17. a. In his answer, what Biblical teaching does Paul present as a positively determined fact?
- b. How do the following verses support this certainty?
1 Chronicles 16:33
- Psalm 96:13
- Ecclesiastes 3:17

18. a. How does Paul present the same basic argument of Romans 3:5 but with a different emphasis in Romans 3:7? What is the emphasis here?
- b. What is Paul's answer in verse 8?
- c. Does his answer present Paul's personal view? Explain your answer.
- d. ? (Thought Question) What does this view encourage? See also Romans 6:1.
19. What is Paul's final comment in this passage?