

The Book of Romans Study Guide

Chapter 2

In this chapter, Paul shifts the focus from human response to general revelation in creation to the response of people who are generally moral in character, including the Jewish people who had the advantage of God's written revelation in the Hebrew Scriptures.

2:1-8

You can imagine that everyone in the congregations of Rome who heard the condemnation of immorality in the first chapter saw themselves as being morally superior and glad that the harsh language was not directed against them.

- v 1 But right away in chapter 2, Paul says words to the effect – “not so fast,” because when we judge and condemn others, it becomes a condemnation of ourselves because we also fail in our behavior.
- v 2 When Paul writes that “the judgment of God rightly falls on those who practice such things,” the context of this chapter shows that he is not talking about the specific degrading acts of chapter 1, but about the foundational decisions that lead to the behavior. And that is not honoring God and giving thanks in 1:21, professing to be wise but becoming foolish in v. 22, and exchanging the truth of God for a lie in v. 25. With that understanding, we can see that there are many more ways that people can respond unrighteously than the descriptions of chapter 1. And that opens up all people who claim to be moral to judgement.
- v 3 He shows that there is no escape from this judgment.
- v 4 He describes a major reason that people who think of themselves as being moral come to the conclusion that they will escape judgment, namely that they think lightly or take for granted the gracious attributes of God in terms of His kindness, forbearance and patience.

Then he adds that the kindness of God is what leads people to repentance. That is a profound statement. You might think that the commandments or fear of God's judgment would do that. But that is more like driving a person to repentance, and God does not do that. Instead, He leads us to repentance by demonstrating His kindness to us in so many ways, so that we can exercise our own will with a conscious choice to turn from sin. And that is the kind of thing that you do for someone you love, not a boss or a ruler that you despise for forcing you to do something.
- v 5 But when we fail to exercise our will in repentance, that stores up wrath that will inevitably be manifested in the day of judgment.
- v 6 And then he reinforces that reality by quoting Psalm 62:12 and 7 other places in the Tanakh/OT. So the certainty of all people being judged according to our deeds is a central theme throughout the history of Israel and was not set aside with the coming of Yeshua.
- v 7 At first glance, this verse seems to imply that doing good works is the basis for obtaining

glory and honor and immortality and eternal life. But the greater context of Scripture shows that cannot be true. Most notably, according to Ephesians 2:8-9 –

“For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.”

Here in Romans 2:7, there are 2 main views for understanding this verse:

- One is that Paul is establishing a hypothetical standard of salvation through perfect obedience, but it is unobtainable because, as he will show in chapter 3, we all sin and fall short of the glory of God and His standard of perfection.
- The other view is that he is describing the way that good works are the evidence of a transformed heart, rather than the cause of salvation. In that way of thinking, our deeds are still judged, in accordance with v. 6, but our salvation remains a matter of faith.

v 8 Regardless, the unrighteous will receive wrath (Gr. *orge* – lit. “desire”) and indignation (*thymos* – lit “killed by rushing upon”).

2:9-16

v 9-10 These verses are in parallel to 1:16 that positively affirms the same salvation to the Jew first and also to the Greek, meaning Gentiles. So that was a focus on the world to come. Now in these 2 verses of chapter 2, he focuses on life in this world. In v. 9, tribulation and distress are in store for every Jew and Greek/Gentile who does evil. And in v. 10, glory and honor are in store for every Jew and Greek/Gentile who does good. Why? Because of the O.T. principle of v. 6 – “God will render to every man according to His deeds.”

v 11 Paul’s statement that there is no partiality with God is consistent with His message in the Torah, particularly in Deuteronomy 10:17-19. But, during the second temple period, teachings began to appear claiming that God showed partiality toward Jews in judgment.

We see that, for example in the rabbinical book called *The Book of Wisdom*, which was written between 150 and 50 B.C. It states that God judges the Gentiles as a "stern king" while acting as a "father" to the Jews (Wisdom 12:14–22). And in the Talmud, it is said that “All Jews have a place in the world to come” (*Sanhedrin 90a*), which implies no real sense of eternal consequences for how a life is lived in this world. And, again, that is also reflected in John 3, where Nicodemus expresses confusion over needing to be born again spiritually, since his earthly birth as a Jew was sufficient for eternal life. It is that kind of distorted thinking that Paul is addressing here in this part of Romans.

v 12-13 He continues this theme of impartiality by showing that people will face condemnation, not because they have the law or do not have the law, but because they have sinned.

v 14-15 When Paul writes that Gentiles instinctively do the things of the Law, it is a reflection of the fact that the fundamental moral commandments of the Torah are really a codification of the sense of right and wrong that all humans possess in our conscience. And that forms another connection to Jews who possess the Law in written form. Both groups end up with at least a measure of the content of the Law, and thus share in the same need to respond righteously to that understanding.

- v 16 Thus, in all of these dimensions of accountability, all people, no matter who you are, will face judgment. And Paul makes it clear that Yeshua will be the one who carries that judgment out.

So far, Paul has addressed issues of righteousness and justification specifically for Gentiles, followed by commonalities that impact both Gentiles and Jews. And now, in the last part of this chapter, he moves on to an issue that related specifically to the Jewish people of his day.

2:17-29

In verses 17-23, Paul sets up two opposing realities: the purity and the benefits of the Torah/Law vs the corruption and consequences of sinful proponents of the Torah. And this is a key to our understanding – the problem was not with the Torah itself, for later in 7:12 Paul will recognize that the Torah is holy, righteous and good. The problem is with people who claim to value and adhere to the Law, but fail to do what it instructs.

So, let's break this down.

- v 18-22 The purity of the Torah is reflected in the phrase, “the things that are essential, being instructed out of the Torah.” And one benefit in this verse is that the Torah enables people to know His will. He follows that up with the benefits of being a guide to the blind and a light in the darkness in v. 19, and then in v. 20, the benefit of having the privilege of being a corrector of the foolish and a teacher of the immature, and having the kind of knowledge that is a resource to others. All of that is very good. But where it goes bad is first by boasting, according to verses 17 and 23, and then by personally breaking the commandments they were teaching others to keep in verses 21-22.
- v 23-24 Doing that brings dishonor to God because His name is blasphemed. The Greek word *blasphemeo* describes the act of speaking with contempt against God. The Hebrew equivalent *ně'atsah* is often used in the Tanakh in the sense of people despising or cursing Adonai. Here in v. 24, Paul quotes from Isaiah 52:5, where the prophet is describing the way that the Babylonians taunted the Israelites while taking them captive and they mocked Adonai because, in the Ancient Near East, the defeat of a nation was seen as proof that their god was weak. So, in similar fashion, Paul is saying that when non-believers claim to be righteous but act unrighteously, the enemies of the true God invariably speak taunts and insults against Him.
- v 26-29 As we saw earlier, during the second temple period, it was believed that being Jewish was sufficient for inheriting life in the world to come, and we also know that circumcision was the sign of inclusion in the Jewish people and thus the sign of salvation. But Paul shows that circumcision has no bearing on justification and thus salvation. Now that has always been true, all the way back to Abraham, the original man who was circumcised, but Genesis 15:6 shows that his righteousness was only reckoned by faith. That same principle was confirmed at the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 where the leaders of the believing community rejected the necessity of circumcision for salvation.

So, Paul is essentially making the same point here, although he does not reject the purpose of circumcision being the sign of being part of the physical lineage of the Abrahamic Covenant. He is separating the physical circumcision that signifies physical inclusion from

the spiritual circumcision of the heart that is necessary for inclusion in the spiritual people of God. And he is showing that both Jews and Gentiles are able to receive that sign as a result of faith.

But that is not a concept that Paul invented. Moses called upon the Israelites to circumcise their hearts in Deuteronomy 10:16 and the prophet Jeremiah did the same in Jeremiah 4:4. Now, remember, during this part of Romans 2, Paul is specifically speaking to the spiritual situation of the Jewish believers in Rome. So, it is natural that he would apply this understanding directly to them by saying in verse 29 that “he is a Jew who is one inwardly.” That is an echo of the calling by Moses and Jeremiah upon the physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, not a spiritualization of the term Jew.

And he reinforces that understanding by saying at the end of v. 29 – “his praise is not from men, but from God.” That is a clear reference to the meaning inherent in the word “Jew,” which is derived from the Hebrew name Yehudah (Judah) that comes from a root meaning “praise.” In that sense, a Jew from the very beginning has been a descendant of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob who genuinely brings praise to Adonai by living a life characterized by true faith and righteousness.

There is no such term as a “spiritual Jew” anywhere in the Bible. But what Paul resolutely affirms is that in order to become part of the people of God who inherit eternal life, both Jews and Gentiles must experience the circumcision of the heart, which is another way of saying our spiritual transformation through faith.