

IV. Here Comes the Judge!

October 13/14/15, 2015

Romans 2:1-16

Aim: To recognize that God judges all men based on their knowledge and conduct, and that judgment results in condemnation apart from Jesus Christ.

In 1:18-32, Paul describes those people whom he accuses of perverting their knowledge of God (Gentiles, primarily) in the third person. In chapter 2, however, it is the second person singular, ‘you,’ that Paul uses in making his accusation (2:1-5, 17-29). This does not mean that Paul is now accusing his readers of these things; were he to do that, the second person plural would have been needed. Rather, Paul utilizes here, and sporadically throughout the letter, a literary style called *diatribe*. Diatribe style uses the literary device of an imaginary dialogue with a student or opponent. Elements of this style include frequent questions, posed by the author to his conversation partner or by the conversation partner, emphatic rejections of possible objections to a line of argument using *mē genoito* (‘May it never be!’), and the direct address of one’s conversation partner or opponent. The dialogue that Paul records in this part of the letter, while imaginary, undoubtedly reflects accurately many actual debates and conversations with those to whom he was preaching the gospel. The ‘conversations’ and indictments that we find in this section are not verbatim reports of actual dialogues, but they reflect real-life situations.

Who, then, is the person that Paul addresses in this section? Although some application to self-righteous Gentiles cannot be entirely removed from what Paul says in 2:1-11, it is clear that Paul’s main target is the Jew. Contrary to popular Jewish belief, the sins of the Jews will not be treated by God significantly differently from those of the Gentiles. For God is impartial and judges every person ‘according to his works’ (2:6-11). [per Moo]

Paul develops his critique of the Jews in these verses in three paragraphs. The first, vv. 1-5, uses the second person singular to accuse the Jews of earning for themselves the same wrath that is already falling on Gentile sinners. The second two paragraphs (vv. 6-11 and 12-16) interrupt the second person ‘accusation’ style (it is resumed in v. 17) with explanation (in the third person plural) of the indictment in vv. 1-5. Both paragraphs serve to validate the inclusion of the Jews along with Gentiles under sentence of God’s wrath by showing that Jews stand on the same basic ground as Gentiles when it comes to God’s judgment. For, in the first place, God’s impartiality demands that He treat all people the same, judging every person according to what he has done (vv. 6-11). To this, the Jews may object that they possess, in the Mosaic law, a distinct advantage over the Gentiles. So in the second place, Paul shows that the possession of the Mosaic law will make no difference in this judgment (vv. 12-16). Paul therefore ‘levels the playing field between Jew and Gentile. Both stand condemned before God because of their transgressions of God’s Word.

A. Judgment and the Sinner (Romans 2:1-5)

Paul begins by turning his attention to a person who is standing in judgment over the people whom he has described in chapter 1. Cheering Paul on in his indictment of Gentiles, this person, although he thinks himself superior to the ‘heathen ‘ idolater of 1:18-32, is nevertheless just as much in danger of the wrath of God, for he is doing ‘the same things as those whom he condemns. Who is this ‘superior’ person? One popular identification of this person is with any self-consciously ‘moral’ person, whether Jew or Gentile. But this identification is a bit too

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broad. Without necessarily excluding application to the moral person generally, we think it is clear that it is the Jew who is the real target of Paul's indictment in these verses. Although Paul does not explicitly identify his target until 2:17, it is clear that already in 2:1-11 the Jew is his 'hidden target.' By beginning his indictment in such general terms – 'O person, each one of you' (v. 1) – Paul enables his readers in Rome to share in the 'discovery' process that he probably used when he preached his gospel to mixed audiences. We can imagine many self-professed 'moral' people adding their 'Amen' to the kind of denunciation of 'heathen' sins that we find in 1:18-32. Suddenly, however, Paul turns on these people and accuses them of doing 'the very same things.' Only as he moves on in his denunciation will it emerge that it is the Jew whom Paul really has in mind. Such a technique would have enabled Paul to gain the sympathy of the Jews in his audience and keep them interested in his message.

We might think the 'O man' (v. 1) is a generic address to any human being, but it was a common form of address in antiquity used between Jews. When Paul uses 'O man,' he is clearly addressing Jewish people.

How does God deal with the more upright, moral, and religious person who has a sense of right and wrong, and who leads an outwardly virtuous life? Many such ethically upright people would heartily concur with Paul's assessment of the flagrantly immoral people he has just described. They obviously deserve God's judgment. Throughout history many pagan individuals and societies have held high standards of conduct. Even the unregenerate have the basic knowledge of good and evil built into them and into society.

Most Jews of Paul's day believed in the idea that performing certain moral and religious works produced righteousness. Specifically, they could earn God's special favor and therefore eternal life by keeping the Mosaic law and the traditions of the rabbis. Many even believe that if they failed in the works effort, they might forfeit some earthly reward but were still exempt from God's judgment simply because they were Jews, God's chosen people. But no one can understand or appropriate salvation apart from recognizing that he stands guilty and condemned before God, totally unable to bring himself up to God's standard of righteousness. And no person is exempt. Therefore, after showing the immoral pagan his lostness apart from Christ, Paul proceeds with great force and clarity to show the moralist that, before God, he is equally guilty and condemned.

It is very easy to get a non-Christian to agree he is a sinner ('nobody's perfect'), but it is almost impossible to get him to realize the gravity of his sin. Typically he has no trouble agreeing that those who are guilty of 'big sins' like murder and rape and treason deserve judgment—even death. However, that God's wrath should fall on those guilty of such 'lesser sins' as envy or arrogance does not seem quite right to them. The problem is twofold: first, man does not understand God's holiness, and, second, he does not understand his own sinfulness.

1. The Judgment of Man (2:1)

a) *Judging Others (2:1a)*

¹*Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges.*

'Therefore' refers to what Paul has just said in the last half of chapter 1, and specifically to the introductory statement in 1:18-20.

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The ‘therefore’ that connects the opening of Romans 2 with chapter 1 creates a problem for our conclusion that 1:18-32 is directed mainly against Gentiles and 2:1-16 mainly against Jews. For if Paul had shifted targets in this manner, we would expect the transition to be made with something like ‘in the same manner also.’ The best solution is to understand the ‘therefore’ to relate, not to the description of (mainly) Gentile sin in 1:21-32, but to the announcement of God’s wrath and the reality of the knowledge of God in 1:18-19. For 1:18-19, which functions as a kind of heading for all of 1:18-3:20, includes reference to all humanity. On this reading, Paul would be saying in 2:1 that *because* God’s wrath is revealed against *all* people, and *because all* people have been given knowledge of God, *therefore* even the person who judges is ‘without excuse’ before God.

In 1:20, Paul directed this accusation (‘without excuse’) against those who spurned the knowledge of God available in nature. Paul now brings the same accusation against those who reveal by their act of judging that they also have access to the knowledge of God. The person whom Paul so accuses, addressed with the second person singular in diatribe style, is ‘O person, each one of you who is judging.’ Paul invites anyone who might judge another to include himself or herself in the scope of his accusation.

When God says, ‘You are inexcusable,’ many people will offer one of two objections. They might say, ‘I may be a sinner, but at least I’m better than most other people.’ Or they might say, ‘I may be a sinner, but I’m good enough to get by. Surely God wouldn’t condemn me.’

As becomes clear in verse 17, Paul was speaking primarily to the Jews, who characteristically passed judgment on Gentiles, thinking them to be spiritually inferior and even beyond the interest of God’s mercy and care. But ‘every man of you’ encompasses all moralists, including professing Christians, who think they are exempt from God’s judgment because they have not sunk into the pagan, immoral extremes Paul has just mentioned.

Many Jews believed they were immune from God’s wrath simply because they were Jews. So we can well imagine how a moralizing Jew would read the condemnation of the pagan world in Romans 1. ‘Go get ‘em, God! Amen!’ The self-righteous Jew never dreamed that he was under the same condemnation. He was blind to his actual condition.

b) Condemning Oneself (2:1b)

For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things.

In the second part of the verse, Paul tells why one who judges is without excuse before God: in the very act of judging another, a person is ‘condemning himself because he does the same things as the other. The similarity of ‘you are doing the very same things’ and ‘those who are doing these things’ of 1:32 suggests that we should look in 1:29-31 rather than to 1:20-28 for the sins Paul has in mind here in 2:1. Many of these sins – for example, pride, arrogance, gossiping, maligning others, and lack of affection – are as prevalent in the Jewish as in the Gentile world. In fact, Paul will accuse the Jews of some of these same sins in vv. 17-24.

Paul’s initial argument is simple. Since you obviously have a criterion by which to judge, it means that you know the truth about what is right and wrong before God. Even the Gentiles know the basic truth of God’s ‘eternal power and divine nature’ through natural revelation (1:20). They also have a sense of right and wrong by conscience (2:15). The Jew, however, not

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only had both of those means of knowing God's truth, but also had the great advantage of having received His special revelation through Scripture (3:2; 9:4).

Whoever passes judgment betrays an awareness of moral standards by which he passes that judgment, only to find that he is self-condemned by his own criteria. Each has much to say now in self-defense, but when God's Day comes each will be reduced to silence.

However, we won't get by because God judges on a standard of perfection. We couldn't get by even by our imperfect human standards, because as we judge others we condemn ourselves, having done 'the same things' ourselves. The sin of hypocrisy is in view here. Paul is chastising his kinsmen according to the flesh, Israel, for their judgmental attitude toward the Gentiles.

God was, and is, under no such delusion. Good religious moralizers do not fool him. The reason these religious moralizers stand condemned is that they practice the same things as unbelieving pagans. God sees sin in their hearts that they do not see—and condemns them.

But it was not simply that those who are judgmental are wrong in assessing the moral standing of others, but that they are also wrong in assessing their own moral standing. The self-righteous make two grave errors: they underestimate the height of God's standard of righteousness, and they underestimate the depth of their own sin.

2. The Judgment of God (2:2-5)

a) *Just Judgment (2:2)*

²*We know that the judgment of God rightly falls on those who practice such things.*

Paul now affirms as a general principle the fact and fairness of God's judgment on such practices. 'Know' translates *oida*, which carries the idea of awareness of that which is commonly known and obvious. In claiming that God's judgment is 'according to truth,' Paul is affirming that God's judgment against sin is fully in accord with the facts, that it is just. This tenet was one on which both Paul and his dialogue partner could agree, it being a standard Jewish teaching. Where the disagreement between Paul and the Jew comes is in Paul's application of the principle to the Jews on the same basis as the Gentiles.

The one thing we can be confident of is that the just judgment of God is always according to truth.

b) *No Escape from Judgment (2:3)*

³*Do you suppose, O man—you who judge those who practice such things and yet do them yourself—that you will escape the judgment of God?*

Having established common ground with his discussion partner, Paul now uses the doctrine of God's 'truthfulness' in judging to criticize the person who proudly stands in judgment over others. And since he is moving again to the attack, Paul shifts back to the second person singular form of address. The sense of the verse shows that Paul is questioning this person's belief that he or she will be able to escape this judgment of God. Such a question is legitimately put to the Gentile moralist or philosopher who thinks he or she can please God by his or her good life, but it is particularly the Jew who would be likely to make such an assumption.

The secret hope of the hypocrite is that God will somehow judge him by a standard lower than perfect truth and righteousness. He knows enough to recognize the wickedness of his heart, but he hopes vainly that God will judge him in the same superficial way that most others judge him

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and that he judges himself. *Logizomai* ('suppose') carries the idea of calculating or estimating (it is related to the English term *logic*). The moralist falsely calculates his own sinfulness and guilt.

The logic of the first three verses of this chapter may be set forth as follows: 1) God's judgment falls on those who 'do these things'; 2) Even the self-righteous judge does 'these things'; 2) Therefore, even the self-righteous judge stands under God's judgment.

c) *Presumption against Judgment (2:4)*

(1) Man's Presumption (2:4a)

⁴*Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience...*

Who is this 'man'? From Paul's question to this 'man' in verse 4 his identity begins to emerge. This 'man' is a Jew. For only to a Jew could Paul point to 'the riches of God's *kindness*' and His 'patient *long-suffering*,' aspects of God's character found in the Scriptures of the Old Testament (e.g., Ps. 34:8; Ex. 34:6).

The 'or' at the beginning of this verse does not set forth an alternative to v. 3 but introduces a rhetorical question that brings to light the false assumptions of the person who is addressed in v. 3. Paul wants to show the person who thinks she can sin and yet avoid judgment that she is, in fact, 'showing contempt for' God's mercy. 'Goodness' (*χρηστοτης, chrestotes*) is used several times in the LXX of the Psalms to designate God's goodness toward His people. "Forbearance" and 'patience' denote the expression of God's goodness in His patient withholding of the judgment that is rightfully due the sinner.

'Think lightly of' ('presume') translates *kataphroneō*, which literally means 'to think down on' something or someone and to underestimate the true value. It therefore often had the connotation of disregarding or even despising. 'Kindness' is one among the fruit of the Spirit that believers are to manifest (Gal. 5:22). 'Forebearance' comes from *anochē*, which means 'to hold back,' as of judgment. It was sometimes used to designate a truce, which involves cessation of hostilities between warring parties. 'Patience' translates *makrothumia*, which was sometimes used of a powerful ruler who voluntarily withheld vengeance on an enemy or punishment of a criminal. 'Kindness' refers to the benefits God gives, 'forbearance' refers to the judgment He withholds, and 'patience' to the duration of both.

In Wis. 15:1-2, the author says: 'But thou, our God, art kind and true, patient, and ruling all things in mercy. For even if we sin we are thine, knowing thy power.' That Paul has this text in mind is probable; but even if he does not, it is the attitude expressed in the passage, and by no means confined to Wisdom of Solomon, that Paul rebukes in these verses. Certainly the OT encourages God's people to regard God as merciful and forgiving (e.g., Ps. 145). But the assumption of God's special favor toward His people had already in the OT period become a source of false security for those within Israel who were not living faithfully within the covenant as the preaching of the prophets abundantly indicates. The literature of inter-testamental Judaism, while consistently stressing the need for Jews to repent of sin, also tended to highlight Israel's favored position to the extent that its security in God's judgment was virtually unassailable. It is this assumption that Paul, in agreement with the prophets, calls into question.

Paul's rhetorical question is essentially asking, 'Do you assume that because God is good He will not judge?' That is the most pervasive religious myth in our culture today. God is viewed as a cosmic bellhop at our beck and call. He is a celestial Santa Clause. All we have to do is come

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and ask Him for what we want, and He will provide it for us. However, a judge who refuses to punish evil is not a good judge; he is an unjust judge. Do we so despise His goodness that we assume that there is no room in His goodness for justice? That is insanity. If God is good, then He will judge, and He will judge according to truth.

(2) God's Kindness (2:4b)

...not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?

The participial clause in the last part of the verse shows that God's purpose in His kindness is not to excuse sin but to stimulate repentance. Paul criticizes his rhetorical partner for willfully ignoring this truth.

The man Paul speaks of sees God's kindness all around him and assumes that judgment will never come. God's kindness is meant to lead such people to repentance, but because of their refusal to respond, it will have the opposite result.

The purpose of the 'kindness of God' is not to excuse men of their sin but to convict them of it and lead them to 'repentance.' *Metanoia* ('repentance') has the basic meaning of changing one's mind about something. In the moral and spiritual realm it refers to changing one's mind about sin, from loving it to renouncing it and turning to God for forgiveness (1 Th. 1:9).

d) *Revealed Judgment (2:5)*

(1) Storing Up Wrath (2:5a)

⁵But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself...

God's patience with sin must not be taken as a sign that He is weak or that He will withhold His judgment forever. In this verse, Paul warns his complacent addressee that a time of judgment is indeed coming, and that instead of mercy, it is wrath that the person who presumes on God's kindness is accumulating in advance of that judgment. It serves, then, as a solemn confirmation of the answer implied by the rhetorical question in v. 3. Such a person will certainly not 'escape the judgment of God.'

'Stubbornness' translates *sklērotēs*, which literally refers to hardness and is the word from which we get the medical term *sclerosis*. Arteriosclerosis refers to hardening of the arteries. Such physical hardening is an ideal picture of the spiritual condition of hearts that have become unresponsive and insensitive to God.

In explaining our sin in relation to God's wrath, Paul uses a banking metaphor. Every day that we sin without repenting, we are depositing future wrath into the account of God's judgment. Christ speaks of 'laying up treasures in heaven' (Mt.6:19-20). Those who despise God's patience are likewise laying up treasures – the treasures of God's wrath. Both believers and non-believers need to realize that everything they do has eternal consequences. In everything we say and do, we are making deposits – for good or ill – in the bank of eternity. We are either 'laying up' good treasures in heaven, or 'treasuring up' the horrible treasure of God's wrath.

(2) Day of Wrath (2:5b)

...on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed.

When will this situation become evident? Paul is looking here at the climactic outpouring of wrath at the end of history; and the Jew who refuses to repent is even now accumulating the

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wrath that on that day will be revealed. Also to be revealed on that day, claims Paul, is ‘the righteous judgment of God.’ This word also continues a central theme of this section of Romans: the reality of God’s judgment and the fact that this judgment will be absolutely just. Paul thus calls into question the Jewish tendency to confine God’s ‘righteous judgment’ to Gentile sinners.

There are various degrees of punishment in hell because hell is where God manifests His perfect justice, and the punishment always fits the crime.

B. Judgment and the Judge (Romans 2:6-11)

These verses form a self-contained thought unit, as their chiasmic arrangement demonstrates:

- A. God will judge everyone equitably (v. 6)
- B. Those who do good will attain eternal life (v. 7)
- C. Those who do evil will suffer wrath (v. 8)
- C’. Wrath for those who do evil (v. 9)
- B’. Glory for those who do good (v. 10)
- A’. God judges impartially (v. 11)

Unlike some chiasmically structured paragraphs, the main point of this paragraph occurs not at the center but at the beginning and the end (vv. 6, 11): God will judge every person impartially, assessing each according to the same standard – works. The paragraph therefore elaborates ‘the righteous judgment of God’ in v. 5b. The verses that are sandwiched between the main assertions in vv. 6 and 11 illustrate the two possible outcomes of this judgment. In applying ‘the Jew first, then the Greek’ sequence of salvation (1:16) to judgment (vv. 9, 10), Paul brings into the light the Jew as the hidden target of his polemic.

1. God Judges Equitably (2:6)

‘He will render to each one according to his works...’

Paul signals that he is continuing the general discussion of vv. 1;5 by connecting this verse grammatically with v. 5 (the ‘he’ represents, in fact, the relative pronoun ‘who’). Paul’s assertion that God ‘will render’ or ‘recompense’ every person according to what that person has done reflects common OT and Jewish teaching. It must be made clear, of course, that although Scripture, both Old and New Testaments, teaches that *judgment* is by works, it nowhere teaches that *salvation* is by works.

The basis of God’s judgment of us will be our works. This does not mean some will be saved by works. Rather, believers will give an account of their works, and non-believers will be judged according to their works. The standard of judgment for those with a religious heritage will be the same as those who have none: work.

This is not talking about salvation by works. Rather, Paul is saying that we will be judged, not on the basis of what we profess to believe, but on the basis of a man’s actions.

2. Two Judgment Outcomes (2:7-8)

Verses 7-8 outline the two possible outcomes of God rendering to ‘each’ according to works. As the contrast in these verses makes clear, there are two, and only two fates in store for ‘every

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person’ at the time of God’s ‘righteous judgment.’ Paul here describes opposite sides of the same coin.

a) *Eternal Life (2:7)*

...⁷ *to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life...*

Paul’s suggestion that a person’s ‘good work’ might lead to eternal life seems strange in light of his teaching elsewhere (see v. 10 for further discussion).

Three terms used by Paul here seem almost as synonyms, but they carry distinct meanings. First, the highest and most wonderful desire of a believer is ‘glory,’ above all, God’s glory. A person who does not have such a desire deep within him cannot be a true believer (cp. 1 Cor. 10:31). Second, a true believer seeks ‘honor,’ again not the worldly honor that most men long for but the honor that comes from God. Third, a true believer seeks ‘immortality,’ the day when his perishable body ‘must put on the imperishable’ (1 Cor. 15:53). Paul is not discussing how a person comes to salvation or *how* God produces Christlikeness in him. He is describing what the life of a true believer is like. ‘Eternal life’ is not simply a quantity of life, it is first of all a quality of life.

b) *Wrath and Fury (2:8)*

...⁸ *but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury.*

Those who do not receive eternal life receive the punishment of God’s wrath. Paul describes these latter people from the standpoint of their basic motivating principle—selfishness—and from the standpoint of their allegiance: they give themselves in obedience to unrighteousness rather to the truth.

The first characteristic of the unredeemed is that they are ‘selfishly ambitious,’ a phrase that translates the single Greek word *eritheia*, the root meaning of which may have been that of a hireling. The idea is of a mercenary, who does his work simply for money, without regard for the issues of any harm he may be doing. Everything he does is for the purpose of serving and pleasing self. The second and consequent characteristic of the unredeemed is that they ‘do not obey the truth.’ The third characteristic of the unredeemed is that they ‘obey unrighteousness.’

To such people God will render ‘wrath and indignation.’ *Orgē* (‘wrath’) signifies the strongest kind of anger, that which reaches fever pitch, when God’s mercy and grace are fully exhausted. *Thumos* (‘indignation’) represents an agitated, vehement anger that rushes along relentlessly. The root meaning has to do with moving rapidly and was used of a man’s breathing violently while pursuing an enemy in great rage. On the final day of judgment, God’s ‘indignation’ will explode like a consuming fire upon all rebellious mankind.

3. Two Judgment Outcomes Again (2:9-10)

Paul now reiterates these two contrasting outcomes of judgment, taking them in reverse order.

a) *Tribulation and Distress (2:9)*

⁹ *There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek...*

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‘Distress,’ though close in meaning to ‘tribulation,’ may focus on the (subjective) suffering caused by the (objective) tribulation. In using the phrase ‘every soul of a person,’ Paul apparently wants to emphasize again the utter impartiality of God’s judgment. In an ironic twist, Paul uses the same phrase that maintained the priority of the Jew as the recipient of the good news of salvation (1:16) to assert the same priority in judgment. As the word of the promise has gone ‘first’ to the Jew, so does punishment for failure to respond to that word go ‘first’ to the Jew.

Thlipsis (‘tribulation’) has the root meaning of exerting extreme pressure, and is sometimes translated as *affliction*, *anguish*, or *persecution*. *Stenochōria* (‘distress’) literally means ‘a narrow place’ and came metaphorically to refer to severe confinement or constriction, and hence the idea of anguish or severe ‘distress.’

As Paul here makes clear, ‘the Jew first’ means that being first in salvation opportunity also means being first in judgment responsibility.

b) *Glory, Honor, and Peace* (2:10)

...¹⁰ *but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek.*

Verse 10 repeats the substance of verse 7, with only minor changes. Paul adds a further term to describe this blessing, ‘peace,’ the state of perfect well-being created by God’s eschatological intervention and enjoyed by the righteous.

The ‘peace’ that God divinely imparts is perhaps used by Paul as a synonym for the immortality the true believer seeks along with glory and honor (see v. 7).

4. Excursus: What Does Paul Mean in Verses 7&10

We now must ask who it is that Paul has in mind in vv. 7 and 10, where he promises salvation to those who engage in persistent ‘doing good.’ The question is an important one because these promises would seem at first sight to conflict with Paul’s insistence elsewhere that ‘no one will be justified by works of the law’ (cp. 3:20). Answers to this question can be divided into three categories, according to the identification of those who are doing good.

a) *Faithful Jews and ‘Moral’ Gentiles*

Quite popular in the patristic period was the identification of these people with *faithful Jews and ‘moral’ Gentiles* before the coming of Christ.

b) *Non-Christians*

The majority of commentators have argued that Paul refers to any *non-Christian*. But within this interpretation, five approaches differing in vital respects, are to be distinguished.

1. Some people think that Paul sets out as a possibility the salvation of some people through their works apart from faith in Christ and that this principle stands in irreconcilable tension with his teaching of justification by faith alone.
2. Others argue, similarly, that God rewards with eternal life those who respond obediently to ‘the light they have received’ and that as long as the works are regarded as produced with the aid of God’s grace no contradiction with Paul’s teaching elsewhere is created.

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3. Another variation holds that those who earnestly seek eternal peace are granted the faith that brings justification and that this faith – the missing ‘middle term’ in Paul’s argument – is what brings eternal life.
4. A few have viewed the principle as purely hypothetical, a statement of the way things would be if Christ had not come and the law could be fulfilled.
5. Finally, others argue that the promise of eternal life for those who do good is fully valid, but that the power of sin prevents anyone from doing that good to the degree necessary to merit salvation. Verses 7 and 10 set out the condition, apart from Christ, for salvation; Paul’s subsequent argument shows that no one is able to fulfill those conditions.

c) Christians

Growing in popularity is the view that Paul is thinking in these verses specifically of *Christians*. They, and only they, are those who, through union with Christ, are able to produce works acceptable to God in the judgment.

The most reasonable explanation is view b5. The context strongly suggests that Paul is not directly describing Christians in vv. 7 and 10. Paul’s purpose in 2:6-11 is to establish the principle that God will judge every person on the same basis – by works, not by religious heritage or national identity. Paul’s focus is on the standard of judgment.

Paul never denies the validity of this principle, but he goes on to show that no one meets the conditions necessary for this principle to become a reality. This is the conclusion to which Paul is driving throughout this part of Romans (cp. 3:9, 19-20). Of course, a person in Christ does meet these conditions as the fruit of faith comes to expression in His life; and, while the principle in its context has the function of condemning all apart from Christ, Paul will show subsequently in Romans that it is, in fact, Christians who fulfill these conditions.

Therefore, verses 7 and 10 set forth what is called in traditional theological (especially Lutheran) language ‘the law.’ Paul sets forth the biblical conditions for attaining eternal life apart from Christ. Understood this way, Paul is not speaking hypothetically. But once his doctrine of universal human powerlessness under sin has been developed (cp. 3:9 especially), it becomes clear that the promise can, in fact, never become operative because the condition for its fulfillment – consistent, earnest seeking after good – can never be realized.

5. God Judges Impartially (2:11)

¹¹*For God shows no partiality.*

The principle that God treats all people equally in the judgment has been made positively, with respect to the criterion of judgment, in v. 6. Now Paul makes the same point negatively, by claiming that ‘there is no partiality with God.’

Prosōpolēptēs (‘partiality’) means literally ‘to receive a face,’ that is, to give consideration to a person because of who he is. That exact idea is seen in the popular symbolic statue of justice as a woman blindfolded, signifying that she is unable to see who is before her to be judged and therefore is not tempted to be partial either for or against the accused.

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C. Judgment and the Law (Romans 2:12-16)

In these verses Paul defends the equality of all people before God's judgment seat against the charge that the Jews' possession of the law gives to them a decisive advantage. This is not the case, Paul argues, because: 1) it is doing, not hearing or possessing, the law, that matters (v. 13); and 2) even the Gentiles, who do not have God's law in written form, are not without 'law' (vv. 14-15). The law, then, gives to the Jews no true advantage when it comes to salvation. It is clear from these verses that Paul argues for universal human sinfulness, and a sinfulness of such a nature that condemnation must be the outcome.

The Jew may have felt superior since God had chosen Israel as His people and at a precise moment in history had given them His Law. Gentiles, however, are not without some sense of the moral principles of that same Law, however dimly those principles may have been understood. A Greek like Aristotle wrote treatises in various aspects of law that govern society. The Jews were not the only persons concerned for religious behavior. What matters to God is how Jews live up to the Law God gave them and how Gentiles live up to those moral standards which reflect the Law of God. Gentiles have moral standards and Jews have the Law of God, but *performance* is what matters to God.

1. The Written Law (2:12-13)

a) *Judged by the Law (2:12)*

¹²*For all who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law.*

The division of the world into those who sin 'without the law' and those who sin 'in the law' corresponds to the distinction between Jews and Gentiles (vv. 10, 14). This means that the 'law' in question is the law of Moses. Therefore, Paul is not here accusing the Gentiles of being 'lawless' (that is, notorious criminals or outlaws) but of being 'law-less' – by definition, as Gentiles, they do not possess the law of Moses. In contrast, then, Jews live 'in the sphere of' within the boundaries defined by, the law. Most Jews maintained that outside Israel, the sphere of the law, there is no salvation. The Jews who live within the domain of law, on the other hand, often considered themselves virtually assured of salvation.

Gentiles will be judged according to their more limited knowledge of God. But because they have God's natural revelation in creation, as well as the witness of right and wrong in their hearts and consciences (v. 15), they are guilty and accountable. *Apollumi* ('perish') pertains to destruction but not annihilation. It basically has to do with that which is ruined and is no longer usable for its intended purpose. The person who has not had the benefit of knowing God's law will be judged according to his limited knowledge of God. But the person who has access to God's law will be judged according to his greater knowledge about the Lord.

All people stand condemned before God on the basis of what they do know. The man without the Bible is condemned on the basis of his moral judgments of others. As we saw in 2:1, he has known and spoken about these moral standards but then has failed to live up to those standards himself. The man with the Bible, on the other hand, stands condemned on the basis of the Bible he possesses. He 'shall be judged by the law' and its moral standards.

The mere *hearing* of the Law in the synagogue is useless, unless followed by the *doing* of the Law, a point also made by James (James 1:22). Three centuries before Christ Aristotle

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distinguished between ‘written laws,’ which could be in error, and the ‘general law as more in accordance with justice’ and which ‘never changes.’ He continues, ‘This law is not of now or yesterday, but is eternal’ (*Rhetoric* 1.15.3-8). The same applies today in what is termed ‘natural justice’ and the concept of ‘civic virtues’ which, though not easily defined, are regularly appealed to. A moral sense undergirds all societies.

b) *Justified by the Law (2:13)*

¹³*For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified.*

Paul explains why even those who possess the law will nevertheless be condemned when they sin. It is because the law can justify only when it is obeyed; reading it, hearing it taught and preached, studying it – none of these, nor all of them together, can justify. This is the first time in Romans that Paul uses the verb ‘justify.’ It connotes the judicial decision of God to regard a sinner as ‘just’ or ‘right’ or ‘innocent’ before Him.

Paul here does not use the usual Greek term for hearing (*akouō*) but the word *akroatēs*, which was used of those whose business it is to listen. The idea is much like that of a college student. His primary purpose in class is to listen to the teacher’s instruction. Normally, he also has the responsibility of being accountable for what he hears and is tested on it. If he is simply auditing, however, he is required only to attend the class sessions; he is not held accountable for what he hears. But God recognizes no mere ‘auditors’ of His Word. The more a person hears His truth, the more he is responsible for believing and obeying it. Unless there is obedience, the greater the hearing, the greater the judgment.

Paul is here simply setting forth the standard by which God’s justifying verdict will be rendered. This verse confirms and explains the reason for the Jews’ condemnation in v. 12b; and this suggests that its purpose is not to show how people can be justified but to set forth the standard that must be met if a person is to be justified.

2. The Unwritten Law (2:14-15)

From earliest times, three basic alternatives on the identity of the “Gentiles” have been proposed: 1) Gentiles who fulfill the law and are saved apart from explicit faith in Christ; 2) Gentiles who do some part of the law but who are not saved; 3) Gentile Christians who fulfill the law by virtue of their relationship to Christ. As in the related vv. 7, 10, and 13, we think the second alternative is best.

a) *Keeping the ‘Law’*

¹⁴*For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law.*

Paul is almost certainly pressing into service a widespread Greek tradition to the effect that all human beings possess an ‘unwritten’ or ‘natural’ law – an innate moral sense of ‘right and wrong, for the purpose of rendering Gentiles responsible for basic moral standards. What Paul is then asserting is that certain Gentiles ‘do the things of the law’ through a natural, inborn capacity. Paul’s point is that Gentiles outside of Christ regularly obey their parents, refrain from murder and robbery, and so on. Paul does not mean that these people need nothing to guide them but that they attest knowledge of divine moral standards. These Gentiles, while not possessing *the* law of Moses, nevertheless have access to knowledge of God’s will for them. By applying to

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Gentiles a term reserved in this context for Jews ('law'), Paul pursues his policy of putting Jews and Gentiles on the same footing.

Does this mean, then, that Gentiles are excused from eternal judgment and punishment because they have not had the advantage of the Law and therefore had no basis for obedient living? No, because Paul has already established, the Gentiles have God's general, or natural, revelation of Himself in creation and know instinctively that they are guilty and worthy of death (1:18-32).

Paul is saying that you find many Gentiles (people without the Bible) who live better lives than those who have the Bible. He's not saying these non-believers live perfect lives. No human lives a perfect life. All he is saying is that the relatively good example of these non-believers condemns those who have the Bible. Of course, this doesn't excuse the man without the Bible. He is not fully living up to the standard he knows. But it is an additional condemnation of the Jew, the man with the Bible. Paul is simply cutting away every foundation other than grace. You can just feel it. He is cutting away all the arguments people have used down through the ages to say, 'I don't need a Savior.' You can feel it all being demolished. Someone will say, 'Look, here are these heathens over here and they live better lives than people who have the Bible.' But as Paul has said, those people's good lives won't save them, because they aren't fully living up to their own standards either.

b) *Judged by the 'Law'*

¹⁵*They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them...*

Knowledge of God's moral demands among the Gentiles simply demonstrates their guilt. The conscience could be the source of moral norms (as in our popular usage of the term), but it is usually viewed as a reflective mechanism by which people can measure their conformity to a norm.

All people experience this swing of the pendulum – excusing...accusing...excusing...accusing... We face our conscience and feel accused; then we explain it away and feel excused.

Paul is merely observing that the laws of the Gentiles reveal a moral consciousness along with the inner ability to distinguish right from wrong. Furthermore, they have the capacity to 'accuse or excuse' themselves by the ethical criteria of their own laws. Only in this remote sense do they have the Law of God, by pale reflection. Paul is not saying that they observe the Law of God, even in this lesser understanding. Indeed, there is every reason to believe that as the Jews fail to keep that Law (see vv. 17-24), so the Gentiles also fail to uphold their 'law.'

With incredible discrimination God judges those lacking His Word by how well they live according to the sense of right and wrong in their hearts. God's judgment is so perfect that He takes into account one's moral perception in rendering judgment. To be sure, no one escapes condemnation. All fall short. None measure up to their own moral perceptions of right or wrong, let alone God's Law.

In chapter 1, Paul develops the concept of mediate general revelation, which is revelation that God gives of Himself through a medium. God communicates His eternal power and deity through the medium of the created order. The medium of nature reveals God to all people. In addition to mediate general revelation, we also speak of immediate general revelation. Here the term *immediate* is not used with respect to time; rather, immediate general revelation is that which God gives without some intervening medium. Simply, immediate general revelation is the

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knowledge of God that He plants in our soul. Before we ever took a breath, God planted in our soul an immediate knowledge and awareness of Himself. This revelation is given apart from our reading the Bible or looking at nature. Therefore, we know God both mediately, through nature, and immediately, through the sense of His deity that we have in our souls. God has revealed Himself to the human heart such that everyone knows what is right and what is not right. We can practice our sins over and over again and get everybody in our community to think and agree that it is okay to do those things, but we know better. We show the work of the law written in our hearts because our consciences bear witness against us.

There are four reasons why the heathen are lost. First, their rejection of their knowledge of God available through His *creation* condemns them. Second, as the apostle now points out, their *conduct*, based on the knowledge ‘of the Law written in their hearts,’ condemns them. Many pagan philosophies, both ancient and modern, teach certain standards of ethics that closely parallel those in Scripture. The fact that pagan people do good things, *knowing they were ethically good*, proves they have knowledge of God’s Law written in their hearts. Third, the heathen are condemned because of *conscience*. *Suneidēsis* (‘conscience’) literally means ‘knowledge with’ or ‘co-knowledge.’ The very idea behind the word testifies to the fact that men recognize they have an instinctive, built-in sense of right and wrong that activates guilt. Fourth, the heathen are lost because of their *contemplation*, ‘their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them.’ This natural faculty obviously is closely related to conscience. Building on the instinctive knowledge of right and wrong that the conscience provides, even unbelievers have the obvious ability to determine that certain things are basically right or wrong.

The point is not that the Jews, who had the law, were sinning against God while the Gentile pagans, who did not have the law, were obeying the law. Paul is saying that those who have the law perish with the law, and those who do not have the law perish without the law. People demonstrate by their actions, by what the philosophers call the *ius gentium* (the law of nations), that even if they have never seen the Ten Commandments, God has written His law on their hearts. Their behavior reveals that they know in their hearts the difference between right and wrong. Both Jew and Greek have consistently defied God, and they will be judged according to the light they have been given. The Jews will have a greater judgment because they have greater light, but the Gentiles are not without light.

3. Judgment Day (2:16)

...¹⁶*on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus.*

Paul doesn’t allow his message to remain abstract; he brings it down to the most concrete, practical form; and the concrete, unavoidable fact is that there is coming a very real day in space and time, in history, when God is going to judge the world. ‘Secrets’ should be a fearsome word to us. God will judge not just the open things but the secret things.

The judgment will be by God, but it will also be ‘by Jesus Christ.’ When unsaved men and women stand before God in judgment and look Him in the face, they will see only one person of the Trinity as judge, and that will be Jesus Christ. The person of the Trinity who came and suffered so much so that people would not have to be judged, will be their judge. The person who tries to come to God without coming through Jesus Christ, will, at the judgment, come face to face with Jesus Christ. He understands temptation and He understands our humanity. Yet that does not lessen the awful truth that He will judge us. Jesus, Savior of the world, will also be its judge.

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Those who are not believers must realize that if they do to have the righteousness of Christ through faith, their sins are yet upon them, and God will judge them with perfect judgment. Handy moralizations—‘Everybody’s doing it,’ ‘To err is human, to forgive is divine,’ ‘Nobody’s perfect’—will not suffice. The day of judgment is coming, and men and women need to ‘settle out of court’ while they can.

There is obviously such a thing as relative human goodness. Many unbelievers live on a high moral plane compared to most people. But that is not the kind of goodness that satisfies God, because nothing is truly good that is done from any motive other than His glory and done in any power but His own. Everything that is done in the flesh can only serve the flesh and is by nature tainted with imperfection and self-interest.

We are not yet to the good news. Paul is seeking to bring the whole guilty world before the tribunal of God so that we will stop giving excuses, shut our mouths, and go to the gospel. While we wait for the good news, we must tremble before the law of a just and holy God.

For next time: Read Romans 2:17-29.