

ROMANS 2:1-3:20 – The Unrighteousness of the Jews and the Guilt of All Humanity

1) Outline the passage. What are its key themes?

- Outline:
 - The unrighteousness of Jews (2:1-3:8)
 - The unrighteousness of all people, both Jew and Gentile (3:9-20)
- Key themes:
 - All humanity is guilty before a holy and righteous God
 - God’s judgment is impartial, according to works
 - God will judge self-righteousness and hypocrisy
 - God must first change our hearts before we are able to obey him
 - No one will be justified by obedience to the law—justification is not by works, but through faith alone in Christ alone

2) How does this passage fit within the broader argument of Romans? How does it address a possible response to 1:18-32?

- Paul has indicted the Gentile world for its sin and rejection of God’s glory in 1:18-32. Paul’s purpose in 2:1-3:8 is to show that the Jews are not exempt from judgment. Indeed, to indict the Jews as sinners was even more important, for it was commonly accepted that Gentiles were sinners. What Paul needed to show was that Jews who possessed the law and a covenant with God were not saved with these advantages.
- Only in the light of chapter 2 can we see that the Jews could not escape from the accusations of chapter 1... Paul has structured the argument so that it has an element of surprise; first he attacks the Gentiles and then the Jews. Here he imitates Amos (chs. 1-2), who recounts the sins of the Gentile world and then turns to censure Judah and Israel. This structure also reminds us of Nathan, who used the parable of the lamb as a setup to confront David with his own sin (2 Sam. 12:7).
- One could read 1:18-32 and respond in a self-righteous way. We might congratulate ourselves about how “we are not like those bad people”. We might also feel pretty good about ourselves because we, like Paul, also disapprove of such sins.
- This passage is a stinging indictment of our external religiosity, our self-righteousness, and our hypocrisy.

Knowing Without Obeying is Not Enough Because God Judges Impartially (Rom. 2:1-16)

3) Why do the Jews have no excuse?

- Because even while they pass judgment on the Gentiles, they “practice the very same things” (v. 1). In the very act of judging another, a person is condemning himself because he is guilty of doing the same things.
- “Same things” parallels “such things” (1:32). It is therefore likely that Paul has in mind the sins of 1:29-31.

- The Jews are guilty not because they are judging others *per se*. They are guilty because they are judging *hypocritically*. Their self-righteousness is a sham because they are guilty of the same sins as the Gentiles.

Digging Deeper: Who is Paul addressing in these verses (vv. 1-16)?

Paul does not specifically address the Jews until 2:17, and thus some think that the self-righteous moralist in general is being addressed in vv. 1-16. But most commentators see a critique of the Jews in these verses as well:

- The Jews would be most likely to criticize Gentiles for the behavior described in 1:18-32. The Jews would pass judgment (v. 1 – “every one of you who judges”) on the Gentiles and regard them as sinners.
- The attitude expressed in 2:3-4 fits Jews who would plead their covenantal relationship with God as protection against his wrath.
- The reference to the law in v. 12 also signals that the Jews are the particular object of Paul’s attention.

4) What does Paul warn the Jews of in vv. 2-5? What does Paul’s warning tell us about the spiritual condition of the Jews?

- Paul warns the Jews of God’s judgment, which “rightly falls on those who practice such things” (v. 3). The Jews were “storing up wrath” on the day of wrath when God’s righteous judgment will be revealed (v. 5)
- The Jews’ spiritual condition:
 - The Jews were self-righteous in how they judged others for the sins that they themselves committed (v. 2).
 - They were self-deceived. Even though they practiced evil, they thought they could escape God’s judgment (v. 3).
 - Not only were they self-deceived, the Jews were also scorning the kindness and patience of God, who had not brought immediate judgment upon them (v. 4).
 - The Jews had hard and impenitent hearts (v. 5). They needed the circumcision of the heart (Deut. 30:6), which only God’s Spirit could bring about (2:29).

5) What is the overall principle of vv. 6-11? Why does Paul emphasize this?

- The overall principle is that God will judge each and every person according to what the person has done (v. 6). This is because God is perfectly impartial (v. 11).
- Paul emphasizes this to remind Jews that merely being a Jew does not spare one from God’s wrath. God shows no partiality; therefore he judges Jews and Gentiles by the same standard.

Digging Deeper: Does Paul teach in 2:7, 10 that some can obtain eternal life by doing good works?

Two Interpretative Options (cf. Schreiner, *Romans*):

1. Probably the dominant interpretation is that these verses are hypothetical. Eternal life would be given *if* one did good works and kept the law perfectly, but no one does the requisite good works, and thus all deserve judgment. The advantage of this interpretation is that it retains the focus of this section of Romans: judgment on all who sinned. It also neatly harmonizes with 3:19-20. No one can ever be justified by the works of the law since no one practices what the law commands.

OR

2. Paul's insistence elsewhere (cf. 1 Cor. 6:9-11; 2 Cor. 5:10; Gal. 5:21) that works are necessary to enter the kingdom suggests that the similar theme here cannot be dismissed as hypothetical. Paul is speaking of real obedience that is rewarded on the last day—such obedience being the result of the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit, as Paul explains in 2:26-29. Verses 2:7, 10 therefore refer to *Christians*, who, through their union with Jesus Christ, are enabled to obey God by the power of the Holy Spirit.

6) According to v. 12, how does God demonstrate his impartiality? Why is it not enough for the Jews to merely possess and know the law (v. 13)?

- All will be judged according to the standard they had. The Gentiles will perish (i.e., face final judgment) because of their sin (cf. vv. 14–15) even though they are without the law (they do not have the written laws of the OT). The Jews are not spared judgment simply because they possess the law (of the OT), for those who transgress the law will be judged for their transgressions.
- Merely possessing the law is not enough because “it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified” (v. 13).
- In verses 2:12-16, Paul defends the equality of all people before God's judgment seat. The Jews' possession of the law does not give them a decisive advantage. This is 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” (in a generic sense) for they still have some knowledge of God's moral demands (vv. 14-15). The Gentiles are aware of the conduct that the law requires because “the work of the law is written on their hearts” (v. 15).

7) What implications and applications do these verses have for us?

Religious Privilege Without Obedience is Not Enough (Rom 2:17-3:8)

In vv. 17-29, Paul addresses two things that especially pointed to the Jews' special status: the law and circumcision. He states that the covenantal advantages they have in terms of the law and circumcision will avail only if they keep the law.

8) Why were the Jews boasting in the law? What was wrong with their boasting in the law (vv. 17-24)? What applications can we draw from here?

- The Jews boasted in the law because it was through being instructed from the law that they:
 - Knew God's will and approved what was excellent (v. 18)
 - Were a guide to the blind and a light to those in darkness (v. 19)
 - Were able to instruct the foolish and teach children (v. 20)
 - Had knowledge and truth (v. 20)
- So the benefits of having the law are genuine (cf. Rom. 3:2). But the issue is how the Jews respond to their covenantal advantages.
- Boasting in God and the law is not wrong in itself (cf. Jer. 9:23-24). What was wrong with the Jews' boasting was that they themselves failed to observe the law (vv. 21-23). They thus brought dishonor upon the God in whom they boast (vv. 23-24).
- All the privileges, distinctions, and gifts that the Jew may claim are meaningless if they are not responded to with a sincere and consistent obedience. It is not boasting in the law that brings honor to God but *obedience* to it. Without obedience, we blaspheme God's name among unbelievers because our lives belie what we profess with our lips.

9) How were the Jews wrong to boast in their circumcision (vv. 25-29)? What applications can we draw from here?

- The Jews were inclined to believe that they would be spared at the last judgment because of their circumcision. The rite was required of all Jewish males for entrance into the covenant (Gen. 17:9-14; Lev. 12:3), and hence it was likely viewed as a form of covenant protection. But in accord with the OT itself (cf. Deut. 10:16; 30:6; Jer. 4:4), Paul argues that circumcision is of value only if one obeys the law (v. 25). The covenant signified by circumcision *does not and cannot save*, for only perfect obedience would qualify and no one can obey to such an extent.
- Those who violate the law are counted before God as uncircumcised. In other words, they are *outside* the covenant and therefore destined for God's wrath (v. 25b).
- Once again, Paul emphasizes the importance of *obedience*. His intention here is to remove circumcision from the list of those things that the Jew might think would afford him an automatic pardon from God's wrath.

10) According to this passage, who is a "true Jew"? How is this significant?

- The "uncircumcised man" in v. 26 refers to Gentiles. But Paul says that obedient Gentiles will be counted by God as "circumcised". To be considered as circumcised

means that the Gentile who keeps the moral norms of God's law is part of God's people, the redeemed community.

- In striking contrast to the Jewish beliefs of his day, Paul claims that true Jewishness and genuine circumcision are not ethnic or physical matters.
- True Jewishness and true circumcision are matters of the heart. They are the work of the Holy Spirit. In this sense, those who believe in Jesus Christ are true Jews because they have received the Spirit, who has changed their hearts.
- The letter/Spirit contrast occurs three times in Paul (see also 7:6; 2 Cor. 3:6) and always compares the old era of redemptive history with the new age inaugurated by Jesus Christ, when God's Spirit is poured out in fullness and power. The law is described as letter because it cannot and does not transform anyone. The reference to the work of the Spirit demonstrates that the obedience described in 2:26–27 and in vv. 7, 10 is the result of the Spirit's work. Therefore, it is not the obedience of the unregenerate that is in view here but rather the obedience of those who, by the convicting work of the Holy Spirit, have repented of their hard hearts (v. 5) and have trusted in Jesus Christ, who have received the Holy Spirit, and who are being enabled by the Spirit to live a new life characterized by obedience to God (cf. Rom. 8:1-17). Such obedience is *not the cause of salvation*, but it is the *effect and fruit of the Spirit's work in a person's life*.

Digging Deeper: The Promise of the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament

The Holy Spirit is the gift of the new age prophesied in the OT (Joel 2:28-29; cf. Isa. 44:3; Ezek. 11:19; 36:26-27). The gift of the Spirit circumcises the heart and makes obedience to the law a reality. The OT shows that the circumcision of the heart is an eschatological reality (Lev. 26:41; Deut. 30:6; cf. Deut. 10:16; Jer. 4:4). When the heart is circumcised, then the law will be kept. One thinks here of Jeremiah's promise (Jer. 31:31-34) that in the new covenant God will write the law on the heart. Ezekiel says that obedience will become a reality when God takes out the heart of stone and puts his Spirit in his people (Ezek. 11:19-20; 36:26-27).

– Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*

How does Romans 2:1-3:8 speak to us today?

*"In many of our contexts, the original groups of Jewish and Gentile Christians are not very relevant (because, sadly, there are so few Jewish Christians in most of our churches). But it does not take much thought to understand how **the mindset of religious privilege occurs in every church**. The church member from a Christian family, who has been brought up to know his Bible, who has perhaps some status in his church by association with significant people, who has been to the 'right' church as a student, whose lifestyle has been outwardly pretty respectable, whose life has perhaps been fairly straightforward, may be tempted to think he is just a bit superior to the new Christian who is clueless about his Bible, doesn't know anybody who matters, has never been to a well-known church, and whose life is still pretty much a moral mess. In these terms there are plenty of 'Jews' and 'Gentiles' in all our churches.*

At one level Paul's aim is simple. He wants to close off the escape hatch by which the morally upright person tries to evade the fact that he or she can be right with God only and 100

*per cent by free, unmerited grace, received empty-handed by faith. This is so offensive to human pride that **in every church evasions of grace spring up like weeds in a springtime garden**. Paul understands the deceitful attractiveness of a complacent false assurance and wants to expose it for the dangerous sham that it is... The moment we adopt a tabloid mentality of just being horrified by the terrible world around, we inevitably pull up the drawbridge to keep that terrible world out (little realizing that we also trap the same world inside our church). **Only sinners with hearts changed by grace alone will have the heart and humility to reach out to unforgiven sinners.**"*

--- Christopher Ash, *Teaching Romans*

Everyone is Guilty; Everyone Needs the Gospel of Jesus Christ (3:9-20)

11) What does Paul conclude in 3:9? What is the basis of his conclusion? How serious is our sin plight?

- All humanity, comprising both Jews and Gentiles, is under sin. The failure to glorify and honor God is not present just among the Gentiles. It is a universal phenomenon. Jews and Gentiles together have "all sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23).
- Paul cites the OT to charge all with sin. Those OT texts that distinguished between the righteous and wicked are now turned against Jews who believed they were righteous, in order to prosecute the theme that all are guilty before God. By abolishing the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, Paul overturns the Jewish concept of covenantal protection. The sin of the Jews places them in the same situation as the Gentiles: guilty before God.

Romans 3	OT Reference
<i>Sinful Condition</i>	
v. 10, none is righteous	Ps. 14:3/53:3; Eccles. 7:20
v. 11a, no one understands	Ps. 14:2/53:2
v. 11b, no one seeks for God	Ps. 14:2/53:2
v. 12, all have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one	Ps. 14:3/53:3
<i>Sinful Speech (note progression from throat to tongue to lips)</i>	
v. 13a, b, their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive	Ps. 5:9
v. 13c, the venom of asps is under their lips	Ps. 140:3
v. 14, their mouth is full of curses and bitterness	Ps. 10:7
<i>Sinful Action</i>	
v. 15, their feet are swift to shed blood	Prov. 1:16/Isa. 59:7
v. 16, in their paths are ruin and misery	Isa. 59:7
v. 17, and the way of peace they have not known	Isa. 59:8
<i>Summary Statement</i>	
v. 18, there is no fear of God before their eyes	Ps. 36:1

12) What are the implications of Paul's statement in 3:19-20?

- Vv. 19-20 function as the conclusion to all of 1:18-3:20. "Those who are under the law" refers to the Jews. Paul's logic is that if the Jews, who are God's special covenant people, cannot keep the law, then it follows that Gentiles, who are taught much of the law by their consciences, will not avoid God's condemnation either.
- The phrase "works of the law" (v. 20) refers to all the works or deeds required by the law. The law required perfect obedience to God's will. All people sin and fall short of this standard, therefore no one is justified (a legal term that means "declared righteous by God") by the law. The law reveals human sin (v. 20b), but it does not provide the ability to conquer sin.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. In what ways are we like the Jews that Paul addresses in Romans 2:1-3:8? For instance, how might we be guilty of self-righteousness, pride, self-deception, and hypocrisy?
2. How can we stir up one another to the urgent need for daily repentance? How can we encourage one another daily so that none of us might be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin?
3. How is Bible knowledge both a valuable and yet a dangerous thing to have? How can we grow in Bible knowledge while avoiding the dangers of pride and hypocrisy?
4. In our lives, what do we boast in? Why? Where do we place our trust and confidence?
5. How might we take God's kindness and patience for granted?
6. Reflect on the OT passages quoted by Paul in Romans 3:10-18 and evaluate our hearts, speech and actions. How are we convicted of sin? How does this engender a greater gratitude for the gospel, as well as a deeper trust in Christ?

OUTLINE OF ROMANS

I. Introduction (1:1-17)

- A. Salutation (1:1-7)
- B. Thanksgiving (1:8-15)
- C. Statement of theme (1:16-17)

II. The Heart of the Gospel: Justification by Faith (1:18-4:25)

- A. The universal reign of sin (1:18-3:20)
- B. Justification by faith (3:21-4:25)

III. The Assurance Provided by the Gospel: The Hope of Salvation (5:1-8:39)

- A. The hope of glory (5:1-21)
- B. Freedom from bondage to sin (6:1-23)
- C. Freedom from bondage to the law (7:1-25)
- D. Assurance of eternal life in the Spirit (8:1-30)
- E. The believer's security celebrated (8:31-39)

IV. The Defense of the Gospel: The Problem of Israel (9:1-11:36)

- A. Introduction: The tension between God's promises and Israel's plight (9:1-5)
- B. Defining the promise: (1) God's sovereign election (9:6-29)
- C. Understanding Israel's plight: Christ as the climax of salvation history (9:30-10:21)
- D. Summary: Israel, the "elect", and the "hardened" (11:1-10)
- E. Defining the promise (2): The future of Israel (11:11-32)
- F. Conclusion: Praise to God in light of his awesome plan (11:33-36)

V. The Transforming Power of the Gospel: Christian Conduct (12:1-15:13)

- A. The heart of the matter: Total transformation (12:1-2)
- B. Humility and mutual service (12:3-8)
- C. Love and its manifestations (12:9-21)
- D. The Christian and secular rulers (13:1-7)
- E. Love and the law (13:8-10)
- F. Living in light of the day (13:11-14)
- G. A plea for unity (14:1-15:13)

VI. The Letter Closing (15:14-16:27)

- A. Paul's ministry and travel plans (15:14-33)
- B. Greetings (16:1-23)
- C. Concluding doxology (16:25-27)