

Romans 2: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Romans chapter 2 Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things.

We know that the judgment of God rightly falls on those who practice such things. Do you suppose, O man, that you who judge those who practice such things, and yet do them yourself, that you will escape the judgment of God?

Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? But because of your hard and impenitent heart, you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath, when God's righteous judgment will be revealed.

He will render to each one according to his works. To those who by patience and well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life. But for those who are self-seeking, and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury.

There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first, and also the Greek. But glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first, and also the Greek.

[1 : 1 3] For God shows no partiality. 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. For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified.

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

But if you call yourself a Jew, and rely on the law, and boast in God, and know his will, and approve what is excellent, because you are instructed from the law, and if you are sure that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of children, having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth, you then who teach others, do you not teach yourself?

While you preach against stealing, do you steal? You who say that one must not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples?

You who boast in the law dishonour God by breaking the law, for, as it is written, the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you. For circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law, but if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision.

[2 : 4 5] So, if a man who is uncircumcised keeps the precepts of the law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? Then he who is physically uncircumcised but keeps the law will condemn you who have the written code and circumcision, but break the law.

For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the spirit, not by the letter.

His praise is not from man, but from God. Verses 18-32 of Romans chapter 1 were a characteristically Jewish condemnation of paganism. We find such condemnation in various Jewish works, such as chapters 13-15 of the apocryphal Wisdom of Solomon.

One could imagine many self-righteous persons nodding along with Paul's condemnation of idolatry and sexual immorality. Yet in chapter 2, Paul gives a diatribe against such imagined persons.

Persons who, accustomed to standing in the position of the judge, confident in their natural standing with God, have never found themselves in the dark. The person in verse 1 regards themselves as the exception, confident in their imagined right to judge and their immunity from judgment.

[4 : 0 0] However, whether pagan moralists or Jews presumptuously secure in their covenant status, they too are without excuse. They also sin in the same ways. The idea that there is a class of sinners that excludes us is unsustainable.

We should recall Paul's description in verses 29-32 of the preceding chapter. They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice.

They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.

Though they know God's righteous decree, that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them, but give approval to those who practice them. Such a condemnation flows very easily off the tongue of the judge.

But if the judge were to step back and pay attention to what they were saying, they should observe that they themselves are guilty of various of the offences that they are condemning. When we adopt the position of the judge, we like to make excuses and allowances for our own sins, which we consider minor peccadilloes relative to the serious offences of others.

[5 : 1 4] While the person judging grants that the judgment of God rightly comes upon sinners, they use such judgment to present their superiority, without recognising that everyone comes under the general condemnation that Paul has just given.

Texts such as the Wisdom of Solomon might exhibit a sort of Jewish exceptionalism, for instance, which simply does not reckon with the radical extent of sin, and the fact that even observant Jews aren't exempt from its spread.

The position of the observant Jew that Paul has in mind might be that, while the sins of the pagans are damnable, God is more indulgent with the sins of Israel. His kindness, forbearance and patience mean that Israel does not face the same harsh assessment.

God views the sins of his people like an indulgent father. He lets things slide for Israel because they are his favourite people. However, God's kindness is designed to give us time for and encouragement to repentance, and hope of forgiveness, not to give us confidence in our impenitence.

Those who don't repent treat God's kindness and forbearance as excusing or minimising sin, rather than as making repentance and forgiveness possible. Yet by using God's kindness to minimise their sin, they are merely compounding their initial sin with sustained impenitence and ingratitude to God's gracious extension of time and opportunity for repentance.

[6 : 31] This is all storing up further wrath for themselves on the day of wrath, when God's just judgement will be disclosed. On that day, God's judgement will be impartial, delivered according to people's works.

No one will get special allowances or exemptions. Some persons will receive eternal life as they patiently persist in well-doing, seeking for glory, honour and immortality.

Paul clearly believes that he is referring to a real, not a hypothetical group here. Some people genuinely will be justified on the last day, when they are judged according to their works.

Note that Paul doesn't say that such persons earn salvation. However, the judgement by which they are vindicated will be according to works. On the other hand, those who do not obey the truth, and seek their own ways rather than God's, will face divine wrath and terrible punishment.

This judgement will begin with Jews, but will also come to non-Jews. God is impartial, and all who do good will receive glory, honour and peace. Again, there is no evidence that Paul regards this group as merely hypothetical.

[7 : 37] How that can be the case when all the sinful and naturally deserving of judgement hasn't yet been made clear, but will be in time. Neither possession nor non-possession of the law excuses someone from divine judgement.

When Paul talks about the law, he isn't speaking of some abstract universal moral standard, but about the law given to Israel, the Torah, which set them apart as a people to the Lord.

The assumption that mere possession of the Torah granted good standing with God is dangerously misguided. What matters is not the mere hearing of the Torah, but actual observance of it. Indeed, despite not possessing the law by birth, the words by nature in verse 14 should be related not to the doing of what the law requires, but to the non-possession of the law.

When a Gentile fulfills the moral requirements of the law, they have the reality at which the law always aimed at in themselves. The work of the law is written on their hearts.

Paul here may be alluding to passages like Jeremiah chapter 31 verses 31 to 34, which promised the writing of the law and the heart of once rebellious Israel, so that they would observe it from the heart.

[8 : 44] But behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord.

For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord. I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts, and I will be their guard, and they shall be my people.

And no longer shall each one teach his neighbour and each his brother, saying, Know the Lord, for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.

Paul describes these Gentiles that show the work of the law written on their hearts as having some sort of awakened conscience, with their thoughts conflicting, sometimes accusing and sometimes excusing them.

This active conscience bears witness to the law written on their heart, evidencing some internalised sense of God's claims upon their lives, and the shape of a God-fearing life. All of this will be revealed on the last day, when the secrets of men's hearts are disclosed, and all face judgement.

[9 : 56] Paul describes this judgement as according to his gospel. We should notice how important Christ as future judge is in Pauline presentations of the gospel to Gentiles, perhaps especially something that we see in the book of Acts.

Paul focuses upon the Jew, who presumes upon his covenant status. This figure has been in view throughout, but now comes into direct focus. This Jew believes that he enjoys a special status.

The judge at the beginning of the chapter believed that he was immune to the judgement. The Jew here exalts himself as a teacher, without taking into account the fact that this exposes him to a stricter judgement, especially when his teaching is hypocritical.

Much of Jesus' teaching was directed against the hypocrisy of the religious teachers and authorities, who taught things that they did not themselves observe. The scriptures taught that, having been given the law, Israel was called to train their children up after them, that they were a light to the Gentiles, and that they had a special wisdom that would make them stand out among the nations.

However, while revelling in the supposed superiority that this granted them, many Jewish teachers were laying heavy burdens upon others, while not truly observing the law themselves.

[11 : 09] The Jew here is not, I believe, a reference to the average, typical Jewish individual, so much as it is a reference to a hypothetical Jewish teacher that stands for the nation's teachers of the law more generally.

While teaching against stealing, they devoured widows' houses and misappropriated funds given to God. While teaching that people must not commit adultery, they were known for their sexual infidelity and their compromising of marriage.

While teaching against idols, they were quite prepared to bend the rules when there was a chance to profit from trafficking and things dedicated to idols. Paul's point is not that every Jewish teacher is guilty of these things, but that these wrongs are so commonplace among them as to be a source and cause of scandal and dishonour to God's name.

The Gentiles blaspheme God on account of their actions. If Paul were making a similar point today, you could imagine him referencing things like child abuse. While only a small minority of priests and pastors may be guilty of this, this minority and the gross failure of wider church bodies to deal with them radically undermines the claims of those bodies to moral authority and a true teaching witness, and it brings the church and the name of God into disrepute in the society at large.

God's concern for the holiness of his name and his people's profaning of it by their sin is a theme in the prophets. For instance, Ezekiel chapter 36 verses 20 to 23.

[12 : 35] But when they came to the nations, wherever they came, they profaned my holy name, in that people said of them, These are the people of the Lord, and yet they had to go out of his land. But I had concern for my holy name, which the house of Israel had profaned among the nations to which they came.

Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord God, It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came.

And I will vindicate the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them. And the nations will know that I am the Lord, declares the Lord God, when through you I vindicate my holiness before their eyes.

Paul concludes this chapter by dramatically relativising circumcision. Circumcision is of value for those who obey the law, but of none to those who do not.

On the other hand, the uncircumcised Gentile who keeps the law will be regarded as having covenant standing with God. The true Jew is not merely outwardly circumcised, but someone who is circumcised in heart by the Spirit.

[13 : 43] Paul is here alluding to Deuteronomy chapter 30 verse 6, And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.

Also referencing passages like Ezekiel 36 verses 26 to 27, And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.

And I will put my spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. These are blessings of the promised new covenant. The true Jew that Paul is speaking about here is not just the Christian believer in general, it's the Jewish believer in particular.

The law and circumcision are indeed positive things and have genuinely granted Jews a special status, as we will see as we go further on. However, they are only of value to true and faithful Jews.

To other Jews who are unfaithful and unbelieving, they merely bring judgment. And Israel has been fairly consistently unfaithful throughout its history. A question to consider.

[14 : 56] What are some ways in which Paul's challenge here might be applied to Christians and the church?