

Romans: Chapter Two

Romans 1.18-3.20: SIN (Righteousness Required)

The Greek (and Jewish) Philosopher (2.1-16)

The Barbarian *pagan* has been declared 'under sin' (1.18-1.32). Paul now turns his attention to the educated *philosopher* or moralist, any man (Jew or Gentile) who 'judges' (v.1). The difference is that the pagan does what they know to be wrong and *approves* of others who do so (1.32). The philosopher *condemns* those who do these wrongs and yet engages in them *secretly* themselves (2.1). They do in private what they condemn in public. That is hypocrisy. **Phillips:** 2.1-16 describes God's indictment of all hypocrites regardless of race or religion, culture or creed. Both Jews and Gentiles figure in the discussion, the Gentile often appearing in a better light than the Jew.

FF Bruce helpfully suggests Paul may have had a man like *Seneca* in mind. He was a Stoic moralist and the tutor of Nero. He would have roundly supported Paul's conclusions in 1.18-32, deploring the wicked excesses in which the heathen engaged. *Seneca* assumed the role of a moral guide to Nero and 'exalted great moral virtues' even 'ridiculing vulgar idolatry'. And yet his history is one of hypocrisy and dishonesty, even to the extent of involvement in the murder of Nero's mother (Agrippina). This is exactly the man Paul has in view in 2.1-16.

God's Judgment of the Philosopher (v.1)

'Therefore' probably relates back to 1.32 (although some take it further to 1.18-19). We know that God's judgment upon those who practice the sins of 1.29-31 is right and just, and yet the moralist 'judge' of 2.1 practices exactly the same things, only in secret. They therefore 'condemn themselves' and are without excuse (or defence), as the heathen (1.20). A good Biblical example is David. He was outraged by the rich man's taking and killing of the poor man's 'one little ewe lamb' and yet he himself had killed Uriah and taken his wife. 'Thou art the man!' (2 Samuel 12). The one who 'judges' (*krino*) is one who 'discerns' and 'discriminates' morally, passing judgment on others (Genesis 3.5). Having not sunk to the idolatrous excess of the heathen, they do not have reprobate minds. **MacDonald:** *The fact that he can judge sins in others shows that he knows the difference between right and wrong.* Please note the very practical application. It is possible for a person to be so taken up with the faults of others that they do not consider their own failures (Matthew 7.1-5). Before judging the lives of others, we must first carefully judge our own lives.

God's Judgment is According to Promise (vv.2-5)

Paul now proceeds to remind this moral hypocrite of the sure and certain judgment of God and its basic principles. For example, it is 'according to truth' (v.2), that is 'reality'. All the facts will be known and revealed, even the secrets of our hearts (v.16, cf. Hebrews 4.13; 2 Corinthians 5.10). **vv.3-4:** These philosophers had gone astray in their thinking, supposing that their moral and upright exterior would exempt them from the judgment of God. They also underestimated the tolerance and patience of God. His delay in judgment is not to excuse sin, but to give opportunity to repent (cf. 2 Peter 3.3-9). **v.5** is a summary of their solemn state. Their hearts are 'hard' and 'unrepentant'. Their own actions were amassing and accumulating wrath. There is a clear contrast between the present day of goodness (v.4) and a future day of wrath. When one closes, the other begins. This is judgment connected with the tribulation and living men on the earth (Zephaniah 1.14-15; 2.2-3; 2 Timothy 4.1).

God's Judgment is According to Practice (vv.6-11)

Although these verses may suggest salvation by works, the theme of Paul's thought is not the ground of salvation but the principles of God's judgment. He will judge every person, whether saved or unsaved, according to their deeds (v.6) – a clear scriptural principle (Isaiah 3.10-11; Proverbs 24.12; Matthew 16.27; 1 Corinthians 3.8; Revelation 20.12-13).

Paul thus directs our attention to *two* kinds of men prior to the gospel age. There are those who sought for glory by patient continuance in well doing (v.7); and those that were 'contentious' (self-pleasing and rebellious), not obeying the truth (v.8). Those with genuine faith in God and a consequent desire to please Him are rewarded according to *their* works – eternal life (v.7b, 10). Those who refuse God's claim upon their lives and become slaves to unrighteousness are rewarded according to *their* works – wrath (v.8b, 9). Paul is not teaching salvation by works, but judgment according to works. **MacDonald:** *This does not mean that these people are saved by patient continuance in doing good. That would be another gospel. No one would naturally live that kind of life, and no one could live it without divine power. Anyone who really fits this description has already been saved by grace through faith.*

Others such as **EW Rogers** suggest that v.7 describes God's genuine offer of eternal life (prior to the gospel age). It was dependent on full, complete and continual obedience to the revealed will of God. Later Paul would clarify that no one can obey God perfectly and so all are under His wrath (3.12, 23-24). **Leckie:** *Until Calvary, man was still under trial and probation. Paul thus speaks here of that which God offered (the Divine ideal) but which man could not attain.* **Carson:** *Paul's purpose at this point is not to show how people can be saved but to set forth the standards of God's evaluation apart from the gospel (and Christ). These standards are the same for everyone – whether they be Jews or Gentiles.* **v.11:** Whatever the interpretation, the conclusion is clear. God is absolutely impartial in His judgment. He is no respecter of persons ('to receive a face') and thus no one can claim favouritism on the basis of who they are, whether Jew or Gentile.

*God's Judgment is According to the **Principle** of Law (vv.12-16)*

How can God be impartial when the Jews have been favoured with increased revelation from God (the Law) that the Gentiles did not receive? These verses show that *'God will judge every man by the standard that man actually has, not by the standard he does not have. He will judge the Jew by the written law and the Gentile by the law in his heart.'* **v.12:** The Gentiles did not have the written Mosaic law, and will therefore not be judged according to its standards. **v.14:** However, some Gentiles 'naturally' do what the Law requires because they have a moral sense of right and wrong written in their hearts (**v.15**). Gentiles instinctively know it is wrong to lie, steal and murder etc. This unwritten code informs the conscience ('a knowing with') allowing moral judgments to be made. Gentiles will be judged by God according to the law written in their hearts.

Jews, however, have been given the written Mosaic Law. They will therefore be judged according to the standards of that Law. **v.13:** The Jews had failed to keep the Law, and were not shielded from its condemnation merely because they possessed and 'constantly heard' the Law read. It had to be fully and completely obeyed to achieve justification (3.20; Leviticus 18.5). **v.16** brings a fitting conclusion to the whole matter. As the gospel reveals, God's future judgment of all mankind will be exercised through Christ Jesus (John 5.22, 27). In a section where Paul has dealt with what is largely *unseen* – hearts, minds, thoughts and conscience – it is appropriate that the 'secrets' of men will be revealed.

The Jewish Pharisee (2.17-3.8)

The final group to be condemned is the religious **Jew**. Surely if anyone can attain to God's righteousness it would be the Jew. Yet Paul will emphasise that salvation cannot be obtained by the *Law* (vv.17-24); *circumcision* (vv.25-27) or *birth* (vv.28-29) – the very three grounds on which the Jew claimed exemption from condemnation.

The Law (vv.17-24). The Law was of great value to the Jew. He 'leaned' or 'relied' upon it as a ground of righteousness (cf. Micah 3.11); boasting in his special knowledge and relationship with God (**v.17**). **v.18:** The Law provided a clear understanding of God's will and gave the Jew ability to 'test' or 'assess' moral values. **vv.19-20:** It was also the very 'embodiment (outline) of knowledge and truth' in keeping with their God-given responsibility to exercise a priestly ministry of guidance and teaching amongst the Gentiles (cf. Isaiah 42.6-7, 49.6; Matthew 23.24-28; John 4.22). Sadly, this resulted in boasting and arrogance on their part. **vv.21-22:** So they taught the Law and its commandments, yet did not practice what they preached (Matthew 23.3). They ministered against adultery, yet divorced on any ground (Matthew 19.3). The Law taught them to 'turn away' from physical idols, yet they bowed down at the 'altar of wealth' by stealing from pagan temples (cf. Daniel 1.2; Acts 19.37). **vv.23-24:** All this disobedience was dishonouring to the God who gave the Law. It caused the Gentiles to speak slanderously and disrespectfully about God as they observed the conduct of His earthly people. *'If this be the people of Jehovah what kind of God must Jehovah be?!'* That is the charge.

Circumcision (vv.25-27). **v.25:** Circumcision was of value as an outward, physical sign of the nation's covenant with Jehovah. It declared that they were separated *from* the heathen nations *unto* God. To the Jew, it was a badge of salvation. However, circumcision was of no value if it was not accompanied by obedience to the Law it represented (Galatians 5.3). They might as well be uncircumcised like a Gentile. **v.26:** Hypothetically, if a Gentile could meet the righteous requirements of the Law, they would be regarded as though they were circumcised. **v.27:** Such a Gentile 'condemns' the Jew by his very actions; being obedient to God's will even though he was not given the 'written letter of the law' or rite of 'circumcision'. **FE Stallan:** *In NT times, the case of Cornelius is an example of the uncircumcised manifesting features which were a condemnation of the ways of the circumcised (Acts 10.2).* Paul is stressing that there **must** be inner and spiritual reality to accompany the outer and physical sign.

Birth (vv.28-29). The conclusion logically follows. A true Jew is not one who could merely trace his ancestry to Abraham or was physically circumcised. This does not bring salvation. The true Jew is one who physically descends from Abraham, yes, but whose life is praiseworthy by God's standards (the word 'Jew' means *praise*). This is no mere outward conformity to religious rites and rituals, but a real work of the Spirit in the life and heart. This is spiritual circumcision (cf. Deuteronomy 10.16; Jeremiah 4.4; 2 Corinthians 3.6); an *inward* transformation and mark of separation to God.