

Paul's Epistle to the Romans

LESSON IV : JEWS ARE ALSO UNDER THE WRATH OF GOD FOR SIN — CHAP 2 VERSES 1-29

INTRODUCTION

“In 1:18-32, Paul describes those people whom he accuses of perverting their knowledge of God (Gentiles, primarily) in the third person: ‘they’ turned away from God; God handed ‘them’ over. In chap. 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, which is attested in several ancient authors as well as elsewhere in the NT (e.g., James), 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. Romans 3:1-8 is a particularly clear example of this dialogical style; and chap. 2, while not containing any true dialogue, is similar to those parts of the diatribe in which the ‘teacher’ rebukes his or her conversation partner by exposing his or her presumption and inconsistency (cf. 2:1: ‘you are without excuse, O person’; 2:3: ‘Do you reckon this, O person’; 2:17: ‘If you call yourself a Jew,’ etc.). However, 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.” [Moo, *Romans*, pg 125f] ***“The representation of the moral state of the heathen world, in the foregoing chapter, is a demonstration of the necessity of the Gospel for the reformation and salvation of man. And how rich is the favor wherewith God has visited the world! To have destroyed a race of apostate rebels, who had abused their understandings and every gift of a bountiful Creator, would have been justice; to have spared them would have been lenity and goodness; but to send his only begotten Son from heaven to redeem us from all iniquity and ungodliness by his own blood; to grant us a free pardon for all our sins; to put us in a state of mercy and salvation; to take us into his kingdom and family; to give us an inheritance among his saints; to bless us with immortality and all spiritual blessings in heavenly places; — this is most wonderful and exuberant favor. Rightly is the doctrine which teaches it called the Gospel, or glad tidings.”*** [Adam Clarke, *Romans*]

BASIC OUTLINE — Paul’s indictment against the Jews proceeds in 2 stages (2:1-16; 2:17-29) with 3:1-8 being a parenthetical response to possible misconceptions the Jews may have.

2:1-16 The Jews and the Judgement of God

2:17-29 The Limitations of the Covenant

Both parts of Paul’s indictment accuse the Jews of committing sins (2:1-5; 2:17-24) and then show those sins are not excusable simply because they are Jews; e.g. by possessing the law (2:12-16) or being circumcised (2:25-29).

IN A NUTSHELL —

“THAT men so impious and immoral, as those described in the preceding chapter, deserved the divine displeasure, and could never, by their own works, secure the favor of God, the Jew was prepared readily to admit. But might there not be a set of men, who, in virtue of some promise on the part of God, or of the performance of some special duties, could claim exemption from the execution of God’s purpose to punish all sin? To determine this point, it was necessary to consider a little more fully the justice of God, in order to see whether it admitted of impunity to sinners on the ground supposed. This first section of the chapter, therefore, is employed in expanding the principle of ver. 18 of the first chapter. It contains a development of those principles of justice which commend themselves at once to every man’s conscience. The first is, that he who condemns in others what he does himself, does thereby condemn himself, ver. 1. The second, that God’s judgments are according to the truth or real state of the case, ver. 2. The third, that the special goodness of God, manifested towards any individual or people, forms no ground of exemption from merited punishment; but being designed to lead them to repentance, when misimproved aggravates their condemnation, vers. 3-5. The fourth, that the ground of judgment is the works, not the external relations or professions of men: God will punish the wicked and reward the good, whether Jew or, without the least respect of persons, vers. 6-11. The fifth, that the standard of Judgment is the light which men have severally enjoyed. Those having a written law shall be judged by it, and those who have only the law written on their hearts, (and that the heathen have such a law is proved by the operations of the, conscience, vers. 13-15,) shall be judged by that law, ver. 12. These are the principles according to which all men are to be judged in the last day, by Jesus Christ, ver. 16.

“This section consists properly of two parts. The first, vers. 17-24, contains an application of the principles laid down in the former section, to the case of the Jews. The second, vers. 25-29, is an exhibition of the nature and design of circumcision. The principal grounds of dependence on the part of the Jews were, (1) Their covenant relation to God. (2) Their superior advantages as

di-a-tribe (dī-ə-trīb) — comes from a Greek word which was made up of two separate words: the prefix dia = ‘completely’ and another word which meant ‘to rub, to wear away, spend or waste time, to be busy.’ The verb meant ‘to rub hard, to spend or waste time,’ and the noun meant ‘wearing away of time, amusement, serious occupation, study,’ as well as ‘discourse, short ethical treatise or lecture, debate, argument.’ Archaic sense: ‘discourse, critical dissertation.’ Today it means: ‘a prolonged or exhaustive discussion; especially, an acrimonious or invective harangue.’

to divine knowledge. (3) Their circumcision.

“Now if it is true that God will judge every man, Jew or Gentile, according to his works, and by the law which he has enjoyed, what will it avail any to say, We are Jews, we have the law, ver. 17; we have superior knowledge, ver. 18; we can act as guides and instructors to others? ver. 19. This may all be very true; but are you less a thief, merely because you condemn stealing? less an adulterer, because you condemn adultery? or less a blasphemer, because you abhor sacrilege? vers. 21, 22. This superior knowledge, instead of extenuating, only aggravates your guilt. While boasting of your advantages, you by your sins bring a reproach on God, vers. 23, 24. According to the first principles of justice, therefore, your condemnation will be no less certain, and far more severe than that of the Gentiles. As to circumcision, to which the Jews attached so much importance, the apostle shows that it could avail nothing, except on condition of obedience to the law or covenant to which it belonged, ver. 25. If the law be broken, circumcision is worthless, vers. 25, latter clause. On the other hand, if the law is obeyed, the want of circumcision will not prevent a blessing, ver. 26. More than this, if those less favorably situated than the Jews are found obedient, they will rise up in judgment against the disobedient, though favored people of God, ver. 27. All this proves that an external rite can, in itself, have no saving power; because God is a Spirit, and requires and regards spiritual obedience alone. This principle is stated, first negatively, he is not a Jew who is such in profession merely, ver. 28; and then affirmatively, he is a Jew who is one inwardly, ver. 29.”
[Hodge, *Romans*, pg 46, 59]

CRITIQUE OF JEWISH PRESUMPTION (2:1-5)

Therefore thou art inexcusable, O man, whosoever thou art that judgest: for wherein thou judgest another, thou condemnest thyself; for thou that judgest doest the same things. But we are sure that the judgment of God is according to truth against them which commit such things. And thinkest thou this, O man, that judgest them which do such things, and doest the same, that thou shalt escape the judgment of God? Or despisest thou the riches of his goodness and forbearance and longsuffering; not knowing that the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance? But after thy hardness and impenitent heart treasurest up unto thyself wrath against the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God; (Rom 2:1-5 KJV)

You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge the other, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things. Now we know that God’s judgment against those who do such things is based on truth. So when you, a mere man, pass judgment on them and yet do the same things, do you think you will escape God’s judgment? Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that God’s kindness leads you toward repentance? But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God’s wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed. (Rom 2:1-5 NIV)

Therefore, thou art inexcusable, O man — every one who is judging — for in that in which thou dost judge the other, thyself thou dost condemn, for the same things thou dost practise who art judging, and we have known that the judgment of God is according to truth, upon those practising such things. And dost thou think this, O man, who art judging those who such things are practising, and art doing them, that thou shalt escape the judgment of God? or the riches of His goodness, and forbearance, and long-suffering, dost thou despise? — not knowing that the goodness of God doth lead thee to reformation! but, according to thy hardness and impenitent heart, thou dost treasure up to thyself wrath, in a day of wrath and of the revelation of the righteous judgment of God, (Rom 2:1-5 Young’s Literal Translation)

Paul develops his argument in this section over three paragraphs:

- vv. 1-5 uses 2nd person singular (“you”); accuses the Jews of earning for themselves the same wrath that is already falling on the Gentile sinners. This is the main point of 2:1-16.
- vv. 6-11 uses 3rd person plural (“they”); Paul explains the indictment of vv. 1-5. Both this and paragraph following validates the Jews being under the same judgment as Gentiles. Paul shows here God’s impartiality demands he treats all people the same, judging each person according to what he has done.
- vv. 12-16 Paul shows possessing the law makes no difference in this judgment because (1) its not possessing the law but doing the law that matters; and (2) the Gentiles also have the “law” in some sense.

PAUL’S “OPPONENT” — Paul begins by addressing an imagined person who is standing in judgment over those mentioned in Rom 1:18-32. This person is cheering Paul on as he proves the heathen under the judgement of God. This man thinks himself superior, cultured and civilized versus those without God in chapter one. Paul addresses that person, stating they too are in danger of the wrath of God because they also do the same things as the heathen.

WHO IS BEING ADDRESSED? — Who is this person? Some believe it to be a moral person, others believe it’s the Jews. “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.” [Moo, *Romans*, pg 128] This is indicated by Paul’s use of language borrowed from the Jewish ancient writing of Wisdom chapters 12-15. But by addressing this to “*O man, O person,*” Paul is enabling his readers to share in the “*discovery*” process he probably used when addressing mixed audiences. Paul begins in a general fashion whereby many in his audiences would add their “*Amen*” to his comments. Then suddenly Paul makes a turn in his speech and accuses his hearers of doing the “*same things*.” “In order to appreciate the force of the apostle’s reasoning in this and the following verses, it

should be remembered that the principal ground on which the Jews expected acceptance with God, was the covenant which he had made with their father Abraham, in which he promised to be a God to him and to his seed after him. They understood this promise to secure salvation for all who retained their connection with Abraham, by the observance of the law and the rite of circumcision. They expected, therefore, to be regarded and treated not so much as individuals, each being dealt with according to his personal character, but as a community to whom salvation was secured by the promise made to Abraham.” [Hodge, *Romans*, pg 46f]

v1 — The “*therefore*” makes it difficult to understand exactly how this verse relates to the previous section, 1:18-32. Much has been written which is not pertinent to our study this morning. Allow me to summarize by quoting Douglas Moo: “Paul would be saying in 2:1 that *because* God’s wrath is revealed against *all* people, and *because all* people have been given the knowledge of God, *therefore* even the person who judges is ‘without excuse’ before God.” [Moo, *Romans*, pg 129f] In second part of verse Paul makes it clear why one who judges is without excuse before God: ***when we condemn an the act we condemn the agent, whether the agent be ourselves or someone else.*** “On this verse we may remark, **(1) That people are prone to be severe judges of others. (2) This is often, perhaps commonly, done when the accusers themselves are guilty of the same offences.** It often happens, too, that people are remarkably zealous in opposing those offences which they themselves secretly practice. A remarkable instance of this occurs in John 8:1, etc. Thus, David readily condemned the supposed act of injustice mentioned by Nathan; 2 Samuel 12:1-6. Thus, also kings and emperors have enacted severe laws against the very crimes which they have constantly committed themselves. Nero executed the laws of the Roman Empire against the very crimes which he was constantly committing; and it was a common practice for Roman masters to commit offences which they punished with death in their slaves. **(3) Remarkable zeal against sin may be no proof of innocence;** compare Matthew 7:3. The zeal of persecutors, and often of pretended reformers, may be far from proof that they are free from the very offences which they are condemning in others. It may all be the work of the hypocrite to conceal some base design; or of the man who seeks to show his hostility to one kind of sin, in order to be a salvo to his conscience for committing some other. **(4) The heart is deceitful. When we judge others we should make it a rule to examine ourselves on that very point.** Such an examination might greatly mitigate the severity of our judgment; or might turn the whole of our indignation against ourselves.” [Barne’s *Notes on the Bible: Romans*]

v2 — Paul just accused the self-righteous person of doing the same things as the heathen Gentiles. He now affirms the general fact and fairness of God’s judgment of such practices.

according to truth = ***God’s judgment against sin is fully in accord with the facts, that it is just.*** On this Paul and the “*imaginary Jewish opponent*” in the discussion could agree. The difference between Paul and the Jews is that the Jews, while not denying the fact of God’s just judgment, would nevertheless include the additional factor of the Jews’ special relationship between them and the Lord. Paul would not deny that relationship (cf. 3:1-8) but will claim that relationship does not shield the Jews from just judgment. “This verse, then, contains the second general principle of justice, according to which all men, whether Jews or Gentiles, are to be judged. The whole hope of the Jews was founded on the assumption that the judgment of God regarding them would be guided by some other rule than truth. He was not to judge them according to their real merits, but according to their national and ecclesiastical relations, just as men now hope to be saved because they belong to the true Church.” [Hodge, *Romans*, pg 48]

v3 — Paul and his discussion partner are now on common ground (“*we know*”, v. 2). Paul now uses the teaching concerning God’s truthfulness to criticize the person who proudly stands in judgment of others (v. 1). To attack, Paul again changes to second person singular: “*you.*” The sense is Paul is questioning the one who judges’ beliefs that they will escape the judgement of God. ***“If then ... he cannot escape his own judgment, how can he escape the judgment of God? If forced to condemn ourselves, how much more will the infinitely Holy condemn us?”*** [Hodge, *Romans*, pg 48] This could refer as much to the moral person as it would to the Jew: the moral person thinks God will overlook their sins “*by their good works*” while the Jews believed they would be overlooked because of the Abrahamic covenant. Paul’s argument so far may be summarized as follows:

- (1) God’s judgment falls on those who do “these things”**
- (2) Even the self-righteous judge does “these things”**
- (3) Therefore: even the self-righteous judge stands under God’s judgment**

And doest the same = “And doest them occasionally” [Robertson, *Word Pictures*, vol 4 pg 334]

ABUSING THE PRIVILEGES OF GOD — “We may here observe how prone men are to abuse, to their own destruction, those external advantages which God bestows on them. God had separated the Jews from the Gentiles, to manifest Himself unto them; and, by doing so, He had exalted them above the rest of the world, to whom He had not vouchsafed the same favor. The proper and legitimate use of this superiority would have been to distinguish themselves from the Gentiles by a holy life. But instead of this, owing to a fatal confidence which they placed in this advantage, they committed the same sins as the Gentiles, and plunged into the same excesses. By this means, ***what they considered as an advantage became a snare to them; for wherein they judged others, they condemned themselves. We may likewise remark how much self-love blinds and betrays men into false judgments.***” [Haldane, *Romans*, pg 76f]

v4 — What Paul introduces here is not an alternative; rather it is a rhetorical question to illustrate the false assumption of the

person 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.”** [Moo, Romans, pg 132]

showing contempt for = καταφρονέω (kataphroneō) properly means to treat with neglect. It is also used in Matt 6:24; 18:10; Luke 16:13; 1 Cor 11:22; 1 Tim 4:12; 6:2; Heb 12:2; 2 Pet 2:10. **“Despise. To despise is to form a low estimate of. They despise the goodness of God, who form such a wrong estimate of it, as to suppose that it gives them a license to sin; who imagine that he will not punish, either because he long forbears, or because his goodness towards us is so great that we shall escape, though others perish.”** [Hodge, Romans, pg 48]

Three terms are used here, all relating to “riches,” to describe the mercy of God.

goodness = χρηστότης (chrēstotēs) kindness, benignity; attributed to God in Rom 11:11a,c where it is opposite the “severity” of God; also used in Eph 2:7; Titus 3:4. It refers to kindness in general, as expressed in giving favors.

forbearance = ἀνοχή (anoxē) used only here and 3:26 in NT; has the idea of holding in or restraining his indignation, self-restraint. In classical Greek it is used of a temporary truce.

patience = literally “longspiritedness, longsuffering.” Both this and the preceding words show forth the patience of God in withholding judgment that is rightfully due the sinner; slowness in the infliction of punishment

“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 intertestamental 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. As the passage unfolds, however, we will find Paul going beyond the prophets in asserting that Jews are no better off than Gentiles in the judgment. This is a radical departure from all Jewish tradition and implies not only a critique of the prevailing understanding of God’s covenant with Israel but also that a new era in salvation history had dawned.” [Moo, Romans, pg 133]

“not realizing that God’s kindness leads you toward repentance” — God’s purpose in his kindness is not to excuse sin but to stimulate repentance. The goodness of God leads us to repentance because it allows us our duty towards a Being who is so kind, and because it gives us ground to hope for acceptance. **“Leadeth thee to repentance (eis metanoian se agei).** The very kindness (to chreeston, the kindly quality) of God is trying to lead (conative present agei) thee to a right-about face, a change of mind and attitude (metanoian) instead of a complacent self-satisfaction and pride of race and privilege.” [Robertson, Word Pictures, vol 4 pg 335] “The way in which people despise or abuse the goodness of God is to infer that He does not intend to punish sin; that they may do it safely; and instead of turning from it, to go on in committing it more constantly, as if they were safe. **‘Because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil,’** Ecclesiastes 8:11. The same thing was true in the time of Peter; 2 Peter 3:3,4. **And the same thing is true of wicked people in every age; nor is there a more decisive proof of the wickedness of the human heart, than this disposition to abuse the goodness of God, and because he shows kindness and forbearance, to take occasion to plunge deeper into sin, to forget his mercy, and to provoke him to anger.”** [Barne’s Notes on the Bible: Romans]

v5 — The goodness of God, so far from being a ground of reasonable expectation that we shall ultimately escape punishment, becomes, when abused, an aggravation of our guilt. Paul in this verse emphasizes the time of judgment will come, and instead of storing up mercy, those presuming on God’s kindness is storing up wrath. The metaphor of “storing up” had the sense of laying up little by little, accumulating a store of anything, whether good or evil. It was common among the Jews at that time (cp. Prov 2:7; Matt 6:19). **“He holds victory in store for the upright, he is a shield to those whose walk is blameless”** (Prov 2:7 NIV) **“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal.”** (Matt 6:19,20 NIV) But what was commonly “stored up” was almost always something good is here given an ironic twist: goodness or blessing is not being stored up but rather wrath.

for the day of God’s wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed — “Day of wrath’ is quasi-technical biblical language for the time of final judgment. This strongly suggests that Paul is looking here at the climatic outpouring of wrath at the end of history; and the Jew who refuses to repent is even now accumulating the 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 (cf. v. 2). Paul thus calls into question the Jewish tendency to confine God’s ‘righteous judgment’ to Gentile sinners.” [Moo, Romans, 134f] **“Day of wrath – The day when God shall show or execute his wrath against sinners; compare Revelation 6:17; 1 Thessalonians 1:10; John 3:36; Ephesians 5:6.”** [Barne’s Notes on the Bible: Romans]

THE IMPARTIALITY OF JUDGMENT (2:6-11)

Who will render to every man according to his deeds: to them who by patient continuance in well doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, eternal life: but unto them that are contentious, and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish, upon every soul of man that doeth evil, of the Jew first, and also of the Gentile; but glory, honor, and peace, to every man that worketh good, to the Jew first, and also to the Gentile: for there is no respect of persons with God. (Rom 2:6-11 KJV)

God will give to each person according to what he has done. To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life. But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger. There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile; but glory, honor and peace for everyone who does good: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For God does not show favoritism. (Rom 2:6-11 NIV)

who shall render to each according to his works; to those, indeed, who in continuance of a good work, do seek glory, and honour, and incorruptibility — life age-during; and to those contentious, and disobedient, indeed, to the truth, and obeying the unrighteousness — indignation and wrath, tribulation and distress, upon every soul of man that is working the evil, both of Jew first, and of Greek; and glory, and honour, and peace, to every one who is working the good, both to Jew first, and to Greek. For there is no acceptance of faces with God, (Rom 2:6-11 Young's Literal Translation)

v6 — “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 of vv. 6-11 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. On the other hand, the style of direct address is dropped — to be resumed in 2:17 — in favor of a more dispassionate expository style.” [Moo, *Romans*, pg 135f]

“He will judge men neither according to their professions nor their relations, but according to their works. The question at his bar will be, not whether a man is a Jew or a Gentile, whether he belongs to the chosen people or to the heathen world, but whether he has obeyed the law. This principle is amplified and applied in what follows, in vers. 7-11. The question has been asked, how the declaration that God will render to every man, whether Jew or Gentile, according to his works — to the good, eternal life, to the wicked, indignation and wrath — is to be reconciled with the apostle’s doctrine, that no man is justified by works, that righteousness and life are not by works, but by faith, and through grace. In answering this question, two things are to be born in mind. *The first is, that notwithstanding the doctrine of gratuitous justification, and in perfect consistency with it, the apostle still teaches that the retributions of eternity are according to our works. The good only are saved, and the wicked only are condemned. ‘For we must all appeal before the judgment-seat of Christ, that every one may receive the things done in his body, whether good or bad,’ 2 Corinthians 5:10, Ephesians 6:8. ... The wicked will be punished on account of their works, and according to their works; the righteous will be rewarded, not on account of, but according to their works. Good works are to them the evidence of their belonging to that class to whom, for Christ’s sake, eternal life is graciously awarded; and they are, in some sense and to some extent, the measure of that reward. But it is more pertinent to remark, in the second place, that the apostle is not here teaching the method of justification, but is laying down those general principles of justice, according to which, irrespective of the gospel, all men are to be judged. He is expounding the law, not the gospel. And as the law not only says that death is the stages of sin, but also that those who keep its precepts shall live by them, so the apostle says, that God will punish the wicked and reward the righteous. This is perfectly consistent with what he afterwards teaches, that there are none righteous; that there are none who so obey the law as to be entitled to the life which it promises; and that for such the gospel provides a plan of justification without works, a plan for saving those whom the law condemns. He is here combating the false hopes of the Jews, who, though trusting to the law, were, by the principles of the law, exposed to condemnation. This he does to drive them from this false dependence, and to show them that neither Jew nor Gentile can be justified before the bar of that God, who, while he promises eternal life to the obedient, has revealed his purpose to punish the disobedient. All, therefore, that this passage teaches is that, irrespective of the gospel, to those who either never heard of it, or who, having heard, reject it, the principle of judgment will be law.*” [Hodge, *Romans*, pg 49f]

v7,8 — These two verses render the only two possibilities available to those who God judges: to “those who by their

persistence in a good work are seeking glory and honor and immortality” he will render eternal life. We will see in a few moments how this relates with justification by faith, but for now it is important to note Paul stresses the work God rewards is a persistent lifestyle of godliness. In contrast, *“those who are characterized by selfishness, and who disobey the truth while obeying unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury.”* Note how these people are characterized: selfishness is their motivation and their allegiance is to unrighteousness. *“As often in Romans, Paul singles out obedience as indicative of one’s true spiritual state (cf. 1:5; 2:25-27; 6:15-23).”* [Moo, *Romans*, pg 138]

v9,10 — tribulation = *pressure, affliction*; typically used of trials and suffering experienced by Christians in this life; here it designates the suffering of eternal condemnation; cp 2 Thes 1:6.

distress = *straitness of place, anguish*; close to the sense of ‘*tribulation*,’ literally *narrowness of place, lack of room*, and then *the anxiety and distress of mind which a man experiences who is pressed on every side by afflictions, and trials, and want, or by punishment, and who does not know where he may turn himself to find relief*. It is thus expressive of the punishment of the wicked. It means that they shall be compressed with the manifestations of God’s displeasure, so as to be in deep distress, and so as not to know where to find relief.

upon every soul of man = perhaps Paul wants to emphasize the complete impartiality of the judgment of God, looking inward

first for the Jew, then for the Gentile — “The word πρῶτον (prōton) may express either order or preeminence.... *If [preeminence], the sense is, The Jew shall not only be punished as certainly as others, but more severely, because he has been more highly favored. “The Jew first,” is equivalent then to the Jew especially. The same remark applies to the following verse. If the Jew is faithful, he shall be specially rewarded. What is true of all men, is specially true of those to whom God has revealed himself in a peculiar manner.* [Hodge, *Romans*, pg 52]

Verse 10 repeats the sense of verse 7 with minor changes. The “glory and honor” was a goal in v. 7, here it is described as a blessing coming from the salvation of God.

peace = “the state of perfect well-being created by God’s eschatological intervention and enjoyed by the righteous.” [Moo, *Romans*, pg 139]

SALVATION BY WORKS? — Who is Paul referring to is an important question. Salvation is promised to those who are persistent in “*doing good works*,” which at first glance conflicts with Paul’s later statement that “*no one will be justified by works*” (Rom 3:20). “*Whether we regard these verses as describing Christians, or view them as setting forth the unrealizable condition for salvation apart from Christ, consistency with Paul’s teaching is maintained. For Paul teaches, in agreement with the OT and Judaism, that judgment will be based on works, for Christians as well as for non-Christians (cf. 2 Cor 5:10). Moreover, he upholds faithful obedience to God, or the law as a theoretical means of attaining justification (cf. 2:13; 7:10). But 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.... We think, therefore, that vv. 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 one his doctrine of universal human powerlessness under sin has been developed (cf. 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.*” [Moo, *Romans*, pg 142]

v11 — Paul returns to the main theme of this paragraph, stating negatively what he had already said in v. 6.

CHRISTIANS WILL BE JUDGED BY THEIR WORKS — “This paragraph [vv. 6-11] raises the question about the relationship between justification and judgment — an intricate theological topic. On the one hand, it is vital that the finality and determinacy of justification not be mitigated and that salvation, from first to last, be ascribed to God’s grace. Paul believed that justification, in this life, was perfectly sufficient for deliverance from wrath at the judgment (cf. 5:9-10; 8:28-39). On the other hand, we cannot ignore the serious warnings addressed to Christians about the importance that their works will have at the final judgment (cf. 1 Cor 3:10-14; 2 Cor 5:10; Jas. 2:14-26; cf. Matt 12:37; 25:31-46). Some seek to reconcile these by attributing different purposes to the initial ‘judgment’ of justification and the final judgment, others by attributing the two strands of teaching to different audiences or different purposes; but none of these is completely convincing. *Without become involved in the intricacies of theological nuance (and they are important here), we would follow those who maintain that the justification by faith granted the believer in this life is the sufficient cause of those works that God takes into account at the time of the judgment. The initial declaration of the believer’s acquittal before the bar of heaven at the time of one’s justification is infallibly confirmed by the judgment according to works at the last assize.*” [Moo, *Romans*, pg 143] “The righteous Judge will not act according to any principle of partiality; the character and conduct, alone of the persons shall weigh with him. He will take no wicked man to glory, let his nation or advantages be what they may; and he will send no righteous man to perdition, though brought up in the very bosom of Gentilism. And as he will judge in that day according to character and conduct, so his judgment will proceed on the ground of the graces, privileges, and blessings which they had received, improved or abused. And as there is no respect of persons with God in judgment, so there can be none in the previous administration of his saving blessings. He that

will be condemned for his unrighteousness, will be condemned on the ground that he had sufficient grace afforded him for the salvation of his soul; and his condemnation will rest on the simple principle, that he abused the grace which was sufficient to save him, by acting in opposition to its dictates and influence. No man, in that great day, shall be brought to heaven through any partiality of the Judge; and no man sent to hell because God did not afford him sufficient grace, or because he had made a decree which rendered even his use of it ineffectual to his salvation. In reference to the great design of God, in the salvation of man, it shall be said, - in time, at the day of judgment, and throughout eternity, — THERE IS NO RESPECT OF PERSONS WITH GOD.” [Adam Clarke, *Romans*]

JUDGMENT AND THE LAW (2:12-16)

For as many as have sinned without law shall also perish without law: and as many as have sinned in the law shall be judged by the law; (For not the hearers of the law are just before God, but the doers of the law shall be justified. For when the Gentiles, which have not the law, do by nature the things contained in the law, these, having not the law, are a law unto themselves: which shew the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the mean while accusing or else excusing one another;) in the day when God shall judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ according to my gospel. (Rom 2:12-16 KJV)

All who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who sin under the law will be judged by the law. For it is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God's sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous. (Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them.) This will take place on the day when God will judge men's secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares. (Rom 2:12-16 NIV)

for as many as without law did sin, without law also shall perish, and as many as did sin in law, through law shall be judged, for not the hearers of the law [are] righteous before God, but the doers of the law shall be declared righteous: — For, when nations that have not a law, by nature may do the things of the law, these not having a law — to themselves are a law; who do shew the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also witnessing with them, and between one another the thoughts accusing or else defending, in the day when God shall judge the secrets of men, according to my good news, through Jesus Christ. (Rom 2:12-16 Young's Literal Translation)

v12 — This paragraph (vv. 12-16) ties together what precedes with what follows. “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.” [Moo, *Romans*, 144f]

‘*Apart from the law*’ and ‘*under the law*’ corresponds to the distinction between the Jews and Gentiles. The ‘law’ therefore in these verses must be the writings of Moses. Paul is not accusing the Gentiles as being ‘lawless’ in the sense of criminals or outlaws, but ‘law-less’ in the sense that the Gentiles do not possess the law of Moses.

Paul gives two parallel sentences: as many who sin ‘without the law’ will perish ‘without the law;’ those who sin ‘under the law’ will be judged ‘under the law’ (and in keeping with the parallelism, this ‘judgment’ must be condemnation).

LIGHT BRINGS RESPONSIBILITY — “In the preceding verse it was stated that God is just and impartial in all his judgments. This is confirmed not only by the previous assertion, that he will judge every man according to his works, but also by the exhibition of that important principle contained in this verse. *Men are to be judged by the light they have severally enjoyed. The ground of judgment is their works; the rule of judgment is their knowledge.* For as many as sinned without law. That is, God is impartial, *for* he will judge men according to the light which they have enjoyed. Our Lord teaches the same doctrine when he says, ‘*The servant which knew his lord's will,... shall be beaten with many stripes; but he that knew not, and did commit things worthy of stripes, shall be beaten with few stripes.*’ Luke 12:47, 48.... [T]hose who sin without a written revelation — although they are to be judged fairly, and are to be treated far less severely than those who have enjoyed the light of revelation — are still to perish” [Hodge, *Romans*, pg 53]

v13 — “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.” [Moo, *Romans*, pg 147]

justify = the first time in *Romans* the word ‘justify’ is used; the word means the judicial decision of God to regard a sinner as ‘just, right, or innocent’ before God (cp. Matt 7:24-27; 12:50; James 1:22-25).

As in vv. 7,10, this is not an explanation of how to be saved but an explanation of how the Lord judges. “*He is not speaking of the method of justification available for sinners, as revealed in the gospel, but of the principles of justice which will be applied to all who look to the law for justification. If men rely on works, they must have works; they must be doers of the law; they must satisfy its demands, if they are to be justified by it. For God is just and impartial; he will, as a judge administering the*

law, judge every man, not according to his privileges, but according to his works and the knowledge of duty which he has possessed. On these principles, it is his very design to show that no flesh living can be justified." [Hodge, *Romans*, pg 54]

v14,15 — These two verses are a self-contained unit, linked to the preceding comments. Christians throughout history have taken one of three interpretations on these verses: (1) it refers to Gentiles who fulfill the law and are saved apart from faith in Christ; (2) it refers to Gentiles who fulfill the law by virtue of their relationship with Christ; and (3) **it refers to Gentiles who obey the law of their conscience but are not saved.** As our comments in vv. 7,10 and 13, we take these verses in reference to the third explanation. "He is not teaching the method of justification, or arguing to prove that the Gentiles as well as the Jews may be doers of the law, and thus be justified in the sight of God. He is expounding the law; he is showing the principles by which God will judge the world, Gentiles as well as Jews. Those who are without the written law, he will judge without any reference to that law; and those who are under the law, he will judge by that law. This general proposition he confirms first by saying, in ver. 13, that the mere possession of the law is not enough; and secondly by saying, in ver. 14, that the Gentiles have a law by which they may be judged." [Hodge, *Romans*, pg 54]

Not all Gentiles live according to the law but some Gentiles "do by nature the things of the law." "What Paul is then asserting is that certain Gentiles 'do the things of the law' through a natural, inborn capacity; cf. NJB: 'through their own innate sense.' ... 'The things of the law' is a general way of stating certain of those requirements of the Mosaic law that God has made universally available to human beings in their very constitution. Paul's point is that Gentiles outside of Christ regularly obey their parents, refrain from murder and robbery, and so on." [Moo, *Romans*, pg 150] "His object is to show that the heathen world have a rule of duty written on their hearts; a fact which is not proved by some heathen obeying the law, but which is proved by the moral conduct of all men. Men generally, not some men, but all men, show by their acts that they have a knowledge of right and wrong." [Hodge, *Romans*, pg 54]

v16 — GOD WILL JUDGE ALL OUR SECRET THOUGHTS — "That God's judgment will take into account not only outward actions but also the 'hidden things' is a natural inference from his knowledge of the secrets of people's hearts. Jesus reminded his disciples that God's reward will be based on what is done 'in secret.' In the present context, this shows particularly that the inner witness of the conscience and conflicting thoughts (v. 15) are known to God and destined to be revealed on the day of judgment." [Moo, *Romans*, pg 154]

ALL JUDGMENT WILL BE THROUGH THE LORD JESUS — The construction of the last part of the verse allows for several interpretations. Moo discusses several then gives what he believes to be the best sense: "It is through Christ Jesus that God will judge, as my gospel teaches." This last alternative does most justice to the somewhat unexpected reference to the gospel. Paul teaches that it is before the 'judgment seat of Christ' that we will have to stand (2 Cor 5:10). When Paul refers to 'my gospel,' he does not mean a particular form of teaching peculiar to him, but the gospel, common to all Christians, which has been entrusted by God to Paul for his preservation and proclamation (cf. 1:1)." [Moo, *Romans*, pg 155]

THE LAW (2:17-24)

Behold, thou art called a Jew, and retest in the law, and makest thy boast of God, and knowest his will, and approvest the things that are more excellent, being instructed out of the law; and art confident that thou thyself art a guide of the blind, a light of them which are in darkness, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of babes, which hast the form of knowledge and of the truth in the law. Thou therefore which teachest another, teachest thou not thyself? Thou that preachest a man should not steal, dost thou steal? Thou that sayest a man should not commit adultery, dost thou commit adultery? thou that abhorrest idols, dost thou commit sacrilege? Thou that makest thy boast of the law, through breaking the law dishonorest thou God? For the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles through you, as it is written. (Rom 2:17-24 KJV)

Now you, if you call yourself a Jew; if you rely on the law and brag about your relationship to God; if you know his will and approve of what is superior because you are instructed by the law; if you are convinced that you are a guide for the blind, a light for those who are in the dark, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of infants, because you have in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth — you, then, who teach others, do you not teach yourself? You who preach against stealing, do you steal? You who say that people should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who brag about the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? As it is written: God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you. (Rom 2:17-24 NIV)

Lo, thou art named a Jew, and dost rest upon the law, and dost boast in God, and dost know the will, and dost approve the distinctions, being instructed out of the law, and hast confidence that thou thyself art a leader of blind ones, a light of those in darkness, an instructor of foolish ones, a teacher of babes, having the form of the knowledge and of the truth in the law. Thou, then, who art teaching another, thyself dost thou not teach? thou who art preaching not to steal, dost thou steal? thou who art saying not to commit adultery, dost thou commit adultery? thou who art abhorring the idols, dost thou rob temples? thou who in the law dost boast, through the transgression of the law God dost thou dishonour? for the name of God because of you is evil spoken of among the nations, according as it hath been written. (Rom 2:17-24 Young's Literal Translation)

In this section Paul resumes the diatribe style of 2:1-5, using rhetorical questions and direct address to an imaginary opponent. For

the first time this opponent is identified as a Jew, indicating Paul is sharpening his attack.

What is the connection with the preceding? There is a sense in which, after speaking of those who sin “in the law” (vv. 12,13), Paul is now demonstrating the Jews could not claim to be “doers of the law.” Others take the sense to be Paul is showing the Jews do the same things as the Gentiles (vv. 17-29 for the Jews, pointed out for the Gentiles in v. 3). Perhaps a reasonable accumulations of both these arguments would be that Paul’s main point in vv. 1-16 is that the Jews will be judged by God on the same basis as the Gentiles: by their works according to the law revealed to each. Therefore the Jews cannot escape the wrath of God any more than the Gentiles. But the Jews also claimed favor with God because of their covenant, which is what Paul now addresses. **“Without dismissing the Jews’ claim entirely (3:1-2), Paul insists that their privileges do not exempt them from God’s judgment. In two paragraphs with roughly parallel arguments (vv. 17-24, 25-29), Paul takes up those two things that, more than any others, pointed to the Jews’ special status: the law and circumcision. In both paragraphs, without dismissing them as worthless, Paul argues that neither knowledge of the law nor physical circumcision has value unless the law is obeyed. Again, it is what is actually done that is critical in determining every person’s destiny — for the Jew as well as for the Gentile (2:13).”** [Moo, *Romans*, pg 157f]

“In Paul’s time some of the leaders of Judaism were making such extravagant statements about the law as to put it virtually in the place of God. Many Jews were trying to keep the law for its own sake, to honor the law rather than its giver. This tendency was even more developed after the fall of Jerusalem, when the law became the rallying point for a nation that had lost its holy city and its temple.” [Harrison, *Romans*]

v17, 18 — This section is divided into two parts: “If...” (vv. 17-20), “therefore...” (vv. 21-24). How these two portions exactly fit together is a subject for debate, but this much is clear: **vv. 21-24 clearly exposes the failure for the Jew to live up to the claims set forth in vv. 17-20. Paul is not here speaking out-of-turn neither; there is nothing claimed in vv. 17-20 which cannot be found in the Jews’ own writings at that time. Paul was quoting their own beliefs, then showing how each fail to secure eternal favor.**

What follows is **a list of five blessings personally enjoyed by the Jews by virtue of their being the Covenant people.** Each is presented from the standpoint of the Jew, Paul’s debating partner, who advances them as evidence of his special relationship with God.

“call yourself a Jew” — originally a Jew was one who occupied the region of Judah. It came to refer to anyone in Israel after the Exile since their occupied land at that time was not much larger than the original land occupied by the descendants of Judah. By Paul’s day it was commonly used in that sense and meant any Israelite in distinction from other peoples. Therefore “to be named a Jew” refers to the religious status shared by anyone who belonged to the covenant people.

“rely on the law” — note how Paul words this: to possess the law of God was indeed a privilege, but the problem was the Jews had come to “rest, rely” upon the law. As the prophet Micah rebuked the leaders of Israel for their sin, they replied, “Yet the lean on [the same word used here by Paul in LXX] the Lord saying, Is not the Lord in our midst? Calamity will not come upon us.” (Micah 3:11). So the Jews thought their reliance on the law exempted them from judgment.

“boasts in God” — to boast, or glory in any person or thing, is to rejoice in him or it as a source of honor, happiness, or profit to ourselves. “Boasting” in God was not in itself wrong. Paul alludes to Jer 9:23,24 when he wrote the letters to the Corinthians, “Therefore, as it is written: Let him who boasts boast in the Lord.... But, Let him who boasts boast in the Lord.” (1 Cor 1:31; 2 Cor 10:17 NIV). Thus it was no sin to have a legitimate pride and joy in the God who had given Israel such great blessings.

“knows his will” — Paul attributed the knowledge of God to all people; here he states the same with an additional emphasis on the knowledge of not only certain aspects of God but knowledge of his will.

“approves those things that are best” — there is some ambiguity in the interpretation of this phrase due to the possible translations of the words used. It could have the sense of “distinguish the things that differ [from God’s will]” in the sense of “knowing right from wrong.” (Godet, Hodge) It could also mean “distinguish the things that really matter.” (Cranfield, Dunn, Moo).

v19,20 — Paul now moves from listing the blessings accorded the Jews to four prerogatives the Jews enjoyed in relation to other people because of these blessings. Of these, the Jews were “convinced, persuaded” that they were: **“a guide to the blind,” “a light for those who are in darkness,” “an instructor of the foolish,” “a teacher of the immature.”**

“The Jews’ sense of mission toward the rest of the world is rooted in the OT. When, therefore, Paul asserts that the Jew was convinced he was a ‘guide to the blind’ and a ‘light for those in darkness,’ we think of the duty of God’s servant — to some degree at least identified with Israel — to be a ‘light to the nations’ and ‘to open the eyes of the blind.’ The Jews, however far short of their responsibility to enlighten the Gentile world they may have fallen, continued to boast in these mandates as a means of highlighting their importance and the value of their law in the eyes of a skeptical and sometimes hostile Gentile world.” [Moo, *Romans*, pg 162]

Paul adds the reason for these prerogatives as being the Jews’ enjoying the body of truth given by God to them.

v21,22 — DO YOU PRACTICE WHAT YOU PREACH? — Turning a corner, Paul uses the blessings boasted of by the Jews to illustrate how empty, hypocritical and inconsistent they were. *“Paul’s stress on ‘doing’ as what ultimately counts before God surfaces here again. 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. And it is just this obedience that is lacking.”* [Moo, Romans, pg 163]

Paul begins with a heading, *“you who teaches others, do you teach yourself?”*, then breaks it down into three examples:

“you who preach against stealing, do you steal?” — a violation of the eighth commandment

“you who say people should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery?” — a violation of the seventh commandment

“you who abhor idols, do you rob temples?” — this is a little harder to identify. Paul’s claim that the Jews *“abhorred, detests”* idols is clear. It is a given fact that at that time in the history of the Jews that they avoided contact with the pagan societies of which they were a part and therefore, technically at least, not idolaters. *“Rob temples”* = ἱεροσυλεῖς (hierosuleis) does not occur elsewhere in the NT but a cognate word is used in Acts, *“You have brought these men here, though they have neither robbed temples nor blasphemed our goddess.”* (Acts 19:37 NIV). The only usage in the LXX is in 2 Maccabees where it refers to robbing the temple at Jerusalem, robbing pagan temples, and of associated acts of sacrilege. Paul could have referred to Jewish robbery of pagan temples for their precious metals to be used in their own temple, an act which was very scarce among the Jews. A. T. Robertson believes that to be the case: *“The town clerk (Acts 19:37) said that these Jews (Paul and his companions) were ‘not robbers of temples,’ proof that the charge was sometimes made against Jews, though expressly forbidden the Jews (Josephus, Ant. IV. 8, 10). Paul refers to the crime of robbing idol temples in spite of the defilement of contact with idolatry.”* [Robertson, *Word Pictures*] Paul may have been referring to the Jews failing to pay the “temple tax” and therefore robbing the temple of what was necessary for support of the worship of God. Paul may have meant sacrilege in a general sense. For this to make sense, the sacrilege would have to involve various acts (or attitudes) of impiety towards the Lord. Hodge agrees with that interpretation: *“They had made his house a den of thieves. Instead, therefore, of taking the word literally, which the context forbids, it should be understood in a secondary sense. It expresses the sin of irreverence in its higher forms; either as manifested in withholding from God his due, which the prophet denounces as robbery — ‘Will a man rob God? yet ye have robbed me. But ye say, Wherein have we robbed thee? In tithes and offerings,’ Malachi 3:8; or it may be taken in the still more general sense of profanation, the irreverent disregard of God and holy things. This is all the context requires: ‘You profess great reverence for God, in eschewing idolatry; and yet, in other forms, you are guilty of the greatest irreverence.’”* [Hodge, *Romans*] All three of these answers have their problems, especially when placing it in the context of the Jews *“abhorring idols.”* One possible explanation is that Paul was noting the teaching activity of the Jews. Paul may have been criticizing the Jewish leaders in Rome who were proselytizing but whose immorality had led to their expulsion from Rome. However, while we might not have a detailed explanation of Paul’s exact words, the sense of what he was saying is clear.

v23,24 — This statement may be taken either as a question or a statement. Here Paul brings home what he was accusing the Jewish opponent as developed in vv. 17-22. The Jews *“relied”* upon the law (v. 17) and *“boasted”* about the law (v.23). But all this is insignificant and, indeed, damaging when the law is not obeyed. In v. 24 Paul ascribes the source of blasphemy among the Gentiles to be the disobedient lives of the Jews. *“The Jews were jealous for the Name of God and would not pronounce the Tetragrammaton and yet acted so that the Gentiles blasphemed that Name.”* [Robertson, *Word Pictures*] *“Christians should ever remember that they are the epistles of Jesus Christ, known and read of all men; that God is honored by their holy living, and that his name is blasphemed when they act wickedly.”* [Hodge, *Romans*]

Paul quotes from the OT to confirm his conclusion, possibly from Isaiah 52:5, *“And all day long my name is constantly blasphemed.”* (Isa 52:5c NIV) Others take the quotation from Ezekiel 36:20, *“And wherever they went among the nations they profaned my holy name, for it was said of them, These are the LORD’s people, and yet they had to leave his land.”* (Ezek 36:20 NIV). The Ezekiel text gives a much closer sense to what Paul was meaning, and even the ancient Rabbis used the text in a similar fashion. The Isaiah text however is much closer linguistically to Paul’s quotation, according to Douglas Moo. Whichever was in Paul’s mind when he quoted the text is immaterial; the sense of what Paul means is what is important.

CIRCUMCISION (2:25-29)

For circumcision verily profiteth, if thou keep the law: but if thou be a breaker of the law, thy circumcision is made uncircumcision. Therefore if the uncircumcision keep the righteousness of the law, shall not his uncircumcision be counted for circumcision? And shall not uncircumcision which is by nature, if it fulfil the law, judge thee, who by the letter and circumcision dost transgress

Circumcision has value if you observe the law, but if you break the law, you have become as though you had not been circumcised. If those who are not circumcised keep the law’s requirements, will they not be regarded as though they were circumcised? The one who is not circumcised physically and yet obeys the law will condemn you who, even though you have the written code and circumcision, are a lawbreaker. A man is

For circumcision, indeed, doth profit, if law thou mayest practise, but if a transgressor of law thou mayest be, thy circumcision hath become uncircumcision. If, therefore the uncircumcision the righteousness of the law may keep, shall not his uncircumcision for circumcision be reckoned? and the uncircumcision, by nature, fulfilling the law, shall judge thee who, through letter and

the law? For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: but he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God. (Rom 2:25-29 KJV)

not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a man's praise is not from men, but from God. (Rom 2:25-29 NIV)

circumcision, [art] a transgressor of law. For he is not a Jew who is [so] outwardly, neither [is] circumcision that which is outward in flesh; but a Jew [is] he who is [so] inwardly, and circumcision [is] of the heart, in spirit, not in letter, of which the praise is not of men, but of God. (Rom 2:25-29 Young's Literal Translation)

v25 — “As vv. 12-24 have shown that the Jews’ possession of the law will not shield them from judgment because it is the doing of the law, not simply the possession of the law, that matters, so vv. 25-29 argue that circumcision also is of no benefit unless the law is obeyed. Circumcision, like the law, was a sign of the Jew’s privileged position as a member of the chosen people, participant in the covenant that God established with Abraham (Gen 17). Later Judaism claimed that ‘no person who is circumcised will go down to Gehenna,’ and the importance of the rite throughout the Second Temple period suggests that this view was prevalent in Paul’s day also. But Paul goes even further. Not only does disobedience of the law endanger the circumcised Jew’s salvation; obedience of the law can bring salvation to the uncircumcised Gentile. Moreover, while Paul’s central concern is again (as in vv. 7,10, and 14-15) to set forth the impartial standard of judgment outside of Christ, he here for the first time in the chapter also hints that it is the Christian, circumcised in the heart by God’s Spirit, who is the ‘true’ Jew (v. 29).” [Moo, *Romans*, pg 166f] “Circumcision is not here to be taken for Judaism in general, of which that rite was the sign, but for the rite itself. It is obvious that the Jews regarded circumcision as in some way securing their salvation. That they did so regard it, may be proved not only from such passages of the New Testament where the sentiment is implied, but also by the direct assertion of their own writers.... For example, the Rabbi Menachem, in his Commentary on the Books of Moses, fol. 43, col. 3, says, ‘*Our Rabbins have said, that no circumcised man will see hell.*’ In the Jalkut Rubeni, num. 1, it is taught, ‘*circumcision saves from hell.*’ In the Medrasch Tillim, fol. 7, col. 2, it is said, ‘*God swore to Abraham, that no one who was circumcised should he sent to hell.*’ In the book Akedath Jizehak, fol. 54, col. 2, it is taught that ‘*Abraham sits before the gate of hell, and does not allow that any circumcised Israelite should enter there.*’” [Hodge, *Romans*]

Paul addresses this argument from his “*opponent*” — How can the Jew be treated as the Gentile, even to the point of being in danger of the wrath of God, when our circumcision marks us off as being the covenant people of God? To this Paul responds: circumcision “*is of profit*” only if the law is obeyed, but if the law is disobeyed then the circumcision has become “*uncircumcision.*”

“is of profit” — Paul must have been taking this to mean circumcision shielding the Jew from the wrath of God, which Paul immediately disproves. This is confirmed in 3:1,2 where Paul asks, “*Does circumcision have any profit?*” That question would only make sense if Paul here takes away the false interpretation held by the Jews.

“if you observe the law” — Some take this to mean Paul only meant this as the average Jew of his day would have understood it: not obeying the law perfectly but as being acceptable to God if the obedience was a sincere and heartfelt obedience. While there are points to argue which favor that interpretation, it must be noted Paul never mixed the law with faith. To Paul, the law was an impossible means of obtaining salvation. Salvation was by grace through faith alone without any admixture of works of the law. “*Paul’s purpose in this section is not to indicate how circumcision is of value with respect to the covenant but to remove circumcision from the list of those things that the Jew might think would afford him an automatic pardon from the wrath of God.*” [Moo, *Romans*, pg 169] “*Paul therefore teaches that circumcision had no inherent, magical efficacy; that it had no value beyond that of a sign and seal; that it secured the blessings of the covenant to those who kept the covenant; but to the transgressors of the law it was of no avail.*” [Hodge, *Romans*]

“as though you had not been circumcised” — this meant to become as a Gentile and expose one’s self to the wrath of God. The Jews believed that only a radical decision to renounce the covenant invalidated one’s circumcision. Here Paul argues that even a simple transgression of the law could have the same effect.

v26 — If not circumcision but the obedience of the law is what determines salvation from judgment, then it follows suit that to one who keeps the law is regarded as one who was circumcised. Who are those of the uncircumcised Gentiles who keep the law and are therefore not under the wrath of God? Paul has already dismissed that possibility of a Gentile being saved without the merits of Christ. *Paul is therefore only erasing the distinction between the Jews and Gentiles as applied to God’s standard of judgment. Paul is not pointing the way to salvation but rather showing the Jews, despite their position, is essentially no different than the Gentiles.*

v27 — “*The belief that the righteous would sit in judgment over the unrighteous was widespread. But the Jewish tradition naturally cast Jews in the role of the righteous and Gentiles in that of the unrighteous. Paul reverses this customary scheme and, continuing his argument from v. 26, asserts that ‘the uncircumcised person by nature who completes the law will judge you [e.g., the Jew] who, though having the letter and circumcision, are a transgressor of the law.’*” [Moo, *Romans*, pg 171f]

Jesus made a similar rebuke when He said, *“The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here. The Queen of the South will rise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon’s wisdom, and now one greater than Solomon is here.”* (Matt 12:41,42 NIV) *“Membership in the true Church, considered as a visible society, is no security that we shall obtain the favor of God. The Jews, before the advent, were members of the true and only Church, and yet Paul teaches that they were not on this account the more acceptable to God. Multitudes of Jewish converts were members of the apostolic Church, and yet, retaining their former doctrines and spirit, were in the gall of bitterness. **All hopes are vain which are founded on a participation of the sacraments of the Church, even when they are of divine appointment, as circumcision, baptism, and the Lord’s supper; much more when they are of human invention, as penance, and extreme unction.**”* [Hodge, *Romans*]

v28, 29 — These verses explain why circumcision does not guarantee salvation and why its lack does not bar one from salvation. While God judges according to our works, Paul here addresses the fact that it ultimately is a matter of a person’s heart relationship to God that is important, not the externals. Paul’s means of addressing this is as follows: two denials in v. 28 being matched with two assertions in v. 29:

A — For it is not the Jew who is one outwardly who is the Jew

B — nor is it the outward circumcision, in the flesh, that is circumcision

A — but the Jew who in secret who is a Jew

B — and circumcision of the heart, in the Spirit, not in letter, is circumcision

The basic principle here is the distinction between the outward and the inward, between the external and the internal. From the earliest history of Israel, God has emphasized the inward transformation which he called the “circumcision of the heart” – *“Circumcise your hearts, therefore, and do not be stiff-necked any longer.... Circumcise yourselves to the LORD, circumcise your hearts, you men of Judah and people of Jerusalem, or my wrath will break out and burn like fire because of the evil you have done — burn with no one to quench it.”* (Deut 10:16; Jer 4:4 NIV). It was also taught this inward transformation could only come from the work of the Lord – *“The LORD your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live.”* (Deut 30:6 NIV). Thus this was not new to the Jews, just an item overlooked and disregarded through the centuries. “For the first time, then, in Rom. 2, Paul alludes to Christians. But even here it is only an allusion, since Paul is not so much describing a group of people as specifying what it is that qualifies a person to be a ‘true Jew’ and so to be saved. **No outward rite can bring a person into relationship with God; with that many Jews would have agreed. But Paul goes beyond any first-century Jewish viewpoint in suggesting that physical circumcision is no longer required and in implicitly applying the term ‘Jew’ to those who were not ethnically Jews.... Paul in these verses reaches ahead to the argument that he will unfold in 3:21-4:25.**” [Moo, *Romans*, pg 175]

Charles Hodge balances how we should respond to Paul’s comments: ***“Whenever true religion declines, the disposition to lay undue stress on external rites is increased.*** The Jews, when they lost their spirituality, supposed that circumcision had power to save them. ‘Great is the virtue of circumcision,’ they cried; ‘no circumcised person enters hell.’ The Christian Church, when it lost its spirituality, taught that water in baptism washed away sin. How large a part of nominal Christians rest all their hopes on the idea of the inherent efficacy of external rites! ... While it is one dangerous extreme to make religion consist in the observance of external ceremonies, it is another to undervalue them, when of divine appointment. **Paul does not say that circumcision was useless; he asserts its value.** So, likewise, the Christian sacraments, baptism and the Lord’s supper, are of the utmost importance, and to neglect or reject them is a great sin.” [Hodge, *Romans*]