

Romans: The Revealing of Righteousness (part 6 of 9)

The Law and Judgment

Romans 2:12-16

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"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." (Romans 2:12–16, ESV)

Let me ask you an eternally important question: If you were to die today and to stand before God, what would you say if God asked you why He should let you into heaven? Your answer to that question says a great deal regarding what you believe about yourself, the Bible, sin, the cross, and eternal life. It reveals what you believe to be God's standard for judgment, and every one of us, no matter how religious we are, has an answer to that question.

The question is revealing, and it is a great place to start a discussion about spiritual things. I have used it numerous time in conversations with people as I have tried to understand their spiritual beliefs. It is a great diagnostic question for yourself and for others.

Dismantling Comparisons

The great thing about the book of Romans is the fact that it clearly answers the question as to what you should say if God were to ask you why He should let you into heaven. The entire book, especially the first eleven chapters, is written to give us a comprehensive understanding of God's plan for salvation.

This first section of Romans, through 3:20, is about the darkness of humanity. Paul wants to show us very clearly our desperate need for a righteousness that can only be given to us by God through faith in Jesus Christ. So if your answer to my first question was something like, "God, you should let me into heaven because I am basically a good person," this book shows you why that answer will not work. And why that answer is eternally dangerous.

But Romans, especially chapter two, also helps us with another common answer to my first question: "God, you should let me into heaven because I'm not as bad as other people." Implicit in this answer is a comparison of oneself to other people and using some standard as the basis of appealing for God's favor. This kind of comparison or justification is an incredibly common part of our humanity. How early in life did you hear: "I know you are . . . but what am I?"

Paul is attempting to dismantle the comparison that his Jewish readers might make between themselves and the Gentiles around them. After talking so strongly about the brokenness of the world in 1:18-32, he turned his attention to those Jews who might try to rest on their spiritual heritage, their chosen status as God's people, or their possession of the law of God. Paul is going after self-justification, and he started that focus in chapter two with a series of warnings to religious people. That is what we looked at last week.

We ended on verse 11 which says, "For God shows no impartiality." This verse serves as a bridge from the introduction about religious self-justification to a focus on God's judgment. Verses 12-29 are some key verses, the basis upon which God enacts His judgment, especially as it relates to Jews who might think that they are better than the Gentiles.

Our text today is verses 12-16, and they show us some very important truths regarding God's approach to judgment.

How Does God Judge?

It is important to keep in mind that Paul is specifically addressing Jews who might think that their special status and their possession of God's Law makes them less liable for judgment than the Gentiles. Paul has context in mind, and this is critical lest you think that Paul is giving a comprehensive treatment of the concept of judgment. That said, what follows is really helpful and challenging.

1. By the standard people possess (v 12)

The point for this entire section is really summarized in verse 12. Paul is attempting to show that the impartiality that was mentioned in verse 11 means that every person is guilty before God, regardless of his or her possession of the Law of God. Human beings are all judged based upon the "law" that they know.

People without the Law will be judged "without the Law," and people who sinned under the Law will be judged "by the Law." The common denominator is the fact that every person has sinned and is judged by God. Possession of the Law does not make any difference. Everyone has sinned: *"for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God"* (Rom. 3:23).

Now this is the first time that the word "law" is used Romans, and it is a critically important a part of Paul's argument. For example, he says the following in Romans 3:20:

"For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin." (Romans 3:20, ESV)

Paul links our human depravity and hopelessness to our inability to keep the law. However, you need to be a good student of the Bible and realize that Paul uses the word "law" in at least two ways:

1) It can refer to the Mosaic Law. If you have a New American Standard Bible (NASB), you will notice that the translators frequently capitalized the word to point to instances when they believe Paul is referring to the commands in the Old Testament law:

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 (Rom. 2:12- NASB).

Now other translations do not make this distinction because the Greek text doesn't actually add the definite article "the" in the text. It reads more like this: "all who have sinned without law." ESV and others solve this by keeping the word "the" but not capitalizing the word "law." However, the meaning is still the same.

2) The word can refer to the principle of law. This appears very clearly in 2:14, and NASB chooses to make this evident through the use of capital and non-capital letters:

*For when Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are **a law** to themselves (Rom. 2:14-NASB).*

So the same Greek word can be used to refer to the Mosaic Law or to the principle of law-keeping that is distinct from the Mosaic Law.

This general, rule-keeping meaning of the law becomes very important later in Romans when Paul talks about the way in which believers in Jesus are freed from Mosaic Law and are given a "new law" which is connected to the work of the Spirit. The best example of this is in Romans 7:6.

But now we have been released from the Law, having died to that by which we were bound, so that we serve in newness of the Spirit and not in oldness of the letter (Rom. 7:6 – NASB)

As we will see later in our study, the fulfillment of the Mosaic Law in Jesus, and the extension of God's plan to include the Gentiles, does not mean that there is no longer any kind of "law" or requirement of obedience. That perspective, called antinomianism, is just as dangerous as believing that a person is saved by the works. Instead, Paul will argue that there is a new law:

"For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit." (Romans 8:3–4, ESV)

So what does all of this have to do with verse 12? Well, the point Paul makes here is that "law" is bigger than just the Old Testament Mosaic Law, and everyone is held accountable or is judged based upon the "law" that they possess. The Jews know what is right and wrong based upon the Law that they have been given. But Gentiles also have a basic sense of right and wrong which is a form of law for them. Think of it as a law under the Law. And in the same way that Creation makes everyone accountable for the knowledge of God's existence, so the internal witness of a basic

morality is the basis upon which people will be judged. In other words, no one will ever be able to say, "I did not know you were real" or "I did not know there was anything right or wrong."

Therefore, the Jews have no advantage over Gentiles because they have the Law. Everyone will be judged by the rule of law. God is impartial in His lawful judgment.

2. By actions not just hearing (v 13)

We also learn about the important connection between hearing and doing in verse 13. The Jews needed to be reminded about another very basic concept when it comes to God's judgment: actions matter.

Hopefully this sounds familiar because we covered this in our exposition of Romans 2:6. Paul is merely repeating the same concept here, but he is restating it so that Jews who have heard the Law all their lives will not think that they are immune from God's judgment just because God's truth is familiar.

We need to pause here for a moment to realize the significance of this statement about hearing the Law of God. There is a real danger for people who regularly hear, read, and study the Word of God, that the Bible can become something we hear but to which we do not respond. There is real danger of becoming a person who only hears the Word of God and does not act on it. Listen to what James says:

"But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like." (James 1:22–24, ESV)

The key problem is the implicit self-deception in thinking that you have responded to the Word simply because you are familiar with it. Knowing something to be true only matters as long as you do what that truth commands. Take, for example, being pulled over by a police officer. After you have rolled down your window, what diagnostic question is the officer likely to ask? He will either ask "Do you know how fast you were going?" or "Do you know what the speed limit is here?" Knowing your speed or the speed limit does not change the fact that you were pulled over for violating the law. He is not giving you a test. He is uncovering the extent of your guilt! Actions trump knowledge.

For the Jews that meant something really important. It meant that they could not appeal to their Jewishness or their knowledge of the Law as the basis for a pass on God's judgment. God is impartial.

Now verse 13 ends with a phrase that is difficult unless you understand it in context. It says:

"For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified." (Romans 2:13, ESV)

Now that should strike you as odd. If it does not, then consider what we read before in Romans 3:20 - *"For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin."* (Romans 3:20, ESV). So it seems that in one verse Paul says that the doers of the law are justified, but in the another verse he says the exact opposite. Context is very important.

In Romans 2, Paul is identifying the difference between merely hearing and truly obeying. And he is linking justification with obedience to show how important obedience is. But in Romans 3:20 he is showing that true obedience is impossible. So, in my view, these verses actually go together, and you need to use the same principles of context in determining when Paul is talking about the Mosaic Law or a general law. Romans 2 and 3 fit together in that they demonstrate that obedience, not just hearing, is central to justification, and that we could never do it. So what's the solution?

Human beings need someone else's obedience to be applied them. They need to be "declared righteous" through the actions of someone else. In other words, we need to be obedient to be justified, and God does that through his Son. Look at Romans 3:21-24 through this lens:

"But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus," (Romans 3:21–24, ESV)

The glorious message of the Good News is that God counts me righteous through Jesus, even though I really am not. Judgment is not based upon hearing but on actions. Justification is by faith alone, not by our actions. But justification means that sinners have been legally declared to be "doers of the law," even though they have not.

So no religious person, including a Jew, could stand before God and say, "I heard your Law. I knew your Law." That will not matter. Judgment is based upon actions, either our sinful actions or the righteous actions of Jesus which have been imputed to us. Hearing alone will not stand in God's judgment.

3. From the inside out (v 14-15)

The next thing that we learn about God's judgment is the focus on a law that is internal, not just external. Let's follow what Paul says here and then figure out why he mentions this now and how it will appear later.

Verse 14 simply makes the point that Gentiles who do not have the Old Testament can still obey the basic elements of the Law even if they do not physically possess it. Two times in verse 14 Paul says that they "do not have the law." Keep in mind that Paul is attacking Jewish exceptionalism to show the impartiality of God. The point in this verse is that the giving of the Old Testament Law does not necessarily equal obedience. Gentiles could actually obey the law (and they often do!) without even having it. In that way, they actually become a "law to themselves." This is not Paul's version of post-modernity as if he is saying that every person determines what is morally right or

wrong. Rather he is saying the opposite, namely, that there is a standard for right and wrong, and even Gentiles, who do not have the law, are able to find elements of it and obey.

Verse 15 furthers this discussion by telling us two things about the non-Mosaic Law obedience:

1) The law is written on their hearts. Gentiles may not have a physically documented law that is captured on a scroll, but they do have an internal law, a moral code inside of them.

2) Their conscience is involved, either convicting or assuring them. Even without the Law, Gentiles have an internal sense of certain moral norms. When those natural laws or norms are violated or kept there is a confirmation that happens in one's conscience.

When you put all of this together, you get a clear sense that Paul is driving his point toward an inward, heart-based, conscience-testifying judgment, not simply an external and superficial judgment. Now next week we will see him press this even further as he addresses the ultimate external Jewish symbol for obedience and blessing: circumcision. And he shows how even that symbol is not ultimate.

"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." (Romans 2:28–29, ESV)

The book of Romans and, for that matter, the entire Bible focuses real righteousness as first an internal matter which then results in external actions. The gospel is powerful because it addresses the sources of the problem. And anyone who thinks that external matters like heritage, knowledge, or religious activity will exempt them from judgment is seriously mistaken.

4. On the basis of the gospel (v 16)

The final aspect of God's judgment is its connection to the gospel. Verse 16 simply states, *"on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus."* (Romans 2:16, ESV) Now this wording is somewhat surprising. We might expect the text to say something like "according to his righteousness" or "according to the Law," but Paul puts the gospel right in the middle of a text on judgment. What's more he says that judgment will be *according to my gospel*. So the gospel is the basis and central to the judgment of God. What does this mean?

First, by referring to "that day" Paul is most certainly referring to a future day of judgment. Other passages in the New Testament look for this coming final judgment and use the same terminology (see Romans 2:5, 1 Cor. 5:5, and 1 Thess. 5:2). So this judgment must be somehow associated with the final judgment.

Second, verse 16 is likely connecting us back to the theme of verse 13, which was about how the doers of the law are justified. If justification results in being granted perfect obedience, then it would make sense why Paul would add the gospel to his language about judgment. The secrets of the heart will be judged by this connection or lack of connection to the gospel. In other words,

your works will condemn you or your faith in Jesus' work will save you. The secrets of the heart are, therefore, taken in a gospel context.

You either have your "righteousness" – whether Jewish or Gentile – which amounts to nothing but disobedience. Or you have the righteousness that God gives through faith in Jesus. This takes us back to 1:17, where we saw that "the righteous live by faith."

The hope of the Jews is the same as the Gentiles because the problem of the Jew is the same at that of a Gentile. No matter what a person's background or religious heritage, God is impartial. Righteousness only comes from faith. True obedience only comes through Jesus. God judges us impartially and based upon the gospel.

Hearing, Believing and Doing

This section of Romans is directed toward Jews who might look down their judgmental noses at Gentiles and think that they are immune from God's judgment. But we ought not be judgmental of those who were judgmental. There are a number of things for us to consider:

1) Hearing the gospel message is critical. We have talked rather negatively about hearing, but people need to hear the basic message that is running through the book of Romans. And that message is simply that human beings are hopelessly lost sinners who cannot change ourselves; we need a righteousness that comes to us as a gift as we believe God's promise to count us righteous in Christ. Everyone in this room, this city, this country, and this world needs to hear that message. So hearing is still very important.

However . . .

2) Hearing alone does nothing and is dangerous. It seems incumbent on us to carefully listen to Paul's warning about only hearing or possessing the truth without any response. Just because we know something to be true or understand the facts about the gospel does not mean that we have truly embraced the gospel. And this position is dangerous because we can easily convince ourselves that hearing is enough. But it isn't.

3) Hearing, believing and doing are eternal issues. We must hear what God says about us, put our faith in His Word, and obey the new Spirit-empowered law of grace. While we are not saved by our works, our obedience really matters. No matter what your background, or your heritage, or what you say you believe, genuine faith is accompanied by works that work.

4) The gospel is the basis of safety from judgment. Everything in this book is designed to point you back to the righteousness of God in the gospel. And so I take you back to the very first question I asked you: If you were to die today and stand before God, what would you say if God asked you why He should let you into heaven? The only answer to that question is:

"I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." (Galatians 2:20, ESV)

The gospel fulfills the Law and spares us from judgment.

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