

THE LETTER THAT CHANGED THE WORLD - The Biblical Theology of Romans - Part six

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THE TWO KINDS OF SINS RELIGIOUS PEOPLE COMMIT

Romans 2:11 - 2:29 - "For God shows no partiality. [12] 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. [13] For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified. [14] 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. [15] 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 [16] on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus. [17] But if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast in God [18] and know his will and approve what is excellent, because you are instructed from the law; [19] and if you are sure that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, [20] an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of children, having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth— [21] you then who teach others, do you not teach yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal? [22] You who say that one must not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? [23] You who boast in the law dishonor God by breaking the law. [24] For, as it is written, "The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you." [25] For circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law, but if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision. [26] So, if a man who is uncircumcised keeps the precepts of the law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? [27] Then he who is physically uncircumcised but keeps the law will condemn you who have the written code and circumcision but break the law. [28] For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. [29] 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."

Last week we studied **Romans 2:1-11**. A quick review would summarize the *second* form of *general revelation* by which man's sinfulness is established. The *first* form of general revelation is the manifestation of God's greatness and majesty in *creation*, and Paul described this in **Romans 1:18-32**.

The *second* form of general revelation (described in **2:1-11**) is the *inward sense of moral "oughtness"* that God has placed in every person. And mankind's sinfulness is established in the way he *"approves"* of those who practice wickedness (**1:32b**), and the way he *does* the things he *disapproves* of when they are done to him (**2:1**). Please notice that *approving* of wickedness *is* wickedness. You don't have to *commit* the specific sin to share equally in the guilt of that sin. You can simply *approve* of it in someone else.

While these principles apply to *all* people, Paul's particular emphasis to this point has been the Greek - the pagan - the Gentile - the person who has been given no *special* revelation in written form or a recognizable presentation of the gospel. Now Paul turns his attention to the *second* group he introduced in his thesis statement back in **1:16** - "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek."

1) THE UNTARNISHED JUSTICE OF GOD IN JUDGING ALL PEOPLE SINNERS

Romans 2:12-16 - "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. [13] For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified. [14] 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. [15] 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 [16] on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus."

Paul's whole point is to establish the *universal* sinfulness of mankind and the *universal* need for the power of the gospel. **Verse 12** makes it clear Paul is only describing *sinner*s in these verses. There is a *theoretical* righteousness outlined in the following verses just to complete Paul's argument, but no one *achieves* this kind of moral perfection. He carefully describes **"those who have sinned without the law" (2:12)** and **"those who have sinned under the law" (2:12)**, his whole point being there are only *sinner*s to be discussed. There are none righteous.

This might not appear obvious to us all right now because we only see certain obvious outward facets of people's actions. And people can reign in evil desires with politeness and good natures. But it will be perfectly clear and proper when the **"secrets of men"** are revealed at the day of judgment (2:16).

While there are tricky elements in these verses, at least two things are quite clearly argued. **First**, all will be judged by what they *know*, not what they *don't* know. And second, God will be **absolutely pure and just** as He judges - **"For God shows no partiality" (2:11)**.

Having taken more time to discuss the lostness of the *Greek* by the standards of two forms of general revelation, Paul now turns his attention primarily to the *Jew* - the one who has been given the special privilege of special, written revelation from God.

The Jews, of course, would applaud Paul's assessment of the Gentile world under the judgement of God. To their surprise, Paul then turns to address some big errors in the Jews' thinking about their own relationship with God. Paul uses his own people, the Jews, to point out the **two kinds of sins religious people commit**, and to point out God's righteous judgment on each of them.

2) **WHY RELIGION WITHOUT CHRIST CAN'T SAVE AND THE TWO KINDS OF SINS RELIGIOUS PEOPLE COMMIT**

Romans 2:17-24 - "But if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast in God [18] and know his will and approve what is excellent, because you are instructed from the law; [19] and if you are sure that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, [20] an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of children, having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth— [21] you then who teach others, do you not teach yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal? [22] You who say that one must not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? [23] You who boast in the law dishonor God by breaking the law. [24] For, as it is written, "The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you."

These are tightly woven thoughts and tricky to explain. The important message seems to root out **two forms** of religious wickedness that Paul sees perfect illustration of in the Jews of his day:

- a) **First, they are proudly, self-sufficiently arrogant in their standing as God's chosen people -**
Romans 2:17-18 - "But if you call yourself a Jew and **rely on the law** and boast in God [18] and know his will and approve what is excellent, because you are instructed from the law...."

Notice the phrases **"rely on the law,"** and **"boast in God."** Nothing acceptable can be offered to God from such a self-centered religious stance. God's special revelation in the law and the Scriptures was given to awaken **humility** and **dependance** and **reception** to the Savior - as we'll see in weeks coming. Paul saw in his own people, the Jews, a **proud self-righteousness** that would only bring the

judgment of God.

They were proud at just being the ones who had *received* the law - ***“We have Abraham as our father!”***

The prophet Zephaniah wrote of the day when God would purge His people of their trust in their own religious status - ***Zephaniah 3:11*** - ***“On that day you shall not be put to shame because of the deeds by which you have rebelled against me; for then I will remove from your midst your proudly exultant ones, and you shall no longer be haughty in my holy mountain.”***

This is very important. It is not only the *breaking* of the law that requires repentance. *Keeping* the law as a proud standard of self-righteousness also brings the judgment of God. For example, Paul, in describing his pre-Christian experience with the law describes himself as being *“blameless”* as far as the keeping of the law was concerned:

Philippians 3:3-6 - ***“For we are the real circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh— [4] though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: [5] circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; [6] as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness, under the law blameless.”***

And yet we also know that Paul considered himself the *“chief of sinners”* and all his keeping of the law *“dung.”* In what sense, if Paul kept the law perfectly, was he still a sinner? He came to see he had been using the law to establish his righteousness before God. This was perhaps the greatest sin of all in Paul's mind.

This is God's word to all the religions of mankind that ignore God's redeeming grace specifically in Christ Jesus.

- b) ***Second, the Jews didn't live up to the standards they taught to others - Romans 2:19-24*** - ***“...and if you are sure that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, [20] an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of children, having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth— [21] you then who teach others, do you not teach yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal? [22] You who say that one must not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? [23] You who boast in the law dishonor God by breaking the law. [24] For, as it is written, “The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.”***

Remember, Paul has already discussed this universal form of human sin in ***Romans 2:1*** - ***“Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things.”*** But he comes back to it specifically in addressing the Jews because this form of sin is *particularly blameworthy* for those who have received such a clear revelation of God's righteous will in the Law and Old Testament Scriptures.

This is especially wicked for the Jews because, having *received* the very *“oracles of God”* (3:2), they of all people should have been made aware of their *own* sinfulness. But they weren't. Their religious pride had made them snobbishly arrogant in only denouncing the sins of *others* rather than pointing their own hearts toward their need of a *Redeemer*, which was what the law was designed to

do.

This leads right into our third point:

3) **THE STRONGEST PROOF OF THE SIN OF RELIGIOUS PRIDE WAS FOUND BY PAUL IN THE ATTITUDE HELD BY THE JEWS REGARDING THE OUTWARD COVENANT SIGN OF CIRCUMCISION**

Romans 2:25-29 - "For circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law, but if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision. [26] So, if a man who is uncircumcised keeps the precepts of the law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? [27] Then he who is physically uncircumcised but keeps the law will condemn you who have the written code and circumcision but break the law.

[28] For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. [29] 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."

It was the claim of Judaism during the time of the Maccabean revolt in the era of second temple Jerusalem that **"No person who is circumcised will go down to Gehenna"** (Tanch.B.60b,8) This was a prevalent view during Paul's day and to it Paul gives special attention. Paul's words in **2:9-11** would have been stunning to the Jewish ear - **"There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, [10] but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. [11] For God shows no partiality."**

That Jews were as vulnerable to God's judgment and wrath as the Greeks was an impossible concept in their minds. Circumcision was viewed as protection from divine wrath and judgment. After all, circumcision, the sign of belonging to God's covenant people given to Abraham, **predated** the giving of the law to Moses.

Paul's argument is outward circumcision only had value to the degree that it reflected a **circumcised heart**, one that was humble and sensitive to the will of God and **aware of its own need**. The whole purpose of the law was to humble man before God and open up the way for the Cross of Jesus (prefigured in the sacrificial system in the Old Testament).

Significantly, Old Testament Judaism had always been instructed that, while man could perform outward circumcision, only **God** could circumcise the human heart - **Deuteronomy 30:6** - **"And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live."**

This very same promise was reiterated beautifully through Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Outward circumcision was the covenant sign that the people looked forward to this inward work by the Spirit of God and trusted in His faithfulness to do it. It was never, Paul points out, given as magical insurance against God's judgment against wickedness.

4) **ONE MORE TRICKY ISSUE WE MUST DEAL WITH**

Some of Paul's words leave the impression people **can** find salvation through the keeping of the law. Consider these verses:

Romans 2:6-9 - "He will render to each one according to his works: [7] to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; [8] but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury.

[9] There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek....”

Romans 2:13 - “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 2:25-27 - “For circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law, but if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision. [26] So, if a man who is uncircumcised keeps the precepts of the law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? [27] Then he who is physically uncircumcised but keeps the law will condemn you who have the written code and circumcision but break the law.”

It **looks** as though one could attain salvation simply through the keeping of the law. And Paul **seems** to describe people who could do so. But we **know** this isn't the case. Paul makes direct, clear, absolutely unqualified statements to the opposite:

Romans 3:9 - “What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all. For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin....”

Romans 3:19-20 - “Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. [20] For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.”

This is critical to understand Paul's argument in Romans chapter 2. Paul isn't pointing out **how people are saved**. He's pointing out **how people are judged**. His whole argument is developed to show **all are on the same footing** in their accountability before God. The Jew has no advantage **in terms of escaping accountability for sin** over the Greek.

Neither **knowledge of the law** nor **physical circumcision** has potential as a covering for sin and wickedness. Neither one has the capacity to **change** (circumcise) the human heart. And, in keeping with the true purpose of the law, there were Jews in the Old Testament who, ahead of their time, saw the day coming when God would accomplish the fulfillment of that desire in their hearts.

Very significantly, **verse 29** is the first place in the New Testament where, to the horror of the Jews of Paul's day, those who were **ethnically** non-Jews are called Jews. This reaches far beyond any sincere attempt at a faithful keeping of the law in the Old Testament to the dawn of a brand new era. The Spirit of God would turn the hearts, not only to keep the **outward** demands of the law - which Paul had dedicated himself to as a Pharisee - but also to the **inward** keeping of the law (the covetousness Paul admitted struggling with) as well. Paul saw the coming of this promised age fulfilled in Christ Jesus and the inward work of the Holy Spirit.