

Keeping the Law Inwardly

Lesson for October 1, 2023

Unit II: Faith Triumphs, Law Falls Short

Adult Topic: A Matter of the Heart

Background Scripture: Romans 2:1-29

Printed Text: 2:12-24, 28-29

Key verse: *“No, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a person’s praise is not from other people, but from God.”* (Romans 2:29, NIV)

The following account was given by a Texas pastor:

When I was a youngster in elementary school, I had the unique experience of attending school where my father was a teacher. I suppose in the eyes of some of my classmates that could be viewed as a somewhat privileged position. Fellow students would be reluctant to beat me up, even if I deserved it, for fear of facing the wrath of my dad.

There were times when, at least in my mind, the fact that my father was a teacher gave me some kind of an edge with other teachers. Some of them were personal friends of my father and so I knew them on a first-name basis, at least until I was instructed otherwise.

But one lesson I learned very quickly about being a teacher’s kid; it didn’t impress my father. A friend and I had been selected as projectionists for our school, which enabled us to move freely about the school. One thing we were not supposed to do was to be in a certain wing of the school. One day we decided to do it anyway and were racing each other down the hallway. I skillfully manipulated a corner without overturning projector and cart only to end up running into my father. It was then I learned that my father was not impressed with the fact that I was his son. I can assure you my punishment was considerably more severe than any other student would have received. In fact, my father thought that my being his son entitled him to expect more of me than the other students.

Bob Deffinbaugh, Community Bible Chapel.

In this week’s lesson, the Jews were as wrong in presuming upon their unique status as a nation as Pastor Deffinbaugh was. They thought that their privileged position exempted them from the judgment of God. They thought their eternal salvation was secure, solely on the basis of their nationality, because they were the offspring of Abraham.

Key Terms

1. **Judgment** (verse 3) – The process of forming an opinion or evaluation by discerning and comparing; a separating, sundering, separation.
2. **Persistence** (verse 7) – A patient, steadfast waiting for; steadfastness; endurance; “patient continuance” (KJV).
3. **Repentance** – A changing of the mind; a changing of the inner man.

Lesson Background

Romans 2 is a part of the broader letter written by the Apostle Paul to the Christians in Rome. The chapter is significant for its theological and ethical teachings, particularly in the context of the early Christian church and the relationship between Jews and Gentiles within the Christian faith.

The following are the key themes and context of Romans 2:

Judgment and Hypocrisy: In Romans 2, Paul begins by addressing the issue of judgment and hypocrisy among religious people. He points out that those who judge others for their sins are often guilty of the same sins themselves. He emphasizes the need for self-examination and humility before passing judgment on others.

God's Righteous Judgment: Paul underscores the idea that God's judgment is based on truth and righteousness. He explains that God judges people impartially, taking into account their deeds and the condition of their hearts. This is a foundational concept in Christian theology regarding divine justice.

Jews and Gentiles: A significant portion of Romans 2 is devoted to addressing the relationship between Jews and Gentiles within the Christian community. Paul argues that being a physical descendant of Abraham (i.e., a Jew) is not enough for salvation. Instead, he emphasizes the importance of faith in Jesus Christ as the means of salvation for both Jews and Gentiles. (The emphasis in this lesson).

Circumcision of the Heart: Paul introduces the concept of circumcision of the heart, emphasizing that true circumcision is a matter of the heart and spirit rather than a physical act. This spiritual circumcision is available to all who have faith in Christ, regardless of their ethnic background.

The Law and Conscience: Paul discusses how both Jews, who have the law, and Gentiles, who do not have the law, will be judged according to their conscience. He argues that the Gentiles, even without the written law, can still do what is right by obeying the law written on their hearts. (The emphasis in this lesson).

God's Patience and Repentance: The chapter concludes by emphasizing God's patience and kindness, meant to lead people to repentance. Paul encourages his readers to turn away from their sinful ways and trust in God's mercy and grace.

Overall, Romans 2 addresses important theological and ethical issues within the early Christian community. It explores the concepts of judgment, righteousness, faith, and the relationship between Jews and Gentiles in the context of the Christian faith.

Lesson in Depth

I. God's Righteous judgment Stands for All (Romans 2:12-16)

In 2:12–16 Paul introduces the issue of the *Mosaic law* into the argument to explain that Jewish possession of the law does not nullify the principle that God will make no distinction between Jew and gentile on the day of judgment. **Doing the law**, not possessing the law, will lead to justification on that day. Gentiles too have a **moral compass** that functions as a form of God's law. It sometimes agrees with the Mosaic law and sometimes leads them to righteous conduct. Because of this, God will be able to judge people justly on the final day apart from the question of whether or not they possess the Mosaic law.

For not the hearers of the law are just in the sight of God, but the doers of the law will be justified: God's righteous judgment is not withheld because someone has *heard* the law; it is only held back if someone actually *does* the law.

The Jewish person – or the religious person – may think that he is saved because he has the law; but has he kept it? The Gentile may think that he is saved because he does not have the law, but has he kept the dictates of his own conscience?

“People will be condemned, not because they have the law or do not have the law, but because they have sinned.” (Morris)

As many as have sinned without law will also perish without law: Judgment for sin can come with or without the law.

Although not having the law, are a law to themselves: Paul explains why the Gentile can be condemned without the law. Their **conscience** (which is **the work of the law written in their hearts**) is enough to condemn them – or, theoretically this law on the heart is enough to justify them.

Written in their hearts: Many pagan authors of Paul's day referred to the “unwritten law” within man. They thought of it as something that pointed man to the right way. Though it is not embodied in written laws, it is in some ways more important than the written law.

A law to themselves does *not* mean that these “obedient Gentiles” made up their own law (as we use the expression “a law unto himself”), but that they were obedient to **conscience**, the work of the law residing in themselves.

“He indeed shows that ignorance is in vain pretended as an excuse by the Gentiles, since they prove by their own deeds that they have some rule of righteousness.” (Calvin)

Their thoughts accusing or else excusing them: In theory, a man might be justified (“excused”) by obeying his conscience. Unfortunately, every man has violated his conscience (God’s internal revelation to man), just as every man has violated God’s written revelation.

While Paul says in Romans 2:14 that a Gentile, may **by nature do the things contained in the law** he is careful to not say that a Gentile could *fulfill the requirements* of the law by nature. Though God has His *work* within every man (resulting in conscience), man can corrupt that work, so that conscience varies from person to person. We also know that our conscience can become damaged through sin and rebellion, but then can be restored in Jesus.

If our conscience is condemning us wrongly, we can take comfort in the idea that *God is greater than our heart* (1 John 3:20).

Their conscience also bearing witness: People who have never heard God’s word directly still have a moral compass they are accountable to – the **conscience**.

“God is describing how He has constituted all men: there is a ‘work’ within them, making them morally conscious.” (Newell)

“He is not saying that the law is written on their hearts, as people often say, but that the *work of the law*, what the law requires of people, is written there.” (Morris)

The day when God will judge: On this day no man will escape God’s judgment by claiming ignorance of His written revelation. Violating God’s internal revelation is enough to condemn us all.

“God therefore will judge all nations according to the use and abuse they have made of this word, whether it was written in the *heart*, or written on tables of *stone*.” (Clarke)

According to my gospel: Notice that the **day** of judgment was a part of Paul’s **gospel**. He did not shrink from declaring man’s absolute accountability to God. ‘My gospel.’ Does not this show his courage? As much as to say, ‘I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God onto salvation to every one that believeth.’ He says, ‘my gospel,’ as a soldier speaks of ‘my colors,’ or of ‘my king.’ He resolves to bear this banner to victory, and to serve this royal truth even to the death.” (Spurgeon)

God will judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ: This concept is distinctively Christian. The Jews taught that God the Father alone would judge the world, committing judgment to no one – not even the Messiah.

Paul intends to show here that the Jews' possession of the law does not give to them a decisive advantage over the Gentiles (2:12). He shows this by arguing that (1) it is doing, not possessing, the law that counts (2:13), and (2) even Gentiles have "law" in a certain sense (2:14–15).

God's final judgment requires obedience to moral standards that are obvious (not just agreement with those standards).

Key = what have we done with what we know? (Timothy Keller)

II. Religious Privilege is Refuted (Romans 2:17-20)

Verse 17-20 show how religious privileges can produce false security. The Jew believed that everyone was destined for judgment except himself. It would not be any special goodness which kept him immune from the wrath of God, but simply the fact that he was a Jew.

Paul lists six things the Jews were proud of when it came to how they lived—their **moral goodness**:

- **"You call yourself a Jew"** (v 17)—they were proud of their nationality, pleased to be Jews.
- **"You rely on the law"** (v 17)—a pride in having and knowing the law God had revealed to their ancestor, Moses, at Mount Sinai (see Exodus 19 – 31).
- **You "brag about your relationship to God"** (Romans 2:17)—God had chosen Israel to be his people (Exodus 19:4-6).
- **"You know his will and approve of what is superior"** (Romans 2:18)—they were able to make correct ethical decisions, and they were able to see the wrong choices others were making. Following the detailed rules and regulations in the law of God gave them a sense of being pleasing to God, particularly as they compared themselves to others.
- **"You are instructed by the law"** (v 18)—they did not only "have" the law, they had mastered it. They could quote it; cross-reference it; go deep into the details of it.
- **"You are convinced that you are a guide for the blind"** (v 19)—they know that they can see, and that others cannot because they are lost in idolatry, and so they spread the knowledge of the law.

III. A Heart in the Right Place (Romans 2:21-24)

Paul says that religious privileges mean nothing if your life doesn't measure up. Your life will show whether or not you truly belong to God or whether you are a hypocrite. In other words, you must practice what you preach – *"you, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself?"* Paul further provides three specific examples of hypocritical law breaking.

- (v. 22a) **Adultery** *"You who say that one should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery?"*
- (v. 21b) **Stealing** *"You who preach that one should not steal, do you steal?"*
- (v. 22b) **Idolatry** *"You who abhor idols, do you rob temples?"*

It comes down to this principle: “You have the law, do you keep it? You can see how others break the law; do you see how you break it also?” Much of the rabbinic Judaism of Paul’s day interpreted the law so that they thought they were completely justified by the law. Jesus exposed the error of such interpretations (Matthew 5:19-48).

God applies His law to both our *actions* and our *attitudes*. Sometimes we only want our attitudes evaluated, and sometimes only our actions. God will hold us accountable for both motives and actions.

“Hypocrites can talk of religion, as if their tongues did run upon patterns, they are fair professors, but foul sinners ...” (Trapp)

Verses 25-27 are omitted from this lesson however, they point out that true spirituality is much more than practicing religious rituals. Religious rituals have no value apart from obedience. They make two points:

- Circumcision has value if you obey the law.
- Circumcision has no value if you transgress the law.

Paul emphasizes that obedience transcends religious rituals.

IV. Will the Real Jew Stand Up? (Romans 2:28-29)

Verses 28–29 are a kind of appendix to this argument. Paul has made clear that being circumcised and possessing the law (v. 27b) do not, by themselves, qualify a person to be part of God’s true, spiritual people. Such outward marks, to be sure, can show that a person belongs to the “physical” Israel. But real Jewishness can never be determined by physical birth, by cuts on our skin, or by devotion to a particular book. To be a “real Jew” is an inward matter. It is marked by the “circumcision of the heart,” a circumcision that comes in the context of the Spirit, not the “written code.”

- Inward reality validates our spiritual identity.
- Inward reality accomplished by the spirit gives significance to religious rites.
- Only inward reality pleases God. “... *and his praise is not from men, but from God.*”

Lesson Summary

In Romans 2:12–16 Paul is primarily addressing the spiritual state of Gentiles—that is, those who are “without [the written] law” (Romans 2:12). Here Paul writes that those who sin without the law will perish without the law, just as those who sin with the law will be judged by the law. Paul’s point here is that all men will be judged for their sin, regardless of whether or not they have access to the written law in Scripture. This is because mankind is not judged based upon his possession (or lack thereof) of the written law; rather, mankind is judged based upon his breaking of the moral law, an act the Bible calls “sin.”

In Romans 2:14–16 Paul writes that those without the written law know that they are lawbreakers, or sinners. Here he explains that they can’t avoid knowledge of the moral law, for “the law [is] written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves their thoughts accusing or else excusing them” (Romans 2:15).

The conscience is frequently mentioned in the New Testament. Indeed, Scripture speaks of having a “good conscience” (Acts 23:1), a “clear conscience” (1 Timothy 3:9), and a cleansed conscience (Hebrews 9:14). The New Testament also mentions the possibility of an “evil conscience” (Hebrews 10:22), a defiled conscience (Titus 1:15), a weak conscience (1 Corinthians 8:7), as well as a seared conscience (1 Timothy 4:2). Additionally, Paul writes about the testimony of his own conscience, which he observed was Spirit-led and without guilt (Romans 9:1). The apostle Paul also encourages believers to submit to their authorities “because of your conscience” (Romans 13:5) and exhorts his readers to order their conduct aright in view of the consciences of others (1 Corinthians 8:12). Clearly, the conscience is a tool God uses to regulate and to reveal His moral standards to mankind.

Paul turns his attention to his Jewish readers. Whereas Paul’s Gentile readers may have argued that they were not condemned because they did not have access to the written law, Paul’s Jewish readers may have argued that they were not condemned because they did have access to the law! In Rom. 2:12–16 Paul answered his Gentile readers by pointing out that their consciences condemned them as lawbreakers. In Romans 2:17–24 Paul answered his Jewish readers by pointing out that the written law that they possessed condemned them as lawbreakers. Indeed, mere possession of the law did not keep the Jews from sinning (John 5:45–47), for they needed the gospel. As Paul explains in more detail in the next chapter, “*Whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law . . . by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in God’s sight*” (Romans 3:19–20).

Later, in writing to the Galatian churches, Paul is very clear that the moral law cannot save those who possess and keep it. Paul wrote, “By the works of the law no flesh shall be justified. . . . If righteousness comes through the law, then Christ died in vain” (Galatians 2:16, 21). This is the same point Paul is making to his Jewish readers here in Romans 2:17–24. Yet, just because the law cannot save does not mean that it ought to be discarded. On the contrary, as Paul will explain in more detail in Romans 3:1–8, being those who possess the written law, the Jews were in a privileged position, for they could more clearly see God’s righteousness, as well as their own contrasting unrighteousness and need of redemption. Indeed, of all people, given their access to Scripture, Paul’s Jewish readers should have been those who were most willing to receive the Messiah and His gospel message of salvation.

Unbelievers are often tempted to place their trust in their good works for salvation. Indeed, a commonality among every world religion, except for Christianity, is the concept of earning one’s own salvation. World religions merely differ in what types of works are prescribed for salvation. In our modern context, people put their trust in the good works of giving, morality, participation, tradition, sacrificing, and the like. In Paul’s context, his Jewish readers, put their trust in the good work of physical circumcision. The act of circumcision, which was prescribed within the Jewish ceremonial law, was first introduced in Genesis 17:10–14. This act was designed to be an outward physical sign of an inward spiritual reality and promise. Yet, among the Jews, over time, the external sign of circumcision became conflated with the internal spiritual reality in was meant to depict.