

1-4

ROMANS

GOD'S GOOD NEWS

STUDY #4

2:1-16



OVERVIEW - ROMANS 2:1-16

In 1:18-3:20, Paul shows why the gospel of righteousness (1:16-17) is *necessary* for all humanity. It is necessary because *all* humanity is under God's wrath - both Gentiles (1:18-32) and Jews (2:1-3:8). In this week's passage, Paul exposes the culpability of Jewish Christians (or even religious moralists) who on the one hand would have agreed with Paul's denunciation of the Gentile world in 1:18-32, but all the while thought it didn't apply to them.

No Excuse (2:1-5)

1-3 Paul's portrayal of Gentile humanity in Romans 1:18-32 would have found immediate acceptance amongst his Jewish recipients whose Jewish culture denounced the idolatry and sexual ethic of the Gentile world, particularly its same-sex sexual conduct.¹ Yet Paul quickly turns the tables on the Jewish Christians at Rome (and religious moralists) who were tempted to look down their noses at the Gentile world with a sense of self-righteousness. Paul reminds them that just as the Gentiles have no excuse before God (1:20), neither do they (2:1). They have failed to live up to God's standards which they have lauded over the Gentile world. They too are under God's wrath and have been handed over sinful desires. This is a sober reminder to us who are prone to look down upon others who do not share our faith or live in obedience to God's ways. We are not above such people or better than such people, we are simply sinners who have found a Saviour and can point others in the same direction.

4-5 Paul reminds his recipients that the only reason why God has not brought immediate judgement and destruction upon them (and the world) is that God relents in his kindness, with the intention of leading us to repentance. He continues in such kindness today. Yet persistence in unrepentant self-righteousness will only add to one's guilt and worsen their predicament on the last day.

No Favouritism (2:6-16)

The broad thrust of Paul's argument is clear - God shows no favouritism. Someone's Jewish identity will not privilege or protect them on the day of God's judgement. Rather, all will be judged according to their works, for these give sure evidence of our hearts (compare the language of v 7-8 with 1:21-23). Beyond this broad thrust, the particulars of these verses are debated. Within this debate there are two main views that fall within an acceptable² field of interpretation. The debate largely centres on what Paul writes in v 13, **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.**

*The 'Hypothetical' View*³ - Those holding to this view believe that Paul describes an 'empty set' in v 13 (and v. 8, 10). In other words, the one who *hypothetically* completes the covenant stipulations of the Old Testament Law lives (Lev 18:5; Rom 10:5), whilst the one who doesn't endures wrath (Rom 2:9, 12, 3:10-20, 23). But given that all are sinful, and unable to do good, none can *actually* be saved by works of the Law. As Paul writes shortly in 3:20, **Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin.** Paul thus describes an 'empty set' and he does so in order to underline to his Jewish audience that *none* are righteous before God, not even Jews, for none have completely obeyed the Law. As part of this view, verses 14-15 are thus best explained as describing the God-given conscience that all humans have of God's moral law (cf. 1:32), thus also rendering Gentiles culpable. No one is righteous.

The 'Gentile Christians' View - Whilst the *hypothetical* view strongly situates itself within the flow of argument in 1:18-3:20, the '*Gentile Christians*' view appeals to the wider context of the letter. It holds that there are two groups being described in these verses - believers and unbelievers (be they Jew or Gentile). They also hold that what is being described in these verses are not the *means* of being declared righteous, but rather the *results* (cf. James 2:14-17). In other words, whilst we are not declared righteous *by* our works of the law, our obedience to the law *reveals* that we have been declared righteous (v 13) as believers. This squares away with Paul's emphasis that the gospel produces obedience (1:5; 16:26). Indeed, those who are declared righteous by Christ through the gospel, are those whose hearts have been circumcised by the Holy Spirit (2:29) who in turn empowers new and obedient living to God (8:1-17). As part of this view, verses 14-15 thus refer to the Old Testament prophesies of a New Covenant whereby God will write his Law on the hearts of his people (Jer 31:33 & Ezek 36:25-27), even Gentiles.

¹ Preston Sprinkle, *People to Be Loved: Why Homosexuality Is Not Just An Issue* (Zondervan, 2015), 64-66, 73-74.

² Acceptable, because both interpretations square away with key Biblical doctrines enunciated elsewhere, and also find strong support within the Paul's letter to the Romans itself. In other words, neither makes the Bible or letter contradict itself.

³ See R Kent Hughes *Romans*, Douglas Moo *NICNT: Romans*. It should be noted that some who hold this view point with regards to v12-16, nonetheless believe that Gentile Christians are being referred to in verses 6-11 (see Tim Keller *Romans 1-7 for You*, and Thomas Schreiner *BECNT: Romans*). For the '*Gentile Christians*' view, see Colin Kruse *Pillar: Romans* & Christopher Ash *Teaching Romans*.

GETTING STARTED

1. Whether a trivial example or serious one, where are you most prone to holding double standards?

INTO THE TEXT

Read Romans 2:1-5

2. How does our condemnation of the wrong behaviour of others, condemn us also?
3. How should verses 1-3 inform the way we view the sin of others and relate to them? Does it mean we should completely refrain from identifying any behaviour as sinful?
4. Why does God not punish people immediately for our sin?

Read Romans 2:6-16

5. How would these verses have challenged the Jewish Christians in the Gentile church?
6. How can we know that Paul isn't suggesting we can be declared righteous *by* works of the law? (v 13)
7. Last week, we considered God's wrath as it is revealed in the present. Here we consider God's wrath as it will be revealed in the future. How do you find yourself responding the description of God's wrath in this week's passage?
8. How can a declaration of God's coming judgement be considered good news/gospel? (v 16)

TAKEAWAY

9. Reflect (and share if comfortable) where you've been guilty of looking down on other people, or groups of people, who do not share our faith? How might we better view and relate to such people?
10. In our post-Christian age, how do we best convey the eternal realities of this passage as we share God's good news with others?