

## Romans 2

### A Commentary On Romans 2

The chapter division here is very misleading, because clearly the 'therefore' is the logical continuation of the argument from the first chapter, which is reaching its climax; Paul's case against the Jews has reached its peroration. Having in Chapter 1 provided two witnesses against the Jews, proof of idolatry, which is a contravention of the second commandment and amounts to breaking of all the Law, and proof of homosexuality, which is a contravention of natural law, Paul now wraps up his case. In verses 1-11, he simply gives a legal summing up. His language is caustic, but his logic is concise. He tells the Jews they are hypocrites; whilst they judge others from the 'truth', (the Law), they are themselves no less guilty of the charges that they level than those who they level them against; a day of judgement is coming, and everyone will stand or fall on merit. That is to say, those Jews who accept Jesus will escape judgement and join the Kingdom of God, and those who do not will perish in the coming destruction of Jerusalem and Judea in the great civil war of AD 67-73. Paul then points out that the judgement will be impartial, 'for God shows no partiality', applied equally to both Jew and Greek, according to merit. This of course follows on logically from the fact that he has gone to the Greeks at all. If the judgement exempted the Greeks, there would be no need for him to minister to them in the first place. All Paul is really saying is that there is no favouritism at all in God's judgements. He does not favour the Jews in any way, they must suffer the consequences of their decisions, but the same standard of even-handedness is applied to all, and so the Greeks likewise will be judged on merit. The core reason why the Judaized Greeks are adjudged to have put themselves under the Law, with all its attendant consequences, is that they have been circumcised, and entered fully into the old covenant.

Paul is very direct in his attack, and he gives the Jews and Greeks a very stark choice. The charge of hypocrisy he levels was of course the same charge levelled by Jesus at the scribes and Pharisees, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!". We can reread the entirety of Matthew 23 at this point as Paul is also referring to that excoriating speech with this one explosive word. Paul's attack is similarly savage and uncompromising and his goals here are probably threefold:

- 1) To warn and lead to repentance Judaized Greeks before the coming judgement
- 2) To warn and lead to repentance Jews before the coming judgement
- 3) As always, to keep the Church vigilant to and cognizant of the threat of Judaizing influences

These really seem to be Paul's primary purposes, and there is a clear double edge to what he is saying. His treatise is quite deliberately aimed at different target audiences.

As somebody who had been saved by the lavish riches of Christ's grace, somebody who had previously zealously persecuted the Church and been involved in the imprisonment and murder of Christians, clearly Paul was always anxious to extend the power of that grace to those Jews who could be lead to repentance; however far they had fallen from God, he knew from personal experience that the hand of forgiveness was outstretched. Clearly, as minister to the gentiles, Paul was attempting to save Judaized Greeks from the coming wrath also. However, he was also equally determined to protect the church from the Judaizing influences that were attempting to infiltrate it, or which had already done so. Everybody at this point of history was particularly susceptible to Judaizing, the converted Jews because they were immersed in old covenant thinking, and non-Jewish converts, because they were incumbent on the Jews for their understanding of Christianity. The Jewish 'appeal to truth', to the Torah, ("You say, 'We know that God's judgment on those who do such things is in accordance with truth' "), was very powerful, and hard for Greek converts to resist. We know this because in Acts 18 we see the Alexandrian Jew Apollo helping the Greek converts in Ephesus to resist this very thing:

24 Now there came to Ephesus a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria. He was an eloquent man, well-versed in the scriptures. 25 He had been instructed in the Way of the Lord; and he spoke with burning enthusiasm and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John. 26 He began to speak boldly in the synagogue; but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained the Way of God to him more accurately. 27 And when he wished to cross over to Achaia, the believers encouraged him and wrote to the disciples to welcome him. On his arrival he greatly helped those who through grace had become believers, 28 for he powerfully refuted the Jews in public, showing by the scriptures that the Messiah is Jesus.

Throughout the church in Greece, this was the problem Paul was up against. The Greeks generally had come in to the Church through the synagogue; many had converted to Judaism before accepting Christ, and therefore Paul had a constant battle on his hands, as evidenced also in many of his epistles, to keep the Judaizing faction from entering like wolves in sheep's clothing, and distorting the gospel, a practice to which the Greeks, who were not so well-versed in scripture, were particularly vulnerable. The Judaizers were basically using the Torah to try and drown Christianity. So Paul here is outlawing the appeal to Torah and tradition. In simple terms he is saying something to the effect of: 'Don't let anyone come round brandishing the Torah (the truth) saying that to be righteous you need to conform to the Law and immerse yourself in the age old traditions of God'. Paul was now the arbiter of the old covenant, the touchstone of veracity, and what Moses had been to the old covenant, Paul was to the new covenant.

In verses 12-16, Paul again confirms the coming judgement against Jerusalem and Judah, whilst at the same time he is explaining why the Greeks are being allowed to perish along with the apostate Jews. Although they have now been circumcised and put themselves under the Law, the actual sin which God despises so much, and therefore the reason why they are inclusive at all in the judgement and targets of wrath, is the sin of homosexuality:

12 All who have sinned apart from the law will also perish ('apollymi' - be destroyed) apart from the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law.

So we now in this verse see the full scope of God's intent and justice. The sin of homosexuality is a sin against natural Law, a law which God fully expounded at Sodom and Gomorrah, and which the Greeks have already contravened nationally before they became Jewish converts. God puts Judah's apostasy, culminating in the rejection of Christ, on a par with Greek homosexuality. Two birds of a feather, one stone. This is of course a savage verdict. We can now go even further in our understanding of why Paul goes to Jew and Greek at the same time; it is not only that he wishes to save Judaized Greeks, it is that the Greek sin of homosexuality and the Jewish rejection of Christ are equivalent sins.

He then makes another statement which has a dual application, a general one and a more particular one:

13 For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous in God's sight, but the doers of the law who will be justified. 14 When Gentiles, who do not possess the law, do instinctively what the law requires, these, though not having the law, are a law to themselves. 15 They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, to which their own conscience also bears witness; and their conflicting thoughts will accuse or perhaps excuse them 16 on the day when, according to my gospel, God, through Jesus Christ, will judge the secret thoughts of all.

In a general sense Paul is referring to the never-ending conflict over the place of the Law post the the old covenant, for he describes exactly what non-legalistic believers struggle with: we understand that we are dead to the Law, and that we have the Holy Spirit guiding our hearts and consciences, and yet we have the perennial conflict of heart with mind. Our mind argues that we need the strictures and parameters of Law: 'thou shalt not' and so forth, (or in some cases does not). But the bottom line is that God says we no longer need the written code, for he speaks to our hearts and consciences, and that is enough.

In a particular sense Paul is referring to the Roman troops who will soon come to raze Jerusalem. These are the 'doers of the Law' enacting the exigencies of the Law on God's behalf. Whilst Titus and his troops enforced the old covenant on behalf of God, the suffering he witnessed eventually made him ill. In short, the Roman troops were dealing with the most troublesome group of people in all history, the people who had murdered God, and they understood full well in their consciences and hearts how the wrath of God needed to fall on Jerusalem, but mentally they would eventually start questioning themselves, so extreme was the punishment they were meting out. As Paul is writing to the Romans, he is in effect here writing directly to Titus and his commanders, who may well have been converted themselves before they attacked Jerusalem, to counsel them on the conflicting thoughts and emotions they would experience when they took siege of Jerusalem. Josephus amongst others gives an historical account of the siege. For instance, anybody who tried to escape Jerusalem through the underground tunnels once the siege had begun, if caught, was

crucified. The reference to 'secret thoughts' again refers back to idolatry, and in this specific instance, heart idolatry, idolatry without a physical image or totem.

Regarding the first more general point, we could say more, but it is perhaps better covered in a specific study of Galatians and the Law. Of course the overall point Paul is reinforcing for the Church is that the Law has been displaced by the new covenant, and he is once again rendering Judaism, Judaizing influence, and the attempt to subvert the Church through appeal to Torah and tradition, null and void.

In verses 17-29 Paul first tells us that the natural Jews are total hypocrites, whose double standards and immorality are so pervasive and deeply entrenched that they give God an atrocious witness and a terrible name:

24 For, as it is written, "The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you."

He then completely redefines what it is to be a Jew. A true Jew is no longer defined by ethnicity and mores, but is quite simply a new covenant believer. I have added the precise translation of certain Greek words to give the full meaning here:

25 Circumcision indeed is of value if you practice ('praso') the law; but if you break the law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision. 26 So, if those who are uncircumcised preserve ('phylasso') the righteousness ('dikaionoma') of the law, will not their uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? 27 Then those who are physically uncircumcised but bring to a close ('teleo') the law will condemn you that have the written code and circumcision but break the law. 28 For a person is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is true circumcision something external and physical. 29 Rather, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart—it is spiritual and not literal. Such a person receives praise not from others but from God.

Most translations imply that one set of law observers is replacing another, but this is not really what he says. Paul is actually saying that the new covenant believer who preserves the righteous intent of the Law - that is, someone who loves God and his neighbour rather than someone who follows the whole of old covenant Law, which is also to say someone who has Christ in their heart, and has thereby put an end to the old covenant - can now be considered the true Jew. Paul has slung away any definition based on law observance, ethnicity, circumcision, ritual, old covenant practices, and replaced it with an entirely new one. Quite simply, a Jew is now a new covenant believer, in short, a Christian.

What makes Romans slightly complex is the time it was written, circa AD 57. As I have discussed elsewhere, the old covenant expired in AD 73, (see my study on Daniel's 70 weeks), whilst the new covenant began in AD 30. So we are in a unique period, an interregnum, where two systems co-exist. Paul therefore is often addressing both covenants simultaneously. When he redefines Jewry here, he is addressing the old covenant, and linking it to the new covenant. Whenever he

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talks about “wrath to the Jew” this is within the old covenant definition of Jewry. Here he is explaining to the natural Jews and Greek converts what is really expected of them, inward circumcision rather than outward, in order for them to be able to grasp Christ, and escape the coming wrath. Likewise he is distancing the true Church from Judaizing pollution. Later on in his letter he will completely scrap any distinction between Jew and non-Jew, thereby invoking a new covenant, post AD 73 definition of Jewry. So effectively we have three definitions of Jewry in play. An old covenant definition, a new covenant absence of definition, and an interregnum definition. For the time he is writing, the interregnum definition is the one he wishes to emphasize, because it is the one which will save the Jews from judgement.