

The Judgment with and without Law

Romans 2:12-16

We had two messages on the judgment and wrath of God upon the self-righteous, in 2:5-10. Paul continues in the same way that his judgment is impartial and righteous as he turns now to how he will judge those without the Law.

Little wonder that Romans 2 is not our favorite chapter in the Bible!

By what standard will all be judged? It will be conformity to the truth and law given to them. God's judgment is righteous.

Will there be any loopholes or excuses? Any partiality or favoritism? Will the Lord go easier on Americans, on poor people, on females, on Jews, on religious people? The answer, in Romans 2, is no!

The works of all men will be judged – works arising from stubborn, unrepentant hearts, demonstrating selfish ambition and rejection of the truth; works which will not obey the Lord.

On the one side, we have in verse 5, wrath and indignation, tribulation and distress. But in verse 7, there are souls to whom is held out glory, honor, peace, even eternal life, to the one who does good, who seeks glory, honor and immortality.

Paul applies these two ways, not only to some people, but to all; to sons of Abraham and to Gentiles; to the Jew first – evil or good; and to the Greek – evil or good.

Now in 12-16, Paul answers important questions. For instance, doesn't the OT Law greatly benefit the Jew? And, if the Gentiles don't have OT Law, how then will God hold them accountable? What good is it having the Law if we are only condemned by it? And wouldn't the Gentile get off scot-free if he doesn't have the commands of God?

Remarkably there are those today who who teach something like this. That unless you hear the gospel, you will not be held accountable; that you cannot be judged; that people ONLY go to hell because they reject Jesus, reject the gospel.

However, God's judgment is not only upon the sin of unbelief; his wrath comes upon the evil works of men, from every nation.

Some, like Billy Graham, have taught that God will accept those without the gospel on the basis of faithfulness to their false religion! While others have held to a second chance to those who had not heard the gospel in this life!

This passage answers these questions, but I am not going to hide from you that this is not the most easily understood part of God's Word. Very good men differ on what Paul is getting it here. What does Law mean? What does it mean to be justified by being a *doer* of the Law? Are these Gentiles in 14-15 actually born again, having a new heart like Jeremiah promised?

But one think is not difficult to understand, and that is this: there is a judgment coming. Let us tremble when we think of the many who are now in self-blinding sin, and who will arrive beneath the wrath of God with much surprise. Paul said, Knowing the terror of the Lord, we persuade men; are we ourselves persuaded?

Behold, if you don't understand the judgment and justice of God against you, you can't understand properly the cross, where believers were judged. And if you cannot understand the cross, then you cannot see God's amazing grace.

Verse 12 begins us with all in sin – this is the condition of every man, woman, and child. The Greek indicates a once for all quality, pointing to our sin in Adam, from which our actual transgressions arise.

And the Law, coming to a certain some, does not change that! WE have already seen that just having or hearing the law does not save.

So the teaching here is that both will perish, the one as well as the other be judged, or a better translation is condemned. They all will be destroyed away from the presence of the Lord.

But there is a difference, a contrast in the standard, for one is with Law and one is without Law. The one who sins without it will perish without it; the one who sins with it will be judged by the Law, or better, *through* the Law.

The most important question to be answered here then in 12-13 is: What is meant by Law?

Two main options have been proposed.

First, there are those who say Law here is simply the commandments, the rules, the moral standards of the OT. This is Exodus 20 and the laws written on stone to be obeyed.

But Law can also mean the whole OT, particularly the first five books of the Bible, and or the Torah, which means instruction.

There are fine teachers who hold number #1, what we can call the narrow, or moral view; but I believe #2, the wider, all-inclusive view, is the better understanding. Why?

1. First, because it seems this is how Paul uses it in 17-20, especially verse 20. The Jews boasted in their Law as instruction as well as commands. So why would we take Law in differently in 12 and 13?
2. Second, this seems to fit better for 14 and 15, that the Gentiles have the work of the Law, a religious outlook, about them. How can this be the more narrow reading, since the one thing all men have in common is general revelation, and all have this moral law written in their conscience.

So here are two sinners then – one with and one without the law; the one without the law is a sinner still, is judged still. And if we take law in the narrowest way, wouldn't we have to say that where no law is, there no sin is!? But while they are judged, they are not judged for a law they did not have.

Without law cannot mean lawless, or wicked but rather they are without special revelation given by God.

One author makes this helpful observation:

“Paul cannot mean that who are without law are entirely destitute of law; in verses 14 and 15 he speaks of the same people as being a law to themselves and as showing the work of the law written in their hearts. The law they are without or which they do not have must therefore be the specially revealed law which those in the other group possess and which they are under. The contrast is between those who were outside the pale of special revelation and those who were within.” John Murray, p. 70

So this helps us in this our first point, which is: **How God will deal with those who do not have the Word of God. 12a, 14-15**

In a word, all who sin must die, must be judged, and must perish.

How so? These ones don't have God's revelation?

Correct, they do not, but they still have the things of the Law/Word by nature; they become by their traditions and habits a walking text, a law to themselves; and this is shown as coming from what their hearts believe, what in nature is still written on his heart and conscience.

Man; fallen, sinful, immoral man, is still man, a moral creature; he has not lost the image of God entirely. He is like the Prodigal Son – living away from his Father's house – but the remembrance and goodness

and truth of his Father is inescapable; and he knows deep down that he is wrong.

He can try to bury it with pleasure and folly. But when he comes to himself, the pleasantness of God cannot be erased even by the stench of misery in a pig-sty.

This throws us back into Romans 1, doesn't it? This is the internal revelation peeled back by Paul, where in the last chapter, he showed the heavenly revelation itself to men.

Now you need to know that there are good men who differ with this; that 14 and 15 describes, not a natural man, or Gentile, who is seeking to keep a law or a way; but because of the law written on the heart, insist this is in fact a saved man, a saved Gentile.

I agree we will come to that truth by the end of the chapter, where uncircumcised Gentiles who embrace the Word, including the promise of grace in the Redeemer, will be counted a true Jew, for he or she is circumcised in the heart, where it matters.

But this does not fit well in 14-15, which exposit and exposes the Gentile without the Law/Word and how God will judge (12a).

Additionally, it would be a unique use of the phrase "by nature" that these men were obeying the Word; or that the Word somehow is replaced by their own mind – becoming a Law to themselves.

Their conscience excusing or approving themselves is the index of the sin they are doing and for which they will be judged; that is not a believer's conscience looking to Jesus. Their secret sins God will judge, as the next verse indicates.

So we are saying that it is not just the bare law of God, but the truth of God's existence, the attributes of the Lord, the ways of God in the world, the fact of eternity beyond time, as the Bible says – "The Lord

has set eternity in the hearts of men” – all these are the soup of life, but which sin has ruined.

Sinful man, without the special Book of God, is to be held responsible at the last Day; all nations will be gathered before Christ’s awesome throne; they will not be judged for what they did not have, but for what they did have.

And who of us lives up to what we know is right, true, and good? That is a way of life which left us when Adam ate from the forbidden fruit. We need a new Word, one of life and grace and salvation.

And that brings us to the second group in 12a and 13b; the ones we’ve considered since verse 1; the “Jews” in 17-24.

They have this Law, this Torah with all of its instructions, revelations, directions and promises.

Think of Ephesians 2 where Paul writes:

¹¹ Therefore remember that formerly you, the Gentiles in the flesh, who are called "Uncircumcision " by the so-called "Circumcision," which is performed in the flesh by human hands - ¹² remember that you were at that time separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. (Eph 2:11-12 NAU)

This is what the Jew was brought close to – Christ, God’s nation, covenants of promise (not mere law), hope and God in heaven.

But the Jews, rejecting Christ, faith, grace – used their Bibles illegitimately – used it as a lucky charm. Since they were not as bad as the Gentiles, they thought they had it made. All the circumcised go to heaven; or in a NT context, all the baptized are going to heaven.

This second point then is: **How will God deal with those who have and hear the Word of God but do not do it? See 12b, 13a**

Just having and hearing the Word, rather than having, believing and holding the Word, is where they went off the rails.

The Word of God did not benefit them, says Hebrews, not being mixed with faith.

They did not have the trust their father Abraham did, who they claimed to be their own. And so they did not do the works of trusting Abraham either.

No, their works showed that they were covenant breakers, yet in their sins!

What a rude awakening are they in for at the judgment then. But they are not alone. All in the NT Church, who have Bibles, who tell others how to live but do not live by faith themselves; who are legalists, or ritualists, or traditionalists – whatever title you want to put on it – Roman Catholic, Protestant, Presbyterian, Baptist, even Christian.

When a church professing Jesus condones sin – the sin of self-trust for salvation; the sin of abortion, the sin of adultery by cheap divorce, the sin of homosexuality – it doesn't matter what you say anymore; your actions speak louder than words.

What a flimsy defense will it be when people will cry out, 'We heard your word!' but did not believe and act upon it!

People will pointing to their ears, and eyes, and mouth, when the Lord is looking at hands, and feet, and hearts; all which were opposite not only to what is professed, but opposite to Him. What a fearful thing, to draw near to God with your lips but the heart being still far from Him!

Is there an answer? What is the answer? Does this passage leave us all sown up to sin, as Romans 3:9 says – Both Jews and Greeks are all

under sin? Or is there a sneak peek at the salvation which Paul announced back in 1:16-17, and will bring forth in fullness in the latter half of Romans 3?

Obviously, if Paul is using “Law” here in the narrow sense, then he can’t mean that anybody is justified by their works in 13b – “But the doers [not the hearers] of the Law will be justified (declared righteous).”

But if Paul is talking about this wider view of the Word, with all of its promises to be believed and trusted, a hope by grace through faith alone which is evidenced in holy living – then that fits with gospel belief here where Paul is found for the first time using the important verb, ‘to justify’.

That is what he is saying.

Paul has not drawn for us a theoretical path to eternal life in verse 7. No, there are those who by perseverance are doing good and in the right way seeking for glory, for honor, for immortality – for, in short, eternal life.

They are the opposite to those who are self-centered, disobeying the truth, and obeying unrighteousness.

Paul pronounces glory, honor and peace over the heads of the one who does good.

Now later we know there is none good, no not one. Then who are these if not believers? From both Jewish and Gentile backgrounds, who come to embrace the Word of God?

By the end of this chapter, Paul is going to take us to those who are really saved, really circumcised inwardly, are given a new heart, are regenerated, in faith.

It seems Paul is referring to something more in verse 16 than the judgment of men by God through His Son Jesus, including the gospel there.

It is true that Paul's gospel message includes the dark backdrop of the judgment. But that seems to be opposite to what he is saying. Why would introduce his gospel message here only for the purpose of bringing out the justice side of things? Is it not because the gospel so much triumphs over justice and wrath which we all deserve?

The doers of the Law – that is, those who are not hearers only, but who by faith embrace the message of salvation and new life in Christ – as witnessed in the Law and the Prophets – and who show their faith by fighting with sin and putting on the new man – they are justified by God.

This seems nothing other than what James is talking about in his 2nd Chapter. We might say, this is the James in Paul!

We are saved by faith apart from any works – good, bad or otherwise. And that salvation by grace then shows itself in embracing the word of God in all of life.

Recall from Romans 1, that Paul's gospel is about righteousness but also power. The gospel of Romans includes both justification by faith apart from works, as well as release from the power of sin's dominion in Romans 6.

Let us consider three things now as we wrap up:

One – if our understanding of our text is correct, this shows that James and Paul are not in conflict in the least. Both are fighting, not one another, but fighting back to back against different enemies. We must not pit them against each other as Luther and the Roman Catholic Church have done. We must not throw out James; but we must also not throw out the gospel of justification by faith apart from works!

James and Paul battle different enemies. Paul goes after dead works, but James fights dead faith.

Two – be assured and rejoice that we are saved all of grace; saved by grace alone; saved by faith alone. Keep before you the excellent word from Augustine – “no one is redeemed except through unmerited mercy; no one is condemned except through merited judgment.”

And three – the Gospel believer has his heart set on things above: eternal life, the glory of God, the honor of heaven, everlasting peace in Christ. And our life here is nothing to be compared with our life there.

Let us be mindful of this more fully as we would be believers and doers of the Word.

Earth and Heaven – Valley of Vision, p. 370

O LORD,

I live here as a fish in a vessel of water,
 only enough to keep me alive,
 but in heaven I shall swim in the ocean.
Here I have a little air in me to keep me breathing,
 but there I shall have sweet and fresh gales;
Here I have a beam of sun to lighten my darkness,
 a warm ray to keep me from freezing;
 yonder I shall live in light and warmth for ever.
My natural desires are corrupt and misguided,
 and it is thy mercy to destroy them;
My spiritual longings are of thy planting,
 and thou wilt water and increase them;
Quicken my hunger and thirst after
 the realm above.
Here I can have the world,
 there I shall have thee in Christ;
Here is a life of longing and prayer,

there is assurance without suspicion,
asking without refusal;
Here are gross comforts, more burden
than benefit,
there is joy without sorrow,
comfort without suffering,
love without inconstancy,
rest without weariness.
Give me to know that heaven is all love,
where the eye affects the heart,
and the continual viewing of thy beauty
keeps the soul in continual transports
of delight.
Give me to know that heaven is all peace,
where error, pride, rebellion, passion
raise no head.
Give me to know that heaven is all joy,
the end of believing, fasting, praying,
mourning, humbling, watching,
fearing, repining;
And lead me to it soon.

1. How God will deal with those who do not have the Word of God?
12a, 14-15
2. How will God deal with those who have and hear the Word of God
but do not do it? 12b, 13a
3. How will God deal with those who hear and do the Word of God,
that is, the Gospel? 13b, 16, 7, 10.