

Toward his goal of exalting the gospel in the eyes of his Roman readers, Paul concluded the first chapter with an indictment having universal relevance. This becomes particularly evident from his inference that begins chapter two: whoever they happen to be, *all men* are without excuse when they pass judgment on someone else, for they are guilty of the same things they condemn in others. This universal condemnation provided the foundation upon which Paul could transition to the particular matter of the Jews and their confidence before God. Contrary to their conviction, the Jews' possession of the Law and the covenant status they held by virtue of it meant nothing in terms of gaining for them preferential treatment; all men - Jew and Gentile alike - will be judged in righteousness according to their own *deeds* without consideration for their ethnicity, status or heritage. Thus, in 2:6-16 Paul set forth the criterion for eternal life, namely blamelessness with respect to the principles of righteousness revealed in the Law. To gain life, men must be in themselves what God is in His essential character - they must be holy as He is holy. This criterion applies equally to all people, and anything short of it will not suffice.

In this way Paul gradually narrowed his emphasis from a universal revelation and indictment of man *as man*, to the specific implication of these truths for the Jews under the Law of Moses. Despite their confidence in it, the Law did not serve their benefit but their condemnation, and in the balance of the second chapter Paul communicated to the Romans why that was the case (2:17-29). This larger context can be partitioned into two sub-sections (2:17-24, 2:25-29):

- The first sub-section presents and supports Paul's fundamental *assertion* of Jewish hypocrisy, while the second sets out its *implication*.

- As well, the former is concerned particularly with the matter of the *Law*, whereas in the latter Paul introduces for the first time the subject of *circumcision*. The reason for this is that the first-century Jew found his confidence before God fundamentally in his *covenant status*. He held that status by virtue of his descent from Abraham, and the circumcision of his flesh set him apart as a participant in the Abrahamic Covenant. Furthermore, the Law of Moses was the covenantal means by which God's covenant promise to Abraham was fulfilled for his physical offspring. God led the sons of Israel out of Egypt to fulfill his word to Abraham to make his descendents a great nation, to give them the land of Canaan, and to be their God, and the Mosaic Law provided the covenantal framework within which those promises were fulfilled. This is why circumcision - the sign of the Abrahamic Covenant - was carried forward as a foundational obligation of the Old Covenant instituted at Sinai (cf. Genesis 17:1-14 and Leviticus 12:1-3).

- d. The first section (2:17-24) clearly indicates that Paul had indeed been transitioning in his focus toward a specific consideration of the Jewish problem in relation to the gospel. It was previously observed that a fundamental point of stumbling for the Jews with respect to the gospel was their confidence that they would be judged according to a different standard than the Gentile heathen. Specifically, there existed among them the common conviction that their possession of the Law of Moses gave them a privileged status as covenant sons.

This sense of ethnic and covenantal privilege is the reason for Paul's insistence that God will "*render to every man according to his deeds,*" and will do so without any partiality whatsoever. Having the Law means nothing; meeting its demand of righteousness is the sole basis of divine acceptance, which obligation places the spotlight directly upon the gospel (ref. 1:16-17, 2:6-16). This contextual foundation is crucial to understand, for Paul continued to build upon it in the present passage and through the end of the second chapter.

As with the first context of chapter two (2:1-5), he again employs the literary device of *diatribe* in which he addresses an imaginary antagonist (2:17-24). But whereas in the former instance his antagonist had been "every man of you who passes judgment," in the present context it is the one who "bears the name Jew." In this way he highlighted both the *universality* and the *particularity* of his indictment of man, implicating in a compelling manner Jew and Gentile alike. More precisely, Paul identified his antagonist in terms of five privileges enjoyed by the Jews in their covenant status (2:17-18). Thus each of the five identifies a point of clear distinction between Jew and Gentile.

- 1) The first privilege he mentioned was the Jews' unique identity as *those who bear the name "Jew"* (2:17a). The term *Jew* had its origin in reference to those Hebrews descended from the tribe of Judah and living in the region of Canaan that was Judah's tribal allotment. Following the Babylonian exile, when the nation of Israel was reduced to a remnant living in and around Judah, the name "Jew" began to be applied to the nation as a whole. Therefore, when Paul referred to the person who called himself a "Jew" he had in mind any member of the nation of Israel descended from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

And so he began his diatribe by distinguishing his antagonist according to the broadest category of identity, namely his participation in the ethnic line of descent from the Hebrew patriarchs. But even more than mere ethnicity, this designation carried with it immense religious significance. For the Jewish nation was first of all a *covenant community* set apart to God. Among all the peoples of the earth God had chosen them in Abraham to be His covenant *sons*. As such, the Jews enjoyed a privilege not shared by any other nation or people group. God was uniquely the covenant God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and, as the descendents of the patriarchs, the Jewish people shared in the covenantal status and blessing conferred upon them.

- 2) For two millennia the Jews had alone stood in covenant union with God, and the "contract" by which He had inaugurated that union was the Law of Moses. The Law not only established their identity as a unique people, it brought definition and structure to every aspect of their personal and corporate existence, with the result that the sons of Israel could not think of themselves except in relation to the Mosaic Law.

Accordingly, those who called themselves “Jews” very naturally *relied upon the Law* (2:17b). The Law of Moses provided for them their personal and national identity and defined and ordered every facet of their lives. But more important to Paul’s argument, it was the basis for their confidence before God. That confidence came from two sources: the first was the *covenantal privilege* associated with possessing the Law, and the second was their conviction of *personal conformity* to its demands.

- The Jew found his confidence before God first in his status as a “son of Abraham.” God had chosen Abraham from among all the inhabitants of the earth, and the Jews believed that the divine blessing conferred upon him extended to all his biological offspring within the covenant line. At the level of *typological fulfillment* this was indeed the case (cf. Genesis 12:1-2, 13:14-17, 15:1-21 with Exodus 3:1-10, 33:1-3; ref. also Deuteronomy 1:1-8, 6:1-19; Joshua 24:1-13; etc.), but Paul would soon make clear that the promise to Abraham really belonged to his *spiritual* seed, both Jew *and* Gentile (2:28-29; cf. also 9:1-24 and Galatians 3:1-29).

- But the Jews found their confidence secondly in their sense of righteousness under the Law. While no Israelite would be so foolish as to regard himself as being without sin, the Law provided for sin’s atonement. As a result, when transgression occurred a Jew could afford himself the confidence of personal righteousness by meticulous observance of the Law’s sacrificial prescriptions. What had been intended by God to provoke submissive, humble *faith* became the instrument of *self-righteousness*.

- 3) Further, the Jew had the privilege of being able to *boast in God* (2:17c). This “boast” fundamentally speaks of a confident claim regarding something, and was used by the prophets in relation to trusting, assured confidence in God. Thus the idea of boasting in God is not necessarily sinful; indeed, Israel had been charged not to boast in riches, wisdom, or the strength of chariots and horses, but in the Lord her God (Psalm 20:6-8; Jeremiah 9:23-24; cf. also Psalm 34:1-2; Isaiah 31:1; Micah 5:1-10; etc.).

The Jew’s election and covenant status gave him an immense privilege that, prior to the coming of Christ, no Gentile could claim without converting to Judaism. For God had been uniquely the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob - the God who had taken the sons of Israel for His own possession and shown His faithfulness to them throughout their generations. For this reason Israel’s boast in Him was well-founded (Exodus 3:1-10, 6:1-8; 1 Kings 18:20-37; also Matthew 22:23-32; Acts 3:1-13; etc). However, the Jews’ legitimate boast in their Rock, Refuge, and Deliverer became a matter of *pride*; their boast was in a perceived privileged status that would exempt them from divine judgment.

- 4) Inasmuch as they possessed the Law of Moses and actively applied themselves toward fulfilling its demands of conformity and sacrifice, the Jews were further characterized by the *knowledge of God's will* (2:18a). This observation by Paul expands upon his previous contention that all men know God, both innately and through the witness of the created order (1:18-21). For the Jew not only had this universal, *intuitive* knowledge, he was further informed and instructed by the ministration of divine revelation that had come through the Law and prophets. Unlike the Gentile heathen that lived in alienation from God in the darkness of pagan idolatry, the Jew was able to take pride in the fact that he knew and served the true God in allegiance to His revealed will.
- 5) Finally, being instructed out of the Law with regard to God's will, the Jew could say of himself that he was one who *approved the things that are essential* (2:18b). This clause has the basic sense of being able to distinguish between things as to their comparative value or excellence. In the present context, Paul's point was that the Law of Moses taught the Jew to recognize and make a distinction between the things that are holy, righteous, excellent, and profitable, and those that are not.

But this capacity to distinguish also carries with it the implication of *approval* and *disapproval*. The Jews not only recognized the things that are excellent, they approved of them. Paul had already made that approval evident by indicting the Jews' judgment of the Gentile (2:1-5), but would demonstrate it further by noting their practice of instructing themselves and others in the righteousness and excellence of the Law (2:20-23).

His status under the Law, and most especially his instruction from the Law, led the Jew to have great confidence that he was "*a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of the immature*" (2:19-20). And just as was the case with the aforementioned privileges, this four-fold prerogative was, in some sense, legitimate. Israel had been chosen to be God's *servant*, and part of the nation's service was to represent and manifest God to the nations. The Jews had in the Law "*the embodiment of knowledge and of the truth,*" and God expected that their own instruction and enlightenment should be used to illumine the Gentiles who long abided in the darkness of paganism. They were to be Yahweh's ministers and representatives in the earth, called to bear witness to His goodness, power, and glory throughout His creation. This does not deny Paul's declaration that all men possess an innate and perceptual knowledge of the truth; it simply recognizes the superior, more thorough knowledge the Jews possessed by virtue of the Law; and of whom much is given, much is required.

Yet, despite his great privilege and the confident zeal with which he approached his ministration of the Law to the uninformed and immature, the Jew was guilty of great hypocrisy: *he failed to practice what he preached* - the one who taught others failed to teach himself (2:21-22).

Although any particular facet of the Law could have been drawn upon to exemplify his charge, it is noteworthy that Paul here interacted with the Decalogue. This is clearly the case with the first two instances of *stealing* and *committing adultery*, and is arguably so with the third matter of *idolatry*. By referencing these transgressions he showed that the Jews were guilty of despising the very heart of the Law of Moses. It was not simply some obscure, insignificant instruction that was being violated among them; it was the commandments of the “Ten Words” engraved on the tablets of stone by God Himself.

It is also important to observe the way in which Paul raised his accusation. He did so within the flow of his diatribe by posing a series of questions to his imaginary antagonist. He did not directly accuse any *particular* Jew of hypocrisy regarding the Law; he simply raised the possibility. Nonetheless, he knew full well that his words would act to probe the conscience of any Jewish reader, and the result of an honest self-inquiry would be the acknowledgement of such hypocrisy. This is evident first from the diatribe itself, but much more from the development of his argument. For already in verse 2:1 Paul identified *all men* as being guilty of violating the righteousness of the Law - regardless of whether or not they possess it - for they are unable to pass judgment on another person without also condemning themselves. Having already laid this foundation, he fully expected a positive response to his rhetorical questions in 2:21-22. This is not to say that Paul was convinced that every Jew was personally guilty of the specific crimes of stealing, adultery and idolatry. Rather, his intention was to compel a Jewish reader to acknowledge the crucial disconnect between *verbal claims* and *conduct* that establishes the hypocrisy of Jew as well as Gentile. It is this very disconnect that makes God’s impartial recompense a terrifying reality (2:6-16), and one that necessitates the gospel of divine righteousness gained through faith in Christ.

Continuing the same pattern of rhetorical questioning Paul pressed upon his imagined antagonist the obvious implication of this sort of hypocrisy. The Jew who relies upon the Law and boasts in God, and yet breaks the Law, is actually one who *dishonors* God (2:23). This statement reaffirms what has been Paul’s constant thesis throughout the larger context, which is that *doing* the Law is what matters, and every person - those under the Law and those without it - will be judged impartially according to the standard it sets forth.

To emphasize his charge Paul alluded to an Old Testament reproof that can be associated with at least two contexts (2 Samuel 12:1-14; Isaiah 52:5; cf. Ezekiel 36:16-21). Neither of them matches exactly Paul’s words, but both speak of how the sin of God’s covenant people provokes the blasphemy of the Gentiles who see it. Whatever context he had in mind, his readers would have gotten his point: *the Law-breaking Jew of the first century was no different than his rebellious ancestors*. The confident Israelite who exempted and even aggrandized himself - not just in comparison to the Gentiles, but also his disobedient forefathers - was in reality guilty of the same charge he brought against them, and so would face God’s impartial judgment even as they had (cf. Matthew 23:29-36; Acts 7:20-53).