

Summary: What is the difference between an “apology” and “repentance”? An apology is at heart a defense, while repentance does not try to make excuses (2:1-4). Paul says that God will render to each one according to his works (2:5-11), and insists that only the doers of the law will be justified, which means that those who try to “apologize” and excuse their faults will not stand in the judgment (2:12-16). Only those who repent are true doers of the law.

What is an apology?

The idea of an apology is at the heart of our passage today.  
The word “anapologetos” and its cognates appear in  
1:20, 2:1, and 2:15.

But the idea of an “apology” is a “defense.”

When someone “apologizes” for a mistake  
they are defending their action by explaining the circumstances.  
“I’m sorry that I ran into your car –  
I was watching the dog that ran into the street.”

That is an apology.

It may include an expression of regret (“I’m sorry that you were offended”)  
but it also at least implies a defense.  
Think of Pope Benedict’s “apology” after calling Islam a religion of violence.  
He did not repent of what he said.  
He apologized.  
He said that he sincerely regretted  
“that certain passages of his address could have sounded offensive  
to the sensitivities of the Muslim faithful.”  
It was not repentance.  
He believed that what he said was right.  
There was no need to ask for forgiveness, because he did not sin in what he had said.

And so he issued an apology – a defense with an expression of regret.

So sometimes an apology is all you can offer.

(And so parents, be careful!

If you say to your child, “apologize to your sister,”  
you are telling them to defend themselves.  
In modern English usage the word “apologize” has taken on the idea of regret,  
and is sometimes used as a synonym for “repent.”  
But the basic idea of an apology is a defense,  
while the basic idea of repentance is a turning of the mind and heart.

There is no change of heart in an apology.

So apologies are appropriate for accidents:

“I’m sorry I hit you with the bat, I didn’t see you coming.”

But only repentance is appropriate for sin:

“I saw you coming and I hit you anyway because I was being selfish.  
Please forgive me.”)

Implicit in the idea of an apology is the idea that I didn’t do anything wrong.

That is why apologies are so much easier than repentance!

Why do I spend so much time talking about apologies?

Because that is where Paul starts our passage today:

### **1. No Apologies: You Are the Man! (2:1-4)**

*Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges.*

You have no excuse.

You have no defense.

Literally, you are without apology.

*For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself,  
because you, the judge, practice the very same things.*

Last time we looked at the cursed exchange at the end of Romans 1.

Although God has revealed his eternal power and divine nature to all men,  
so that all men know God (1:20-21),

“they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him”

but instead “exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images” (1:23)

“exchanged the truth of God for a lie” (1:25)

and “exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature” (1:26)

Worship is at the heart of humanity’s rebellion.

We know God, but we refuse to worship him.

And because of our refusal to worship him,  
we believe lies and act contrary to nature.

And Paul concluded the passage by giving the laundry list of the fruits of idolatry.

“They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice.

They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness.

They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful,

inventors of evil, disobedient to parents,  
foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.” (1:29-31)

So when Paul says in 2:1 that “you, the judge practice the very same things,”  
he is saying that you do the same sort of things as those you judge.

Paul's strategy here is very much like that of Nathan in 2 Samuel 12.

Paul started with the ungodly and unrighteous  
(and probably most of his hearers would think of the Gentiles,  
though some might have thought of Israel and Judah before the Exile)  
and Paul shows that the wicked are without excuse (1:20).  
The wicked have no "apology" – no defense – for their wicked conduct.

But now Paul turns to those who smugly turn their noses to the sky against the wicked,  
and he says, in effect, "you are the man!"

It is true that the wicked have no excuse – no apology –  
but neither do you!

Some people hear this passage and try to escape judgment by becoming non-judgmental.  
You've met them.

They smile winsomely and say, "Oh, I don't judge anyone!"  
And so they wind up approving of everything.

What's the problem with that?

Think back to 1:32 –

"Though they know God's decree that those who practice such things deserve to die,  
they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them."

Or in 2:2 –

"We know that the judgment of God rightly falls on those who do such things."

God says that slander is sin.

God says that ruthlessness is sin.

God says that disobedience to parents is sin.

If you try to be "non-judgmental" and give approval to those who rebel against God,  
then you are disagreeing with God.

So if you practice covetousness, envy, strife, gossip, foolishness, or faithlessness,  
then you come under judgment,  
and if you approve of those who do these things,  
then you come under judgment  
and if you disapprove of them and judge them,  
then you *also* come under judgment because you yourself have done them too.

After all, consider Paul's statement in verse 3

*Do you suppose, O man –*

*you who judge those who do such things and yet do them yourself –  
that you will escape the judgment of God?*

God is a righteous judge.

But sometimes we forget this.

*Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience,  
not knowing [or ignoring] that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance. (2:4)*

You have no excuse.  
There is no defense.  
You cannot apologize to God

You cannot say, "it wasn't my fault!"  
Adam tried that: "it was the woman you gave me! It was her fault!"  
God wasn't particularly impressed by that!

You cannot say to God, "I'm sorry that you were offended by my actions,  
but you should have understood my intentions!"

God's kindness and patience should not lead you to defend yourself.  
It should lead you to repentance,  
where you no longer seek to defend yourself,  
but you acknowledge your sin to the Lord and ask his forgiveness.

This distinction between "repentance" and "apology"  
will continue to be important in this passage.

An apology – a defense – is not enough before God.  
You must repent.

## **2. The Judgment According to Works (2:5-11)**

And if you do not repent, then  
*Because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself  
on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment is revealed. (v5)*

God is a righteous judge.  
He is just.  
He will do what is right.

Paul has a rather long sentence in verses 5-8,  
but unfortunately the ESV breaks the paragraph in the middle of Paul's sentence!

In verses 1-4 Paul contrasts the idea of an apology or excuse (verse 1)  
with the idea of repentance in verse 4.

Then in verses 5-11 Paul shows how impenitence results in judgment.

Paul has said in 1:17 that in the *gospel*  
the righteousness of God is revealed.

Now he says that the day of wrath

is also the day of the revelation of God's righteous judgment.

Judgment is coming.

If you try to excuse yourself –  
if you seek a defense, an apology, for your actions –  
you will merely store up wrath for that day.

Because on that day,

*He will render to each one according to his works:*

*to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality,  
he will give eternal life;  
but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness  
there will be wrath and fury.*

Does God judge each one according to his works?

We sang Psalm 62 earlier.

Psalm 62 concludes by saying,

“For you will render to a man according to his work.”

In Job 34:11 Elihu says

“For according to the work of a man he will repay him.”

Jeremiah 17:10 says,

“I the LORD search the heart and test the mind,  
to give to every man according to his ways,  
according to the fruit of his deeds.”

And Jesus himself says in Matthew 16:27,

“For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father,  
and then he will repay each person according to what he has done.”

Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:10,

“For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ,  
so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body,  
whether good or evil.”

Peter says in 1 Peter 1:17 that God,

“judges impartially according to each one's deeds.”

In Revelation 22:12 Jesus says,

“Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense with me,  
to repay everyone for what he has done.”

There are more references,

but that should suffice to convince us that there is a judgment according to works.

If all you have is an apology on that day,  
how will you fare?

Paul says that “to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality,  
he will give eternal life.”

Actually there is no verb in verse 7.

The verb from verse 6 “to render” is implied in verse 7.

So to the one who is patient in doing good and seeks glory and honor and immortality  
God will render eternal life.

Some have said that Paul’s point here is that there is no one in this category.

After all, Paul will go on in chapter 3 to say that “there is no one” who seeks for God.

But Paul is talking about the judgment according to works –

a judgment that is spoken of all over Scripture.

And it does seem clear from verses 9-11 that Paul is speaking of the final judgment.

And at the final judgment some will *receive* eternal life,  
and for others there will *be* wrath and fury.

Notice the different verb in verse 8.

In verse 7 the verb is “give” or “render” (same as verse 6).

But in verse 8 Paul says that to those who are self-seeking and disobedient,  
“there will be wrath and fury.”

Eternal life is a gift.

It is something that God gives.

Wrath and fury simply is.

It is something that “you” have been storing up because of your hard and impenitent heart  
(verse 5).

And to make it clear that he is thinking of real people at the final judgment,

Paul says in verses 9-11

*There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil,  
the Jew first and also the Greek,  
but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good,  
the Jew first and also the Greek.  
For God shows no partiality.*

Paul had said that the gospel is the power of God for salvation  
to the Jew first and also to the Greek (1:16).

Now he points out that being a Jew does not mean automatic blessing –  
rather, it means to be first, either in judgment or in blessing!

Tribulation and distress will come upon every human being who does evil,  
starting with the Jew.

Glory and honor and peace will come upon everyone who does good,  
starting with the Jew.

But while God will judge the Jew first and honor the Jew first,  
there is no partiality with God.  
Israel is my son, my firstborn.  
Therefore the firstborn son is first in line.  
When God renders judgment, he will start with the Jew.  
But God is just,  
and he will not say, “well, you’re Jewish, so I’ll let you get away with it.”  
No, remember Paul’s point in this passage:  
there is no apology – no defense – for sin.

But there is repentance!  
“God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance!”

Therefore, those (whether Jew or Greek) who repent of their wickedness  
and seek glory and honor and immortality  
will receive eternal life.

For God shows no partiality.

### **3. Not Hearers, But Doers of the Law Will Be Justified (2:12-16)**

But Paul does not stop there.

The question naturally arises, what about those who sinned apart from the law?  
If God shows no partiality, then what about the Gentiles who have not heard?

Paul says in verse 12:

*For all who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law,  
and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law.*

You don’t need the law in order to know how to sin.  
And as Paul has demonstrated in chapter 1,  
everyone knows who God is,  
everyone knows that God condemns sin,  
and yet everyone sins.

So here Paul says that if you sin without the law, you die without the law.  
If you sin under the law, you are judged by the law.

After all, as Paul says in verse 13,

*For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God,  
but the doers of the law who will be justified.*

What does Paul mean that the “doers of the law will be justified”?  
Aren’t we justified by faith?

We could spend weeks going through this,  
but it is really very simple.

You are not justified by being a Jew.

Who are the “hearers of the law”?

The Jews.

The Jews have been “hearing the law” for centuries.

And the Jews have always called themselves “the righteous.”

Paul has just said that God shows no partiality.

There is no difference between Jew and Gentile.

Who are “the righteous before God”?

Paul says it is not “the hearers of the law”  
but the “doers of the law.”

This is simply the exact same point that James makes in James 2.

If you say that you have faith, but you do not have works –  
if you are a hearer of the word, but not a doer of the word,  
then that is not really faith.

But what about this remarkable statement

“will be justified”?

Aren't we already justified?

Of course!

Yes!

But what is justification?

To justify means “to declare righteous.”

At the final judgment, when you stand before Christ,

God will openly declare you righteous before all humanity.

When you first believed in Christ,

you were declared righteous by faith.

It is not that there are two different justifications.

There is one justification,

based solely on the imputed righteousness of Jesus Christ.

But that single justification is declared for the first time when you first believe,

and then it is declared openly at the final day before all the nations.

And so Paul says that it the doers of the law who will be justified on the final day

because all those who are justified by faith today

will demonstrate their faith by what they do.

After all, if you think about it,

will there be anyone on the final day who is openly acknowledged and acquitted  
who was merely a hearer of the law, and not a doer?



Of course not!

How can we who are united to Christ live in sin any longer? (Romans 6)

Now, I want you to pay attention to this next point:

Notice what Paul says about *what* justifies us here.

Verse 13 – “it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified.”

By *what* are you justified?

By doing the law?

NO!!!

Paul does not say that we are justified by our law-keeping.

In fact, he doesn't say “by what”!

He will come back to that in chapter 3

where he will emphatically declare that we are NOT justified by works of the law.

Paul says that only doers of the law will be justified.

But you are not justified by doing the law.

But what about the Gentiles?

After all, Paul's point here is to say that it is not enough to be a Jew (a hearer of the law).

Do the Gentiles “do the law”?

Paul says in verse 14

*For when Gentiles, who do not have the law,*

*by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves,  
even though they do not have the law.*

*They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts,*

*while their conscience also bears witness,  
and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them...*

Now, before we stop to consider what this means,

we need to understand *when* their conscience bears witness –

*when* their conflicting thoughts accuse or excuse them.

Verse 16

*on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus.*

We're still talking about the final judgment.

On that day, their conflicting thoughts will both accuse them and defend them.

But here we run back into our word “apologeomai.”

Their thoughts – their “reasonings” – will accuse them,

and their thoughts or reasonings will defend them.

We are talking about a legal case here.

They stand before God the judge,

and all the thoughts of their hearts are laid bare before God.

And it will be clear on that day

that all people had the work of the law written on their hearts.

At times their thoughts will accuse them:

“I did it out of selfishness and pride,”

and at other times their thoughts will defend them:

“I had a good reason for what I did.”

At the judgment seat of Christ they will offer an apology:

Well, God, I did my best!

I'm sorry I didn't do more, but I tried!

What is missing?

Repentance.

Yes, the work of the law is written on the hearts of all men,

but look at where Paul is going in 3:20

“By works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight.”

The message of the gospel is that judgment is coming.

And the only way to stand in that judgment is to repent.

You *know* that God's judgment is against those who sin.

Stop making excuses!

Stop offering apologies.

Stop saying, “I'm sorry, but...”

There is no *but* in repentance.

There is only, “I have sinned against you. Please forgive me.

I hate what I have done, and I never want to do it again.”

Almighty God, we know from your gospel that the day is coming when you will judge the secrets of men by Christ Jesus our Lord. We confess before you that we have sought to defend ourselves and “apologize” rather than truly repent before you and others. Have mercy upon us. Forgive us for thinking that we could make excuses for our evil thoughts, words, and deeds. Help us to see that we have no excuse – no defense – but that we do have an Advocate with you, even Jesus Christ our beloved Savior. Grant, O faithful and merciful Father, that we might be filled by your Spirit so that we might truly hate and grieve over our sin – that we might truly turn from it to you – all for the sake of our glorious King Jesus, who loved us and gave himself for us. Amen.