

ROMANS 2

COMMENTARY

1 Therefore you have no excuse, everyone of you who passes judgment, for in that which you judge another, you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things. 2 And we know that the judgment of God rightly falls upon those who practice such things.

2:1 While ch. 1 has widely included a discussion on the idolatry and gross immorality of the pagans at large, the discussion in ch. 2 shifts significantly, addressing some of the pride and arrogance which has erupted among many of Paul's Jewish contemporaries. It has not been uncommon to compare Paul's style of argumentation in ch. 2 to that of diatribe, an ancient classical form of communication where speakers would present questions or presumed questions and responses from an arguer, and then answer them. Given the content which follows, F.F. Bruce makes the poignant observation, "We can only try to imagine how Tertius' pen kept up with the apostle's words. No wonder that, especially in impassioned moments, his Greek is full of breaks in construction and unfinished sentences."¹ Paul will discuss that possession of the Torah on the part of the Jewish people, specific knowledge of its code of conduct, and the rite of circumcision, will hardly merit a Jewish person some kind of special favors before God. *Everyone is guilty before the Creator because of sin.*

Paul's words are directed to those who think that they can judge, condemn, or look down upon those from the nations who commit sin. He asserts, "Therefore you have no excuse, O man, whoever you are, when you judge another; for in passing judgment upon him you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things" (RSV). While sometimes rendered as "everyone of you" (NASU), *ō anthrōpe* (ὦ ἄνθρωπε) is more literally "O man" (RSV/ESV). Perhaps when some of Romans' original recipients heard Paul's letter being read aloud to them, hearing "O man/person" emphasized would have sharply grabbed their attention. There might even be an echo of the Prophet Nathan's words to David here: "You are the man!" (2 Samuel 12:7).² Paul's statement of v. 1 bears a striking similarity to Yeshua's admonition, "Do not judge so that you will not be judged. For in the way you judge, you will be judged; and by your standard of measure, it will be measured to you" (Matthew 7:1-2).

The logic of Paul in ch. 2, in addressing how Jewish people are just as much sinners as the nations at large, cannot be overlooked. While sins such as idolatry or homosexuality (1:22-27) stigmatized the pagans, a Jew faithful to the Torah was not too likely to have fallen into such abominations. Still, there would be plenty of sinful activities, behaviors, and attitudes where an average First Century Jew could be surely rebuked. James D.G. Dunn notes, "A line of argument which accused Jews of idolatry and homosexual practice would be unlikely to commend much support, either from the judgmental Jew or from the God-worshipping Gentile who had previously been attracted to Judaism, particularly because of the sublimity of its idea of God and of its high moral standards. But the list of 1:29-31 largely consists

¹ Bruce, 82.

² Heb. *atah ha'ish* (אַתָּה הָאִישׁ).

of vices into which an individual can slide without being fully aware of it.”³ To repeat some of the main sins, which all people fall into—**even Jews who are familiar with the direction of God’s Torah**: “all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, evil; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice; *they are* gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, without understanding, untrustworthy, unloving, unmerciful” (1:29-31).

2:2 Paul’s statement regarding those who would issue condemnation to others, but yet are sinners themselves, is how “we know that the judgment of God is according to truth against those who practice such things” (NKJV). This judgment is not just truly or rightly a reality, but it is *kata alētheian* (κατὰ ἀλήθειαν), “according to truth,” meaning that it is in accordance with the revealed will and Instruction of God.⁴ While some might think that Paul is being a bit harsh or unfair, he is acting no differently than John the Immerser/Baptist, who was quite clear about judgment overtaking the unrepentant among his fellow Jews:

“But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, ‘You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bear fruit in keeping with repentance; and do not suppose that you can say to yourselves, “We have Abraham for our father”; for I say to you that from these stones God is able to raise up children to Abraham. The axe is already laid at the root of the trees; therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire’” (Matthew 3:7-10).

3 But do you suppose this, O man, when you pass judgment on those who practice such things and do the same *yourself*, that you will escape the judgment of God? 4 Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and tolerance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance?

2:3 Paul asks a poignant question, widely agreed to be directed to the Jews in Rome: “Do you imagine, whoever you are, that when you judge those who do such things and yet do them yourself, you will escape the judgment of God?” (NRSV). It should certainly be recognized how these statements are probably rooted within the prophetic admonitions of the Tanach about the Day of the Lord:

“Wail, for the day of the LORD is near! It will come as destruction from the Almighty” (Isaiah 13:6).

“For the day is near, even the day of the LORD is near; it will be a day of clouds, a time *of doom* for the nations” (Ezekiel 30:3).

“Be silent before the Lord GOD! For the day of the LORD is near, for the LORD has prepared a sacrifice, He has consecrated His guests” (Zephaniah 1:7).

The dilemma being presented by Paul, this early in his letter to the Romans, as John R.W. Stott explains, is how “The first group [pagans] disassociate themselves entirely from God’s righteous decree, in regard to both themselves and others; whereas the second group deliberately identify themselves with it by setting themselves up as judges, only to find that they are being judged for doing the same things.”⁵

³ Dunn, *Romans*, 38a:80.

⁴ Cf. Cranfield, *Romans 1-8*, 143.

⁵ Stott, 81.

It has been concluded at times that Paul's word of v. 3 has been appropriated directly from *Psalms of Solomon* 15:8 in the Pseudepigrapha: "But they shall pursue sinners and overtake them, for those who act lawlessly shall not escape the Lord's judgment."⁶ Dunn especially thinks, "The attitude that Paul hits out against is just that expressed in *Psalms of Solomon* and in almost the precise words used by Paul. The implication, which comes to clear expression in *Psalms of Solomon*, is that the law was a critical factor in Jewish 'judging' of the Gentiles; but Paul implies also that Jewish pride in the law (2:17-20) obscured the degree to which Jews themselves failed to 'do' the law (2:21-29)."⁷ As will be seen, it is hardly that the Torah or Law of Moses is a bad thing. Possession of the Torah, and specific knowledge of the Torah's instruction, however, will merit one significant responsibility before the Lord.

2:4 Even with sure judgment to be issued upon sinners, Paul does ask the Jews in Rome, "Or do you despise the riches of His kindness, and the forbearance and the long-suffering, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance?" (LITV). The verb *kataphroneō* (καταφρονέω) mainly means, "to look down on someone or someth. with contempt or aversion, with implication that one considers the object of little value, look down on, despise, scorn, treat with contempt" (BDAG).⁸ Paul inquires, "do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness...?" (NIV). The Torah speaks affluently of the kindness and mercy of God, which Jews in Rome knowledgeable of the Scriptures should have been aware of: "The LORD is slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, forgiving iniquity and transgression; but He will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generations" (Numbers 14:18).

It has been widely recognized among commentators that Paul's sentiments in vs. 3-4 are probably based within the thought of Wisdom 15:1-3, "But thou, our God, art kind and true, patient, and ruling all things in mercy. For even if we sin we are thine, knowing thy power; but we will not sin, because we know that we are accounted thine. For to know thee is complete righteousness, and to know thy power is the root of immortality." God is gracious enough, to His own chosen people for certain, to allow them time to repent. The challenge, of course, is in recognizing that the same forbearance and mercy that God exudes to Israel proper, is also to be extended to all human beings. N.T. Wright's thought on this is worth noting:

"God is kind and forbearing, at least toward Israel, so that Israel's sins appear as mere peccadilloes, regrettable no doubt but not serious like those of the pagans (Wis 11:9-10; 15:1-6; 16:5-12; 18:20-25). Thus, while Paul's thought echoes that of Wisdom to the extent of seeing God mercifully allowing a space for people to repent (Wis 11:23), he urges that all need to avail themselves of this chance and that not to do so means despising God's patience and storing up wrath for the final day."⁹

While Paul's major intention is to establish how all people, Jews and those from the nations, are equally sinners, Tim Hegg takes his remarks as deliberately trying to undermine the idea that ethnic Jewish people (with some exceptions) automatically have a place in God's Kingdom—precisely because they are Jews:

"The idea that 'every Jew has a place in the world to come' (b.*Sanhedrin* 105a; cf. m.*Sanhedrin* 10:1) may well have been accepted dogma among the Jewish communities of the 1st Century. If so, the viewpoint was that a person born a Jew, apart from being 'cut off from his people' (punishment for a short list of gross sins), had a secure place in the world based not upon his personal piety, but upon his being a part of the covenant nation. Thus, the scenario where one is able to 'look' religious but in reality

⁶ R.B. Wright, trans., "Psalms of Solomon," in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, Vol 2, 664.

⁷ Dunn, *Romans*, 28a:81.

⁸ BDAG, 529.

⁹ Wright, in *NIB*, 10:439.

have nothing but self-centeredness in life, may have been encouraged or at least fostered by the idea that one's birthright secured the future."¹⁰

Moving forward to today, how many of us take God's forbearance and mercy a little less seriously than we ought? The declaration of v. 4 is most serious: "Are you, perhaps, misinterpreting God's generosity and patient mercy towards you as weakness on his part? Don't you realize that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?" (Phillips New Testament). I myself am immediately reminded of Hebrews 3:13, "But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is *still* called 'Today,' so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin." Making sure that we have truly partaken of God's forgiveness offered in Yeshua, and that we have been transformed by His mercy, is not only an individual Believer's responsibility—but it is the responsibility of communities of Believers to make sure that others have truly been changed by the Lord!

5 But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, 6 who WILL RENDER TO EACH PERSON ACCORDING TO HIS DEEDS [Psalm 62:12; Proverbs 24:12]: 7 to those who by perseverance in doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, eternal life; 8 but to those who are selfishly ambitious and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, wrath and indignation.

2:5-6 It should be apparent that Paul's admonitions are intended to invoke a change of behavior and attitude among the Jews in Rome. He issues a rather bleak remark in, "But by your hard and unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath, when God's righteous judgment is revealed. He will pay back each person according to his deeds" (TLV). Specifically quoted from the Tanach are Psalm 62:12, "And lovingkindness is Yours, O Lord, for You recompense a man according to his work," and Proverbs 24:12, "If you say, 'See, we did not know this,' does He not consider *it* who weighs the hearts? And does He not know *it* who keeps your soul? And will He not render to man according to his work?" The implication of both of these verses is that while God will surely judge sin, and allot punishment accordingly—God also allows an adequate opportunity for people to change their ways. Some further Tanach passages to keep in mind, include:

"I, the LORD, search the heart, I test the mind, even to give to each man according to his ways, according to the results of his deeds" (Jeremiah 17:10).

"[G]reat in counsel and mighty in deed, whose eyes are open to all the ways of the sons of men, giving to everyone according to his ways and according to the fruit of his deeds" (Jeremiah 32:19).

"The LORD also has a dispute with Judah, and will punish Jacob according to his ways; He will repay him according to his deeds" (Hosea 12:2).

A further thought to consider is expressed in Sirach 16:14 in the Apocrypha: "He will make room for every act of mercy; every one will receive in accordance with his deeds."

Given Paul's later sentiment in v. 11, "For there is no partiality with God," it is useful to also remember the Torah principle of impartiality in judgment (Deuteronomy 1:17; 10:17; 16:18-20).

2:7-8 Paul states that there is a significant difference between those who are redeemed and those who are unredeemed: "To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality,

¹⁰ Hegg, *Romans 1-8*, 39.

he will give eternal life. But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger” (NIV). The redeemed are those who seek after God, they are actively accomplishing good works, and they look forward to the future Kingdom to come and the Eternal State. All the unredeemed have to look for is an eternity of wrath and punishment issued upon them for their unrepentant choice to deny God and His ways.

Within theological studies, annihilationists, who believe that the condemned are to be obliterated from existence, and those who believe in a never-ending eternal punishment of the condemned, are likely to both appeal to this passage in some way. The main emphasis to be seen, that the Apostle Paul wants his audience to be aware of, is how “there is no partiality with God” (v. 11), and how Jewish and non-Jewish people will both experience some kind of penalties for their sins if unrepentant (vs. 10, 16).

Annihilationists, in viewing this passage, would take Paul’s statement that those who are good will be given “glory and honor and immortality, eternal life” (v. 7), as meaning that the condemned will not be granted immortality. But they need to be very careful how far this description is pushed, because it is absolutely true that the unrighteous will be resurrected and be given immortal bodies (cf. Revelation 20:5). What the resurrected unrighteous will not be given, which all are agreed upon, is a position of “glory and honor.”

Do not overlook the fact that Romans 2:7 specifies how the righteous “**seek** for glory and honor and immortality...,” meaning that they “**aim** at glory, honour, and immortality” (Moffat New Testament). Here it might be best for us to consider the verb *zēteō* (ζητέω) to relate to: “to search after, search out” or “to seek after, desire” (LS).¹¹ The righteous eagerly desire resurrection bodies and a place of honor in the future age; the unrighteous do not desire or search out for these things. All they can await for, because of the futility of their sin and spiritual blindness, are shame and humiliation. Yet because the unrighteous do not seek out immortality,¹² it does not mean that there will not be a second resurrection for them, with a final sentencing before God to follow for their sins against Him. And, the kind of “immortality” that the righteous definitely desire is far more than just bodies that will never suffer decay or corruption; it also involves a restored communion and fellowship with the Creator akin to what Adam and Eve originally experienced in the Garden of Eden, in a New Creation that is engulfed by total *shalom* and tranquility.

The punishment issued upon the unrighteous condemned is stated by Paul in Romans 2:8 to be “wrath and indignation,” *orgē kai thumos* (ὀργή καὶ θυμός). Note that there is nothing stated here about annihilationism or an extinction from existence; this passage is a general description about assured punishment for the unrepentant and their exclusion from His Kingdom. An evangelical annihilationist like Stott, who could have at least mentioned his position, notably declined to do so in commenting on Romans 2:7 in his book *The Message of Romans*. All he did instead is say the more general, “To sum up, those who seek God and persevere in goodness will receive eternal life, while those who are self-seeking and follow evil will experience God’s wrath.”¹³

As Bruce Milne appropriately summarizes, Hell “is the express, personal judgment of God directed towards, and centred upon, the individual concerned. Hell is his just and personal judgment on those who in ‘godlessness and wickedness’ set themselves against him.”¹⁴ The annihilationist, and the advocate of a never-ending punishment for the condemned, agree upon this. And, both will not rest their case for the duration of the final sentencing on the rather general expectations expressed by

¹¹ LS, 344.

¹² Consult some of the useful discussion offered by Christopher W. Morgan, “Annihilationism: Will the Unsavd Be Punished Forever?”, in Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson, eds., *Hell Under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents Eternal Punishment* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), pp 204-206 surrounding the issue of “conditional immortality.”

¹³ John R.W. Stott, *The Message of Romans* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1994), 85.

¹⁴ Bruce Milne, *The Message of Heaven & Hell* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002), 217.

Romans 2:7-8. Further engagement with more passages of Scripture is required. (See the author's publication *Why Hell Must Be Eternal* for a more detailed examination of this subject matter.)

9 There will be tribulation and distress for every soul of man who does evil, of the Jew first and also of the Greek, 10 but glory and honor and peace to everyone who does good, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. 11 For there is no partiality with God.

2:9-10 Humanity on the whole, of both Jews and those from the nations, will be treated with equity by God. In one of the most important words appearing in his epistle, Paul says, "There will be trouble and hardship for every human soul that does evil—to the Jew first and also to the Greek. But there will be glory, honor, and *shalom* to everyone who does good—to the Jew first and also to the Greek" (TLV). Judgment for sin—whether it be eternal punishment *or* simply difficulty in life (often designed to bring people to Him)—is something that will come to both the Jewish people and all others. Yet concurrent with this is also the promise that restoration to God is also available to all. James R. Edwards interjects how for the purpose of this part of Paul's letter, "He may begin with Jews in order to acknowledge their priority in the history of redemption (see Amos 3:2; Luke 12:48), but he does so with the reminder that priority in redemption entails priority in judgment!"¹⁵ Amos 3:2 has a very sobering message: "You only have I chosen among all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities."

2:11 Readers encounter a variety of English renderings for *prosōpolēmpsia* (προσωποληψία): "For there is no respect of persons with God" (KJV), "For there is no acceptance of faces with God" (YLT), "For there is no preferential treatment with God" (Phillips New Testament), "For God does not show favoritism" (NIV), "For God shows no partiality" (RSV). The Torah includes the steadfast word, "For the LORD your God is the God of gods and the Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God who does not show partiality nor take a bribe" (Deuteronomy 10:17). An important thought is expressed by *Testament of Job* 43:13 in the Pseudepigrapha: "Righteous is the Lord, true are his judgments. With him there is no favoritism. *He will judge us all together.*"¹⁶

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; 13 for it is not the hearers of the Law who are just before God, but the doers of the Law will be justified. 14 For when Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves, 15 in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them, 16 on the day when, according to my gospel, God will judge the secrets of men through Messiah Yeshua.

2:12 It is often, and to a wide degree, correct, to assume that vs. 12-16 pertain to how God will judge people according to the light that they have. The main thrust of what Paul is trying to communicate to the Jews in Rome, is how Jewish possession of the Torah—and with it specific knowledge of its instruction—is not going to merit Jewish people some sort of special favors before Him. If anything, Jewish possession of the Torah, knowledge of its instruction, and documented Tanach

¹⁵ Edwards, 69.

¹⁶ R.P. Spittler, trans., "Testament of Job," in James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, Vol 1 (New York: Doubleday, 1983), 862.