

Romans: Comment and Commentary

“Therefore, accept one another,  
just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God (15:7).”

*Parenthesis: This verse seems to summarize the book.*

*“Accept one another:” the purpose of the book (12-15)*

*“Just as Christ accepted us:” The foundation of the exhortation (1-11)*

I. Prologue, 1:1-17

II. The Universality of Human Sinfulness, 1:18-3:20

A. The Guilt of the Gentile, 1:18-32

B. The Ground of Divine Judgment Established, 2:1-16

This paragraph (2:1-16) establishes the guilt of Gentiles and Jews for being lawbreakers. “Jew” is not mentioned until verse 9, but Paul is trying to show that both Gentile and Jew are condemned because both have violated God’s law willingly. Some have interpreted the paragraph to be a third group of people, namely moralists, but it simply does not seem to be in the passage itself. First, Paul’s focus throughout the letter is upon Jew and Gentile (v. 9). Second, there are only two kinds of people in the world, Gentile and Jew, and these are in one of two conditions, saved or lost; both are rightly condemnable by God. Third, the persons being judged in this passage are those who have been the recipients of the deepest blessings of God (vv. 4, 10). I think Paul’s argument is this: the Gentiles are guilty (1:18-32, as the Jews would agree), God’s judgment is impartial (2:1-16, Jews are unwilling to grant this, but it is true), and the Jews are as guilty as the Gentiles (2:17-3:8).

*Parenthesis: Paul’s line of argument is clever. Before he declares that the Jew is guilty before God, he shows that Gentiles are justly condemnable for their moral and mental sin (1:18-32). Then he shows that God’s ground of judgment is the same for all people (2:1-16). Since all Jews are people and all Jews are lawbreakers, they, too, stand justly condemned (2:17-3:8).*

1. Divine judgment announced, v. 1

“Therefore” indicates an inference drawn from the immediately preceding context. Paul begins by establishing the fact that divine judgment is righteous judgment; that those who are tempted to criticize others are as guilty as they (psychologists call this behavior “projection”).

The referent to the pronoun, “you” (second person plural) is not stated, but later we are told that it is the Jews. They deserve the same expression of wrath as do Gentiles, the learned or unlearned, the cultured or barbarian (1:14). The charges are blindness and hypocrisy because they judge others for what they do themselves as the recorded history of the nation demonstrates.

2. The principles of divine judgment, vv. 2-16

a. According to truth, vv. 2-5

1) The basic principle stated, v. 2

God’s judgment is based on truth; it is just, being based in impartiality and holiness.

2) The principle applied, vv. 3-4

However, there are those who suppose that they are the exception (v. 3). The Jews believed that their past position before God and His promises to them eliminated the possibility of coming under judgment. *Immunity based on privilege is contrary to divine justice.*

The word “or” introduces a second thought. The goodness of God should lead to repentance, not license (v. 4). “Despise” is to underestimate the significance of something, to think lightly of it, and thus fail to esteem its value.

3) The consequence stated, v. 5

What is stated negatively in the previous verse is here stated positively. The “day of wrath and revelation” is the future judgment. It is a day for believers (vv. 6-7) and unbelievers (v. 5). It will be a day when God’s righteous judgment will be evidenced, leading some to divine cursing and others to eternal life.”

b. According to works, vv. 6-10

If God’s judgment is based on works (deeds), how is judgment by works reconciled with justification apart from works?

- Works are the fruit of salvation, not its cause. While we are saved by grace alone through faith alone, we are never justified by a faith that is alone.
- Paul is not explaining the gospel in this paragraph; he is explaining the law as the ground of judgment.
- The judgment of unbelievers based on works is relative to their final state; the judgment of believers based on works is with a view to the truthfulness of their profession and reward.
- The focus in the paragraph is on the legal sin of the Jews; they had knowledge, but it was not effective.

Wiersbe has a useful comment at this point. “In Romans 2:6-11, Paul was not teaching salvation by character or good deeds. He was explaining another basic principle of God’s judgment: God judges according to deeds, just as He judges according to truth. Paul was dealing here with the consistent actions of a person’s life, the total impact of his character and conduct. For example, David committed some terrible sins; but the total emphasis of his life was obedience to God. Judas confessed his sin and supplied the money for buying a cemetery for strangers; yet the total emphasis of his life was disobedience and unbelief”

1) The basis of future judgment for all, v. 6

Verse 6 is a quotation from Psalm 62:12. It is explained relative to the obedient (vv. 7, 10) and the disobedient (vv. 8-9). What Paul is affirming is that, although justification is by faith, judgment will be according to works. The presence or absence of saving faith in our hearts will be disclosed by the presence or absence of good works of love in our lives.

This verse affirms three things about God’s judgment: it is universal (“to each one”), the criterion is “according to works,” and it will be fair and just because God renders the judgment.

2) The judgment of the just and unjust, vv. 7-10

These verses consist of two comparative couplets, though the order is reversed (saints, the lost, the lost, saints). The point in the comparative is destiny: life or judgment.

In v. 7 Paul cites three aspirations of the saint with the reward being eternal life. In verse 10, a trilogy appears with peace replacing immortality.

To those who pursue the path of disobedience, the result will be divine judgment, the loss of life (vv. 7, 8).

c. According to an impartial standard, vv. 11-16

The principle of impartiality is stated in v. 11. The “for” of verse 12 refers to the previous verse explaining the principle. The “for” of v. 13 refers to the last clause of v. 12 and explains why the Jew shall be judged by the law. The “for” of v. 14 looks back to v. 12. The Gentiles (vv. 14-16) have a law also; it is moral or constitutional. Both peoples will be rightly judged for breaking God’s law. Judgment is based on the light people possess; Jews and Gentiles both have a revelation of God’s law.

1) The principle stated, v. 11

That “God is no respecter of persons” would have shocked Jews in the Roman house churches who through their ethnicity inherited special spiritual privileges. After all, does not the blessing upon the world come through a Semite?

2) The principle explained, vv. 12-15

a) The principle stated, v. 12

The basis of judgment for Jew and Gentile is the same, the law. However, one group has it in stone and the other on the conscience and in natural revelation. The issue is not having the law in whatever form; it is in obedience to it. It is interesting that in all cultures of the world there is a sense of sin, a fear of judgment, and an atonement to make appeasement to whatever god or gods people fear.

*Parenthesis: Salvation and Obedience*

*It is important in reading these verses to stay within the topical context. The issue at this point is not salvation; it is condemnation. While obedience is not the cause of redemption, as Paul later makes abundant clear, it is clearly the evidence of it. Fruit is the greatest test of the life of God in the soul.*

b) The principle elaborated, vv. 13-15

Verses 13-15 explain Paul's statement in v. 12. All mankind has a revelation of God, though in differing degrees of specificity. All will be held accountable for the "light" they have been given. Any degree of light is worthy of infinite judgment when it is rejected because rejection, even light and insufficient to save, indicates the attitudes of the heart. The presence of privilege does not automatically imply the blessings of privilege.

Verse 14 is a parenthetical statement. Conscience to those without the law has the same function as those who have the law; it reveals God's demands though not of equal purity (conscience is blighted; the law is not). The equality of Jew and Gentile was not in the degree of revelatory knowledge, but in their disregard to what they had received.

3) The principle affirmed, v. 16

The "day that God will disclose the secrets of men" is the day defined in v. 15 as the "day of wrath." This day is mentioned in Ps 110 and fulfilled in Rev 6:17.

The law gives the Jews no real advantage when it comes to salvation. Redemption requires a miracle of grace; no one can affect it. What the Jews thought would bring them into blessing, Paul uses as preparation for the gospel. Doing the law can bring salvation, but only a perfect God/Man has ever fulfilled its demands. Christ obeyed for His people!

Parenthesis: Paul's various uses of "law"

- It can mean an innate moral sense, the law written on the heart of Gentiles (2:15).  
It can mean the Mosaic Law, the Torah. Paul uses "law" in this sense 90% of the time.
- It can mean the entire Hebrew Scriptures (3:19).
- It can mean the Mosaic Covenant or the law-administration of the Old Testament (3:21; 6:14-23; 7:4).
- It can mean the divine law in general (2:14).

C. The Guilt of the Jew, 2:17-3:8

The referent of vv. 1-16 is now made clear; it is the Jew. Paul is explicitly contesting the traditional understanding of the covenant. Whereas the Jews tended to rely on their election and the works of the law, Paul insists that it is only and always faith that is the basis of a righteous standing with God. Therefore, "signs of election," such as circumcision, have no redemptive value without faith.

1. Their privileges, vv. 17-20

The three-fold of "if you" found in verses 17-19 are first class conditions meaning that Paul, for the sake of the argument, assumes that the statements are true. If done, certain consequences should be evident (v. 20), but it is not. Hence, the conditions ("if you") are invalid.

a. Five personal privileges, vv. 17-18

- 1) The name "Jew" suggests the special relationship Abraham and his descendants had with God. The term is first used in 2 Kings 16:6.
- 2) They were given the law as a special privilege.
- 3) They claimed a special relationship with God.
- 4) They claimed to know God's will; this is understandable since they possessed the law.
- 5) They claimed a superior ability to make moral decisions.

b. Four privileges toward others, vv. 19-20

- 1) A guide to the blind
- 2) A light to those in darkness
- 3) An instructor to the foolish
- 4) A teacher of babes

2. Their practices, vv. 21-24

The "therefore" of v. 21 introduces an inference from the preceding verses. Is it not reasonable that the Jews should have lived up to their privileges?

a. The accusation, v. 21a

The claim of the Jew is empty; they have failed to conform to the standard that they claim is theirs.

b. The rhetorical evidence, vv. 21b-23

Paul provides five instances of failure to prove his case that the Jews have not followed the light that they have been given and, thus, stand condemn equally with the Gentiles. The essential moral/religious problem with the Jews of his day was hypocrisy.

The phrase “robbing temples” is unclear (v. 22). He may mean sacrilege, desecrating the true worship of God. This is one of the charges brought against Paul by the town clerk in Ephesus (Acts 19:37). It seems that the Jews were charged with this.

- c. The scriptural evidence, v. 24  
In the climax of Paul’s critique, he blames them for the Gentiles’ blasphemy of God. It is an allusion to Isaiah 52:5 and Ezekiel 36:20. In the Gentile mind, people are like their god. The Jews have represented God poorly to the Gentiles.
- 3. Their position, vv. 25-29  
Paul responds to one of the greatest arguments of the Jews for restrictive specialty before God, the covenant. The sign of the covenant was circumcision. Circumcision was the great sign of covenant inclusion, but were the circumcised included simply because they were circumcised?
  - a. Ritual without reality is unrighteousness, v. 25.  
To transgress the law is to show the emptiness of the symbol of relationship. Circumcision was a symbol that implied a relationship of conformity and dedication, in this instance, with God. If a reality does not exist, where a symbol does, it means nothing. Paul does not contest the value of circumcision per se. however, the Jew who habitually breaks the law is as an uncircumcised pagan.
  - b. Reality without ritual is righteousness, vv. 26-27.  
Conversely, if a reality exists, but not the symbol, the symbol is unnecessary. If it is not circumcision but obedience to the law that determines whether one will be saved at the judgment, it follows consequently that a Gentile, an uncircumcised person, can be saved, if he/she obeys the law. Covenant status does not determine heaven; faith in Christ does!
  - c. Reality is praised by God, ritual by men, vv. 28-29.  
God delights over symbols. Without heart affection and obedience, God takes no delight in religious symbols and rites.

Paul applies the term “Jew” to those who are not ethnically Jews. He is using it symbolically of one who truly obeys. All believers are “Jews”!

Applications:

1. All mankind will be judged before God by their works. Again, Paul is not discussing the means of salvation in this passage, but the ground of judgment. The manner of our living, the choices that we make in life, the priorities we express are neither the ground of redemption nor divine wrath; they are merely the evidence of the justice of it. In the day of judgment, the books will be open and not one will perceive the injustice of condemnation. When God opens the book of evidence of your life, what will the evidence say about the justice of your destiny?
2. When our thoughts, words, hands, and feet do not match what is in our hearts (the realm of our innermost feelings, desires, and priorities), either we are in momentary disobedience, living in disharmony with ourselves, or we are evidencing that what is in our heart is not in our hands. What we have is a disjunction within ourselves, evidencing by our conduct what is not true of us or by such action demonstrating what is true of us.
3. When a Christian does not act in accordance with what they know is proper, they do damage to themselves but also, and most importantly, dishonor the Lord. God is dishonored by our conduct when it is discordant with His character. A secondary, though important, result if misconduct is that unbelievers get their understanding of God from watching us. We are to be the light for the blind, teachers for the ignorant, guides to the lost by our words and conduct. Does our conduct justify in others a disregard for God and rejection of Him?
4. Outward ritual is not that same as reality; it is only a symbol of profession. The difficulty with those Paul was addressing in this instance is the two did not match. Ritual is not to be despised or denigrated, but it, and reality of the thing it points to, must match. Are there things we do without giving to our Lord our heart first? God is not impressed with what we do unless what we do symbolizes a greater reality found in our hearts. When ritual does not match the heart, religious piety is a show that does not impress God and may be evidence of judgment to come. Outward religious conduct will never cleanse the heart.
5. Privilege never implies possession. Privilege is a call for a grateful heart to respond in joyful praise, delight, and humility of heart. Privilege never implies immunity from judgment; it may be the ground of judgment since privilege leads to evidence consistent with it. Do you find yourself seeing privilege as a license rather than a call to joyous delight in divine conformity? Do you put on religious airs to impress people and delight yourself? When will we see that such is dishonoring to the Lord? We must never take advantage of religious privilege for self-gain!
6. Salvation is a work of God alone. No one can circumcise his heart. Salvation is by works, but it is achieved through the work that Christ has done for us! Simply put, what God demands (perfection), He provides. He demands perfection; He gave us the perfect One! We must never suppose that our action, being finite and sullied, can ever impress the infinite, holy one. Jesus alone is the believer's righteousness; we are in Christ and possess His divine

righteousness as our own in Him. Our acts of conformity to Christ should only point others to Christ, not to ourselves. Is that true of you? Can that be said of you?

7. Is it not interesting that Paul does not define a true Jew on the ground of ethnicity? What do you think are the implications of this insight in helping us to read the Bible? A “true Jew” is one who embraces the faith that was expressed by Abram before he became Abraham; he believed the promises of God and lived in hope. The point seems to be that reality is rooted in the heart, not in outward conduct. The “Jewish” people in Paul’s day had missed the point of the nature of true religion and were not generally followers of Abraham. They confused privilege as rooted in outward obedience, rather than an inward change of affections.
8. The sins of mankind have always been the same in every age. Is it not a testimony to humanity that our consistent identity through the centuries is our darker side? Humanity apart from Christ is a sad chronicle. The good side of all of this is that we are not living in unusually savage days; we are living in normal days. Perhaps the vast media access and global communication has flooded us with the true darkness that surrounds us.
9. When true religion declines, people place greater and greater emphasis on external rituals to sooth their consciences before God. True religion does not put confidence in works or a variety of behavior patterns, but in the person that symbols should point, the Lord Jesus. The outward ritual of the cutting of the flesh, circumcision, bore testimony to the invisible circumcision of the heart. When the thing symbolized by an action does not exist the symbol is meaningless. Before we engage in religious ritual of any kind, we must be sure that it is a testimony to an existing reality.