

Ministry of Grace Church

Romans 2:12-20 - Sermon Notes



Background

Before we get into today's passage of Paul's letter to the church in Rome, let's review what we talked about last time, where we learned that Paul came down pretty hard on Christians who are judgmental. The reason isn't because we're not supposed to judge, as some people claim, but because when we are judgmental of others, we are condemning ourselves. Do you remember why it's self-condemning to be judgmental of others? Because we do the same things that we judge others for!

The other major point that Paul made last time is that God will repay everyone according to his or her works. He said that those who persevere in doing good will receive eternal life. On the other hand, those who are selfishly ambitious and do not obey the truth, will receive the wrath of God. But wait a minute! That sounds like Paul is saying that we are saved by our good works. That might be your conclusion if these verses are taken in isolation. However, if you look at [Ephesians 2:8-10](#), you will discover that the good works that we do are not of our own making. They are, rather, the evidence that we are truly born again. Here's what Paul said in Ephesians:

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not of works, so that no one may boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them. ([Ephesians 2:8-10](#))

This is, in fact, one way of knowing whether or not we are genuinely saved. Paul said that if we are saved by grace through faith then we **will** do good works. After all, that's what God saved us for.

The final point that Paul made in the previous passage of scripture is that these principles apply to both Jews and Greeks. We noted earlier that this expression means "Jews and non-Jews." As you will recall, the church in Rome consisted mostly of Jews who had been

converted to Christianity. He now starts out this passage by showing why both Jews and Gentiles are sinners who deserve God's wrath. Let's see how Paul explains this.

Romans 2:12-13

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. For it is not the hearers of the Law who are just before God, but the doers of the Law will be justified.

First of all, let's peek ahead a little bit and see what Paul will tell us in the next chapter of this letter:

as it is written, "There is none righteous, not even one;" (Romans 3:10)

This particular treatise of Paul's is going to show that perfectly obeying rules and statutes is impossible for sinful man to do whether he is a Jew or a Gentile. Paul will demonstrate to these Roman Christians that all of us are sinners worthy of death apart from the grace of God. In other words, if God had not been involved in our lives and saved us through His grace, we would all justly be sentenced to the lake of fire.

Righteousness, in God's view, is the characteristic of always doing what is right. Since we don't always do what is right (because of our sin nature), we are unrighteous, whether we are a Jew or a Gentile. As Paul is talking to the Jewish Christians in Rome, he is telling them that those who have sinned without the Law will perish without the Law (because they are unrighteous).

At this point the Jewish believers are likely to get a bit prideful knowing that they do, indeed, have the Law. So, Paul drops the other shoe. He tells them that those who have the Law and transgress the Law will be judged through the precepts laid out in the Law. Since there is only one who completely satisfied the Law (Jesus Christ), Paul is telling these Jews that they are just as unrighteous (and condemned) as the Gentiles who commit sin apart from the Law.

He now explains in a tactful way *why* those who have the law are just as guilty as we who never had the law. He says, "it's not the hearers who are just before God but the doers of the Law." The word translated "hearers" is the key to this passage. It is *akroatēs*. There is a similar Greek word, *akouō*, which means "to listen with attention," that is, "to hear." But this word, *akroatēs*, means "to listen to something strictly for pleasure, such as a piece recited or sung." It is also defined as, "listening to instruction without doing what is being taught."

These Roman Christians took delight in listening to the Scriptures being read to them. But it doesn't matter if one listens to the law being read every weekend as these Roman Jews have for years, if you don't learn from what you listened to. And it's not the Christians who have been reading their Bibles every day for years who will be justified before God. We are not commanded to just read our Bible or even to listen to good, sound doctrinal teaching. We are told to put the teaching into practice. Jesus didn't tell people, "If you love me, listen to my commandments. He said,

If you love Me, you will keep My commandments. (John 14:15)

We are admonished in a number of passages in the Bible regarding the importance of doing rather than simply hearing. Here are some of them, starting with a quote from the Law:

So you shall keep My statutes and My judgments, which if a man does them, he shall live by them; I am Yahweh. (Leviticus 18:5)

But become doers of the word, and not merely hearers (*akroatēs*) who delude themselves. (James 1:22)

Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter. (Matthew 7:21)

Therefore everyone who hears these words of Mine and does them, may be compared to a wise man who built his house on the rock. (Matthew 7:24)

Everyone who comes to Me and hears My words and does them, I will show you whom he is like: (Luke 6:47)

Paul will now explain to the Jewish Christians in Rome that having the Law is not a sufficient reason to feel confident. Because, as he just said, simply listening to the Law is not good enough to demonstrate a person's righteousness; instead, one must be a doer of the Law.

Romans 2:14-16

For when Gentiles who do not have the Law naturally do the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves, in that they demonstrate the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them, on the day when, according to my gospel, God will judge the secrets of men through Christ Jesus.

Lest we get confused here, Paul is not claiming that any of us can be justified by obeying the Law. As he will point out later, there is no one who keeps the whole Law, and if we break one of the commandments, then we are guilty of all of them. The only one to keep the whole Law was Jesus Christ. For that reason, he is righteous.

Yet - somehow the Jews believed that it was possible to keep the Law. This is precisely the notion that Paul is in the process of systematically proving false. To the Jew, and therefore to most of the early Christians, the Law was supreme and keeping the letter of the Law was paramount. That's how they gauged how good they were. And Paul says, WRONG!

What he is saying is, even though the Gentiles do not have the Law (the Old Testament), they still do some good things. And by doing so they demonstrate that there is a natural law that governs man, independent of the revealed Law in the Old Testament.

But salvation (being righteous in God's eyes) can only come by faith. However, Christians today sometimes develop a mindset that we are good Christians if we keep all the rules of the church. That really is no different from the early Christians believing that they could be saved by keeping the Law.

He says that our conscience bears witness with our thoughts. The word translated "conscience" is *suneidēsis*, which is made up of *sun*, meaning "together" and a form of *eidō*, meaning "to know." It is that part of our mind that knows, together with our heart, whether something is right or wrong.

When we do what is right, our conscience is clean because we know that we have done what is right. Likewise, when we do not do what is right, our conscience witnesses to our heart that what we have done is not right. This is a significant statement from Paul because, as he said in the first chapter of this epistle, the natural man knows and understands the nature and power of God simply from the creation around him. Now he is saying that the natural man knows, instinctively, the difference between right and wrong. He even goes one step further,

saying that those without the Law recognize when another person does wrong or right and as a result, they either accuse or defend one another. There is a law written in our hearts, to which our conscience bears witness, and it teaches us the difference between right and wrong.

Last time, we talked about the woman who was caught in adultery and they told Jesus that she should be stoned according to the Law. In response, He said:

He who is without sin among you, let him throw a stone at her first. (John 8:7b)

Do you remember what happened next?

When they heard it, they began to go out one by one, beginning with the older ones, and He was left alone, and the woman, where she was, in the center of the court. (John 8:9)

Do you see that? They were **not** convicted by the Law, they were convicted by their own consciences.

Paul closes this argument by saying, “God will judge the secrets of men through Christ Jesus.” This is probably a reference to a verse in Ecclesiastes. At the end of Solomon’s search for the meaning of life he concluded:

The end of the matter, all that has been heard: fear God and keep His commandments, because this is the end of the matter for all mankind. For God will bring every work to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil. (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14)

Paul is talking about those who deny that God exists even though there is ample proof of His existence and His power. They will stand before the One they have denied and they will have to explain their actions as well as their thoughts. And on that day even their own consciences will condemn them. They will be without excuse! And ... they will also be without a savior! Paul now continues with his message against these proud Jews.

Romans 2:17-20

But if you bear the name “Jew” and rely upon the Law and boast in God, and know His will and approve the things that are essential, being instructed out of the Law, and are confident that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of the immature, having in the Law the embodiment of knowledge and of the truth,

The early Christian believers in Rome, to whom this letter was written, took pride in being Jews, descended from Abraham. Many of them believed, similar to the Galatian Christians, that one had to be a Jew and obey the Law before one could become a Christian. Paul has spent the last 5 verses explaining why obeying the Law of Moses does not lead one to righteousness. He now will show these Roman Christians why being a Jew may, in fact, be a hindrance to being righteous before God.

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul made a very bold statement regarding righteousness:

We *are* Jews by nature and not sinners from among the Gentiles; nevertheless knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the Law; since by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified. (Galatians 2:15-16)

This justification (righteousness) does not come from keeping the Law, it comes by faith. Notice what he says here to the Roman Christians, “**you bear the name Jew, and rely upon the Law, and boast in God.**” Do you see the condemnation of pride implied here? In the coming verses Paul will deal directly with that pride and will show how it is not external appearances which are important to God, but internal attitudes.

These early Christians, who were primarily converted Jews, were still hung-up by pride, believing that they were the chosen people of God. He has just said that the Jews, “**rely upon the Law, and boast in God.**” He now implies that these Jewish Christians know the will of God. By this, he means that they have the ability to know what God has determined through the Jewish scriptures (the Old Testament).

These verses are ones that we as Christians need to give special heed to. We see that the Jews became arrogant because they had the Holy Scriptures, the Law and the Prophets. We need to be careful that we don’t get just as arrogant because we have an even more complete form of God’s Word in the Bible. Remember what Paul said back in verse 13? “**For it is not the hearers (*akroatēs*) of the Law who are just before God, but the doers of the Law will be justified.**” In order to be a doer of what is taught in the Bible, you first have to know what the Bible teaches, don’t you? That means reading and studying. We need to be instructed in the doctrinal truths from the Scriptures!

Not only were these Christians in Rome proud of their Jewish heritage and the fact that they had the Law as their guide into spiritual truths, they also believed themselves to be the only ones possessing God’s truth. Because of this, they believed that they were better informed with regard to spiritual truths and, therefore, were the only ones truly able to provide spiritual insight to others.

Boy, talk about arrogance! Unfortunately, there are a number of people in churches today who have this same attitude -- even in some Bible-believing churches. Just because we have the truth in the Bible and have been instructed by great Biblical teachers does not mean that we are any better than anyone else. Let’s guard against this sinful arrogance. An interesting thing to note is that the message of salvation was first given to the Jews, according to Jesus. Here’s what He said to a Samaritan woman:

You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. (John 4:22)

However, the Jews forgot that their purpose was to share the good news of salvation with those around them, not hoard it to themselves.

Paul has been describing the arrogance of the Jewish Christians who believed themselves to be justified in that arrogance since they were Jews, descendents of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; since they had the Law, the Holy Scriptures; and since they could know the will of God and could distinguish right from wrong through the instruction they had from the Law. Because of all these things, they believed themselves to be spiritual guides to the blind Gentiles, and they believed themselves to have the light of the truth for the world.

The Jewish Christians in Rome also believed themselves to be instructors and teachers of the unintelligent and the immature. Several verses back Paul said that the Jewish Christians in Rome were arrogant, and he implied that he was going to deal with that pride. He is now

setting them up for a rude awakening. You see, any devout Jew or Jewish Christian would be nodding in agreement with Paul because they knew what Paul has been saying is the truth.

Paul now starts to turn the tables on them. He says that they have “[in the Law the embodiment of knowledge and of the truth.](#)” It would be clear to Paul’s readers that he was not saying that they possessed knowledge and truth from the Law but that they simply appeared to have them, while in reality they didn’t have them at all.

In the next verse Paul will begin to do a little toe stompin’ as he points out the problem with this Jewish arrogance.

So What?

It’s amazing how many times we are admonished to put action to our faith. Clearly, it is important for us to be reading and studying our Bible every day in order to learn the truths that God has for us but reading and studying alone are not good enough.

We’re not commanded to read the words and talk the talk. We’re commanded to read the Word of God and walk the walk!

Obedying God is good. It’s what He wants us to do. It’s what we ought to do. But it won’t save us, because we can never be good enough. That’s why we need the grace of God, and that’s why salvation can only come through faith. As Paul will tell us later in this letter, God does not look favorably on the Christian who lives by all the rules; He looks favorably on the Christian who lives by faith. Let me repeat that, God does not look favorably on the Christian who lives by all the rules; He looks favorably on the Christian who lives by faith.

We all know when we have done right and when we have done wrong, even if we don’t know everything taught in the Bible. It’s true that there are some people who don’t seem to have a conscience. They actually have one, but they have denied it for so long that it has become ineffective at directing their actions. They have, as Paul said in his first letter to Timothy, “[been seared in their own conscience](#)” (1 Timothy 4:2b). They are not free of their conscience, they are trapped by their sin nature and their conscience has become ineffective. Each of us needs to make sure that our conscience is working effectively.

We Christians will also stand before God where our works will be judged, but it will not be for condemnation. Our works will be judged to determine our rewards. The fire will destroy all that was not done for His glory, and what is left is all we will have to show for this life.

As we have said before, there is no place for pride in a Christian. Pride focuses on self instead of God. Pride is, in a sense, the very definition of sin. God wants us humbled before Him, relying on Him. Pride does not humble, it lifts self up. Pride does not rely on God, it relies on self. We have a big God who will judge the whole world. Let’s humble ourselves before the Judge and plead for His mercy through the blood of Jesus Christ. Pride can’t do that. Can you?

Let’s pray.