



MAIN COMMENTARIES ON 'ROMANS'

Chapter 2

In chapter two St. Paul shifts his focus from the Gentiles to the Jews. In the first chapter he criticizes the Gentile lack of regard for righteousness; in the second chapter he criticizes the Jews for their false self-righteousness.

St. Paul begins talking to the reader as a single person - "O man" (Romans 2:1) - in the ancient rhetorical style called a "diatribe." There are several reasons for doing this. First, St. Paul emphasizes that he is addressing every judgmental person. Secondly, he is pointing out that each judgmental person, while claiming to be superior to others, is in reality simply a human with all the weaknesses common to humanity. Third, it is a useful rhetorical strategy: to avoid alienating the Jews at the beginning of his argument, he simply addresses an anonymous individual, perhaps hoping that the Jews will agree with his points regarding this anonymous person before seeing that the points apply to them as well.

Verse one presents a devastating distinction from 1:32. In 1:32 the Gentiles not only engage in wicked acts, but also encourage others to do the same; in 2:1, however, even the self-righteous who condemn such behavior engage in the same sinful activity. There is a single word that describes the self-righteous judge mentioned in Romans 2:1: a hypocrite. We will soon learn more about the problem of hypocrisy, but right now we can understand the hatred St. Paul expresses for hypocrisy in this chapter if we remember that Jesus condemns hypocrites, and warns His followers to not be like them (see Matthew 6:2, 5, 16).

We have described the anonymous reader in Romans 2:1 as "self-righteous:" we should contrast this with the righteous God, Who judges in truth and is good, forbearing, and longsuffering (2:2, 4). God can judge in truth because He *is* true (Deuteronomy 32:4; Psalm 31:5; Isaiah 65:16); He is God in truth and righteousness (Zechariah 8:8).

St. Paul warns that the self-righteous hypocrites will not escape the judgment of God (Romans 2:3). Many Jews believed that they were exempt from the wrath of God because they were of the "seed of Abraham." For example, in his dialogue with St. Justin the Philosopher in the second century, Trypho

even said, "They who are the seed of Abraham according to the flesh shall in any case, even if they be sinners and unbelieving and disobedient towards God, share in the eternal Kingdom." Many modern Christians believe something similar about themselves, claiming that God would never condemn anyone, or that God will accept them because they are at least as good - if not better - than most people.

St. Paul proves this thinking to be wrong. God has not spared the hypocrites from destruction because of their special status or inherent goodness: He has spared them - so far - because He wants His goodness to lead them to repentance (Romans 2:4). Fr. Lawrence Farley explains:

For every day, God delays His judgment on the world, displaying how abundantly kind and mild He is, how clement and forbearing, how patient and longsuffering. This delay is meant to lead to repentance, inducing the thoughtful to repent and change their life. As one reflects on how good God is to withhold His wrath, one is called to repent.

The hypocrites should know this about God, but they remain unrepentant (Romans 2:5). Their self-righteousness will therefore face the righteous judgment of God: they will then receive the wrath of God which they have earned. You might wonder: how and why do these hypocrites earn God's wrath, and how and why do the righteous avoid it? St. Paul answers this question in Romans 2:6-11:

[God] 'will render to each one according to his deeds': eternal life to those who by patient continuance in doing good seek for glory, honor, and immortality; but to those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness - indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish, on every soul of man who does evil, of the Jew first and also of the Greek; but glory, honor, and peace to everyone who works what is good, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For there is no partiality with God.

St. Paul begins and ends this statement by explaining that God's judgment is fair, because it examines the life of each person. Those people who patiently do good will be rewarded with eternal life, while those who selfishly engage in wickedness will experience God's wrath. Verse seven - "patient continuance in doing good seek for glory, honor, and immortality" - requires some explanation. When St. Paul talks about seeking glory, honor, and immortality, he does not mean that good persons hope to receive these things from other people (see 1 Thessalonians 2:6). Instead, these people are "seek[ing] those things which are above" (Colossians 3:1): they do good in order to grow in their relationship with God, and ultimately to hear Him say, "Well done" (Matthew 25:21, 23; Luke 19:17). In contrast to this selfless desire to please God, the hypocrites are "self-seeking and do not obey the truth" (Romans 2:8).

St. Mark the Ascetic, a fifth century monk, tell us that doing good only in order to receive a reward is a self-seeking act: “He who does good and seeks a reward works not for God but for his own desire.”

Tying together verses four and seven, the fourth century Christian Ambrosiaster explains that both God and those who do good exercise patience:

Now Paul predicts the just judgment of God, as he has declared it will be for the good; that is to say, for those who, recognizing the patience of God is designed partly for concealment and partly for greater revenge on those who do not correct themselves, repent of their previous works and live rightly, armed with confidence in their faith in God that they will not have to wait long before receiving their promised reward of eternal life. For God will give them glory and honor.

St. Paul continues his point by examining the standards by which a person’s actions can be understood as good or wicked (Romans 2:12-16). A first century Jew would have objected to St. Paul’s previous statement by claiming that Jews were in a superior position to Gentiles before God’s judgment because the Jews were God’s chosen people and had been given His Law. St. Paul responds by pointing out that both Jews and Gentiles will be either justified or condemned based upon their performance of God’s will (see also James 1:22): the Jew who has the Law will be condemned he or she fails to observe it, and the Gentile who does not have the Law will nonetheless be responsible for his or her sin.

The first century Jew would then have another question: how can Gentiles, to whom the Law was not given, work what is good and be doers of the Law (Romans 2:10, 13)? St. Paul answers that Gentiles “are a law to themselves” (2:14), because the Law is written in their hearts, and their consciences approve their good works and condemn their sins (2:15). In chapter one St. Paul stated that Gentiles are not ignorant of the existence and majesty of God (Romans 1:19-20), and here he makes it clear that Gentiles have the ability to follow God based upon this knowledge. St. John Chrysostom therefore explains, “Conscience and reason take the place of the law. By saying this, Paul showed that God made persons independent, giving them the freedom to choose virtue and avoid vice.”

Verse sixteen provides a very important point: St. Paul is not teaching that God is pleased with “empty” obedience to His will. Instead, Jesus Christ will judge not only a person’s outward behavior, but also his or her “secrets,” the feelings, thoughts, and motivations that only God can examine and judge. While good works are necessary, they must be performed for the right reason: as a healthy part of a faithful

relationship with God. As St. Mark the Ascetic, a fifth century monk, notes, “He who does good and seeks a reward works not for God but for his own desire.”

In verse seventeen St. Paul returns to the diatribe style of verses 1-5. It is here that he first states that the anonymous reader to whom he has been speaking is a Jew. His primary argument in the remainder of this chapter (and into chapter three) is that Jews cannot rely on either the Law or circumcision to protect them from the judgment of God.

St. Paul refers to people as bearing the name “Jew” (Romans 2:17). It is easy to ignore this brief comment, but it actually is very important for understanding verses 17-20. The name “Jew” itself is taken from the Hebrew word *yahuwdah*, which means, “The Lord be praised.” This name - together with the covenant between Israel and God - signifies that the Jews traditionally had a special relationship with God. This is important because St. Paul contrasts the people he discusses in verses 17-25 who “bear the name Jew”, and yet fail to live up to the responsibilities of this name, with those who are not ethnic Jews and yet still fulfill the will of God (2:29).

St. Paul lists the acknowledged advantages of which the Jews were proud: they were God’s covenant people (Romans 2:17); they trusted that Law for their standing before God (2:17); they boasted of true - specifically non-idolatrous - worship of God, and their special relationship with Him (2:17); they knew God’s revealed will (2:18); they approved excellent things (which C.K. Barrett translates as, “Able to judge what is significant and good”) because they were instructed by the Law (2:18); they were guides and instructors to Gentiles who did not have the knowledge and truth provided in the Law (2:19-20).

Unfortunately, however, far too many Jews betrayed these advantages by failing to live up to the ideals of the Law. St. John Chrysostom explains, “The Jew may boast that he is loved by God and honored above all men. It seems to me that here Paul is gently mocking their unreasonableness...because they misused this gift...to set themselves up against the rest of mankind and to despise them.”

Just as he gives a list of the advantages given to the Jews, St. Paul lists some of the ways in which these advantages have been compromised: the teachers are themselves ignorant of the implications of the Law (Romans 2:21). For example, despite condemning theft, adultery, and idolatry, too many Jews nonetheless engaged in theft, adultery, and - instead of idolatry itself - robbing the temples in which idols were worshipped, believing that their status as Jews would protect them from God’s judgment (2:21-22). St. Paul unhappily asked, “You who make your boast in the law, do you dishonor God through

breaking the law” (2:23)? The result of this kind of hypocrisy, St. Paul says (quoting Isaiah 52:5 from the Septuagint), is that the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles.

St. Paul is not an anti-Semitic bigot: he is not indiscriminately attacking Jews or Judaism. In addition to the fact that he is himself a Jew (as he mentions in Romans 11:1, and also in 2 Corinthians 11:22), St. Paul points out that circumcision and the Law are profitable to those Jews who practice the Law (Romans 2:25). His point is that circumcision and the Law, in and of themselves, are not enough to protect a person from God’s judgment: simply being circumcised and knowing the Law are inadequate for the person who unrepentantly breaks the Law (2:26-27).

Instead of such hypocrisy, the *true Jew* - whether or not the person is ethnically Jewish - is the person who is a Jew “inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit” (Romans 2:29). With this statement St. Paul recalls Deuteronomy 30:6, “And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live” (see also Deuteronomy 10:16; Jeremiah 4:4). The essence of true religion is relationship with God, and not simply nominal observance or knowledge of a set of rules (of course, we must remember, as St. Paul points in Romans 2:25, that the rules may be of tremendous value when faithfully observed).