

Romans



Lesson 3: *God Shows No Partiality*

Introduction

In the first chapter of Romans, Paul gave a brief rehearsal of the typical sins of pagan Gentiles. Paul—the Hebrew born of Hebrews—now turns his attention to an imaginary fellow Jew who is tempted, because of his knowledge of the law and the prophets, to say, “I thank God that I am not like those people.” Paul’s essential point is, “But you are. And worse!” For the Gentile has sinned against natural revelation, but the Jew has sinned against supernatural revelation. Therefore, he has no excuse since he who condemns the Gentile sinner does the very same things. Paul’s point is it is not hearers of the law who will be saved, but doers of the law. Just how the human race under sin can ever do that will be made evident in future chapters, but for the present Paul’s point is clear: both Jews and Gentiles are under sin and nobody can, by themselves, keep the law. Both will be judged impartially. Proud Jewish readers had better be cautious lest he find that the uncircumcised Gentile who keeps the law is judged more favorably by God than a circumcised Jew who does not keep the law. That warning goes for any Christian who seeks his justification, not in Christ, but in a sense of superiority to those he looks down on.



Romans 2:1-29

1 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. 2 We know that the judgment of God rightly falls upon those who do such things. 3 Do you suppose, O man, that when you judge those who do such things and yet do them yourself, you will escape the judgment of God? 4 Or do you presume upon the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience? Do you not know that God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? 5 But by your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God’s righteous judgment will be revealed. 6 For he will render to every man according to his works: 7 to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; 8 but for those who are factious and do not obey the truth, but obey wickedness, there will be wrath and fury. **9 There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, 10 but glory and honor and peace for every one who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. 11 For God shows no partiality.**

12 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 righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified. 14 When Gentiles who have not the law do by nature what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. 15 They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness and their conflicting thoughts accuse or perhaps excuse them 16 on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus.

17 But if you call yourself a Jew and rely upon the law and boast of your relation to God 18 and know his will and approve what is excellent, because you are instructed in the law, 19 and if you are sure that you are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, 20 a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of children, having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth— 21 you then who teach others, will you not teach yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal? 22 You who say that one must not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? 23 You who boast in the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? 24 For, as it is written, “The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.” 25 Circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law; but if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision. 26 So, if a man who is uncircumcised keeps the precepts of the law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? 27 Then those who are physically uncircumcised but keep the law will condemn you who have the written code and circumcision but break the law. 28 For he is not a real Jew who is one outwardly, nor is true circumcision something external and physical. 29 He is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart, spiritual and not literal. His praise is not from men but from God.

**ONE OF THE BEST WAYS TO MEDITATE UPON GOD’S WORD IS THROUGH MEMORIZATION.
A SUGGESTED MEMORY IS PRINTED IN BOLD WITHIN THE BIBLICAL TEXT
OR YOU MAY WISH TO CHOOSE A VERSE OF YOUR OWN.**

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Points to Ponder

The Jew First, and Also the Greek

In Romans 1, Paul sketches the process whereby sin against God inevitably devolves into sin against nature—including human nature—with the result that we sin against both ourselves and others, mutilating body, soul, and spirit. And Paul makes clear that this dire condition afflicts the entirety of human race. However, he is aware that not every member of his audience is really convinced of this fact. And so, in Romans 2 he turns his attention to an imaginary disputant. The disputant, as Paul indicates in verse 17, is Jewish.

What is Paul getting at? Paul, himself a “Hebrew born of Hebrews” (Phil. 3:5), is addressing the danger of spiritual pride (a danger, if anything, more perilous to Christians than to Jews). For in receiving revelation from God, Israel has indeed received “a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of children,” since Jews truly do have “in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth”. Hence, a continuing tension in the early Church existed between converts from paganism and Jewish Christians. Gentile Christians (as we shall see in more detail in Romans 11:13 and following, as well as in the subsequent tragic history of Jewish-Christian relations) tended to pridefully look down upon Jews as “law-bound” and as “broken off branches” (Rom. 11:19).

Jewish Christians, for their part, tended to pridefully look down on Gentiles as a “breed without the law.” The central fact is both groups were being prideful—a stark warning to today’s Church, which is still shot through with factions of so-called liberals, conservatives, traditionalists and whatnots, all busily attending to the sins of others while often ignoring their own. Paul, having made the case in Romans 1 for the universality of sin among the Gentiles, now turns his attention to the Jewish members of his audience. He shows that the gift of revelation Israel has received makes Jews more, not less, responsible for sin in their midst, precisely because they have received supernatural revelation from God (unlike the Gentiles) and yet, like the Gentiles, they have sinned against that revelation just as the Gentiles have sinned against the natural revelation they have received. To show this, Paul turns to the Jewish Scriptures, particularly Isaiah 52:6 and Jeremiah 9:25. His ultimate point is that



“God shows no partiality” in that all have sinned and are equally deserving of God’s wrath. Yet, at the same time, this also means that God’s gracious gift of salvation in Christ is open to anybody, “to the Jew first, and also the Greek.”

Two Views of Justification

Romans 2:6 and following (up through Romans 4) have been interpreted in two very different ways by Catholics and non-Catholic Christians, especially when it comes to the matter of justification.

For many non-Catholic Christians, Romans 2 sets forth “Plan A”. That is, it purportedly describes the first plan for “saving yourself.” The idea is that “Plan A” means God offers to every person the way of salvation based on keeping the law perfectly. If you cannot keep the law perfectly (and nobody can), God then (in Romans 3 and 4) offers “Plan B”: trust Jesus Christ, who did keep the law perfectly, as Lord and Savior. Then you don’t have to keep the law, even though it isn’t a bad thing to attempt to do. Bottom line: salvation and justification don’t depend upon your obedience to the law. In sum, this common non-Catholic view says that Romans 2:6 and following present a “way of salvation” that is actually impossible to attain. Why? In order to steer us to belief in justification by faith alone. According to this scenario, we can do nothing that is righteous, and justification consists simply and solely of Christ’s righteousness being legally imputed to us and to our “account” before God.

The Catholic interpretation is markedly different. It holds that Romans 2-4 describe a single plan of salvation. This plan requires all men to have faith in Christ, a faith incarnate in works of love — for all of us are to “be holy, even as your heavenly Father is holy” (Matt. 5:48). For, as writes: “Faith without works is dead” (Jas. 2:24). Thus, the Christian faith is inherently incarnational. “The aim of our charge is,” as Paul wrote to Timothy, “love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and sincere faith” (1 Tim. 1:5). Faith can no more be isolated from works of love and obedience to the law than the human and divine natures of Christ can be torn apart.

So Romans 2 sets forth the absolute need for works of love to be lived out and enfleshed in our lives if we are to be saints, while Romans 3 and 4 sets forth the absolute necessity of Christ’s saving power at work in us as the singular source of those works of love. Paul does not see obedience to the law as impossible, nor faith is a kind of escape hatch from the dilemma of our eternally sinful inability to keep the law.

Rather, he sees the law as a tutor, pointing us to Christ (Gal. 3:24-26), who in turn not only forgives our sins, but makes (not merely “declares”) us righteous sons and daughters, participating in his divine nature (2 Pet. 1:4), and empowering us to keep the law by living in love. This agrees with the repeated teaching of both Jesus and Paul that God “will render to every man according to his works” (Rom. 3:6; Matt. 25:31-46). The Spirit is given us, not to make it unnecessary to keep the law, but to make it possible to keep the law. This is why Paul speaks in Romans 1:5 of the “obedience of faith.”

New Testament Citations of the Old Testament

Citations of the Old Testament within the New Testament are never random, as if the author is saying, “That sort of reminds me of a passage from Isaiah.” Nor are the passages cited meant to be read in isolation from their context. On the contrary, New Testament allusions to and quotations from the Old Testament text are meant to remind us of the whole fabric from which a single text is cited. Similarly, when a modern civil rights leader such as Martin Luther King, Jr. drops the phrase “we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal” into a speech, he need not recite the entire Declaration of Independence. The quotation has immediately brought to the minds of his hearers the entire Declaration and, indeed, a huge amount of the rhetoric of the American founding.

In the same way, when Paul cites, for example, Isaiah 52:6 or alludes to Jeremiah 9:25 in Romans 3:24-25, he means for readers to consider the entire passage in which these verses occur and to connect his thought with that of the Old Testament writers. In the case mentioned here, this means Paul wants his Jewish reader to see that the condemnation of Jews under their law and the concept of “circumcision of the heart” are not creations of his imagination, but have a long pedigree in the Jewish prophetic tradition. This allusive way of citing the Old Testament pervades the New Testament.

Christians are Spiritual Semites

In light of the tragic history of anti-Semitism that has often characterized Gentile Christian attitudes toward Jews, it is vital to understand that Paul, himself a Jew, regards the Church as the fulfillment of—not the replacement for—Israel. The New Covenant transcends the Old, but does not abolish it. As Jesus himself says, “Think not that I have



come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil them” (Matt. 5:17). Thus, we can, so to speak, go above the law and the prophets into the realm of grace, but we can never go below the law into sin. For the law is, as Paul says, “holy, just, and good” (Rom. 7:12). This is why Paul warns Gentile believers not to “boast” over Israel: “If you do boast, remember it is not you that support the root, but the root that supports you” (Rom. 11:18).

And that, in turn, is why the Second Vatican Council stated in *Nostra Aetate* that “God holds the Jews most dear for the sake of their Fathers; He does not repent of the gifts He makes or of the calls He issues.” Therefore, Christians are, as Pope Pius XII famously noted, “spiritual Semites”, wild olive branches grafted onto the tree of Israel by the Master Gardener, who is Christ. For this reason, Paul says, “He is a Jew who is one inwardly” and declares that the Church is the “Israel of God” (Gal. 6:16). We are Jews, according to Paul.

Catechism Connections

- After the Fall, God promised redemption; he desires to give eternal life to all those seeking salvation. CCC 55.
- Man’s moral conscience directs him to do what is good and to avoid evil. CCC 1777.
- The Law was fulfilled perfectly by Jesus, who did not abolish it, but fulfilled it. CCC 580-81.
- The Law, although unable to save man, was given by God as a “pedagogue” to point toward the Savior. CCC 708.
- Justification frees man from sin and purifies his heart while reconciling him to God. CCC 1990.
- Justification is from God’s grace, which is free and undeserved, helping man to answer God’s call to be partakers of the divine nature. CCC 1996.
- Justification is merited by Christ, given through Baptism, and is a work of God’s mercy. CCC 2020.
- Faith apart from works is dead, and faith without hope and love keeps the believer from being fully united to Christ. CCC 1815.
- The Church is a vineyard, nourished by Christ the true vine, within which Jews and Gentiles are reconciled. CCC 755.

Rome to Home

According to Saint Paul, conscience in a certain sense confronts man with the law, and thus becomes a “*witness*” for man: a witness of his own faithfulness or unfaithfulness with regard to the law, of his essential moral rectitude or iniquity. Conscience is the *only* witness, since what takes place in the heart of the person is hidden from the eyes of everyone outside. Conscience makes its witness known only to the person himself. And, in turn, only the person himself knows what his own response is to the voice of conscience.

The importance of this interior *dialogue of man with himself* can never be adequately appreciated. But it is also a *dialogue of man with God*, the author of the law, the primordial image and final end of man. Saint Bonaventure teaches that “conscience is like God’s herald and messenger; it does not command things on its own authority, but commands them as coming from God’s authority, like a herald when he proclaims the edict of the king. This is why conscience has binding force”.

Thus it can be said that conscience bears witness to man’s own rectitude or iniquity to man himself but, together with this and indeed even beforehand, conscience is *the witness of God himself*, whose voice and judgment penetrate the depths of man’s soul, calling him *fortiter et suaviter* to obedience. “Moral conscience does not close man within an insurmountable and impenetrable solitude, but opens him to the call, to the voice of God. In this, and not in anything else, lies the entire mystery and the dignity of the moral conscience: in being the place, the sacred place where God speaks to man.”

Pope John Paul II
Veritatis Splendor, par. 57-58



Study Questions

It's best to read the entire Scripture readings for this lesson and Points to Ponder before responding to the study questions.

1. Why does Paul warn against judging others and how does he characterize God's judgement? Read Rom. 2:1-5, 9-13.
2. On what basis will God reward or punish us? What does "patience in well-doing" suggest about the Christian walk of faith? Read Rom 2:6-8.
3. How are Gentiles judged favorably? By what law are they judged if they have not been exposed to the teaching of Moses? Read Rom. 2:14-16.
4. What is the law and what is it capable of doing? What is Paul warning those under the law against? Read Rom. 2:17-21.



Notes:

