

## Romans: The Jews & the Judgement of God, Part 4a

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### EXPOSITION: Chapter 2:1-29

#### 2:1-5—The Jews & the Judgement of God

Keeping in mind the direction of Paul's argument throughout the larger passage (1:18-3:20) – that is, to establish the universality of sin and judgement without exception – from 2:1 he focuses on the Jew, confronting their attitude of exceptionalism. Allied with this was their abstraction of the law from the covenant; that is, from the "obedience of faith", of relationship to the living God. They reduced the law to mere intellectual knowledge and its possession as a marker of their covenant status. In doing so they manifested the same autonomy that characterizes all those in Adam, seeking to establish a righteousness of their own (10:2-3). All legalism is merely a manifestation of autonomous man. They are therefore possessors of knowledge *about* God but not the knowledge *of* God. In the new epoch this is equally the failure of Christians. We are wise to be warned. No one has a claim on God.

**1** *Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things.*—Clearly in the previous passage (1:18-32) Paul has not had the Gentiles exclusively in view; otherwise, in now focusing on the Jews, he would not have opened with "therefore". While he does not specifically refer to them as Jews until v. 17, "passing judgment" was especially the penchant of the Jews in their estimate of Gentiles. Nonetheless, they hypocritically engaged in identical behaviours as the rest of scripture bears out, thus implicitly condemning themselves along with the Gentiles. Consequently, the status of sin and judgement is manifestly universal.

**2** *We know that the judgment of God rightly falls on those who practice such things.* **3** *Do you suppose, O man—you who judge those who practice such things and yet do them yourself—that you will escape the judgment of God?* —The Jews, priding themselves on covenant status, supposed they would be exempt from the judgement of God.

**4** *Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?*—Tragically, Israel, in their rebellion, habitually presumed on "the riches" of God's covenant kindness (3:2; 9:4, 5; 11:22). The indictment only increases by virtue of their "not knowing" that this was to produce repentant hearts and rectified behaviour. Rather as v. 5 shows, their hearts have been hardened.

**5** *But because of 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.*—While the righteousness and wrath of God are currently revealed through the preaching of the Gospel (1:17-18), for those whose hearts remain "hard and impenitent" the wrath of God is being "stored up", and on the "day of wrath" will come into "full operation and execution" (Murray, p. 61). The "day of wrath" is the final judgement (1 Tim 4:8; 2 Ths 1:10; 1 Ths 5:4; 1 Cor 3:13), which Paul also proclaimed to the Areopagus in Athens, that God had "fixed a day on which he will judge the world" (Acts 17:30-31). The reference to their "hard" (*sklerotes*) hearts identifies Paul's target as Jews; the same word is used in Dt 9:27 to describe the "stubbornness" of Israel.

#### 2:6-11— The Impartiality of the Judgement of God

**6** *He will render to each one according to his works:*—There are three components to God's righteous judgement: 1) "to each one" – it is universal; 2) "according to his works" – it is impartial; 3) "he will render" – it is inescapable. Some commentators opine that this principle of judgement is contrary to Paul's thesis that no man will be justified by "works" and therefore claim that Paul must be arguing hypothetically at this point or else speaking of the law not the Gospel. Nothing could be further from the truth. The principle of being judged according to our "works" is corroborated elsewhere in the NT (Mtt 7:21; 16:27; 25:31-46; Jn 5:28f; 1 Cor 3:11-15; 2 Cor 5:10; 11:15b; Gal 6:7-10; Eph 6:8; Col 3:23-24; 2 Tim 4:14; 1 Pet 1:17; Rev 2:23; 20:12f; 22:12) and OT (Ps 62:12; Prov 24:12; Eccl 12:12; Is 3:10f; Jer 17:10; Hos 12:2). Justification by faith and judgement by works are not contradictory. Nevertheless, there are distinctions that must be appreciated. For the just – the saved – it is their holiness and good works that are judged and rewarded (1 Cor 3:10-15; 2 Cor 5:10); while they are justified by faith *alone*

their faith is not *alone*, it must be accompanied by good works (Eph 2:10). For the wicked – the damned – it is their sin and sinful behaviours that are judged, attracting God's wrath.

In v. 7-10 this principle of works is applied to both the just (v. 7, 10) and to the wicked (v. 8, 9).

*7 to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life;*—As Cranfield aptly indicates, it is significant that these people "seek" glory, honour, and immortality (the hope of resurrection) not "deserve" them. This is not contra to being justified by faith. Clearly these people are regenerated by the Spirit and actuated toward God; they are the just (Ps 1:5; 58:3).

The universal and clear revelation of God to mankind through creation (1:18-20), that is sufficient to render him culpable and under God's judgement, begs a question. Is the corollary then also true: that is, is the revelation of God through creation so clear that it is also sufficient for salvation? If God's justice is manifest in one (i.e. judgement), why not the other (i.e. salvation)? Admittedly the thrust of Paul's argument throughout 1:18-3:20 is the former; nonetheless, the latter cannot be excluded from his purview. While it is God's revelation through 'nature' it is nonetheless *super-natural*, and, more to the point, is the revelation of Christ as the Logos (word) by whom the creation came into being and is providentially sustained (Heb 1:2-3). In addition to the sending of preachers with special revelation, by citing Psalm 19:4 later in the epistle, Paul teaches that the Gospel – "the word of Christ" – has also been proclaimed universally to man (Jew *and* Gentile) through the created order:

How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!" But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?" So *faith comes* from hearing, and hearing *through the word of Christ*. But I ask, have they not heard? Indeed they have, for "*Their voice has gone out to all the earth, and their words to the ends of the world.*" [Cited from Ps 19:4, referring to God's general revelation through creation]

Rom 10:14-18

Why, therefore, would the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit be limited to *special* revelation only—why not also through *general* revelation? If God's voice through creation is "the word of Christ" – the Gospel – faith will be activated by the Spirit in the hearts of the elect. God is never without a witness (Acts 14:17); the Gospel has always been proclaimed to man through the creation. In this way the elect have been saved, though deprived of the special revelation of Scripture. How is this not also *sola Christus, sola gratia, sola fide*?

The just – those who "seek for glory and honour and immortality" – are therefore of all tribes tongues and peoples. The Gospel has gone out continually from the Garden, beginning in the *protevangeliium* (Gen 3:15), proclaimed through the covenants and promises, but also "ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made" (1:20).

This then begs another question, which Paul addresses in the next chapter (3:1): "Then what advantage has the Jew?" That is, why *special* revelation? This feeds into the corrective project of this commentary. The answer is revolutionary. It is found in the words of Jesus: "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly" (Jn 10:10b). The purpose of God's redemptive act in Christ was both *qualitative* and *quantitative*. It was not that there hadn't been "life" throughout redemptive history – through both general and special revelation – but now in the God-man, Christ Jesus, there was an epochal increase of God's life in time-space history. As the first born of a new creation he perfected a new humanity, personifying the perfection and fulness of life, "exceeding abundantly above all we ask or think" (Eph 3:20)—light-years beyond even the original paradisiacal state. As the "last Adam" (1 Cor 15:45) and the "second man" (1 Cor 15:47), he was the termination of the old order and the beginning of the new.

This then rescues the Gospel from the truncated travesty that we have made it. We have domesticated it to merely serve our own ends: our personal salvation. While that is most certainly essential, it is not the purpose of the Gospel; rather, *through* individual regeneration it is to usher in "*the* regeneration" (Mtt 19:28)—the renewal of the cosmos, the healing of the planet. In Christ, God's original purpose for history, the flourishing of humanity is fulfilled. This is evidenced in 5:1-2 when Paul

declares "...we have been justified by faith..." and "...also obtained *access* [*prosagogen*] by faith into this grace...". The Greek for "access" means *freedom to enter*—banished from the Garden in Adam (Gen 3:24), mankind now has freedom in Christ to re-enter the fulness of his original, gracious purpose for the cosmos. *Personal* regeneration and justification are foundational to the whole structure of Christian revelation; they are the re-entry, the doorway to the *corporate*, to the *whole* house and economy of God. While the part – justification – effects the whole, it is not the whole—there remains sanctification and glorification. God's plan is to perfect a new humanity and through them renew the whole cosmos. And this, the remainder of Romans will unpack.

**8** *but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury.*—These people are the unregenerate, the wicked: "self-seeking" or "selfishly ambitious" (NASB). The word (*eritheia*) was used in classical Greek to describe canvassing for office, intrigue, and factions. It therefore speaks of the egotism of factious and contentious opposition to God, of man's innate hostility toward God (8:7; Col 1:21; Gal 5:20; Jas 4:4). For them, awaits the divine "wrath and fury".

**9** *There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek,*—"tribulation and distress [anguish]" are the consequences in human experience of the divine "wrath and fury [indignation]" of v. 8. "Every human being" again underlines universality—judgement applies to all, regardless of race or religion.

**10** *but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek.* **11** *For God shows no partiality.*—This verse is transitional, confirming what precedes (v. 6-10) and introducing what follows (v. 12-16). It confirms that God is just and his judgements are equitable, without partiality (Dt 1:17; 10:17; 32:4; Job 34:10; Rev 15:3). The criterion of judgement is not privilege or position but the character of one's own works. This applies to both retributive judgements for the wicked and to the rewards of the just. But the verse also introduces the notion that the impartiality of God's judgement does not ignore the diversity of human situations: Jew and Gentile, the evil-doer and well-doer; God's judgements account for all people and situations.

#### 2:12-16—The Law & the Judgement of God

**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.*—v. 12 connects back to v. 11: God shows no partiality (v. 11) by taking into account whether or not they possessed the law (v. 12); this determines the severity of the judgement. This verse is the first explicit reference to the law and is therefore significant. These are the two distinct groups of mankind with which the apostle now deals: 1) those "without the law", and 2) those "under the law". These two categories or groups need to be identified. Paul uses the term "without the law" in 1 Cor 9:21: "To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law." Before elucidating my point it must be noted that there is no difference between the *law of God* and the *law of Christ*, they are the same laws, but now under a different administration: the law of God administered through Moses is now administered through Christ; once administered through the external written code only, they are now administered internally by the Spirit. Clearly, by becoming "as one outside the law", Paul did not become a lawless evil-doer; "outside the law" must therefore mean, "not having the written law". And the law they do not have is the special revelation of God's law as entrusted to the Jews (3:2). Consequently, those "under the law" refers to God's covenant people, the depositories of special revelation. Those who "perish [put to death] without the law" refers back to v. 8-9, to those who have hardened themselves in hostility to God's general revelation, attracting the divine "wrath and fury", in contrast to those who inherit "eternal life". Two principles may be elucidated: 1) specially revealed law (i.e. Scripture) is not a prerequisite for sin and judgement, as the wicked have "sinned *without the law*"; and 2) in their perdition they will not be judged according to a law they did not receive; judgement therefore is according to the light they actually received: "...to whom much is given much will be required" (Lk 12:47-48). This consequently alludes to varying measures of severity in the final judgement (Lk 10:14).

Returning to Paul's primary argument, mere possession of the law, therefore, does not immune from God's judgement, as the next verse emphatically underlines.

**13** *For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous [dikaios] before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified [dikaioo].*—This is the central thought of the paragraph: that hearing without heeding does not justify; that is, to be declared righteous, as one with covenant status. Justification is a covenant concept (see 1:17 and above for the covenant implication of the *dik* group of words). Paul and James are in harmony in this regard, that hearing and doing are conjoined (Jas 1:22-23). True

covenant obedience has always entailed faith.

Paul, however, is not teaching that the law-keeping – as practiced by the Jews – will justify; the law abstracted from the covenant will not render one righteous before God, as Paul explicates in Romans (3:20, 28) and Galatians (2:16; 3:11), and as Jesus made clear to the Scribes and the Pharisees (Mtt 5:20; 15:1-9; Is 29:13). Adherence to law divorced from faith and the true knowledge of God, as a source of autonomous righteousness, was roundly rebuked by the prophets (Is 1:10-18; 29:13; 58:2; 64:6; Amos 5:21-24). This is the historic controversy that God had with OT Israel and is ignored by the *'New Perspective of Paul'* in their assessment of first century Judaism (E. P. Sanders, J. D. G. Dunn [coined the term 'New Perspective of Paul' in his 1982 Manson Memorial Lecture], & N. T. Wright, et al). In fact, N. T. Wright, taking v. 13 out of context, misconstrues Paul as teaching that works (i.e. he qualifies, "works inspired by the Spirit"), in addition to initial faith, is the basis for our future justification to be declared on the final day of judgement (see 'New Perspectives on Paul' p. 254, 260); that is, justification, contrary to the insights of the Reformers, is not *sola fide* (by faith alone) and *sola gratia* (by grace alone), rather it is faith *plus* works. This revisionist view of justification will be discussed further in 3:21-31. According to Wright the believer is not only judged by works but also justified by works. While the former is true (v. 6, 16), the latter could not be further from the meaning of the text. Rather than addressing one's status before God, he argues that justification is principally the declaration of one's status as a member of the covenant community, rendering justification an issue of ecclesiology (doctrine of the church) rather than soteriology (doctrine of salvation), and that while we *get in* through faith we *stay in* through obedience. This is effectively semi-Pelagianism (condemned at the Council of Orange, AD 529): beginning by faith but continuing by works (although, according to Wright, works inspired by the Spirit). According to this scheme, God merely responds to man's initial faith by extending grace and man then cooperates with that grace; thus salvation is *synergistic*, through works and grace, God and man. Whereas the Gospel is *monergistic*, operating through God's grace, acting unilaterally upon the heart of man to regenerate and justify. The 'New Perspective of Paul' misrepresents the Gospel, stripping it of God's initiative and power in *sovereign* grace and, consequently, the Christian of their assurance of salvation, forcing them, ironically, into works-righteousness (whether works inspired by the Spirit or not, is immaterial for the purpose of justification), so as to hopefully be declared just on the final day of judgement. While grace has a limited place in this scheme, man, nevertheless, remains *autonomous* (i.e. in control).

While their core thesis that first century Judaism (i.e. the Scribes & the Pharisees) was not legalist, but rather gracious, and therefore Paul has been traditionally misinterpreted, is massively contestable (for a technical critique see D. A. Carson [ed.], *Justification & Variegated Nomism: The Complexities of Second Temple Judaism*) they completely miss the essence of legalism as an issue of *autonomous* righteousness; that is, *self-righteousness*—righteousness gained independently of God's *sovereign* unsolicited grace. Both biblical and extra-biblical data demonstrate that the Jews were relying on their fastidious ritual law-keeping to mark their covenant status; whether by circumcision, Sabbaths, or other laws is beside the point, the core issue was their separation of law-keeping from the life of faith (see comments v. 25-27).

Accordingly, the doing of the law (covenant obedience) to which Paul refers is the life of faith and reliance on the Lord, first exemplified redemptively in Abraham – justified by faith before the law (Gen 15:6) – and subsequently in all those who believe; it was always by faith that one was declared righteous before God (as will be explained in ch. 4). Both Moses and Jesus encapsulated the covenant – and thus the whole law – in the *shema*: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with **all your heart** and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be **on your heart**" (Dt 6:4-6; Mk 12:29-30; Mtt 22:37). That Yahweh stipulated the command to be "on your heart" (v. 6) is significant. The heart of the law – that is, of the covenant – was always the heart, that is, a heart of reliance on the Lord, of trusting in and obeying his wisdom.

Given by God's sovereign revelation to Moses, the law was "added" to Abraham (Gal 3:19) not for the purpose of *justification* but rather *sanctification*, as a charter for living (Lev 18:5; Dt 4:1-8). However, to clarify the inner working and harmony of the law—the *moral* law answers the question: How ought I to live?; and the *ceremonial* law answers the question: How can I be justified when I break that law? From a redemptive-historical perspective, instead of a backward step from Abraham to Moses, the law was rather a *progressive* revelation of God's covenant requirements, serving not only as the outshining of his own perfections, but also commanding a faith response: "For indeed the gospel was preached to us as well as to them; but the word which they heard did not profit them, **not being mixed with faith** in those who heard it." (Heb 4:2 NKJV). Furthermore, even in its cultic (ceremonial) expression, the law adumbrated Christ's atoning work; those who engaged in the OT sacrifices out of a heart of faith were reaching forward, anticipating Christ's once-and-for-all sacrifice for sin. Without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sins (Heb 9:22); and so, the propitiation of God's wrath and justification of the sinner was provided in a limited and provisional way through daily and yearly sacrifices (Heb 7:19; 9:9; 10:4, 11). Moreover, Paul later explains that

the law is "spiritual", "holy", "righteous", and "good" (7:12, 14). As he will also explain later in ch.10:1-3ff, and as already stated, it was never designed to be abstracted – that is, divorced – from a life of faith as a means of establishing one's own righteousness. True law-keeping – covenant obedience – always involved the "obedience of *faith*" (1:5; 6:16; 16:26), of walking in covenant relationship with the living God, reliant upon him. This walking with God, as a justified believer, was always "from faith to faith" (1:17)—beginning and ending in *faith*.

And so, being declared "just" was never apart from faith. In this way law and justification were certainly not mutually exclusive in God's economy; they were never contradictory. Both law and justification are covenant categories. Even so, God did not originate covenant (and thus law) on a works-righteousness principle; this rather, was an aberration. It was the rebellious hearts of God's people that perverted the law (or covenant) as an autonomous principle, one of works-righteousness, which the apostle will address momentarily in 3:21-31. Whether Jew or Gentile, the core human sin is autonomy – *self*-rule (Gen 3) – manifested in *self*-justification in all its forms, pagan or Jewish.

As a footnote, the notion of a so-called 'covenant of works' (taught confessionally by the Reformed tradition, but also debated within it) has caused significant confusion. This is for several reasons. *First*, God, who is gracious in character, cannot do anything that is contrary to his own nature (Num 23:19; 2 Tim 2:13; Tit 1:2; Heb 6:18); hence, to make a covenant with man that was based on works, contrary to his character, is not tenable in principle. *Second*, true to the five-fold covenant structure described in Part 1 and above, God's covenants have always been the gracious and sovereign exercise of the victorious king's majesty (*transcendence*) and authority (*hierarchy*) over the vassal, requiring obedience (*ethics*), sanctioned by curses and blessings (*oaths*), and guaranteeing the victorious king's continuity (*succession*). *Third*, God's covenants have always demanded obedience – that is, "works of the law" (as opposed to the "law of works" as a works-righteousness principle explained in 3:21-31) – but not abstracted from the king and his covenant. Common to all God's covenant arrangements, from Adam to Christ, they have required the "obedience of faith", promising life and blessing as the outflow (10:5; Gal 3:12; Lev 18:5; Lk 10:28; Neh 9:29; Ezk 18:9; 20:11; Gen 2:9, 16; Rev 2:7; 22:2, 14). This ethical-obedience component of the covenant structure has been confused for a supposed 'covenant of works', particularly as it relates to the Adamic and Mosaic arrangements. Because all God's covenants are initiated downward from the greater to the lesser – from the victorious king to the vassal – they are gracious in nature.

God, in sovereign grace, condescends to the human estate. The Creator/creature difference is so profound that only God can bridge the gap. And so, as the infinite Creator-God, who dwells in eternity, he must initiate the communication, breaking in to space-time history. He thus relates to finite humans anthropomorphically – in humanly understood terms – as our heavenly Father, but also as our conquering King, forming a covenant relationship with us. By a decree of divine election we find ourselves in relationship with the living God. This has been aptly termed the 'covenant of grace'. As the prophet declared, "And he shall bring forward the top stone amid shouts of 'Grace, grace to it!'" (Zech 4:7). From beginning to end, God's covenant with man is all of grace—sovereignly conceived and initiated by him, unfailingly sustained by him, and ultimately consummated in him. Accordingly, after eleven chapters of articulating God's covenant genius, overwhelmed, Paul declares: "For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen" (11:36). Salvation is of the Lord!

**14** For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. **15** They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them—It must be noted that "they are a law to themselves" is not used in the modern colloquial sense of being lawless and without constraint; rather, it merely refers to the source of the law as not external to themselves, instead they themselves are the source.

There is some difference among commentators as to the identity of the Gentiles in this text. Cranfield, for example, argues that "Gentiles", in the absence of the definite article "the", are not all Gentiles but merely a particular group: Christian Gentiles (Cranfield, p. 156, Vol. 1). However, keeping in focus Paul's overall project in the first three chapters of establishing universal sin, and in view of the preceding passage 1:18-32 not only introducing this theme but allied to it, arguing that all mankind is accountable because of the clear revelation and knowledge of God received through creation, it would seem that in this vein Paul is continuing to build his case. While in chapter 1 he focuses on the revelation of God to all mankind through the external world (*creation*), in chapter 2 he now focuses on the revelation of God through man's internal world (*conscience*).

Although Gentiles do not have the law by virtue of *special* revelation – the Scriptures – they have it in another sense, "by nature" (v. 14), through God's *general* revelation to all mankind. Created in the image of God (Gen 1:26), man bears the imprint of God's nature as a moral being, and thus the imprint of God's law as the outshining of that holy nature. Moreover,

Paul has also claimed in 1:19-21 that the revelation of God to man through creation is clear, however, man suppresses his knowledge of God in unrighteousness. Nonetheless, the recrudescence of sin is never sufficient to completely deface God's image in man; he is still able to do in some measure "what the law requires": for example, his instinct for social order, justice, filial affection, monogamy, protection of life and property with sanctions for murder, theft etc. This, the notion of *common* grace teaches; God's providential grace extends over the created order, holding in check the full expression of sin and ensuring a measure of social cohesion (1 Tim 2:1-2) and also the uniformity of natural laws—God sends rain on the just and the unjust (Mtt 5:45; Gen 8:22). This then provides explanatory power to the Christian apologetic: man is moral because he is made in God's image. This exposes one of the inadequacies of the humanist worldview; it cannot *account* for morality.

This is very different to 'natural law' theory or 'natural theology' that presupposes the autonomy and neutrality of reason (refer Part 3; 1:21-22). Any belief system that endorses man's independent determination of law has not taken into account the full effect of the Fall (Gen 3). Whether by default or design, 'natural law' assumes the ultimacy of man. Fallen man's autonomous reason (including his conscience), as the following comments demonstrate, offers no objective basis for law and ethics. What is moral one moment is immoral in the next; autonomous man is manifestly arbitrary and capricious.

Man's inner life – his conscience – is such that his thoughts vacillate between accusation and defence of his behaviours. With the law imprinted on his heart, man's conscience bears witness to its truth, but sadly provoking his thoughts one moment to either "accuse" him or in another to "excuse" him. Even with the witness of conscience to the veracity of God's law, men "by their unrighteousness suppress the truth" (1:17) and become "futile in their thinking" (1:21). When his behaviour violates God's law his thoughts function like a trial lawyer, although schizophrenically, in one moment defending him and then in another prosecuting him. In his hostility to God, man is perpetually in mental and moral conflict, even on the day of judgement, casting up arguments against the knowledge of God in defence of his own behaviours.

So, tracking with Paul's theme, even the Gentiles have the law in some sense, and thus are under judgement. How much more the Jews (v. 12b, 13)!

**16** *on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus.*—On "that day" every secret thought and action will be brought to judgement (Eccl 12:14); the secrets of men's hearts are all known to God, nothing is hidden (1 Sam 16:7; 1 Chr 28:9; Ps 139:1ff, 23; Jer 17:10; Mtt 6:4, 6, 18; Heb 4:12ff). See v. 6 for the principle of judgement according to works.

Man is judged on that day "by Christ Jesus". As the personification of the righteousness of God – "the brightness of his glory and the express image of his person" – he alone is the standard by which man is judged. This element of Paul's gospel was earlier proclaimed by him in Athens before the Areopagus:

... he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.

Acts 17:31

#### 2:17-29—The Jews & the Covenant

The apostle now addresses the Jews directly, confirming that they have been his audience from v. 1. He continues the thrust of his argument from the principle of v. 13 (see comments above), that it is not the hearers but the doers of the law that will be justified, and this is governed by his overall argument of ch. 1-3, showing that all mankind is under sin and, therefore, also under God's judgement. This is especially so for the Jew; they are exposed and judged by their attitude to the law and the covenant administered through Moses:

Do not think that I will accuse you before the Father; the one who accuses you is Moses, in whom you have set your hope. For if you believed Moses, you would believe Me, for he wrote about Me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe My words?

Jn 5:45-47

Paul now focuses on the privileges and responsibilities of being a Jew. Those who have received the oracles of God – the law and the covenant – are also called to be a light to the nations, bearing the responsibility of teaching them the laws and ways of God. But the Jews have become habitual law-breakers themselves, violating the covenant, and misconstruing what it means to be a Jew. Despite their breaking of the law they rely on their mere possession of it, and circumcision, for their religious status and as the boundary markers between Jew and Gentile.

Consequently, the apostle defines true circumcision and the true covenant person. These principles apply equally to the Jew and today's Christian. There is a prophetically pertinent message here for the contemporary church; as the new covenant people it, likewise, has violated the covenant and is under God's remedial judgement. To whom much is given much is required.

*17 But if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast in God 18 and know his will and approve what is excellent, because you are instructed from the law; 19 and if you are sure that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, 20 an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of children, having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth—21 you then who teach others, do 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 dishonor God by breaking the law. 24 For, as it is written, “The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.”—In v. 17-24 Paul enumerates first the legitimate privileges of God's covenant people – albeit perverted by the Jews – and then the responsibilities; the former consisting in: 1) the law, 2) boasting in God, 3) knowing his will (v. 17, 18); and the latter: being a guide to the blind (v. 19, 20)—in fact, a missionary nation to the nations of the earth.*

Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel.”

Ex 19:5-6 (cited 1 Pet 2:5, 9; Rev 5:10; see also Dt. 4:1-8; Eph 3:10)

From v. 21-24 he then shows how they have been delinquent in their responsibilities; they are not living lives of covenant fidelity, violating its ethical stipulations, and thus not fulfilling their divine mandate to be a light to the nations. In fact, their corporate conduct has occasioned the Gentiles to blaspheme the name of God.

Ironically, the first century impasse for the Jews has now become, in the twenty-first century, the same impasse for the Christian church. We have habitually violated the covenant and God's name is blasphemed in the nations as a result. Spiritually delinquent, we have lost the cultural traction won by generations over two millennia of Christian history and kingdom advancement.

By calling the Jews up to their covenant responsibility to teach the nations, Paul is reiterating the original purpose of God for man, first given to Adam in the garden: the dominion/cultural mandate to extend the Edenic paradise to the whole earth as the habitation – indeed the cosmic temple – of the living God (Gen 1:26-28; Rev 21:1-4, 22-26; 22:1-5). But now, in the last Adam and the second man – the beginning of a new humanity – it is fulfilled in the mandate of the Great Commission (Mt 28:18-20) to disciple all nations, teaching them everything that Christ has commanded. God's purpose for creation is now consummated in the new creation. For God has purposed, in the new epoch:

... that **through the church** the manifold wisdom of God might **now** be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.

Eph 3:10

This multi-faceted wisdom of God is revealed in the person of Jesus Christ (1 Cor 1:30), who is the consummation and embodiment of God's holy law as the radiance of his glory. God's word, incarnate and inscripturate, is the wisdom of God for all spheres of creation, indeed, for the governance of the nations:

See, **I have taught you statutes and rules**, as the Lord my God commanded me, that you should do them in the land that you are entering to take possession of it. **Keep them and do them, for that will be your wisdom and your**

**understanding in the sight of the peoples**, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.' For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is to us, whenever we call upon him? And what great nation is there, that has statutes and rules so righteous as all this law that I set before you today?

Dt 4:5-8 (see also Is 2:2-4)

The implications of this are revolutionary: Israel, as a covenant society, is God's prototype not only for the church but also the nations—in Paul's words, "a light to those who are in darkness" (v. 19).

This is the crux of Paul's whole theological vision in his epistle to the Romans: the victory of Christ in history through the Gospel (i.e. before the second coming), comprehensively applied (i.e. to the totality of life); it is the wisdom of God displayed *now* through a new humanity, the new covenant *ecclesia*. The *corporate* Christ is destined to be both the *demonstration* and *proclamation* of God's wisdom to the world—as a new society transformed through individual regeneration and justification, ultimately leavening civil society and its laws. The church is thus the agent of the Kingdom of God coming to earth, the rectification of the broken cosmos.

**25** *For circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law, but if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision.*—It is highly significant that the apostle contrasts "circumcision" with obedience to "the law"; in his view, they are not the same, despite circumcision's stipulation in the law (Lev 12:3). This confirms the comments on v. 13 regarding the Jewish abstraction of the law from the covenant, that is, from true covenant obedience and faith. So Paul's use of the term "law" in this verse (v. 25) clearly carries the notion of the covenant and of true heart-faith. This is in contrast to an autonomous works-righteousness use of the law (10:3), and a cherry-picking one at that, independently choosing only those laws that suit, and in this case, circumcision, as the marker of covenant status. The Jews were reiterating the original sin of standing in judgement over the commands of God and autonomously determining their validity (Gen 3). Whether Jew or Gentile, the choice is always the same: *theonomy* (God's law) or *autonomy* (man's law).

Consequently, the prophets warned Israel that despite their reliance on their liturgy and ritualism – the public worship of Yahweh – in the face of their idolatries they were to be consigned to captivity—in other words the covenant had been broken and its curse sanctions were about to be applied (Dt 28; Jer 7; Amos 5:18-27; Hos 6-9). Their circumcision had become uncircumcision; the outward signs of covenant membership were to no avail.

**26** *So, if a man who is uncircumcised keeps the precepts of the law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? 27* *Then he who is physically uncircumcised but keeps the law will condemn you who have the written code and circumcision but break the law.*—Again we notice the distinction between "the written code [*gramma*]" and "the law [*nomos*]", between the Pentateuch – Scripture – and the covenant (see comments v. 13). While they are intrinsically linked, and in essence one, there is nonetheless a distinction. The mere possession of the former carries no weight when it is disobeyed, for the latter has been broken; rather, it provokes condemnation. When the obedience of faith is absent, neither ritualism nor notional assent to the Scriptures will suffice; in the hands of the disobedient, both the sacrament and the Scriptures are invalidated and voided of spiritual power.

**28** *For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. 29* *But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God.*—The apostle now introduces a radical correction to the Jewish self-understanding – as to who is a *true* Jew – which is fundamental to his Gospel. Whereas v. 28 states the negative as to the false, v. 29 states the positive as to the true—the *true* Jew and *true* circumcision: the true Jew is one inwardly, in contrast to outwardly, and true circumcision is of the heart by the Spirit, in contrast to the letter. The law not only stipulated outward circumcision, but, more importantly, that of the inward—the circumcision of the heart as the key to true covenant faith and obedience (Dt 10:16; 30:6). The outward was only ever the sign and seal of the inward, as modeled by Abraham, which Paul later explicates in ch. 4. But the natural Jew had only practiced the former, neglecting the latter, the spiritual, and, thus, violating the covenant. Therefore, Paul is not teaching anything that was not first established in the covenant through Moses or first demonstrated in Abraham. So, the contrast of "letter" and "Spirit" is two-fold: 1) a contrast of the Jewish aberration (abstraction of law from the covenant resulting in externalism, i.e. autonomous *self-righteousness*) with the correction (the obedience of faith from the heart, i.e. internal) brought about in Christ; and 2) a contrast of the old covenant limitation, as a ministry of condemnation and death, with that of the new covenant consummation



of the Spirit, a new life and power to obey (2 Cor 3:4:18), which Paul develops later in the epistle (5:10; 8:1-39).

In summary, Paul has not only built the case for God's judgement of the Jews (continued 3:1-8) but also for the inclusion of the Gentiles through grace and faith alone (continued 3:21-31; ch. 4, 9-11). The apostle has exposed the Jewish misconstrual of the law, abstracting it from the covenant, as a means of autonomous self-righteousness. The issue was never religious status through ethnicity but always God's sovereign grace and election, of his initiative and regenerating power to renew the heart. The apostle's redefinition of the Jew – from natural to spiritual – is revolutionary for the interpreter of the OT; it rescues the prophetic corpus of Scripture concerning Israel from an ethnocentric interpretation, opening it up, instead, to show God's redemptive-historical purpose to the Gentiles and the whole earth. He will explain the full implications of this for the ethnic Jew – Israel – in ch. 9-11. And so, whether Jew or Gentile, the true "Israel of God" (Gal 6:16) is not outward but inward; not depending on markers of Jewish religious status, they are the ones who have believed from the heart unto justification, and their "praise is not from man but from God" (v. 29):

In the Lord all the offspring of Israel shall be justified and shall glory.

Is 45:25

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Part 4: [Introduction—Judgement & Justification: \*Justice Promised\*](#)

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