

## ROMANS 2

### MADE RIGHT BY TRUSTING CHRIST (1:18—5:11), *cont.*

#### God's Impartial Judgment (2:1–16)

In this section (and some others, most obviously 3:1–9; 9:14–24) Paul employs a lively rhetorical style called diatribe, commonly used for teaching. This style typically includes an imaginary interlocutor, who may or may not be explicitly identified, who raises objections. These objections allow the speaker or writer to develop the argument, demolishing the objections one at a time while holding the audience's attention.<sup>1</sup> Scholars debate whether Paul begins addressing a specifically Jewish interlocutor here (2:3) or only at 2:17 (where it is explicit); most likely he implicitly addresses the Jewish interlocutor throughout the chapter, since what “we know” (2:2), what the interlocutor should know (2:4), and the continuity of subject matter (cf. 2:9–10, 12–15; with 2:25–29) all suggest a Jewish hearer. Nevertheless, Paul remains subtle in the first section, springing his rhetorical trap only gradually as he shows that Jew and Gentile alike are condemned. Singling out a hearer (rhetorical “apostrophe”), as Paul does with “O man” (2:1, 3; cf. 9:20), was a common rhetorical device,<sup>2</sup> again effective for holding audience attention.

Because those who commit all kinds of sins (1:29–31) recognize that such behavior merits death under God's standard (1:32), they deserve divine judgment (2:3, 5). Whether they (like morally lax Gentiles) excuse or (like strict Jews) condemn such behavior, they are condemned (2:15). In 1:32 they excuse it, and in 2:1 they condemn it, but both approaches of sinners are inexcusable (1:20; 2:1–5).

1. On the style, see Stowers 1981: 122–33.

2. E.g., Isa 22:17; Mic 6:8; Epictetus *Disc.* 1.1.23 and passim; Marcus Aurelius *Med.* 5.36.1; 11.15. For the interlocutor including Jews, see e.g., Augustine *Exp. prop. Rom.* 7–8 (Bray 1998: 52).

Paul develops this condemnation of those who piously denounce sin by means of a syllogism: they commit these sins (2:1), we know that such sins merit God's judgment (2:2; cf. 1:32), therefore they will not escape God's judgment (2:3). Most people recognized and condemned such inconsistency,<sup>3</sup> a point to which Paul returns in a more explicit challenge to a Jewish interlocutor in 2:17–25. Paul prepares his audience far in advance for his warning against judging culturally different believers in Rom 14:3–4, 10, 13.

If anyone wishes to appeal to God's mercy, Paul is clear (against some of his detractors, 3:8) that God's mercy gives space for repentance. That is, God's mercy brings about righteousness, rather than simply blessing sinners in their sin (2:4). Jewish hearers would understand that the kindness of God was what led people to repentance (2:4);<sup>4</sup> some also thought of treasuring up rewards in heaven (cf. e.g., Tob 4:9–10)—though what is stored up here is wrath (2:5)!<sup>5</sup>

Continuing his lavish display of effective literary devices, Paul now reinforces his point with inverted repetition, what is called a chiasm (2:6–11):

- A God repays each according to their works (2:6)
- B To those who do good, seeking glory and honor<sup>6</sup> (2:7)
- C But wrath to those who disobey the truth (2:8)<sup>7</sup>
- C' Suffering to those who do evil (2:9)
- B' But glory and honor to those who do good (2:10)
- A' Because God is impartial (2:11)

In this passage Paul argues for God's ethnic impartiality.<sup>8</sup> Contrary to Jewish expectations, God will judge both Jew and Gentile (2:9–10), both

3. E.g., Matt 7:1; Polybius 12.23.1, 3; 12.24.5; Seneca *Dial.* 4.28.6–8; Juvenal *Sat.* 2.9–10, 20–21; *b. Roš. Haš.* 16b.

4. Cf. *Let. Aris.* 187–88; Wis 11:23; 12:10, 19; the fifth benediction of the *'Amida*.

5. The connection is uncertain, since “treasure up” did not always carry its originally literal sense (see e.g., Prov 1:18; 2:7; 16:27 lxx).

6. Roman culture valued seeking honor and glory, but the glory Paul emphasizes here is eternal (8:18; 9:23), equivalent to God's praise at the judgment (2:29). On the honor sense of “glory” (and seeking only honor from God, as in 2:29), see the information in Keener 2003b: 885–86; for other aspects of “glory,” see *ibid.*, 410.

7. Cf. those disobeying the truth about God (1:25) facing wrath (1:18).

8. On divine impartiality, see most thoroughly Bassler 1982. God not discriminating

those with the law of Moses and those with only natural law (2:12–15)—and he will hold those with greater revelation more accountable! Judging people in accordance with their deeds was one way of speaking of God’s impartiality;<sup>9</sup> the surprise is that, instead of God’s own people being favored, they are judged more strictly because they have a fuller knowledge of right and wrong (2:12–15; 3:20; 7:7–11; cf. Amos 3:2).

In view of the lostness of all humanity in this section (3:9, 23), scholars debate whether those who do good works for eternal life<sup>10</sup> represent a real but small class of people (the way some Jewish people thought of “righteous Gentiles”); a hypothetical class of people (posited perhaps for rhetorical purposes) (cf. 10:5; Gal 3:11);<sup>11</sup> or Christians (cf. 2:29). Especially both latter proposals may have some merit: in principle it is the righteous who will be saved, and in practice it is those who are in Christ who can live righteously (8:2–4). Yet Paul’s *focus* at this point is not on Christians, but on the principle of God’s ethnic impartiality (also the point of all humanity being under sin in 3:9). Paul is digressing on the point precisely to explain how those who fancied themselves morally superior were treasuring up *wrath* for themselves (2:5). It served Paul’s point to note that Gentiles would at least sometimes do morally right actions, whereas Jews would sometimes not do them. Nevertheless, apart from Christ, the natural law of conscience innate in human beings functions like the external law of Moses, identifying sin but not transforming people to be righteous (2:14–15). Comparing the passage with other passages in Romans allows us to see that while it focuses on the potential righteousness of any person, Paul would only aver that those transformed by Christ would live thus:

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between Jew and Gentile is a theme of Romans (cf. 3:30).

9. E.g., Sir 16:12; Paul here echoes Ps 62:12; Prov 24:12.

10. For one synthesis of how judgment by works and justification only by faith fit in Paul’s concern for reaching Gentiles, see insightfully Boers 1994: 221–24. Those with the law within fulfill righteousness (8:2–4; Gathercole 2002: 223), and are still evaluated for works (14:10; 2 Cor 5:10).

11. One could debate whether his rhetoric is hypothetical here or hyperbolic in 3:9–23 (where he seems to place every individual under sin), his objective being merely to show that both *groups* (Jew and Gentile) need Christ. But it is doubtful that he thought of morally sentient adults who had not sinned, of Adamites who did not need to be in Christ (5:12–21), or of people of flesh who did not need the Spirit for life (8:2–10).

The righteous do good works (2:7)	These cannot be Jewish law-works (3:20, 27–28)
The righteous endure (2:7)	Believers endure (5:3–4; 8:25; 12:12; 15:4–5)
The righteous “seek” for glory (2:7)	No one “seeks” for God (3:11); one must not “seek” righteousness the wrong way (10:3, 20)
The righteous seek glory and honor (2:7, 10)	Humanity lost God’s glory (3:23), but glory awaits believers (5:2; 8:18, 21; 9:21, 23)
The righteous receive eternal life (2:7)	Believers in Jesus receive eternal life (5:21; 6:22–23; cf. 8:13)
The righteous will have peace (2:10)	Humanity does not know peace (3:17), but believers will have it (5:1; 8:6; 14:17)
The righteous do “good” (2:7, 10)	The wicked do not do good (7:18–19; cf. 3:10); believers should do what is good (12:9, 21; 13:4; 15:2)
Doers of good include both Jews and Greeks (2:10)	Both Jews and Gentiles are under sin (3:9); the community of believers includes both Jews and Gentiles (1:16; 9:24; 10:12; cf. 3:29)

Thus while Paul is focusing on God’s ethnic impartiality rather than on believers here, when he later addresses such issues he seems to assume that it is believers in Jesus who are able to fulfill the role of the righteous. Christ comes not merely to forgive unrighteousness but to empower for righteous living.

Scholars again differ as to whether the law in obedient Gentiles’ hearts by nature (2:14–15) refers to Christians or to conscience in all humans. In practice, it those in whom the Spirit dwells (Jew or Gentile) who fulfill the heart of God’s law (8:2–4; Jer 31:31–34).<sup>12</sup> There may be an element of such emphasis here, preparing for 2:29. Nevertheless, Christians also had access to the written law, so in 2:14–15 Paul probably focuses more generally on a natural law innate in humanity. He has already spoken of God’s revelation in creation (1:20), including within humans (1:19), and he also

12. They even have the Spirit “testifying” like the conscience here (8:16), while apparently retaining conscience’s testimony as well (9:1).

appeals to the Greco-Roman notion of “conscience” (9:1).<sup>13</sup> Although employing it in a wide range of ways, Greco-Roman sources (including Jewish ones) speak widely of a law of nature,<sup>14</sup> and even Palestinian Jews outside this widespread tradition seem to have believed that God had given laws to Gentiles’ ancestors in the time of Noah.<sup>15</sup> Such a morally informed person’s divided thoughts in 2:15 may presage the morally divided person in 7:15–23 (who, however, knows more specifically Moses’s law and hyperbolically appears incapable of doing any good).

### Indicting Hypocrisy (2:17–24)

Paul’s diatribe uses rhetorical exaggeration, common in polemic, to hold attention. The evildoing Jewish interlocutor here is hyperbolic, perhaps even reduced to the absurd.<sup>16</sup> Certainly most Jewish people did not commit adultery or rob temples! Paul’s graphically rendered point is simply that Jewish ethnicity or possession of the law cannot guarantee moral superiority to Gentiles. (Paul will maintain the sin of all Jews with a biblical argument in 3:9–20.) Because of the general law of nature, some Gentiles might do what is morally right (2:14–15), even while this hyperbolic Jewish objector, who three or four times reiterates dependence on the law (2:17, 18, 20, 23), dishonors God by breaking it (2:23).

Torah study was central to Pharisaic and presumably other Jewish teachers’ piety (2:17–20), but intellectual and spiritual proficiency risked generating pride in one’s accomplishments, then as now. Certainly today some have used such proficiency to diminish their concern with corresponding failure in the area of praxis. This Jewish teacher’s fundamental problem, twice repeated, is finding security in or “boasting” in the law (2:17, 23; cf. Sir 39:8). Ancients often considered unqualified boasting ob-

13. Already used in Greek-speaking Judaism (e.g., Josephus *Ant.* 16.103, 212; idem *J.W.* 4.189, 193; *T. Reu.* 4:3; Wallis 1974–75; idem 1975).

14. In moral senses, e.g., Xenophon *Mem.* 4.4.19; Aristotle *Rhet.* 1.15.6, 1375ab; Cicero *Inv.* 2.22.65; 2.53.161; Seneca *Ben.* 4.17.4; Musonius Rufus 16, p. 104.35–36; Epictetus *Disc.* 2.16.27–28; Horsley 1978. Philo viewed Moses’s law as a written version of the law of nature (Najman 2003).

15. E.g., *Jub.* 7:20; *t. ‘Abod. Zar.* 8:4–8; *b. Sanh.* 56a, bar.; *Pesiq. Rab Kah.* 12:1; *Gen. Rab.* 34:8.

16. *Reductio ad absurdum* was a familiar line of argument (cf. e.g., Lysias *Or.* 4.5–6, §101; Seneca *Ep. Lucil.* 83.9; 113.20; Heath 1997: 93–94).

noxious to begin with,<sup>17</sup> but for Paul boasting in one's works as opposed to God's activity is sinful (3:27; 4:2; 5:2-3, 11; 15:17).<sup>18</sup>

Ancient rhetoric was fond of repetition, which cumulatively reinforces the overall effect of one's words. Paul cites about eleven pious Jewish claims for his interlocutor in 2:17-20, whose righteousness he then challenges with five rhetorical questions (as often in prosecuting or defensive rhetoric) in 2:21-23.<sup>19</sup> The latter cases each use antithesis and the literary device of starting and ending with parallel language (x . . . y/x . . . y) to drive home the point. Evoking prophetic biblical critiques throughout,<sup>20</sup> Paul finishes off the hyperbolic hypocrite with an explicit text in 2:23-24. Ironically, the righteousness this interlocutor claims in the law of Moses is available only to those in whose hearts the law is written by the Spirit (8:2-4):

The name "Jew" (2:17)	True Jews (2:29), children of Abraham (4:12, 16-17), and those grafted into Israel (11:17)
Boasting in God (2:17, 23)	Boasting in God the right way (5:11; cf. 5:2-3)
Knowing God's will and approving the good (2:18)	Knowing God's will and approving the good (12:2)
A light to those in darkness (2:19)	People of light rather than darkness (13:12)
Teacher of law (2:20)	Right use of teaching (6:17; 12:7; 15:4; 16:17)
Having knowledge and truth in the law (2:20)	Having knowledge of truth (15:8, 14)

17. See discussion in Forbes 1986; Watson 2003; Keener 2005b: 221-22.

18. On boasting here, cf. Gathercole 2002: 162-88, 215. Given possible allusions to Isa 42:6-7 here, it is not impossible that this Jewish "instructor" is also seeking to reach (and circumcise) Gentiles (cf. Isa 42:6; those in darkness in Rom 1:21), not unlike the teacher in Josephus *Ant.* 18.82. But this leader of the blind was himself blind and in darkness (cf. Rom 11:8-10).

19. Cf. analogous challenges to hypocrisy in antiquity, e.g., Seneca *Controv.* 2.6.5; and many other cases of accumulating rhetorical questions, e.g., Lysias *Or.* 10.22-23, §118; Cicero *Phil.* 3.6.15; Musonius Rufus 11, p. 80.22-25; 13B, p. 90.13-16; 15, p. 98.25-27; Lucian *Tyr.* 10. These add rhetorical force (see Dionysius of Halicarnassus *Dem.* 54).

20. See e.g., Jer 7:9; Grieb 2002: 32; cf. 1QS 1.23-24; CD 4.16-18; 8.5-8.

Ancients considered temple robbery (2:22) the epitome of impiety.<sup>21</sup> Many Gentiles suspected Jews of this crime because they knew that they did not regard pagan temples as sacred,<sup>22</sup> though Jewish apologists emphasized that good Jews would do no such thing.<sup>23</sup> Here Paul's hyperbolic opponent, far from abhorring idols, apparently finds their sale lucrative. Profaning God's name (2:23–24) was among the most heinous of offenses.<sup>24</sup> The sort of hypocritical Jew who discredited God and his people depicted here could be familiar enough to Paul's audience: a generation earlier, one Jewish charlatan, who professed to teach Moses's laws but did not obey them, had exploited Roman women, leading to scandal in Rome (Josephus *Ant.* 18.81–84).

As at some other points in Romans (e.g., 3:10–18), Paul uses the Scriptures in what may be a deliberately unexpected way. In the context of Isa 52:5 God's name was blasphemed among Gentiles because of his people's suffering; here, Paul complains, God is blasphemed because of their sin! They were exiled to begin with, however, because of their sin (cf. Ezek 36:18–20). Paul might connect this passage with many of his people's rejection of the good news of Isa 52:7 (cited in Rom 10:15.)

#### Inward Jewishness (2:25–29)

Responding to one boasting in his Jewish ethnicity and virtues (2:17–24), Paul counters that Jewishness (here embodied in circumcision) is valuable only if one truly keeps the covenant. Gentiles who follow the moral demands of the law, even if they lack knowledge of the written law (or are uncircumcised Godfearers attached to the synagogue), will be reckoned more within the covenant than Jews who break the law. Although Paul again speaks in principle of any Gentile, in practice those who could fulfill this standard, from Paul's perspective, are those who are in Christ, since they are the ones who have the Spirit (cf. 2:29 with 7:5–6; 8:9).

21. E.g., Xenophon *Apol.* 25; Cicero *Quint. fratr.* 1.1.8.25; idem *Fin.* 3.9.32; Lucian *Hermot.* 37; *Vit. Aes.* 127–28; Hermogenes *Progymn.* 6, On Commonplace, 12.

22. Cf. Acts 19:37; Josephus *Ag. Ap.* 1.192–93, 248–49; for Jewish assault on pagan shrines, cf. Exod 34:13; Deut 7:5; 12:3; Philo *Embassy* 200, 202.

23. E.g., Josephus *Ant.* 4.207; idem *Ag. Ap.* 2.237; Philo *Moses* 2.205.

24. Cf. Lev 22:32; Sipre *Deut.* 328.1.5; Moore 1971: 2:101; Urbach 1979: 1:357; Keener 1999: 219.

Scripture supported Paul's contention that those who violated God's law were uncircumcised in heart (Rom 2:25; Lev 26:41; Jer 4:4; 9:25–26); Paul goes beyond Scripture simply in arguing the converse, namely, that those who keep God's law are circumcised in God's sight (Rom 2:26). Physical circumcision was a dividing issue; many Roman Gentiles criticized Jews for this practice, and it remained a primary barrier for Gentile men desiring to join God's people. Most Jews did not believe that Gentiles needed to be circumcised to be saved; they needed it only to become members of Israel's covenant.<sup>25</sup> Paul thus prepares here for his later argument about Gentile believers being grafted into Israel's heritage alongside Jewish believers (4:16; 11:17).<sup>26</sup>

Literal circumcision appears in far fewer biblical texts than one would expect from its later emphasis (although it is crucial in most of these, especially Gen 17; Ex 4:26; Lev 12:3; Josh 5:2–8);<sup>27</sup> but Jewish people emphasized it especially rigorously in the centuries before Paul's day as a significant distinctive of national identity. Without rejecting physical circumcision, Paul regarded spiritual circumcision (Deut 10:16; 30:6; Lev 26:41; Jer 4:4; 9:25–26; cf. Ezek 44:7, 9) as essential and more crucial than the physical covenant "sign." Physical circumcision remained acceptable for Jewish believers, but the imposition of circumcision on Gentile believers risked alienating people from the covenant needlessly (cf. 1 Cor 7:18–19; Gal 5:6; 6:15).<sup>28</sup> For Paul, the promised gift of the Spirit (2:29) confirmed God's acceptance of Gentiles into his new covenant, obviating the need for a mere symbol of the covenant that simply pointed to it.<sup>29</sup>

25. For Jewish views of Gentiles, see Donaldson 1997b: 52–74.

26. The Gentile practitioner "judging" the Jewish nonpractitioner may involve merely being a comparison standard for God's judgment (see e.g., Matt 12:41–42/Luke 11:31–32; *Lev. Rab.* 2:9; *Pesiq. Rab.* 35:3; comparable scenarios involving other kinds of figures in *'Abot R. Nat.* 6A; 12, §30B), but some Jewish eschatological scenarios did involve the righteous judging the wicked (1 *En.* 91:12; 95:3; 98:12; 1QpHab 5:4; 4Q418 frag. 69, 2.7–8; *Sipre Deut.* 47.2.8).

27. That it was symbolic identification rather than ontologically efficacious is clear from where it had been omitted (Josh 5:2–8; cf. Exod 4:25).

28. Some other individuals allowed this concession, at least in some extraordinary cases (Josephus *Ant.* 20.41; see further Watson 2007: 75–78); but this would be a minority view in Jerusalem and probably even in most Diaspora synagogues.

29. Generally, when Paul contrasts "flesh" and "Spirit," as in 2:28–29, he refers to God's Spirit (see e.g., 1:3–4; 8:4–9, 13; cf. Gal 3:3; 4:29; 5:16–17; 6:8; Phil 3:3). The Spirit is the foretaste of the future age (Rom 8:23; 2 Cor 1:22; 5:5), and the symbol is irrelevant compared to the new creation (Gal 6:15).



*Romans 2:25–29*

The genuine Jew, Paul says, seeks his or her praise from God (2:29), like the righteous people of 2:7, 10. Paul might be offering a wordplay that some of his audience would recognize: the name of the Jews' ancestor "Judah" meant "praise" (though translated differently in Gen 29:35; 49:8). For the contrast between Spirit and letter, see the comment on 7:6.

SAMPLE