

Arguments of Romans 2

Introduction

No doubt the Jews of Paul's audience would have given a hearty "amen" to the description of the willful rejection of God by those described in chapter one. They would have immediately thought of the Greeks (Gentiles) who as a whole abandoned the truth for idolatry and its attending degradation. But they needed to see that they were no better off than these Gentiles.

The Jews proudly remembered that they were descendants of Abraham, to whom God had promised His blessing. They had inherited the covenant sign of circumcision which confirmed their participation in the covenant God had made with Abraham to be the God of the Jews. Furthermore God had entered into a covenant with them at Sinai, promising that in keeping it they would be his people. The Jew proudly concluded, "I am a Jew. I have been circumcised. I have the truth. I am God's and the promises are mine."

Paul must now shatter that notion once and for all, if they were to be saved. These Jews to which Paul addresses his remarks are not the humble penitent Jews who naturally would have accepted the gospel willingly and gladly, but the self-righteous and stubborn kind who insisted that their rather shallow and external keeping of law would suffice for righteousness. Paul seeks to shake them from their moralism and self-righteousness.

Chapter Overview

And so Paul goes right to the heart of the problem in chapter two. Analytically, it is addressed to the Jew from beginning to end, though Paul tactfully reserves who the "you" of this passage is until v. 17. But note the sequence of interrogations: v. 1 Do "you" think you will escape? (v. 3) Do "you" think lightly of God's goodness..? (v. 4) Do "you" not teach yourself? (v. 21)? The "but" of v. 17 renews the argument proposed by the "but" of v. 5 in a different form. In v. 5-16 Paul is showing the consequences of their disobedience at the judgment. In v. 17-24 Paul is showing the inadequacy of the Jew's claim to be righteous based on knowing the Law and being circumcised. Both paragraphs drive home the point that the Jew who quickly condemned the pagans from an attitude of superior position and knowledge was no better off than the people he condemned!

The principles deduced certainly would apply to any who sought justification by a superficial keeping of law, but the principle target of this argument is the Jew. Paul so thoroughly exposes the unrighteousness of the Jew, though having circumcision and professing to keep the Law, that the Jew might suggest or think that there is no advantage at all in his being a Jew (cf. 3:1).

God's wrath is also against the Jew who claims to know what is right because he himself, though having the Law, does what he condemns in others (2:1-16)

- v. 1-4—The man who condemns others condemns himself, if he does the same things. It is known that those who do the things Paul described in 1:18-32 are wrong and are rightly judged by God. Can one who also does these things escape God's judgment? (v. 3) Does one think so lightly of God's kindness, forbearance, and patience, not knowing that God's goodness leads one to repentance (v. 4)? To refuse to repent is to manifest stubbornness and impenitence and bring just condemnation upon oneself.
- v. 5-10—This is what such people who refuse to repent will receive, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. Their destiny is tribulation and distress because their life is one of selfish ambition and disobedience to God. (The primacy of the Jew in salvation is matched by their primacy in judgment). Only the penitent will be saved in the end, whether Jew or Greek--that is those who in penitent faith seek eternal life, God's glory, honor and immortality or later expressed as glory, honor and peace and indicate such by a life of obedience to the truth. (This penitence and obedience to truth is not a life of meritorious perfection such as was required by the Law but rather it is the expression and proof of the faith that Paul will later discuss more fully. It is the imperfect but growing conformity to the truth, in keeping with faith in Christ and a constantly penitent spirit that presses toward perfection rather than resting in self-righteous satisfaction. Here Paul anticipates the remaining message of the book).
- v. 11-16—On the other hand, sinners will be punished whether Jew or Greek. There will be no favoritism. The issue is not this: having a written code or not having a written code. (Paul uses law here in v. 12 anarthrously not to avoid reference to the Law of Moses but to give emphasis to the idea of what the Law was and is by nature, a revealed and written code of conduct in which the Jew prided himself so much.) Paul's point is: Those having a written code who continue in sin will be condemned and those not having a written code who continue in sin will be condemned. Hearing a written code like the Law was is not enough. One must do it to be justified; and this the Jew had not done. But in addition, having a written code like the Law is not enough; for even the Gentiles, not having a written code, may in fact do some of the things that the Law requires. In this sense, the Gentiles who have no written law are a law unto themselves and show the work of the Law written in their hearts. It is conceivable that some, not all, Gentiles might not only render to God the same obedience as these moralizing Jews but in fact outdo them since their obedience, though imperfect, is not merely external but conscientious, coming from the heart. Paul's point is not that the Gentiles have succeeded in earning salvation by works but that their obedience is as good or better than that which these moralizing Jews have practiced! So how could having and hearing a written code make a difference in the judgment!?! (Both Jews and Gentiles who sin are lost regardless of the source or level of obedience they render to God. Both need the gospel of Christ).

The Jew's claim to righteousness by circumcision would do no good if he did not keep the whole Law (2:17-29)

- v. 17-24—Though the Jew may wear the name meaning "praiseworthy", professing a reliance upon the Law, boasting in the God of Israel, knowing his will and teaching it to others, what value is this if he does not do what the Law says.
- v. 25-29—Circumcision is a sign of God's covenant promise to be the God of Israel. But such is meaningless if the Israelites refuse to obey him as God. Circumcision is not enough! When the Gentile obeys the Law, he really does what the Jew has consented to in his acceptance of circumcision. Will not his obedience to the Law cause God to see him as one of his people? And will not his obedience condemn the disobedience of the circumcised man?

The real Jew is and always has been the one whose heart is circumcised, in the spirit not just in his flesh; his righteousness proceeds from the inner man and is not merely an external show of righteousness in keeping the letter of the Law. The true Jew wants to be praised by God, not merely please and be approved by men.