

# ROMANS

GOD'S RIGHTEOUSNESS REVEALED

## IMPORTANT QUESTIONS

**Text:** Romans 2:12-16

**Main preaching point:** Judgment will be according to *the light of revelation and conscience*, judged by Christ Himself.

### INTRODUCTION:

The word “for,” which begins verse 12, explains that Paul is unpacking the statement in verse 11 that “*there is no partiality with God.*” To say that **God is impartial** means *God is perfectly and completely just*. God does not play favorites. He does not tip the scales. He does not grade on a curve. All of God’s dealings are marked by impeccable justice. Every verdict reached is the right decision. Every punishment or exoneration is the proper execution of equity. There is a rectitude in God. Deuteronomy 32:4 says, “*All His ways are just; a God of faithfulness and without injustice, righteous and upright is He.*” Because of this important attribute, God always does what is right in His dealings with mankind.

The question often raised by people within and outside the church is, “What about the person who has never heard the Bible? What about the man or woman in the Katmandu jungle who has never read the Ten Commandments? How can they be accused of breaking the law if they do not have the law?” On the other hand, some ask, “What about a person who is sincere, honest, and moral but not a churchgoer? They are not drunkards; they are not adulterers. Not every human being is a thief or murderer. Some honor their parents, and others believe in the sanctity of life and practice integrity, so why are they guilty—and how can they be condemned by God?” In this section, the Apostle Paul seeks to answer these *important questions*.

There are two reasons these legitimate questions are important for us to understand.

- First, if you know the Lord savingly, you need to be “*ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence*” (1 Pet.3:15). Strong Christians know *what* they believe and *why*—and can defend it from the Word of God.
- Second, if you have not yet come to know the Lord, you need to understand that the Gospel makes you wise about the way of salvation, which is in Christ Jesus. The Gospel is not *illogical, irrational, or unreasonable*. Being a Christian does not mean checking your mind at the door and taking a blind leap in the dark. Salvation is about truth, and Jesus said, “*I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me*” (John 14:6). If you are ever going to be saved, you need to understand what you need to be saved *from*.

In this section (2:12-16), Paul explains *the equality of God’s judgment*, both with respect to the Gentiles and the Jews—or *the entire world*. Paul proceeds to show that it does not greatly matter whether people have received the law in a formal sense or not; *all are under condemnation*. Three headings will help us understand some important questions about God’s judgment and respond in a way that is pleasing unto God.

## EXPOSITION:

The first important question that Paul addresses is,

### A. WHO IS GUILTY BEFORE GOD? (v.12)

Jews and Gentiles appear to differ fundamentally in that Jews *hear the law*. They possessed the law and listened to it read in the synagogues every sabbath day (*Acts 13:15; 2 Cor.3:14*), whereas the Gentiles *do not have the law*. It was not revealed to them nor given to them. Nevertheless, Paul insists, this difference can be exaggerated. For there is no fundamental distinction between them *in the knowledge they have* (all have the light of creation and conscience) or *in the sin they commit* (all disobey the law they know), *or the guilt they have incurred, or in the judgment they will receive*.

In verse 12, Paul puts Jews and Gentiles into the same category of sin. Please note that Paul makes two parallel statements, beginning with the words **“all who have sinned.”**

- <sup>12</sup> 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;

The category is *all who have sinned*, but the distinctions are those *without the law* and *those under the law*. What does Paul mean? Paul is making the point that divine justice will only regard the sins of men, and wherever these are found, it will condemn the sinner as guilty. Paul is summing up their life of sin from the perspective of the last day. *All who have sinned will also perish (Rom.6:23)* or will be *judged* irrespective of whether they are Jews or Gentiles, whether they have the Ten Commandments or not. Paul begins with the Gentiles.

1. **Gentiles who sinned will perish (v.12a)**—For all who have sinned without the Law will also perish without the Law. In other words, *they will not be judged by a standard they have not known*. They will perish *because of their own sin*, not because of *their ignorance of the law*.

The word for **“sinned”** here means *to miss the mark*. It comes from an Old Testament example of an archer aiming his bow and arrow at a target and they have dramatically missed the bullseye. An assistant would be standing off to the side of where the archer was shooting, and once the arrow hit the target—he would run over to observe where it landed. If it did not hit the middle red circle called the *bullseye*, the assistant would shout—*sin!* If the arrow was a little outside the circle, he would not say *“little sin”* or, way outside the circle, *“big sin.”* If the arrow landed anywhere outside the bullseye, the declaration was the same—*sin!*

This is true of every sinner—*“for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom.3:23)*. We have completely missed the perfect standard of God. Wise King Solomon wrote in **Ecclesiastes 7:20**—*“Indeed, there is not a righteous man on earth who continually does good and who never sins.”*—except for Jesus Christ.

When Paul says, *“all who have sinned **without the law**,”* he is speaking of people *without a written law* or people outside Israel who do not know the law that God revealed to His ancient people. Later he will prove that *none are without law* because even Gentiles have a law *“written in their hearts” (2:15)*. But in this first case, Paul addresses the person who has not received the written law or heard the Gospel.

The question is, "What is the consequence or penalty for falling short?" Paul says they will perish—**"for all who have sinned without the Law will also perish without the Law."** The word **"perish"** doesn't simply mean they will die physically, but rather they will suffer eternal punishment and damnation (*1 Cor.1:18*). Whether *you have the law* or *you don't have the law*, without the Gospel, you will perish.

Sinners are not waiting to perish; they are already under the perishing and under the wrath of God because of sin (*John 3:18; 36*). They are already self-destructing by their own life lived without God.

**1 Corinthians 1:18** says, "*for the word of the cross [that is the preaching of the cross] is foolishness to those who are perishing....*" They are like a cheap sweater that is unraveling daily. All who are without the law are not innocent or righteous. They are sinners who have rebelled against God and are in defiance of Him. Who will be judged? *Gentiles who sinned will perish because they have sinned without the law.*

- 2. Jews who sinned will be judged (v.12b)**—and all who have sinned under the Law will be judged by the Law;

**"And all who have sinned under the law"** refers to *the Jews* and anyone who has been exposed to the knowledge of the Bible. To be "*under the law*" means to be under its light, under its understanding, and under its obligation. To hear the Bible is to be made a steward. It is better never to hear the truth than to hear it and reject it. Why? Because the more light, the more judgment, the more accountability.

This was the Gospel mission of Israel. They, too, will be judged by the standard *they have known and not practiced*. In other words, God will be totally even-handed in judgment.

To bring these statements together—Paul is saying *the way people have sinned will be the way they will be judged*, regardless of whether it was *in ignorance of the law* or *knowledge of the law*.

God's judgment will be *according to truth* (vv.1-4), God's judgment will be *righteous* (v.5), and God's judgment will be *according to works and impartial* (vv.6-11). The great Princeton theologian Charles Hodge said, "The ground of judgment is their works; the rule of judgment is their knowledge," whether they have lived up to their knowledge or not.

So, who is guilty before God? God is not harder or more severe on *the Gentile* than He is on *the Jew* or *more lenient* on the person *who knows the Bible* than He is on those *who do not know the Bible*. God is equally just—and all are guilty of sin before a holy, Sovereign, just God.

**Application:** What does this mean for us? It means we should all stand in awe of God's righteousness. No one can say, "God, You are not fair." All deserve judgment, for all have sinned. Two men may owe you money, and you may, without any injustice, forgive the debt of one and require the debt of another. Two criminals may be condemned to die, and the king may pardon one and not the other. He is not unjust if he lets one suffer who broke the law, nor if he saves the other. Because he is king, he has that prerogative. It is God's right to forgive who He wants, but He is not bound to force His mercies upon men. If you refuse His offer of grace, you will perish because of your sin, not God's justice.

The second important question is...

## B. WHO IS RIGHT BEFORE GOD? (v.13)

Verse 13 serves as a parenthesis. The word “**for**” ties this in with the preceding verse and explains it. It is a follow-up explanation.

- <sup>13</sup> for *it is* not the hearers of the Law *who* are just before God, but the doers of the Law will be justified.

At the end of verse 12, Paul refers to “*all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the Law,*” or *Jews or those who know the Bible*. Please note that Paul says those who know the Bible will be *judged*, not *saved*.

As we come to verse 13, Paul reminds us of the circumstances of his day. People under the law did not *read* it for themselves (unless they were scribes); they *heard* it read. There are many people like this today—they hear about the Bible or sermons from the Bible, but they never read it for themselves. Someone might ask, “*Well, does hearing the law make one right with God? Will knowledge acquit me in the court of heaven?*” The answer is—*absolutely not! Hearing the truth does not make you right before God.*

Come up close. Paul desires to teach us two vital truths that everyone needs to know.

1. **Hearing alone is not enough (v.13a)**—Hearing the Gospel is important. During the ministry of Christ, He repeatedly taught about the importance of hearing. In Mark 4:23, He said, “*If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear.*” In Mark 4:24, He said, “*Take care what you listen to.*” In Luke 8:18, Jesus said, “*So take care how you listen.*” Later Paul will tell us that “*faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ*” (Rom.10:17). Hearing is important, but hearing alone is not enough.

In fact, the writer to the Hebrews warns us to *fear lest we fall short of the blessing of salvation by hearing but failing to act on what we hear.*

- **Hebrews 4:2**—For indeed we have had good news preached to us, just as they also; but the word they heard did not profit them, because it was not united by faith in those who heard.

Israel had God’s promises, and look at what they did! They got right up to the edge of the promised land—the land of rest—but they failed to go in. Why? God had already promised it to them. And He has also promised salvation to those who trust His Son. It was theirs for the taking, and it is yours as well. But instead of *taking God at His Word and obeying Him*, they selected spies to go in and inspect the land. Ten returned and reported, “It’s everything God said it was over there in Canaan. It is a land flowing with milk and honey, but there are giants in the land, and we can’t take it.” Joshua and Caleb said, “Yes, there are giants in the land, and there will be battles, but we can take it! God said He will give it to us, and we will believe God!”

The message Joshua and Caleb preached to them did not do them any good—why? Because they did not *mix it with faith*. They did not act on it and trust God’s Word.

The ingredient that makes a person right with God is faith in Christ—faith that acts, faith that trusts, faith that obeys the Word of Christ. Jesus said, “*Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter*” (Matt.7:21; Cf. Mark 3:31-35; 1 John 2:15-17). Hearing alone is not enough. Who is right before God?

**2. Doers are just before God (v.13b)**—The word “**but**” marks a contrast—“**but the doers of the Law will be justified.**” What does Paul mean?

First, think with me about *what it does not mean*. It does not mean *we are able to obey the Law perfectly*. In **Romans 3:20**, Paul states, “*because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin.*” In **James 2:10**, James says, “*For whoever keeps the whole law—*” that is to say, every command in every aspect of life, both in attitude and action—“*and yet stumbles in one point...*” It may not have even been *intentional or deliberate*. We can stumble because we were being *careless or not paying attention, or the enemy tripped us up.* “*Yet stumbles in one point [of the law], he has become guilty of all.*”

James does not mean if you dishonor your parents, then you are guilty of murder or covetousness. But rather, *to break God’s law at any point stamps you as a transgressor of the law*. Our obedience to the law cannot be *selective*. We cannot choose the parts we like and disregard the rest. To break out one corner of the windowpane is to break the whole window. So, Paul is not suggesting that if anyone keeps the law perfectly, they will be justified by God.

Second, think with me about *what Paul does mean in verse 13*. Paul is saying that *if you are more than a hearer of the Law*, but you are a repentant and a believer in Jesus as He is presented in the Gospel, *you will be a doer of the Word of God*—proving that you are justified or right with God.

Paul has already mentioned in Chapter 1:5 that he has been called as an apostle “*to bring about the obedience of faith*,” which means *the obedience that comes from or is produced by faith (Eph.2:8-10)*. All true saving faith is an obedient faith (*James 2:14ff*). If faith does not obey, it is not saving faith, and one is not right before God.

Paul is NOT saying that people are saved by law-keeping. He is laying down the principle that *hearing is not enough*. The person who is right with God *is more than a hearer*. The person who is right with God is more than a doer of good deeds with superficial outward acts. They do the will of God from the heart (*Rom.6:16-22*). Jesus said to the Pharisees:

- **Matthew 5:20**—“For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses *that* of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.”

The righteousness that surpasses that of the Pharisees *conforms to God’s demands both externally and internally*. When God *justifies* a person by faith, He also *regenerates* the one being justified. **The point is** that *a person who is born again will seek to live out a righteousness that shows that they are a justified-by-faith person.*

**How can a man be right with God?** It is only through the Gospel of Christ (*Rom.1:16-17*). It is by coming to Christ by faith and finding new life in Him (*2 Cor.5:17*). But even then, we are not capable of *obeying and serving* God by our own strength. We are only able to do it *because “it is God who is at work in you both to will and to work for His good pleasure” (Phil.2:13)*. Where the law is concerned, deeds and deeds only matter.

## RECAP:

- **Verses 12**—Who is guilty before God? *Everyone—Jew and Gentile, those under the law and those without the law.*
- **Verse 13**—Who is right with God? Many people are *religious* but *unregenerate* church members. They have a form of godliness but deny the power of godliness in their lives (*2 Tim.3:5*). Those who are right with God *do more than hear the law; they do the Law from the heart (Rom.6:17-22)*. They have repented of their sins and have true, genuine saving faith that proves itself in works—they do what God’s word says, not perfectly, but as the *pattern* and *passion* of their lives.

Now Paul advances the argument further and comes back to those who have not received special revelation—*those without the law* or *those who have never heard the Gospel*.

## C. WHAT ABOUT THOSE WHO HAVE NOT HEARD BUT DO THE LAW OF GOD? (vv.14-15)

Paul addresses the objector who would say, “Wait a minute, Paul, what about the moral pagan? What about the decent grandmother who has never heard the Gospel? What about the honorable father, the good-natured teenager, and the mild-mannered wife—who have not been exposed to the Gospel? Do you mean to tell me that God will condemn them too?”

Paul says they do not get a pass and will be condemned because God has written the law on their hearts. The invisible finger of God has written His law upon the tablet of every human heart. It is a limited knowledge of the Law. It is not enough to save, but it is enough to condemn.

- <sup>14</sup> For when Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves, <sup>15</sup> in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them.

What about those who have not heard but do the law of God? Paul says they are held accountable not just for their choices but for their deeds, conscience, thoughts, and secrets within them. They are not off the hook. Follow Paul’s argument.

Paul begins by giving two complementary facts which are self-evident.

1. **They do not have the law externally**—“**For when Gentiles who do not have the law...these, not having the law...**” (v.14a, c) It is stated twice in verse 14 for emphasis. *Externally, they do not possess the law.*
2. **They have the same standard internally (vv.14b-15)**—“**...do instinctively the things of the Law...**” (v.14b) which means some Gentiles *instinctively* do what the law requires. Intuitively, they know the difference between right and wrong—and you do too. This is an observable, verifiable fact that anthropologists have discovered everywhere. Not all human beings are *murderers, thieves, or adulterers*. On the contrary, some honor their parents, some practice honesty, some are loyal to their spouses, and some speak the truth—these are all deeds the law requires.

What does Paul mean when he says, “**these not having the Law, are a law to themselves**”? He is not saying they can frame their own laws.

The next line explains it (v.15)—“**in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts.**” In other words, they do not have the law *in their hands*, but they do have its operation *written on their hearts*—by whom? There is only One who can write it in their hearts and ours, and it is our Creator and Maker. This is what it means to be made in *the imago dei*—the image of God.

What is written on their hearts? It is not a reference to the *ceremonial law*, the *civil law*, or the *moral Law*, but “**the work of the law,**” or *the business or operation of the law*. And what is the business of the law? Its chief function is to *evaluate actions*. Here Paul describes the operation of **the conscience**—“*their conscience bearing witness and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them.*”

Every human being has a conscience. Richard Sibbes reminds us that “*conscience is the soul reflecting upon itself.*”

- Conscience is at the heart of what distinguishes human beings from other creatures.
- Conscience is *an innate ability to sense right and wrong*.
- Conscience *entreats us to do what we believe is right and restrains us from doing what we believe is wrong*.
- Conscience is not *the voice of God or the law of God*. It is a human faculty that judges our actions and thoughts.

When we *violate our conscience*, it condemns us, triggering feelings of *shame, anguish, regret, anxiety, disgrace, and even fear*. When we follow it rightly, it *commends us, bringing joy, peace, self-respect, well-being, and gladness*.

The word “**conscience**” is a combination of the Latin words *con* (“together”) and *scire* (“to know”). It literally means *co-knowledge*. It is a gift from God to help us know *our inner motives and true thoughts*. We may try to rationalize and justify things in our own minds, but a violated conscience will not be easily convinced.

The conscience is not infallible. Its role is not to teach us moral or ethical truth but *to hold us accountable to the highest standards of right and wrong we know*.

- The conscience functions like *a skylight, not a light bulb*. It lets light into the soul but does not produce its own.
- The conscience functions like *nerve endings in our fingertips*. It is sensitive to external stimuli but can be damaged by the buildup of callouses or even wounded badly—and become seared (1 Tim.4:2).
- The conscience functions *like a courtroom*. It is a *register* to record what we have done in exact detail (Jer.17:1). It is the *accuser* that lodges a complaint against us when we are guilty. It is a *defender* to side with us in our innocence (Rom.2:15). It acts as a *witness*, giving testimony for or against us (2 Cor.1:12). It is a *judge*, condemning or vindicating us (1 John 3:20-21). And it is an *executioner*, smiting us with grief when our guilt is discovered (1 Sam.24:5). Sibbes compared the chastisement of a violated conscience to “a flash of hell.”

There will be three witnesses summoned on the final day—**the heart** (testifying of what God requires), **the conscience** (testifying about what the sinner did or did not do), and **the thoughts** (accusing and sometimes excusing us).

My, my, my! Paul has stressed that *we cannot escape God's judgment*. It will be *righteous (vv.5-11), according to works, and impartial*. And now Paul concludes this section by giving us three further truths about judgment day.

- <sup>16</sup> on the day when, according to my gospel, God will judge the secrets of men through Christ Jesus.

What will be on trial is more than just our deeds that violate the law of God written on our hearts.

**First, God will judge men's secrets.** The motives, the attitudes, the hidden thoughts. Selfish ambitions. Revenge. Hidden anger and bitterness will all come out in the open before God on the last day. Everything concealed—*innermost thoughts and actions* will come into judgment. Spurgeon called it "the Greatest Trial on Record." The evidence will be overwhelming! Scripture tells us repeatedly that *God knows our hearts*. As a result, there will be no possibility of a miscarriage of justice on the last day. For all the facts will be known, including those which are not known at the present time.

**Second, God's judgment will take place through Jesus Christ.** He claimed that the Father had entrusted all judgment to Him (*John 5:22, 27*). Paul declared in Athens that God had both *fixed a day* and *appointed a Judge (Acts 17:31)*. If the secrets of men are to be brought into judgment, and if Jesus is to be the Judge, then He must be the Searcher of hearts—and He must be God. In Revelation 2:23—He said, *"I am He who searches the minds and hearts; and I will give to each one of you according to your deeds."* It is a great comfort to know that our Judge will be none other than our Savior. 1 Thessalonians 1:10 says it is Jesus who *"rescues us from the wrath to come."*

This Jesus is God and man in one person. He is the eternal Son of God, of the same in essence as the Father, equal to Him in power and glory, who, before the world, was appointed in time to be the Redeemer of mankind. And when the fullness of time had come, He took upon Himself a true human nature, body, and soul. He was conceived of the Holy Spirit, born of a lowly virgin, loved in a lowly condition, and was owned by a voice from heaven to be the only begotten and beloved Son of God. He preached good news to sinners, confirmed His doctrine by miracles, died for the salvation of sinners, was raised up on the third day, appeared to the disciples after the resurrection, and ascended up to heaven where He now is at the right hand of God, making intercession for us.

**Third, God's judgment is part of the Gospel.** The good news of salvation shines brightly against the backdrop of divine wrath. We cheapen the Gospel if we represent it as a deliverance *only from unhappiness, fear, or other felt needs*. The good news is that God rescues sinners from His own wrath *by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone*. Our Judge will be the One who died for us, so we could not look for anyone more predisposed in our favor. All that can be done for sinners, He has done and will certainly do.

## CONCLUSION AND APPLICATION:

Since He has done so much for us, we cannot expect that He is okay with half-hearted devotion or mere attendance. The application for us today is to examine ourselves.



- **2 Corinthians 13:5-6**—Test yourselves *to see* if you are in the faith; examine yourselves! Or do you not recognize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you—unless indeed you fail the test? <sup>6</sup>But I trust that you will realize that we ourselves do not fail the test.

**IF you have a saving interest in Christ, then you have FAITH.** Not merely historical faith or temporary faith, but justifying faith to discern Christ, apply the truth, love the Lord, and follow Him.

**IF you have a saving interest in Christ, then you have LIFE.** 1 John 5:12, *“He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life.”* Eternal life, spiritual life—you are alive in Christ, you have a spiritual appetite, spiritual motions turning away from sin and toward Christ, and spiritual senses to discern good and evil.

**IF you have a saving interest in Christ, then you have LOVE.** You love Christ *sincerely* and *supremely* so that it could never be pronounced upon you, *“If anyone does not love the Lord, he is to be accursed”* (1 Cor.16:22).

**IF you have a saving interest in Christ, then you have LIKENESS.** You are not perfectly like Him, but you are progressively like Him in your disposition, humility, and the like. You endeavor to be more and more like Him, but where pride reigns instead of humility, anger instead of meekness, malice and revenge instead of forgiveness, then you are without a saving interest in Christ.

**IF you have a saving interest in Christ, then you have OBEDIENCE.** Your faith shows in your works; your love shows in your obedience.

Test your interest in Christ. He is the only Deliverer from the wrath of God—test it by these marks and evidence.

© July 16, 2023 The Church at South Mountain

You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce and distribute this material in any format provided that you do not alter the wording in any way and do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction.

For web posting, a link to this document on our website is preferred. Any exceptions to the above must be approved by The Church at South Mountain.

Please include the following statement on any distributed copy:

© The Church at South Mountain. Website: [casm.org](http://casm.org)

While all reasonable attempts have been taken to trace the literary and biblical sources used by the author, due to the nature of some of the original materials (old audio/radio or live preaching events), some have been impossible to locate. Any information regarding the origin of any unreferenced statements or quotations is welcomed and will be included in the next revision of the study.

Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are from the New American Standard Bible: 1960, 1962, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1975, 1977, 1995 by the Lockman Foundation.