

II. The Heart of the Gospel: Justification by Faith (1:18–4:25)

A. The Universal Reign of Sin (1:18–3:20)

1. All Persons Are Accountable to God for Sin (1:18–32)

- In this section (vv. 18–32), Paul begins explaining why humanity needs God to reveal his righteousness through the gospel. His answer will extend until 3:20, but he first states that God’s wrath is presently “**being revealed from heaven**” against mankind (v. 18). This “**wrath**” is something that can now be seen. Paul makes several points in explaining how this is so:
- ***All men know God.*** God is giving humanity some of the consequences of their sin before the final judgment. God is right to do this because men “**suppress the truth by their wickedness**” (v. 18). They know God but live as if they do not.
- ***All men know God because he has revealed himself to them.*** In verse 19, Paul gives the reason why (“**since**”) he can say that men are wrongly suppressing the truth, i.e., denying something that is plain to them. Paul can say this “**because**” (v. 19b) God has revealed himself to them. The translation “**to them**” (e.g., NIV, ESV, CSB) is probably better than the NASB’s “within them.” However, the rest of the passage indicates that God has revealed himself to us internally. In verse 20, Paul gives the reason why (“**for**”) he can say that God has revealed himself to all humanity. He points to how creation displays God’s attributes; of course, man is part of this creation. This revelation from God is limited, but it includes an awareness of his power and deity (v. 20). People are created with God’s fingerprints on them, and it is an act of their will that suppresses this knowledge.
- ***All men are, therefore, without excuse for rejecting God (v. 20b).*** This revelation is only partial (nobody knows everything about God) and will not lead anyone to Christ, but it does make all men responsible for their rejection of the true God. God is not obligated to send additional revelation to those who have already rejected what has been given. Therefore, those who have not heard the gospel are guilty as well.
- ***All men demonstrate their rejection of God by their actions.*** After an aside in verses 19–20, Paul returns in verse 21 to give a reason for God’s wrath (“**for**”), explaining what he means by “**godlessness and wickedness**” in verse 18, i.e., even though men know God, they do not honor him as God or give him thanks. Instead of glorifying God, they choose to worship the creation over the Creator (v. 23; cf. v. 25). Even though they claim to be wise, they act like fools (v. 22).
- “**Therefore**” (v. 24), God is right to punish them for this rejection (vv. 24–32). Paul describes the consequences of mankind’s rebellion three times using the word “**exchanged**” (vv. 23, 25, 26) to describe mankind’s actions and three times using “**gave them over**” to describe God’s appropriate response (vv. 24, 26, 28). Paul emphasizes humanity’s idolatry (v. 25) and sexual immorality, particularly

homosexuality¹⁹, which is called “unnatural” and “shameful acts” (vv. 26–27), but also lists many examples of mankind’s sin (vv. 29–31).²⁰ This action of “giving them over” should be viewed “as a positive, judicial decision on God’s part, whereby he sentences people to the very sins they have chosen for themselves” (EBR, 40). This word, translated as “gave them over,” is used to describe how a person is handed over to a court for punishment (see e.g., Matt 10:17; 20:9; 24:9; Lk 21:12; 24:20). So, God is not only just in punishing sinners, but he also gives a penalty that fits their crimes.²¹

- ***All men know they have done what is wrong.*** Because they are created in God’s image, all people know right from wrong, and they know that their actions deserve punishment. They not only know that God created them (our second point), but they know that they are accountable to him as Lord. This does not mean that people will always admit this. The passage tells us that they are suppressing the truth, and one of the consequences of their rebellion against God is a “depraved mind” (v. 28). So, they start believing a lie. Furthermore, they not only do the evil things listed in this passage, but they also approve of others doing them (v. 32). Notice they are doing things they know deserve a death penalty. Therefore, there is a level of self-deception that keeps humanity from seeing the truth.
- It is against this backdrop of the revelation of God’s wrath that God also reveals his righteousness through the preaching of the gospel.

¹⁹ This particular sin is likely singled out because it so obviously goes against God’s created order.

²⁰ The last “gave them over” phrase (v. 28) includes a play on words. Paul says that men did not find it “worthwhile” (NASB has “see fit”) to acknowledge God, so God gave them over to a “worthless” mind (NASB has “depraved” mind). This “worthless” mind results in people doing “things that are not fit” and in vv. 29–31 Paul lists out these unfit things.

²¹ It is not clear what Paul means by “**received in themselves the due penalty for their error**” (v. 27). It could be that he is referring to homosexuality itself as the penalty given by God to those who have abandoned what nature so clearly teaches about the genders. The paragraph is making this point, but it is not clear whether this particular phrase is making this point. It could be that Paul is referring to eternal punishment as something that these individuals will personally receive. This would fit with other passages of Scripture such as 1 Cor 6:9–10.

2. Jews Are Accountable to God for Sin (2:1–3:8): In the previous section (1:18–32), Paul focused on how all men have rejected general revelation and thus stand justly condemned before God. In this section (2:1–8), Paul turns to how special revelation has also been rejected by men, specifically by the Jewish people.
 - a. The Jews and the Judgment of God (2:1–16)
 - i. Critique of Jewish Presumption (2:1–5): “Paul places Jews in the same category into which he has placed the gentiles (1:21–32): guilty of sinful acts and ‘without excuse’” (Moo, *EBR*, 46).
 - Paul uses the literary device called *diatribe* in this section. A diatribe is a style that “usually takes the form of a dialogue, using questions and answers to make its points. The writer enters into a discussion with a fictional opponent as a way of advancing his or her own argument” (Moo, *EBR*, 47). This style can be seen in the way that Paul uses pronouns. In 1:18–32, Paul used the third person (“them,” “they”) to describe what is generally true of humanity. In this section, Paul uses the second person (“you,” “yourself”) in a conversation with a fictional opponent who represents the typical Jewish person of the first century.
 - Paul says that the Jewish opponent does the “**same things**” (v. 1) as the pagan described in the previous section. All men are undoubtedly guilty of the broad types of sins listed in 1:29–31. Therefore, when the Jewish person judges others for sinning, he condemns himself because he will face the same standard (Jesus makes a very similar argument in Matt 7:1–2).
 - Paul’s Jewish conversation partner would have agreed with him that God’s judgment on people who do such things is “**based on truth**” (v. 2, NIV, CSB), i.e., based on the “actual facts of the case” (Moo, *EBR*, 46).
 - However, while acknowledging that God was just and that they were sinners, many first-century Jewish people would have put trust in their status as God’s covenant people as the means of rescue from the penalty that these sins deserved (see e.g., Wis. Sol. 15.1–3). Paul responds by noting that God’s “**kindness, forbearance, and patience**” towards the Jewish people should lead them to repentance (v. 4). God’s faithfulness in preserving them as a people was not a testament to their goodness but to God’s mercy.
 - Instead of storing up for themselves treasures in the age to come, the unbelieving Jewish person, like the Gentile, is “**storing up wrath**” for themselves because of their “**stubbornness**” and “**unrepentance heart**” (v. 5). Their national identity would do them no good on the day of judgment if they did not repent. This was also stated by the OT (e.g., Jer 7), John the Baptist (Matt 3:7–12), and by Jesus himself (Luke 13:1–9).

- ii. The Impartiality of Judgment (2:6–11): God’s judgment of the Jewish people will be consistent with his impartial treatment of all people at the Final Judgment. Paul makes his argument by using a chiasmic structure (i.e., a literary device where ideas are presented and then repeated in inverted order, usually with the main idea expressed in the center):
- **God is impartial, so he will use the same standard to judge everyone—their works (vv. 6, 11).** The phrase “**will repay each person according to what they have done**” is nearly an exact quote from Psalm 62:12 and Proverbs 24:12 (note the quotation marks in the NIV; cf. Jer 17:10; Matt 16:27; 1 Pet 1:17; Rev 2:23). “The critical criteria at the judgment will be their inner disposition toward [God] and the way of life it produces. God will not render judgment based on what people possess, know, or hear. Nor will his judgment take into account the social group with which they identify” (Thielman, 130).
 - **People who persistently do good will attain glory and eternal life (vv. 7, 10).** Using the words “**persistence**” and “**seek**,” Paul emphasizes the consistency of good works. There are two ways that this verse can be reconciled with what Paul will later say about the impossibility of our good works making us right with God (e.g., 3:20; 4:2–5):
 - Paul could be referring to the fruit of the Spirit produced in the lives of Christians (see e.g., Schreiner, Kruse, Morris, Harrison/Hagner).
 - In my opinion, Paul is more likely presenting the standard God uses in determining whether any man is worthy of eternal life, but Christ only meets this standard (see e.g., Moo, Thielman, Murray).²² Therefore, in this context, Paul presents the hopeless situation in which we all find ourselves (the Jewish person included) apart from Christ’s righteousness. Other NT passages indeed describe the importance of the believer’s Spirit-enabled works at the final judgment (e.g., 2 Cor 5:10; James 2:17), but that is not Paul’s focus here in Romans 2.
 - **People who do evil will suffer God’s wrath (vv. 8, 9).** Verse 8 clarifies that it is not just the outward action that will be judged but also the underlying selfish ambitions of men (see “**self-seeking**”). Both the Jew and the Gentile

²² On this major interpretive question in Romans 2 see esp. Kevin W. McFadden, *Judgment According to Works in Romans* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013): 43–62, 139–53 and the presentation by Lee Irons which is available at <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/lee-irons-on-rom-213/>. Some call this view the “hypothetical view” (e.g., Irons uses this name for his own view). However, this name overlooks (1) the reality of the offer and (2) the fact that Christ actually met this condition. As the rest of the letter to the Romans will make clearer, Christ’s obedience merited eternal life and those who are united to him share in his righteousness and thus share in the eternal life he deserves.

will suffer God's wrath. The Jewish person's privileges do not excuse them at the judgment but instead make them "**first**" in receiving judgment (v. 9).

iii. Judgment and the Law (2:12–16): In this section, Paul addresses the objection that the Jewish people possess the Law of Moses and are thus not in the same situation as Gentiles with whom God had not made a covenant at Sinai. Paul answers that both Gentiles and Jews will perish. Having or not having the Mosaic Law will make no difference (v. 12). The reason ("**for**") Paul can say this is that God will be basing his judgment on whether you did the Law and not on whether you had the Law (v. 13). When Christ returns, he will be God's agent judging both Jews and Gentiles (v. 16). God will be just in condemning unbelieving Gentiles because they violated their consciences ("**the requirements of the law are written on their hearts,**" v. 15; cf. Jer 17:1).²³ Unbelievers at times "**do by nature**" or "do instinctively" (v. 14)²⁴ the things God requires, but in so doing, they actually condemn themselves because they are demonstrating that there is a law which they do not always keep. They do not persistently do good.

b. The Limitations of the Covenant (2:17–29): "The basic point [of this section]... is to show that the legitimate Jewish boast in possessing the law and circumcision (the mark of the covenant) falls short of bringing salvation to the Jewish people" (Moo, *EBR*, 51).

i. The Law (2:17–24)

- The Jewish people were given the great privilege of possessing the Law and being able to share it with those who did not have it (vv. 18–20).
- In verses 22–23, Paul gives examples of how the Jewish people have not lived up to this great privilege. Of course, not every Jewish person has committed all of these offenses, but these are the types of sins committed by the Jewish people as a whole, represented by Paul's fictitious opponent. The meaning of the phrase "**rob temples**" (v. 22) is debated since this does not seem like something that was regularly done, but it likely refers to the practice of profiting from goods (e.g., precious metals) taken from pagan temples, which was a violation of the Law of Moses (cf. Deut 7:25–26).

²³ It is possible that Paul's statement that the actions of Gentiles at times are "**defending them**" (v. 15) is a hint towards believing Gentiles who have a transformed heart (see e.g., Schriener).

²⁴ The phrase "by nature" could modify the phrase "do not have the Law" rather than the phrase "do the things of the Law." For example the CSB translates the verse as, "So, when Gentiles, who **do not by nature have the law**, do what the law demands, they are a law to themselves even though they do not have the law." Either way, Paul is referring to Gentiles doing at times things that the Law of Moses required of the Jewish people. The reason why unbelievers sometimes do what is right is because God has graciously given them a conscience and he uses it, and other means, to restrain their evil behavior. As verse 15 makes clear, Paul's focus here is on the conscience.

- ii. Circumcision (2:25–29):
- There is debate on whether the uncircumcised man who keeps the law in vv. 26–27 is a believing or unbelieving Gentile.
 - It could be that Paul refers to the unbeliever who occasionally follows his conscience and does what is right (as in vv. 14–15).
 - Alternatively, it could be that Paul refers to a condition that is never met (as in vv. 7 and 10; so, e.g., Moo, Thielman).
 - However, it may be that here, at last, Paul points specifically to those Gentiles who will have a changed heart and do things that are genuinely pleasing to God (so, e.g., Schreiner).
 - In Deuteronomy 30:6, God promised that he would someday “circumcise the heart” of the people of Israel so that they would repent of their sins (cf. Jer 9:25; 24:7). The OT also referred to unbelieving Gentiles as those who were “uncircumcised in their hearts” (Ezek 44:7, 9). The Jewish people were called upon to “circumcise” their “hearts” (Deut 10:16). “Circumcision of the heart” is the equivalent to the new birth—it is what makes genuine repentance and faith in Christ possible. Whether Paul refers here to those who are transformed and are following God’s moral law or whether he is still referring to a group of people who never actually exist, from these OT passages, Paul’s readers would know that what ultimately counted before God was not outward acts but an inward transformation.
- c. God’s Faithfulness and the Judgment of Jews (3:1–8): “Here he heads off any idea that his argument in chapter 2 undercuts his claim from the theme of the letter (1:16) that the gospel is for the Jew first” (Moo, *EBR*, 56).
- In this section, Paul is again using the diatribe style. The section is an aside from the main argument of 2:1–3:20 to address some possible objections to what was said in chapter 2. The questions posed by Paul’s fictional Jewish opponent appear in vv. 1, 3, 5, 7. Paul’s responses appear in vv. 2, 4, 6, 8
 - To the objection that Paul’s argument in Romans 2 leaves the Jewish people without any advantage (v. 1), Paul answers that the Jewish people have a genuine advantage in that they were given the “**very words of God**,” i.e., the OT (v. 2). They had special revelation even though it was rejected by most of them.
 - To the question of whether most Jewish people’s unfaithfulness would nullify God’s promises (v. 3), Paul answers that God will remain faithful to his commitments to the Jewish people (v. 4).²⁵ However, by citing Psalm 51:4 as support (a passage where David speaks of God’s just punishment in the case of

²⁵ Paul will return to this question in Rom 9–11 and develop it much further.