

Sermons through

Romans

Work of the Law in the Heart

Romans 2:12-16

With Study Questions

*Pastor Paul Viggiano
Branch of Hope Church
2370 W. Carson Street, #100
Torrance, CA 90501
(310) 212-6999
pastorpaul@integrity.com
www.branchofhope.org
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For as many as have sinned without law will also perish without law, and as many as have sinned in the law will be judged by the law ¹³ (for not the hearers of the law *are* just in the sight of God, but the doers of the law will be justified; ¹⁴ for when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do the things in the law, these, although not having the law, are a law to themselves, ¹⁵ who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves *their* thoughts accusing or else excusing *them*) ¹⁶ in the day when God will judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ, according to my gospel (Romans 2:12-16).

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The Righteous Guru

So very much can, and has been, said and written on this passage that it is difficult to zero in on how it is to be preached. There is general consent that verse 12 holds all men without excuse – that whether or not you were raised in the church (in this case the Old Covenant church of Israel) or outside the church, that all men are without excuse in their sin and disdain for God and His righteous counsel (Romans 1:18-21).

Years ago a friend told me of his complaint against Christianity. The problem lies, he explained, in the notion that a hermit/guru living in a tree in the rain forest who never harmed a single soul or had a foul thought would, apart from Christ, be condemned to hell. My friend had conjured in his mind this perfect person – this heavenly earth-man who had never done evil – and my friend could not reconcile how a just God would condemn such a person for simply not following Jesus.

At first blush the scenario causes one to pause. But upon further examination it becomes apparent that his mythical narrative is fraught with error and false suppositions. For one, condemnation is not the consequence of refusing to follow or believe in Jesus – condemnation is the

consequence of sin. Rejecting Jesus is to refuse one's only hope of rescue from sin.

He made the false supposition that a sinless man would not go to heaven. A sinless man needs no savior. The announcement of the gospel did not come until Adam sinned. But the primary error made by this story is the notion of the sinless man. The man who thinks he is sinless, according to John, deceives himself and the truth is not him (1 John 1:8).

If sinfulness is an attribute of all men (as the Bible proclaims from cover to cover) then it is an error to assume someone else to be sinless (excepting Jesus of course). Furthermore, so deep and undeniable is this truth (the truth of all men being indwelt and corrupted by sin) that Jesus announces that He did not come for those who deny this self-evident truth.

And when Jesus heard it, he said to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners" (Mark 2:17).

Verse 12 explains this universal inexcusability. Whether one is raised with a Bible in their hand (or more likely in the case of the first century Jew – hearing it read in the synagogue) or with no written code whatsoever, there is not a man who does not sin and there is no man who is truly seeking the God against whom he sins.

The entire human race would shake their collective fist against their Maker – against the only source of truth and wisdom. There is no person pining away for a God who, in His celestial indifference, is somehow ignoring his plea for holiness – no bushman, no mountain priest. If we learn anything from the opening chapters of Romans, it is the desperate case of all humanity.

(for not the hearers of the law *are* just in the sight of God, but the doers of the law will be justified (Romans 2:13)).

Who Will Be Justified?

It is here that the passage gets trickier – especially if we agree with the definition of "just" and "justified," given by so many fine teachers, of a forensic declaration of acquittal:

To be just before God, and to be justified, are the same thing. They are both forensic expressions, and indicate the state rather than the character of those to whom they refer.¹

I should also point out that both δικαιοι (*dikaioi*, righteous) and δικαιωθήσονται (*dikaiōthēsontai*, shall be declared righteous) are forensic in this verse.² ('Righteous' and 'declared righteous' being "just" and "justified").

In other words "just" does not tell us about the character of the person but about the verdict of the Judge. We discussed this last week so I'll not spend a great deal of time here. If you recall we observed two types of people in the previous passage – those who did good and those who obey unrighteousness.

Having eliminated untenable explanations, we concluded that Paul was either (in his description of the righteous person) merely giving a hypothetical (not entirely unlike my friend's righteous hermit/guru – although without the false assumptions), or Paul was teaching of the evidence of righteous deeds that necessarily accompany (at some level) the truly faithful.

What must be rejected is the idea that men merit acquittal from the searching eyes of a Holy God who "**will judge the secrets of men**" by virtue of their law-keeping; or, as Calvin explains:

That if righteousness be sought from the law, the law must be fulfilled; for the righteousness of the law consists in the perfection of works." They who pervert this passage for the purpose of building up justification by works, deserve most fully to be laughed at even by children.³

Calvin may sound testy here, but we must understand that he lived in an era when there was widespread ecclesiastical abuse of a doctrine that proclaimed salvation via personal piety, holiness and financial offerings –

¹ Charles Hodge, Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans. Page 54

² Schreiner, T. R. (1998). *Vol. 6: Romans*. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (119). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

³ Calvin, J. (1998). *Romans* (electronic ed.). Calvin's Commentaries (Ro 2:13). Albany, OR: Ages Software.

and many of those proclaiming that doctrine living lives devoid of any holiness whatsoever!⁴

Be that as it may, we should not understand Paul's words here to be in conflict with his own words in the very next chapter, where he writes:

Where is boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? Of works? No, but by the law of faith. ²⁸ Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law (Romans 3:27, 28).

Simply put, we are not acquitted by God by virtue of our works – that the worker is justified does not necessarily mean the work justifies him. Paul continues:

for when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do the things in the law, these, although not having the law, are a law to themselves, ¹⁵ who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves *their* thoughts accusing or else excusing *them*) ¹⁶ in the day when God will judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ, according to my gospel (Romans 2:14-16).

Natural Law?

There is some debate as to who these gentiles are, “**who do not have the law,**” but “**by nature do the things in the law**” and somehow becoming a “**law unto themselves.**” Some believe these are gentile Christians in the church; others believe Paul is writing about non-Jewish humanity in general. There are good arguments for both. But there are some conclusions people tend to draw from this passage that I think are unwarranted:

For one, whether the gentiles are Christians or not, it would be a mistake to assume that this “**law to themselves**” creates a sufficient codification of ethical or moral conduct – as if man, because he is made in the image of God can, apart from the written revelation of God (the Bible), arrive at specific, accurate, godly, ethical conclusions and decisions. At whatever level this thing called ‘natural law’ is derived from ‘general

⁴ The observation of Luther leading to the Reformation.

revelation' and human nature (or the *imago dei*), it is, because of sin, very flawed.

One need merely look at the gentile Christian in the Scriptures to see how this method falters. These people, according to Paul **“show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves *their thoughts accusing or else excusing them*).** But when it came to eating meat sacrificed to idols, Paul writes that **“their conscience, (was) being weak, (and) is defiled” (1 Corinthians 8:7 – prentesis mine).** In short, when it comes to ethics, our conscience, operating independently from Scripture, can be trusted only so far.

I, therefore, think it is a mistake to draw the conclusion that natural man, apart from Christ and His law, can create industrious, lasting societies of mutual equity – even if motivated by some primal survival instinct. If history has shown us anything, it has shown us that men, left to their own accord will eventually devour themselves and grow ripe for God’s holy judgment. This is evidenced by so many eras recorded in Scripture, including Noah, Sodom and Moses’ prophetic anticipation of Israel’s deliverance from Egypt which would coincide with **“the iniquity of the Amorites”** reaching its **“fullness” (Genesis 15:16).** We can delude ourselves into thinking that modern man, because of his appropriation of natural law, will not suffer the fate of the Amorites – but here we overestimate ourselves.

So what is Paul’s point here? What can we safely derive from this notion of the **“works of the law written”** on the hearts of man?” It would appear that Paul is describing, in a very general and flawed sense, man’s knowledge of right and wrong. As Calvin explains:

Nor can we conclude from this passage, that there is in men a *full* knowledge of the law, but that there are only some seeds of what is right implanted in their nature, evidenced by such acts as these ⁵

Mere Externalism

Again, what is Paul’s point in writing these words?

⁵ Calvin, J. (1998). *Romans* (electronic ed.). Calvin’s Commentaries (Ro 2:15). Albany, OR: Ages Software.

Perhaps Paul is writing of the hypothetical natural man who does good unto justification – a simple laying down of the rules of God’s just judgments. But as a pastor who had concern for the souls under his care, it appears he noticed something else in that church that needed to be addressed. T. R. Schreiner observes:

It is crucial to understand that Paul’s aim is to show the Jews that possession of the law is not inherently salvific and constitutes no advantage over the Gentiles.⁶

As a young Christian, full of enthusiasm and perhaps too large a dose of anti-establishmentarianism, I remember being very committed to churches which emphasized a personal/individual faith in Christ – perhaps to the exclusion of the necessary corporate relationship we are called to have as the body of Christ.

Nonetheless Paul (especially in the next section – verses 17-29) will sound out those who have all the outward accoutrements of religion but appear to function with uncircumcised hearts. It might be easy here to pick on Roman Catholics and Greek Orthodox, in their high liturgies which, it would appear at some level, encourage this kind of externalism; as if their peace with God is found in their church membership and its many rituals.

But we (especially as we have become a second and third generation church) should not think ourselves immune to this. We have membership vows, sacraments, sermons and Bibles – but do we have hearts of faith toward Christ and love toward God and our neighbor? Do we think our religion is covered by that which is merely external – things others can see? Later in this chapter Paul will seek to dismantle the notion of seeking comfort in the external:

For he is not a Jew who *is one* outwardly, nor *is* circumcision that which *is* outward in the flesh;²⁹ but *he is* a Jew who *is one* inwardly; and circumcision *is that* of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter; whose praise *is not* from men but from God (Romans 2:28, 29).

⁶ Schreiner, T. R. (1998). *Vol. 6: Romans*. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (118). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

Given Much – Good or Bad?

Being a member in good standing of a Christian church is not inherently salvific. It is a sign that we have been given much by God – which can be a good or bad thing:

And that servant who knew his master's will, and did not prepare *himself* or do according to his will, shall be beaten with many *stripes*.⁴⁸ But he who did not know, yet committed things deserving of stripes, shall be beaten with few. For everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required; and to whom much has been committed, of him they will ask the more (Luke 12:47, 48).

In light of these things, I can understand the little debate over the portion of our church service where sinners are pardoned by virtue of their confession of sin and faith in Christ. Some think it is just too easy – telling people their sins are forgiven. Others don't like the word often used during the pardon, saying that we should have faith in "sincerity" thus adding the burden of some level of sincerity.

This tension seems unavoidable. One need merely observe Jesus when a woman, who was described merely as a sinner fell at His feet and wept – and how she received the wonderful pardon **"Your sins are forgiven... Your faith has saved you; go in peace"** (Luke 7:48, 50). Jesus could have said what He said elsewhere: **"For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven"** (Matthew 5:20). He could have said what He said to the rich young ruler: **"If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me"** (Matthew 19:21).

Jesus says all these things within the boundaries of the gospel – He wasn't offering conflicting messages. But He knew the heart of the woman; He knew the heart of the Pharisees and of the rich young ruler. We, of course do not know the heart of others. Now perhaps Paul in all of this is merely writing of a hypothetical person. Or perhaps he is seeking to put his readers to the test – that they might consider whether or not they, by faith in Christ, have circumcised hearts – and therefore seek to do the

things of the law – not in an effort to merit justification before God – but as the necessary fruit of saving faith.

Secret Things

Let us take to heart that it is not the outward things that Paul writes of on the Day of Judgment, but the “**secret things.**” Schreiner writes:

The accusing and defending work of the conscience in the present will reach its consummation, full validity, and clarification on the day of judgment, when God will judge the secrets of all⁷

Paul writes elsewhere:

Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God (1 Corinthians 4:5).

Calvin concludes:

When we hear this, let it come to our minds, that we are warned that if we wish to be really approved by our Judge, we must strive for sincerity of heart.⁸

So it is neither a works righteousness nor a level of sincerity which procures salvation – as Paul will later write: “**It is God who justifies**” (Romans 8:33). When Paul writes “**Grace be with all those who love our Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity**” (Ephesians 6:24) he is not writing of a level as much as a type – not a quantity but a quality of love – it is a God-given incorruptible, unceasing and immortal love – though checkered with human failure, it is nonetheless a love which flows from a circumcised heart.

⁷ Schreiner, T. R. (1998). *Vol. 6: Romans*. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (125). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

⁸ Calvin, J. (1998). *Romans* (electronic ed.). Calvin’s Commentaries (Ro 2:16). Albany, OR: Ages Software.

Questions for Study

1. Discuss the idea of a perfectly righteous guru/hermit and if such a person would go to heaven apart from Christ (pages 2, 3).
2. How does verse 12 explain the universal inexcusability of man (page 3)?
3. What does “just” and/or “justified” mean? How is one justified? If the doers of the law are justified, does it follow that they are justified by the doing (pages 3-5)?
4. Define and discuss the strengths and weaknesses of “natural law” (pages 5, 6).
5. Compare, contrast and explain how external things relate to the issues of the heart (pages 6, 7).
6. What are the difficulties associated with the declaration of pardon for sinners (pages 8, 9)?
7. How should we respond to the knowledge that God will judge “the secret things?” (page 9)?