

BIBLE STUDY ROMANS 2

Introduction

Chapter divisions in the Bible are useful for navigation, but they can be troublesome when it comes to tracking the flow of an argument. Paul does begin a new section in Romans 2—but one that builds directly on the latter half of chapter 1. He begins with a “**What were you thinking?!**” kind of **statement** that assumes we know Paul is talking to the Romans. Paul fills in the “**who**” by using a series of support clauses that digress from the original question of “**Who are you?**”

Even though in most English Bibles, 1:18–32 is labeled with a heading like “the guilt of humankind,” not everyone who reads this passage would believe it applies to them. Paul lists some pretty egregious sins, and our tendency to think more highly of ourselves than we should often leads us to deflect things we should take to heart. After all, who hasn’t envied or expressed hatred? But in the broader context, it’s easy to see how people who had not committed the big sins could exempt themselves entirely. They think, “Boy, I’m sure glad I don’t do horrible things like that!” Paul seems to have anticipated that some Jewish readers would exempt themselves from his indictment of seemingly pagan Gentile behavior. But excluding themselves from the condemnations of chapter 1 sets them up to get zinged in 2:1. Paul lists things everyone can agree are wrong—only to turn the tables on the people who exempted themselves.

Romans 2:1–16

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Pastor Maurice Anderson
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Wednesday,

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Turning the Tables Romans 2:1



- Unrighteousness
- Wicked
- Greedy
- Evil
- Murderers
- Gossips
- Slanderers
- Haters of God

TURNING THE TABLES: We have a tendency to think more highly of ourselves than we should; we think we are generally good people. When Paul presents a list like this, our first inclination is to think of other people who fit the descriptions. But rarely do we place ourselves at the top of the list. There is always someone more evil, more vile, right? Paul uses the list of sins in Romans 1:29–31 to set the stage for a reversal in 2:1. Remember, sin is a universal problem; it does not discriminate, no matter what kind of wishful thinking might lead us to believe otherwise. Rather than directly addressing the “holier than thou” crowd and trying to win a conviction, Paul uses a backdoor approach. How? He gets them to heartily affirm that a whole host of things are deplorable and then shows them that they do the very same kinds of things. Conclusion? They (and we) are just as much under the impending wrath as the heathen Gentiles who likely came to their minds.

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Turning the Tables Romans 2:1



SAY WHAT!?

- Unrighteousness
- Wicked
- Greedy
- Evil
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- Gossips
- Slanderers
- Haters of God

...and YOU!

TURNING THE TABLES: Paul's condemnation of clearly sinful behavior in 1:29–31 would not draw opposition, but agreement, especially from those who were confident in their righteous standing before God. He turns the tables in 2:1–3 by declaring that “you” are under judgment, identifying “you” as those who pass judgment on others and do the same things.

He exploits the human tendency toward pride to emphasize that we all face the same impending judgment, thus we all have the same need for reconciliation with God. We may not have committed the heinous sins listed at the end of Romans 1, but no one is sinless. We display the height of hypocrisy when we judge others for what we do ourselves.

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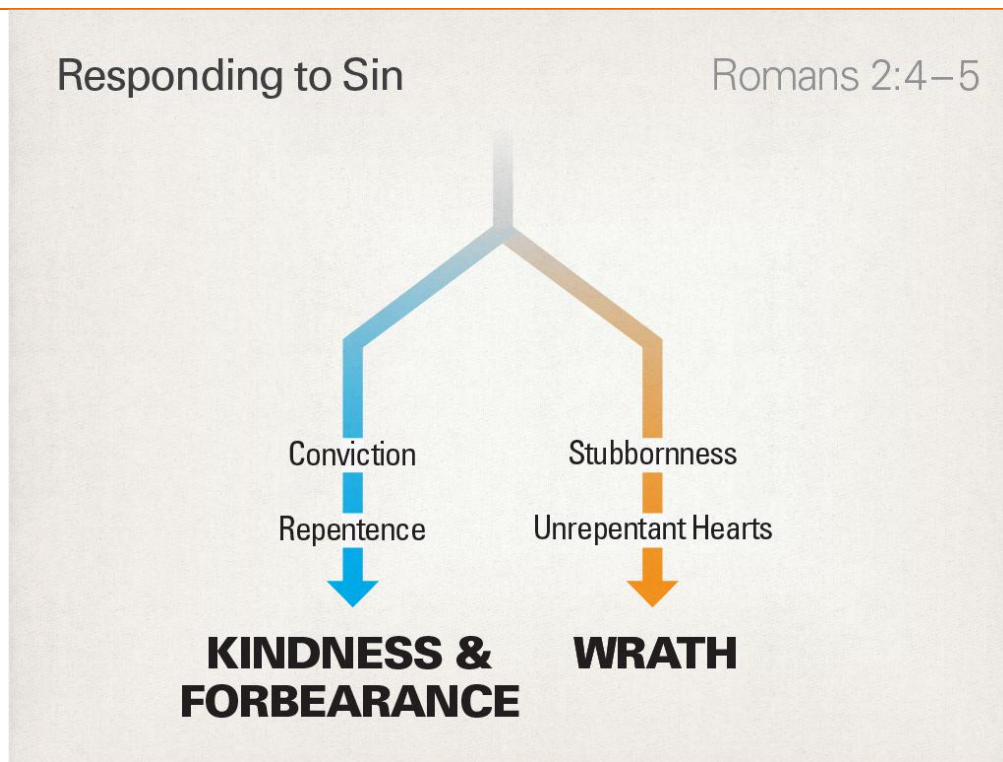
DELAY TACTIC: Paul begins this section with a series of statements addressed to “you” without clearly identifying the people to whom he refers. He identifies them as “you who pass judgment on others and do the same thing,” then repeats this same information twice more. The final time this information functions as a detour of sorts, separating the question of what is supposed from what is supposed. Since Paul has already identified his intended audience in 2:1 and 2, the repetition in 2:3 serves the rhetorical function of causing a delay to draw attention to the what: “escaping judgment.”

Paul devotes the rest of this chapter to fleshing out the “no matter what.” Even though Paul addresses all people, it is fair to assume that good Jews (or modern Christians) would exclude themselves from those facing impending judgment. Why? Because no self-respecting Jew would participate in sexual immorality, murder, or most of the other things Paul lists. And if they had any doubt about their behavior, they could appeal to their special covenant relationship with God. This is precisely why Paul transitions here to dispelling the notion that

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Jews and Gentiles are somehow held to different standards. To really understand the gospel, we need to understand that everyone is in the same predicament.

The hypocrite in question wants to condemn sinners rather than pardon them or extend grace. After all, doesn't their sin deserve to be judged? Yes, but the hypocrite is only looking at one side of the proposition. They ignore the fact that they are behaving in the same way. Paul claims that God's kindness, forbearance, and patience are intended to bring about repentance. The hypocrite lacks these qualities, and Paul characterizes the hypocrite's decision to condemn as despising God's kindness and patience. This comes as a slap in the face to those who expect God to respond to sin with the same righteous indignation they do.



RESPONDING TO SIN: There is a tendency to think of God monolithically, as either kind and loving or as harsh and judgmental. In reality, both views are true. One of the keys to determining which aspect of God we experience is our response to the recognition

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that we have sinned and therefore face God's wrath. Paul outlines two paths. Those who acknowledge their sin and repent experience God's kindness, forbearance, and patience as they walk by faith. Those who reject the conviction of sin and refuse to repent face the very wrath described in Romans 1. Our perspective on God's character relates directly to our response to sin

Verse 5 makes clear they are not escaping wrath, but storing it up instead. Second, God doesn't write people off just because they have sinned. In fact, in God's economy, His kindness, forbearance, and patience are intended to bring about a change of heart in the sinner. He is not letting them off the hook, but merely giving them an opportunity to change.

No matter which path we take, we will be judged by God; there is no way around it. Paul makes clear that a person's lineage as a Jew or Gentile will not affect the outcome, since God uses the same standard to judge everyone. It is not a matter of merely possessing the law, but of obediently living it out.

Remember that the problem of sin is described at the end of Romans 1 as a rejection of God's created order. If we continue to reject His order, we will eventually become stubborn and unrepentant, the darkening of the heart Paul describes in 1:21–23.

God responds with forbearance and patience. Why? Because He wants us to turn back to Him instead of continuing in our stubborn rebellion. Remember, He created us for a purpose, and that purpose has been derailed by sin. God's desire is that we would return to Him instead of pressing ahead down the wrong path. We need a complete change of direction—repentance. If we do not repent, judgment and wrath await us. But if we are willing to



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humble ourselves and repent, to respond favorably to God's kindness, forbearance, and patience toward us, we can expect a completely different outcome.

IN ROMANS 2:11 PAUL RAISES THE ISSUE OF

PARTIALITY (RESPECT OF PERSONS),

rejecting any notion that God plays favorites. In the verses that follow, Paul offers support for his claim that God is impartial, thus opening an unsettling discussion about the relationship between the law and righteous behavior. Paul introduces two categories of people in 2:12: those with the law and those without the law. Both groups commit sin; the key distinction is whether they do it while being under the law or not. Conventional wisdom suggests that having God's law might create some special status for those who possess it. However, the opposite seems to be the case.

WHEN READING 2:12,

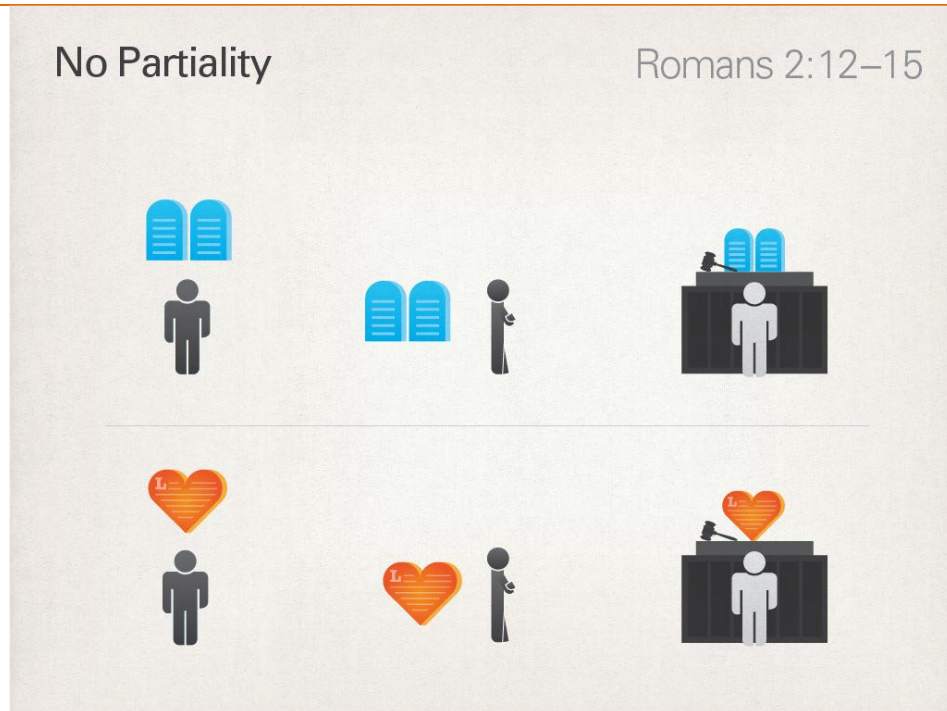
we may think it sounds as if those who are not under the law are not held accountable to it. The corollary seemingly holds as well: Those who are under the law will be judged by it. In this sense, it may appear that people without the law stand a better chance than those who have it. We all know the saying that "possession is nine-tenths of the law," but God's economy doesn't work that way. As Paul explains in 2:13, it's not possessing the law but keeping it that determines our righteousness. For the Jew who believes possession conveys some special status within the covenant community, this idea would be shocking. Jew and Gentile alike must follow the law to be declared righteous by it. Both face the same dilemma: Sin creates a barrier to having a righteous standing before God (2:16).

In 2:15, Paul elaborates on these law-keeping folks without the law. How could they possibly keep a law they do not have? From God's perspective, the law that was given to Moses is



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not the only code that can convict a person of sin. Rather, there is a law that is written on people's hearts. This law correlates to their consciences, the thoughts of which accuse and even defend them (see 1:19–20). But Paul goes further, claiming that God will prove this on the day when He judges people according to the gospel message. In this way, the law to which people have access determines the basis on which they will be judged.



NO PARTIALITY: In God's judgment, possession is not "nine-tenths of the law."

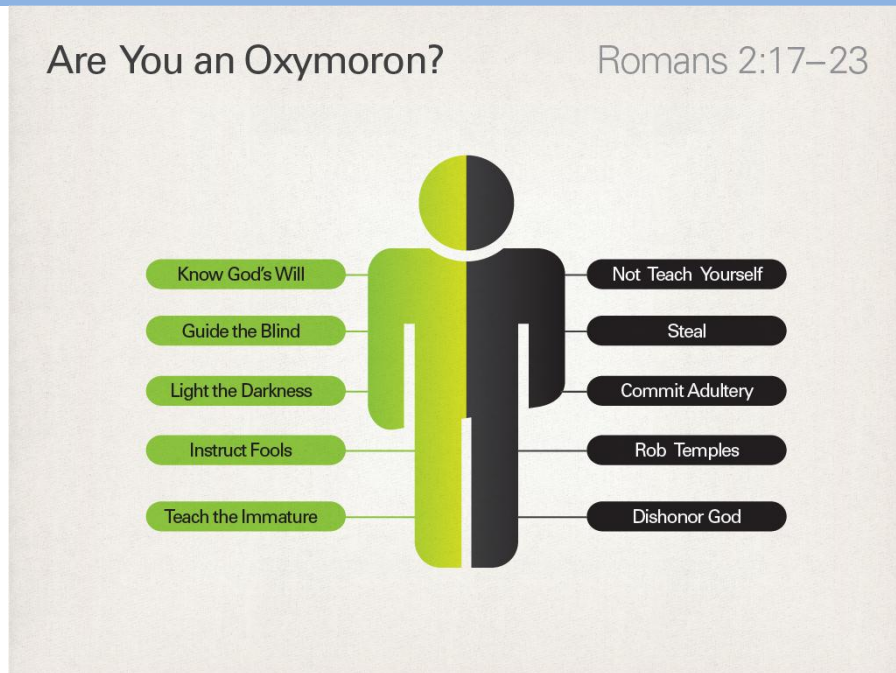
We will be judged by our obedience to the law, whether that be God's law revealed to Israel, or whether it is law written upon the heart. Thus there is no distinction between Jew and Gentile on the basis of possessing the law of Moses.

So what is the point of this discussion about an alternative kind of law? First, it is the keeping of God's law, not the possession of it, that determines one's righteousness on the

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day of judgment. And Paul is not referring only to the Mosaic law, but to the law that is written upon people's hearts

Romans 2:17-25



ARE YOU AN OXYMORON? God judges the entirety of our lives, not just the good stuff. It doesn't matter how many good things we do—or believe we do—if the rest of our lives tells another story.

We've all heard the saying "do as I say, not as I do." If you don't do the things you tell others to do, you are not only a hypocrite, you are under judgment as a lawbreaker. But there is an even greater consequence: You damage God's reputation as well as your own. Paul says in verse 23 that those who transgress the law—but boast about keeping it—dishonor God by their actions.

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Paul sets up this long, hypothetical situation to reinforce the point he made 2:13, but this time he focuses on those who teach the law rather than those who hear it—and he makes an even more damning claim. Quoting Isaiah 52:5, Paul reminds the Romans that such behavior derails God’s intention for Israel to be a blessing to the nations.



It's Not Just Bad: God cannot be fooled. We can claim to live a righteous life and even do righteous things, but that cannot offset our sinful behavior. Ignoring our sin is not just wrong, it is a form of blasphemy. It's letting our actions say that God's judgment is somehow wrong. In 2:25, Paul provides support for his claim about dishonoring God and causing unbelievers to blaspheme His name, making an important point to close this section of his argument. The outward signs of Jewish identity—circumcision, teaching, and instructing others in how to keep the law—all should be done in conjunction with living a righteous life, not in lieu of it. The outward trappings are worthless without the inner righteousness. Paul says their circumcision has become uncircumcision. Christians face the same kind of battle today with

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maintaining the outwardly respectable façade of attending church, reading the Bible, and doing charitable works in the community. Is doing these things wrong? It depends. God never intended us to keep the law and obey Him just so we look like respectable people. Instead, He wants our hearts to change—and for that change to be visible through our behavior—which in turn could change a community and the world.

Keep in mind why Paul is taking us down this path. He wants to get as much buy-in as he can for the *need* for the gospel message of salvation by faith. A chunk of his audience would not have seen a need for the gospel as long as they were confident that their current relationship with God was sufficient. By destroying that misplaced confidence, Paul creates room for the truth that is worthy of all confidence. But he's not quite there. He has some more deconstructing to do.

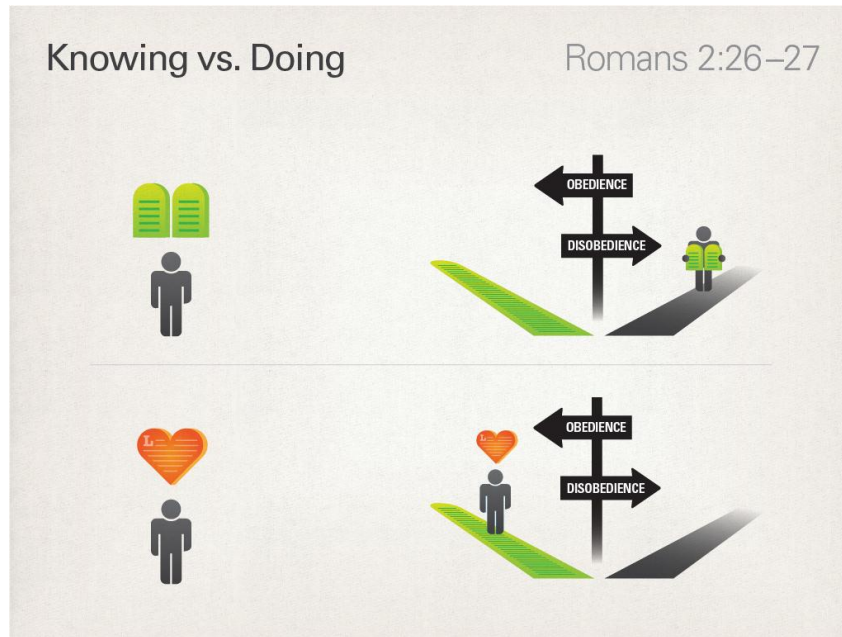
Romans 2:26–29

Paul's argument, which begins in 2:26. Here Paul resumes the "equal opportunity" theme from 2:11–15 by contrasting the value of the inward change with outward appearance. In 2:17–25, he already clarified the gravity of hypocrisy. Now he turns to a related idea. What if someone has truly experienced a change of heart but without adopting the outward sign—they fulfill the requirements of the law but remain uncircumcised? *What would God think of such a situation? Paul explains that God would view it just as He views the Gentiles who respond obediently to the law that was written on their hearts (2:13b–15).*

If you have the outward signs without the inward obedience, the outward signs are meaningless; if you are inwardly obedient, then it will be credited to you as if you had adopted the outward signs.



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Knowing vs. Doing: Paul makes a “for sake of argument” case that circumcision and possession of the law don’t matter to God as much as obedience. Therefore, Gentiles who are obedient to the law written on their hearts will be more highly regarded than circumcised Jews who possess the law but do not obey it. Paul makes clear in Romans 3:9 that all are guilty of sin, but here he highlights that the outward trappings of Judaism matter little unless accompanied by inward obedience.

Paul’s point here is not some new revelation about what makes a Jew a Jew. Rather he reiterates God’s original intention. He challenges folks to go retro, to rediscover what their covenant faith was originally all about. Just as God places higher value on obedience than on knowledge, He values faith and obedience more than circumcision. Paul drives this point home in verses 28–29. What is the defining characteristic of a God-pleasing Jew? The heart. The internal work done by the Spirit means more than the external marking of the flesh. If you want to please God, you can’t let the external distract you from the internal.

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So if all God really cares about is the heart, why even bother with the external? Is there any value in circumcision? And if Gentiles can please God through obedience to a law of their own, is there even any value in being a Jew? Paul addresses these issues as the big idea for Romans 3.

