

A Study in the Book of Romans

8

Romans 2:1-29

Key Verse

“ There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile; but glory, honor and peace for everyone who does good: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For God does not show favoritism. ”

Having presented mankind’s degraded condition in the previous chapter, Paul knows that some will react to his graphic description of their wickedness with the cry, “I’m not like that!” His purpose now is to prove that *everyone is guilty*. All *men have sinned*, whether Jew or Gentile.

We Cannot Judge Others

Read Romans 2:1-3

When we look at the wickedness of someone else and then compare our own lives to him, we may be able to say, “I’m not as bad as he is.” But the standard by which we measure ourselves is not the evil that others do, but the righteous standard of God himself. As Paul says in **2 Corinthians 10:12**:

“When they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves, they are not wise.”

Compared to his holiness *all* of us are wicked. Paul will underline and expand on this vital fact in the rest of **Romans 2-3**.

Introduction

▶ The Gospel’s Three Revelations ◀

The Gospel’s Three Answers

The Gospel’s Answer to Israel

The Gospel in Action

Conclusion

Man Is Guilty by Thought

Paul goes on to reveal how man is guilty, not just by actions, but by his heart-intent. The Jews had been given God's Law through Moses. But Jesus taught that God's righteous standard is even higher than the Ten Commandments, found in **Exodus 20:1-17**. He said in **Matthew 5:21** and **27**:

“You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment...You have heard that it was said, ‘Do not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”

Read also Matthew 5:17-48

God is interested not just in your *actions*, but in your *heart* – your thoughts, your feelings and your attitudes. As he said to Samuel in **1 Samuel 16:7**:

“...The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.”

Read Psalm 139:1-4,23-24

Facts that Shocked the Jews

The Jews of Paul's day would have been shocked by the six statements he makes in chapter two:

The Jews are guilty too

Read Romans 2:1-3

After reading his horrific description of mankind's downward spiral into godlessness and wickedness in **Romans 1**, the Jews would have agreed fully with Paul and joined in with a self-righteous denunciation of the crimes. But never for one moment would they have included themselves in the same category. They believed that all the Gentiles were destined for judgment – but not the Jews.

The Jews will be judged

Read Romans 2:4-10

Paul claimed that the Jews of his day had been taking advantage of God's great kindness, tolerance and patience with them. They had looked upon the mercy of God as an invitation to sin instead of seeing it as God's love giving them opportunity to repent and be forgiven. The Jew thought that just because he was a Jew he was immune to God's anger, but Paul reveals that being a Jew by race will not save him from judgment. He'll be judged, like the Gentile, not on his racial heritage, but by the kind of life he has lived.

God has no favorites

Read Romans 2:11

The Jews thought they had a privileged position with God because he had given them his Law and had separated them from the world as a special nation. They believed they were favored especially, simply because of their national descent from Abraham (**Matthew 3:7-9**). What they didn't realize was that their separation was not because they were special in themselves (see **Amos 9:7**) but because God had a purpose for them to fulfill – they were called to be God's channel to reach a world that was cut off from him. Through them God revealed his righteous standard (by giving them the Law of Moses) and through them the Savior of the world came. Their separation was not for special *privilege* but for special *purpose*.*

They will be judged according to their greater knowledge

Read Romans 2:12-24

In **Romans 1**, Paul had shown how God had revealed Himself to mankind through creation – therefore mankind was without excuse for turning from Him. He now declares that the Jews had received a greater revelation of God via the Law, and with it a greater responsibility. Therefore they, too, were without excuse (**2:1**), and would be judged according to the understanding of God they had received through the Law and through the Prophets (**2:12**).

True circumcision is of the heart

Read Romans 2:25-27

The rite of circumcision had been given to the Jews as the sign of their separation to God (**Genesis 17:9-14**). The cutting off of the flesh symbolized their separation from sin in their obedience to God's righteous commandments. The Jews prided themselves in the fact that God had given them his Law, and that they had been circumcised. But Paul points out that these mean absolutely nothing if one doesn't live according to them. He declares: *knowing* God's Law isn't what counts – *living by it* is. *Being circumcised* isn't the issue – *having a heart separated from sin* is. If a Gentile kept God's Law and lived up to his righteous standard, then, says Paul, he would be truly circumcised even though he had not had the physical rite.

The true Jew is not of race, but of heart

Read Romans 2:28-29

Another great boast of the first-century Jew was that he was a descendant of Abraham and therefore an heir of God's special promises to Abraham (**Genesis 12:1-3**). He believed that since he was a Jew by *race*, he had special privileges with God. But again Paul shows that God is only interested in the condition of a

* And what a challenge this is to us as Christians today. We too are not called for special *privilege* (even though we are privileged in Christ), but for special *purpose*.

man's heart, not his racial heritage.

In **John 8:37-44**, Jesus himself had this to say to his Jewish compatriots:

“I know you are Abraham’s descendants. Yet you are ready to kill me, because you have no room for my word. I am telling you what I have seen in the Father’s presence, and you do what you have heard from you father.’ ‘Abraham is our father,’ they answered. ‘If you were Abraham’s children,’ said Jesus, ‘then you would do the things Abraham did...You are doing the things your own father does’...You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father’s desire...”

Read also John 8:31-59

God is a Righteous Judge

Coupled alongside his proof that man’s sinful condition is universal, Paul also sets out to reveal that, in the face of man’s sin, God is a righteous judge.

Read Deuteronomy 32:4

Read Psalm 145:17

Read Revelation 15:3

His judgment is based on truth

Read Romans 2:1-3

God judges with perfect knowledge of every heart and every situation. **Psalm 139:1-4** expresses it this way:

“O Lord, you have searched me and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O Lord.”

God knows our...

- ☞ **Actions** – what we do and where we go (**Psalm 139:1-3**)
- ☞ **Thoughts** – everything we think and feel (**Psalm 139:2**)
- ☞ **Ways** – why and how we do things (**Psalm 139:3**)
- ☞ **Words** – every word we speak (**Psalm 139:4**)
- ☞ **Heart’s desires** – things we hide from other people (**Psalm 44:21**)
- ☞ **Heart’s intents** – every attitude and plan (**Hebrews 4:12**)

His nature is love

Read Romans 2:4

Paul uses three words to describe God’s heart of love towards sinful man:

- ☞ **Kindness** – blessing us even though we don’t deserve it (see **Psalm 36:5-9; 103:8-10**).

- **Tolerance** – holding back his judgment on acts of sin to give opportunity for repentance (see **Nehemiah 9:30-31; Romans 3:25-26; Titus 3:3-7**).
- **Patience** – lovingly waiting for people to turn to him (see **2 Peter 3:9; 1 Timothy 1:15-16; 1 Corinthians 13:4-7**).

But men had treated with contempt all the love God had shown them, and instead of turning to God because of his kindness, tolerance and patience, they had used these as an excuse to sin even more.

His judgment is fair

Read Romans 2:5-11

We are judged as individuals before God. His judgment is not governed by our racial heritage or by whether our environment is good or bad, but God looks at our heart's motives and desires, which are then evidenced in our outward acts. Those who "seek glory, honor and immortality" will show it in their "persistence in doing good," and those who are "self-seeking" will show it by rejecting the truth (at whatever level they receive it) and following evil. Thus the acts of a person are the result of the heart of that person.

God's Perfect Justice

Read Romans 2:12-16

Paul shows that God will judge people according to the understanding they have received. As we have seen already, there are three degrees of understanding which have been revealed to mankind:

Nature (verses 12,14-15)

God has implanted in all mankind an instinctive knowledge of right and wrong within their hearts. The Gentiles, says Paul, have an unwritten law – their conscience. They will be judged by their obedience, or disobedience, to this unwritten law.

As men continually disobey their conscience, however, there are definite stages of regression:

- **Their conscience first is weakened** – "When you sin against your brothers in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ" (**1 Corinthians 8:12**). When a person's conscience is weakened, they don't hear the inner voice of their own conscience as strongly as before.
- **Then it is corrupted** – "To the pure, all things are pure, but to those who are corrupted and do not believe, nothing is pure. In fact, both their minds and consciences are corrupted" (**Titus 1:15**). They corrupt God's inward law by refusing to listen to it.
- **Then it is seared** – "Such teachings come through hypocritical liars, whose

consciences have been seared as with a hot iron” (1 Timothy 4:2). Their conscience now no longer bothers them. They have silenced it.

- **Finally it is totally evil** – “Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water” (Hebrews 10:22). This is where the inclination of the heart is constantly toward evil rather than good.

Through Jesus Christ, however, our conscience is restored:

- **He first cleanses our conscience** – “How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!” (Hebrews 9:14).
- **Then he restores a good conscience to us** – “The goal of this command is love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith” (1 Timothy 1:5 – see also verse 19; 1 Peter 3:21).

And finally, as we continue to walk with the Lord..

- **He keeps our conscience clear (or pure)** – “...But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander” (1 Peter 3:15-16).

The Law (verses 12-13)

In addition to the conscience, however, the Jews had also received the moral Law of God in written form. This was a much clearer revelation of God’s will and they, says Paul, will be judged accordingly.

The Gospel (verse 16)

A yet higher revelation has been given to those who have heard the message of the Gospel. Once again, people will be judged according to whether they receive or reject Jesus Christ (see John 12:48).

Who is the True Jew?

The Jews prided themselves in the fact that they were descendants of Abraham, and therefore heirs of the promise given to him by God. Their racial descent was their great boast and their claim to special privileges with God.

Yet the promises given to Abraham were of two categories. He was promised the earthly inheritance of the land of Canaan and a multitude of natural descendants who would possess it. But there was also a special Promise given to him – a Promise that involved a spiritual and heavenly inheritance. In Romans 2, Paul shows that there are *two* lines of descendants from Abraham and the true heirs of Abraham’s special promise from God are only in one of those lines.

Read Genesis 22:17

At first reading it would seem that the Lord is just using two different allegories to emphasize how numerous the descendants of Abraham would be. But, as the New Testament reveals, God is actually referring to two different groups of descendants. In **Galatians 4:21-31**, Paul expands on our understanding of the nature of these two lines of descendants:

“Tell me, you who want to be under the law, are you not aware of what the law says? For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the slave woman and the other by the free woman. His son by the slave woman was born in the ordinary way; but his son by the free woman was born as the result of a promise. These things may be taken figuratively, for the women represent two covenants. One covenant is from Mount Sinai and bears children who are to be slaves. This is Hagar. Now Hagar stands for Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present city of Jerusalem, because she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem that is above is free, and she is our mother... Now, you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise... Therefore, brothers, we are not children of the slave woman, but of the free woman.”

Here Paul refers to the fact that Abraham had two sons. Isaac and Ishmael represent the two lines coming from Abraham. Ishmael pictures those born of natural descent, and Isaac pictures those born not by the flesh, but through faith in a *promise* (**Genesis 18:10-14; Romans 4:16-22**).

Let's take a look at the comparison Paul makes between these two lines:

Natural Israel

- Descendants of Abraham through natural birth – born through *the flesh*
- Abraham's union with Hagar – the *slave woman* – pictures the Jews in bondage to the Law
- Pictured in Mount Sinai where the Law was given (**Exodus 19:16-20:20**).
- Earthly Jerusalem – the natural Jews.
- “The sand of the sea-shore” (or

Spiritual Israel

- Descendants of Abraham by spiritual birth – born of *promise* through faith (**John 1:12-13; 3:3**).
- Abraham's wife, Sarah – the free woman – pictures the liberty that is found in the indwelling Holy Spirit (**Genesis 16:1-4**).
- Pictured in Mount Zion where *grace* was experienced (**Psalms 132:13-16**).
- Heavenly Jerusalem - the Church (**Hebrews 12:22-24**), made up of Jew and Gentile.
- “The stars in the sky”

“the dust of the earth”) (Revelation 1:16-20).
 (Genesis 13:14-16;
 Deuteronomy 7:12-15).

The *natural* descendants of Abraham are heirs of natural promises. These promises include the promise of a land of their own. In **Genesis 13:14-16**, we find this account:

“The Lord said to Abram after Lot had parted from him, ‘Lift up your eyes from where you are and look north and south, east and west. All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever. I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could count the dust, then your offspring could be counted. Go, walk through the length and breadth of the land, for I am giving it to you.’”

Read also Genesis 12:7

God promised to bless the Abraham’s offspring, to give them an earthly land as their inheritance and to prosper them if they continued to be faithful to him.

But the *spiritual* descendants of Abraham (both Jew and Gentile) are the heirs of the eternal Promise.

The Promised “Seed”

Galatians 3 provides remarkable insight into what this means for you. In **Galatians 3:6-9,16,29**, Paul writes:

“Consider Abraham: ‘He believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness! Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham. The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: ‘All nations will be blessed through you.’ So those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith...The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. The Scripture does not say ‘and to seeds, meaning many people, but ‘and to your seed’, meaning one person, who is Christ. *If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.*”

The promise of God was to Abraham and his “Seed”, and Paul shows here that this “Seed” was *Christ*. In Christ we become the children and heirs of Abraham.

Later, in **Romans 9:6-8**, Paul elaborates further:

“For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham’s children. On the contrary, ‘It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned! In other words, it is not the natural children who are God’s children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham’s offspring.’”

What a remarkable statement! Not all who are descended from Israel are Israel! Paul is saying that in God's books, just to be born a Jew is not enough. In order to experience the full spiritual blessings of the covenant, one must be a Jew with faith!

What Paul is the need for every person – whether Jew or Gentile – for the Gospel of God's grace. In the next chapter, Paul will press this foundational revelation even further.

What Is True Circumcision?

As Paul had traveled, preaching the Gospel, he had received his greatest persecution from his own people, the Jews (**2 Corinthians 11:22-27; Acts 13:45-50; 14:19-20; 17:5-14; 18:12-13; 21:10-13, 17-36; 22:7-26**). This was because he taught that the rite of circumcision was no longer a requirement by God and this offended the Jews. As Paul said to the Galatian Christians in **Galatians 5:11**:

“Brothers, if I am still preaching circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offence of the cross has been abolished.”

Even some of the Jews who had become believers in Christ had tried to instill the need for circumcision into the young Church, claiming that faith in Christ plus circumcision and obeying God's Law makes us righteous. In **Galatians 6:12-13**, Paul had this to say about these people (called “Judaizers” because they wanted to “Judaize” the Gentiles, or make Jews out of the Gentile believers):

“Those who want to make a good impression outwardly are trying to compel you to be circumcised. The only reason they do this is to avoid being persecuted for the cross of Christ. Not even those who are circumcised obey the law, yet they want you to be circumcised that they may boast about your flesh.”

But Paul was strong in refuting this error. In **Galatians 15:2-6**, he writes:

“Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law. You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ, you have fallen away from grace...For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.”

Read Galatians 2:21

Read Galatians 3:1-14

Read Galatians 6:12-15

The Galatians Christians, particularly, had believed this teaching of the Judaizers and Paul wrote to them pulling no punches! J. B. Phillips translates **Galatians 3:1-3** with these stinging words:

“O you dear idiots of Galatia, who saw Jesus Christ the crucified so plainly, who has been casting a spell over you? I will ask you one simple question: did you receive the Spirit by trying to keep the Law or by believing the message of the gospel? Surely you can’t be so idiotic as to think that a man begins his spiritual life in the Spirit and then completes it by reverting to outward observances?”

Paul was fearless in this declaration to the Jews at Rome also. His teaching was not that circumcision had been wrong, but that it had been a picture of what was to come. It had been fulfilled in Christ in the same way as all the Old Testament sacraments had been. God was now looking for the true circumcision of the heart.

The Old Testament Rite

Read **Genesis 15:1-6**

Read **Genesis 17:1-14,23-27**

Read **Exodus 12:48**

Read **Leviticus 12:3**

Read **John 7:22**

Circumcision was given to Abraham as a seal of the covenant God had made with him. God had promised to bless him and make of him a great nation (**Genesis 12:2-3**), send the Savior of the world through him (**Galatians 3:6-9,16,22,29**), and give him an eternal dwelling and inheritance (**Hebrews 11:8-10,39-40**). Abraham’s side of the covenant was to *believe* God’s promise. The result of his faith was that God declared him righteous. Then, as a *seal* of this covenant, he was circumcised, symbolizing the separation from sin and the world that had already taken place in his heart (**Romans 4:11**).

The covenant-seal of circumcision was passed on to his descendants, but even in the Old Testament it was only meant to be an outward sign of the inward condition of their hearts. The Lord makes this plain to Israel in **Deuteronomy 10:16** and **30:6**, when he says:

“Circumcise your hearts, therefore, and do not be stiff-necked any longer...The Lord your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live.”

Just before the Children of Israel entered the Promised Land under Joshua, they were all circumcised – symbolizing the cutting away from their hearts of all the evil influences of Egypt (**Joshua 5:2-9**).

The Jews, however, came to believe that the outward act of circumcision itself made them righteous before God and had neglected the condition of their heart.

The New Testament Fulfillment

The rite of circumcision in the Old Testament was given to act as a prepicture of the victory over sin and over the evil works of the flesh (**Galatians 5:19-21**) which

Christ would accomplish on the Cross for us. In **Colossians 2:11-13**, Paul writes:

“In him you were also circumcised, in *the putting off of [the flesh]*, not with circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.”

When Jesus Christ died on the Cross, he represented *our flesh*, full of its sin and evil desires, being cut off. When we are baptized in water, we are identifying ourselves with what happened on the Cross and are declaring what has taken place in our hearts through faith in Christ’s work. Baptism pictures the cutting off of our flesh and our rising to a new life in the Spirit (**Romans 6:4-11**). It is faith in Christ’s death on our behalf that is the *true* circumcision experience!

This is why Paul declares in **Philippians 3:2-3**:

“Watch out for those dogs, those men who do evil, those mutilators of the flesh. For it is *we who are the circumcision*, we who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh”.

Paul denounced those who tried to insist on Christians also being circumcised, because, he declares, through our faith in Christ’s death for us, *we are already circumcised!* Those who are truly circumcised, he says, are those who:

- **Worship by the Spirit of God** – Hearts filled with love and praise to God through His Holy Spirit dwelling within.
- **Glory in Christ Jesus** – Acknowledging with wonder and praise that it is only through Jesus’ redemptive work on Cross that we are set free from sin.
- **Put no confidence in the flesh** – Knowing that there is nothing we can do by our own effort, whether by the act of circumcision or by trying to obey the moral Law of God, to become righteous before God.

Read Ephesians 2:8-9

Read Philippians 3:4-9