

Lesson 5: Indictment of the Moral Man

Romans 2:1-16

Paul charges those who trust in their own moral standing with breaking moral law.

¹ Therefore you have no excuse, everyone of you who passes judgment, for in that which you judge another, you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things. ² And we know that the judgment of God rightly falls upon those who practice such things.

(1) ³ But do you suppose this, O man, when you pass judgment on those who practice such things and do the same *yourself*, that you will escape the judgment of God?

(2) ⁴ Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and tolerance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance?

⁵ But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up **wrath** for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God,

Paul explains the way a moral defense will be judged.

God will judge impartially based on a person's actual deeds.

⁶ who will render to each person according to his deeds: ⁷ to those who by perseverance in doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, eternal life; ⁸ but to those who are selfishly ambitious and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, wrath and indignation. ⁹ *There will be tribulation and distress for every soul of man who does evil, of the Jew first and also of the Greek, ¹⁰ but glory and honor and peace to everyone who does good, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. ¹¹ For there is no partiality with God.*

Doing moral law, not knowing moral law, is the basis of judgment.

¹² 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; ¹³ for *it is* not the hearers of the Law *who* are just before God, but the doers of the Law will be justified.

The principle of moral judgment based on the doing what is morally right is present in those who do not have God's revelation of moral law.

¹⁴ 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, ¹⁵ 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, ¹⁶ on the day when, according to my gospel, God will judge the secrets of men through Christ Jesus.

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Paul charges those who trust in their own moral standing with breaking moral law (2:1-5).

In the 11 chapters of the main argument of Romans, Paul takes us deeper into our understanding of the gospel by first establishing that a person is justified before the court of God by faith. Justification by faith, this is chapters 1-4. In these chapters, Paul takes the role of prosecuting attorney. The first phase of his prosecution goes after all human beings who reject God as Lord.

He does this in chapter 1:18-32 where he charges human society with turning from God, suppressing truth about God, and engaging in a whole range of immoral activities. People are selfish, disrespectful, dishonest, greedy and sexually immoral. Paul's audience got it. Atheists and pagans, old and new make up their own morality. The passions of their heart are degrading and the moral judgment of their minds is depraved. They have an amazing tolerance for their own sin as they justify their selfish, prideful, greedy behavior. That is human society. If you have felt that moral judgment on the wickedness of your fellow man, on the depravity of society; if you feel things are bad and getting worse, then Paul's next words are for you.

[Read Romans 2:1-5.]

The prosecutor Paul has now turned his sights on the real target. The real target is not pagan man. The real target is moral man, the person who is self-satisfied with their own moral standing. Making a moral argument against humanity in general is no real challenge. But what about the moral man? -

the man who claims to be good. Paul includes moral man in his indictment, charging that those who trust in their own moral standing fail to keep the moral law. That charge is leveled in Romans 2:1-5. Paul goes on in 2:6-16 to explain how God judges the person who comes to his court and makes a defense based on their own morality.

Let's address the charge first and then move on to the clarification.

Essentially, you do what they do (2:1-2).

In verse 1, Paul proclaims that you who judge others do the same thing. For Paul's charge to work, he does not need to show that you, the moral person, break the exact same moral laws as the pagan in the same way with the same intensity. You may not visit a prostitute but instead enjoy sexually explicit movies or television. You may not murder but instead make degrading remarks about your neighbors. You may not steal, but you are not precisely honest with your tax returns.

Even as I suggest examples, you may think, "That's not the same thing." Or you may think, "I don't do that." I grant that I may be missing the mark for you. So how about we do this. Imagine that you have a digital recorder in a pendant around your neck. This recorder captures everything you say. Now imagine that we go through your life and keep only the moral judgments that you make about other people. Every time you judge someone for the way they drive, the way they dress, the way they parent, the way they act, what they say; we record anytime that you pronounced judgment on the behavior of another person. And imagine that, standing before the court of God, the recorder is played. God says here is the standard by which you will be judged. And surprisingly, you here your own voice pronouncing moral judgments about the behavior of other people. The standard by which you judged others is the standard by which you will be judged. How do you think you will do?

If you do not understand immediately that you will condemn yourself, then you lack self-awareness. Your own words will condemn you. You do not live up to your judgment of other people. And that would be enough. If you come before the court of God, and you say, "I am moral. Judge me according to my own morality." And God actually plays the standard of your own morality. You will fall short. But that is not going to be the standard. The standard in God's court is not your sense of morality but his. If you can't even keep your own moral standard for other people, do you think there is any possibility that you keep God's moral standard? Paul writes, "You have no excuse, everyone of you who passes judgment, for in that which you judge another, you condemn yourself."

The problem is not that our moral standard for others is wrong. Definitely, we are sometimes wrong. Often, we are right. Verse 2, "We know that the judgement of God rightly falls upon those who practice such things."

Active wrath is a future reality for everyone (2:3-5).

Our problem is that we forget the old adage, when you point your finger at someone you have three pointing back at you. Try that out. Point at someone and look where three of your fingers are pointing. We do not think about our self when we point at others. We make moral judgments which we somehow disconnect from our own thoughts, our own words, our own behaviors from our judgments of other people. Paul tells us we better remember ourselves. Verse 3 "Do you suppose this, O man, when you pass judgment on those who practice such things and do the same, that you will escape the judgment of God?"

The moral person so often feels safe within their own conception of goodness, especially when life is going well. It is possible to grow up in a good family, religious or non-religious, to grow up being taught the difference between right and wrong, to be held to a standard of honesty, goodness and civic duty. It is possible that your personality responded to that kind of upbringing and that you benefited from your morality. You never cheated. You are honest. You worked hard. You got a job, married, had children. You have friends. You get respect at work. You mow the yard on the weekend, do the shopping, make sure the kids get to their activities. Life works. Life is good.

Why is life good? Is your life a sign of God's approval for your good behavior? A sense of moral pride would be quite natural at this point. I have done well. I am getting what I deserve for my hard work and honest life. I am basically a good person.

Paul says, "Think again." Verse 4, "Do you think lightly of the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance?" There is a natural benefit that comes from living a moral life. Good moral decisions often bring positive, practical consequences. Sociologists have theorized that following the "success sequence" of finishing high school, working full-time and getting married before having children is a major contributing factor in avoiding poverty. Wise moral choices often produce positive results over time. Whether you are Christian, Jew, moral atheist, if you follow the moral law of God, generally, you will experience blessing in your life. Not as a guarantee, but as a general rule. So, a lot of people experience the blessing of following a moral pattern based on Judeo-Christian values.

Is the blessing, the benefit you receive in life, a sign that God is pleased with your moral behavior? That's not the lesson Paul says we should learn. He says that God's kindness should not lead us to pride or arrogance. It should not lead us to think that we have attained moral approval. Rather, God's kindness should lead us to repentance as we recognize God's mercy to us who do not live up, even to our own standard of righteousness, much less his. If I take the moral high ground and I say that I deserve this life because I have been good then verse 5 applies, "because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God." You are only focused on your good days, your best days, when you were decently moral. And somehow you are blocking out all those thoughts, all those words, all those actions that are storing up for you the wrath of God on that day. God may be pleased with your attempt at living morally. He is not pleased with your selfishness, your pride, your lust, your hurtful words. He may kindly bless you. Not to say you have attained moral approval for your life. Instead, to extend mercy to you in what you are doing well, so that as you honestly confess how far you still fall short, you might turn to him with a heart of confession and repentance and gratitude.

Two words in verse 5 connect us back to something we have already seen. Here in verse 5 God's righteous judgment will be revealed, and it will be a day of wrath. "Because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in that day." In chapter 1:18, we were told, "the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven." Its helpful to ask, "What's the difference between the wrath here in chapter 2 and that wrath there in chapter 1?" The wrath in chapter one was against pagan man who rejects the idea of moral accountability to God. The wrath here is against the moral man. Also, the wrath there is being revealed in present history. The wrath here is to come on a future day of judgment. The wrath there is passive; a giving over of man to himself, such that the consequences of his own depravity are the punishment. The wrath to come is active punishment, according the righteous judgment of God.

Paul has charged moral man with sin and tells him to expect wrath. Following God's moral law to some degree may protect a person from certain practical consequences of sin in this present life, but a failing attempt at morality does not free a person from accountability to the judgment of God.

Paul goes on in the next 11 verses to explain the idea of moral defense before God. If I am going to choose to stand before God, saying, "Judge me according to my own basic goodness", then I better know how God will evaluate my case? If you still think, "I am good enough." even after verses 1-5, then pay close attention to what will be required of you. You get to choose whether you make a moral defense when you stand before God on the day of judgment. So, you better be clear on what is required to make a successful moral defense.

So, let's look at Paul's clarification in the next 11 verses.

Paul explains the way a moral defense will be judged (2:6-16).

God will judge impartially based on a person's actual deeds (2:6-11).

The first thing you need to know is that God will render judgment with complete impartiality, according to the deeds a person has committed during his or her lifetime. These two truths, that it is according to your behavior and that it is impartial, occur in verse 6 and verse 11. They form an inclusio or we could say bookends to this section of the text. Traditionally, 6-11 causes some confusion for interpretation. In fact, verses 6-11 are highly structured, and when we recognize the structure Paul's point comes more into focus.

- A ⁶ who will render to each person according to his deeds:
- B ⁷ to those who by perseverance in doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality,
- C eternal life;
- D ⁸ but to those who are selfishly ambitious and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness,
- E wrath and indignation.
- E' ⁹ *There will be* tribulation and distress
- D' for every soul of man who does evil, of the Jew first and also of the Greek,
- C' ¹⁰ but glory and honor and peace
- B' to everyone who does good, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.
- A' ¹¹ For there is no partiality with God.

The structure Paul uses here is called a chiasmic structure or a chiasm. It is a parallel structure where the first element parallels the last element, the second element parallels the second to last element the third element parallels the third to last element and so on. I want to explain this to you because it is important for this passage and because we will see this structure more than once in Romans. A simple American example comes from President Kennedy. "Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country." The word "country" links the beginning and end of the saying. The word "you" links the middle phrases together. We have country, you, you, country. That is chiasm. "Country" on the two ends. "You" in the middle. The name of the Swedish group ABBA provides a famous European example. The first letter of each member's name Agnetha, Bjorn, Benny and Anni-Frid make up the ABBA pattern. The ends are parallel, and the middle is parallel. When you see photos of the group, you notice they usually stood with the two guys on the outside and two girls on the inside which really is BAAB, since Bjorn and Benny are on the outside but BAAB is not nearly so nice a group name as ABBA.

Hebrew writers used chiasm throughout the Old Testament and carried into the New Testament. The flood narrative is arranged chiastically with rising and lowering of the water. There are a lot more numbers in there than just 40. Those numbers are arranged chiastically. The book of Deuteronomy is arranged chiastically. A number of Psalms use the pattern. For example, Psalm 145:2 reads, "Every day I will bless you, and I will praise your name forever and ever." The first phrase "every day" parallels the last phrase "forever and ever", while the second phrase "I will bless you" parallels the second to last phrase "and I will praise your name." That's the chiastic pattern which we will see again in Romans, though for now I need to show it to you in verses 6-11. And I do need to warn you, that your English translation may have changed Paul's Greek word order. If that is true, the chiastic structure may not show up the Bible version you are using. I am using the NASB which works hard to keep the Greek structure. If you want to see my example, you can go to observetheword.com and download the resource notes for this lesson.

One way you notice a chiasm in Scripture is to pay attention when words or phrases or ideas stand out by being repetitive. In verse 7 and 8, the phrase "to those who" is repeated. And in verse 9 and 10, the phrase "of the Jew first and also of the Greek" is repeated. Noticing repetition does not guarantee a chiasm, but it does challenge you as an observer of Scripture to look closer to see what

the author is doing. Why the repetition. Here we see two groups of people both mentioned twice. “Those who persevere in doing good” are morally good people. Those who are “selfishly ambitious and do not obey the truth” are morally bad people. Then we have “every soul of man who does evil” – obviously bad people. And “everyone who does good” – the good people. Our pattern in the text is good people, bad people, bad people, good people. That is a basic chiasm.

There is more. We also get the reward or punishment for each group whether good or bad. The reward in verse 7 is “eternal life” and in verse 10 “glory, honor and peace.” The punishment in verse 8 is “wrath and indignation” and in verse 9 “tribulation and distress.” So, our pattern now is good, reward, bad, punishment, punishment, bad, reward, good. Finally, to the front of the pattern we add the introduction in verse 6 “who will render to each person according to his deeds” and to the end we add the conclusion in verse 11, “for there is no partiality with God.” Here is the pattern: “Who will render to each person according to his deeds”, good, reward, bad, punishment, punishment, bad, reward, good, “for there is no partiality with God”.

These verses can be summed up like this, “The one who stands before God based on his own morality will be judged by his own deeds. If his deeds are good, he receives reward. If his deeds are bad, he receives punishment. And the judgment will be made without prejudice.” This is a basic, clear explanation of what will be required of the moral defense. If you stand before God based on your own morality, then your deeds will be evaluated. Good is rewarded. Bad is punished. And there is absolutely no partiality shown in the evaluation of deeds.

This does not sound like grace. This sounds like works. Some scholars want to address that problem by interpreting the good person in verses 5-10 as the new covenant believer. They suggest that Paul is here describing what Moses predicted in Deuteronomy 30, that God would do something new inside the new covenant believer, so that the new covenant believer could indeed live out the moral law of loving God and loving his neighbor. By living in the power of the Holy Spirit, they are the ones who persevere in doing good, and so receive the reward of eternal life. They would say that Paul supports this view by later, in this chapter, emphasizing that a Jew is one who has been circumcised in the heart by the Spirit. The regeneration of the Spirit enables the good person to live a morally worthy life.

I affirm that the work of the Holy Spirit enables new covenant believers to truly live for God. But verse seven is describing the means by which a person obtains eternal life. By perseverance in doing good an individual is found righteous and so granted eternal life. Is that the new covenant idea of how a person gains righteous standing before God? Does God enable us to do moral righteousness so that we can be justified before his court according to our own moral behavior? That’s a good question. I do not want to spoil Paul’s presentation. The short answer is “By no means!” That is not what Paul is arguing here. It is not by our own moral behavior that we are going to be found righteous in God’s eyes. I am jumping ahead to Paul’s verdict in chapter 3. Let’s not run ahead of Paul.

Concerning this text, I do not believe Paul has in mind the Christian here. I believe that Paul is stating the requirement for moral judgement. He has not stated whether anyone meets that requirement. He is simply making clear the standard. The standard is not being better than the next guy. The moral person who stands in judgment over those who are more immoral, should think very carefully before choosing to make a moral defense before God. A feeling of moral superiority over a secular person, atheist, or modern pagan does not help establish a credible defense in God’s court of justice. God is impartial. You will be judged on your own works alone; not in any comparison with anyone else. God does not grade on a curve. Moral judgment declares that if you have persevered your whole life in doing good, then you can expect eternal life. If you have done good, you will receive glory, honor and peace. But if you have not, you should expect wrath, indignation, tribulation and distress. This is true of Jew or Greek, Christian or atheist, Muslim, or Hindu. Each of us must ask the question, “Have I met God’s moral standard through my good behavior, throughout my life?”

In answering that question, we remember the two main points of the passage. First, there is no partiality with God. That's verse 11. It does not matter what kind of family you have grown up in, how often you have gone to church, whether or not you are a missionary, how much money you have or do not have. There is no partiality of any kind. The moral defense before God only takes into account your own moral behavior. Second, it is perseverance in doing good that is taken into account. Your whole life will bring the evidence for you or against you. You do not get to make an album of your best possible moments and put that on display. This is not Facebook or Instagram. God has the whole film. He has your inner thoughts on record. He will make a fair and impartial judgment of you based on the sum total of your life's works and thoughts.

Do you want to take the moral defense? "Judge me God on what I have said, thought and done. Judge me by my goodness, according to your standard of what is morally good."

Doing moral law, not knowing moral law, is the basis of judgment (2:12-13).

Paul continues by reminding us that it is not our knowledge of the law that counts, but our doing of the law. Verse 12, "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." That Paul has general moral law in mind seems clear by the comparison of the moral person to the pagan person. You judge those pagans who do not obey any objective standard of moral law, and yet, you break the same law you hold them to. That was the accusation at the beginning when we moved from pagan man to moral man. Paul will make that point again in our last two verses. Moral judgment extends beyond keeping the Old Testament law to a general requirement of all mankind. Still, Paul's reference here to law is not moral law in general but to Torah, that high expression of moral law possessed by the Jew's. Torah is the instruction included in the first five books of the Old Testament. It is the covenant made with Israel through Moses that provided the basis for the rule of later kings and the exhortation of later prophets.

The word Paul uses for law is *nomos* in the Greek. Most often when we see the word law in Romans, Paul is referring to Torah, which is a specific expression of moral law from God. Here Paul has in mind the Torah, and we see that when he was thinking of the moral man judging the pagan, he was thinking of the moral Jew judging the pagan non-Jew. In our day, we can very easily think of the law as referring to the new covenant commands, and we can imagine the target of Paul's indictment to be the cultural Christian who stands in moral judgment over the non-Christian. We can imagine our day that the one with the law is the Christian who has this idea of biblical morality, judging the non-Christian who does not accept the Bible as a standard.

Paul says, think not about yourself in relation to your neighbor. Think about whether you are doing or not doing the law. The one who sins while possessing the law is judged for his own sin. The one who sins while not possessing the law is judged for his own sin. It is not knowing the law but doing the law that counts. Verse 13 is sometimes problematic for Christians who have been taught that we are justified by faith. If that is so, what do we do with Paul's proclamation, "not hearers of the law are just before God, but the doers of the law will be justified"? The idea that "doers of the law will be justified" supports Paul's explanation of the moral defense that we saw in verses 6-11. There are two ways for a person to be declared just before a just judge. Either the person is not guilty and so declared just. Or the person has been found guilty and has paid the punishment required, thus having been justified before the court. If you are caught speeding and there is a fine to be paid, and you paid it, having paid the penalty you are not justified before the court. On the moral defense, a person is not pleading to be justified based on having paid the penalty. On the moral defense, a person is asking to be found innocent or justified before the court if they have persevered through life in doing righteous deeds. The one who does what is right is justified according to the moral defense. They have not broken the moral law. Therefore, they are not condemned.

Paul here emphasizes that truth of the moral defense. Doers of the law will be justified, declared to be in the right. Paul still does not yet explicitly answer the question of whether anyone has actually

persevered in keeping the law. But he does not need to answer that question. He can live it to us to answer. We know we have not.

The principle of moral judgment based on the doing what is morally right is present in those who do not have God's revelation of moral law (2:14-16).

In our last three verses, Paul describes the moral nature of man. All people through all cultures through all time recognize some reality of right and wrong. Our understandings of morality have not always agreed. I believe C. S. Lewis made the point that even cannibals recognize how immoral it would be to eat a person in one's own tribe. Though twisted there is a moral impulse there. A definition of right versus wrong. All people recognize the existence of some right and some wrong which is why guilt is a universal human feeling. Unless a person is truly psychotic, then he recognizes right and wrong, and feels guilt for having done wrong. And we do not lift up the psychotic person, void of morals, as the aim of an evolving society. We recognize the psychotic person, the person who has no sense of right and wrong and no feeling of guilt, we recognize that person not as a superior human being, but as an undesirable aberration. We are moral, and we think people ought to be moral. That is how we feel.

This universal moral impulse is evidence of the fact that all people are created in the image of God. In the case against pagan man, Paul argued that the creation implies a creator. We could argue as well that this universal sense of morality implies a law giver. Where does this sense of morality come from? And why do we believe we ought not try to escape it, at least not completely? We want to redefine morality, but we do not want to do away with morality. We want there to be a right or wrong that people are accountable to. That people do not agree on the details of morality follows Paul's earlier argument that by turning away from God, the moral image in us has become fractured. Or as he put it in 1:21, "They became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened." That darkness may have twisted the moral impulse in us, but it has not removed it.

So, Paul argues in verse 14 that people who do not have the special revelation of God's law still "do instinctively the things of the Law." People still feel that it is right at times to help others out without receiving anything back, to tell the truth, to be courageous, to speak gently to a child in tears, to provide for those in need. Of course, Paul is not saying that all people feel all those things at all times. Paul does not argue that people understand these things with clear moral vision. Nor does he argue that people are consistently successful. In fact, he indicates that people are not consistently successful in keeping to the moral standard they believe in. He writes in verse 15, "they show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness, and their thoughts alternately accusing, or else defending them."

On the one hand, the person without the law brings judgment on the person who has the law when the person without the law is the one who does what is required by the law. Some non-Christians are simply nicer people than many Christians. Some non-Christians shame Christians by behaving more in line with the teaching of Christ. This is true. And it is evidence of an internal moral impulse. On the other hand, every non-Christian is also condemned, "everyone without the law", by their own conscience for their failure to do good. Again, this does not mean they feel guilty about all they should feel guilty about. If their heart is darkened, their conscience is not a sure guide to their own moral state. But enough of the image of God remains that each one recognizes a moral standard, and each one recognizes deep inside that they have failed in keeping to their own standard. Guilt is universal. And western people spend an enormous amount of money and energy trying to rid themselves of that guilt without admitting to their own sinfulness as the source. The entertainment industry thrives as it distracts us from the troubling truths of our internal turmoil. The psychiatric industry thrives in the effort to convince us, contrary to our inner voice, that we are good and everything is okay. No, it is not. We know it is not.

Paul's point in verse 16 is future oriented. He looks towards that day of wrath he mentioned in verse 5. He tells us that men and women will be judged by the standard of the gospel of Jesus Christ. That

is the standard that states, the immoral man must die on a tree. The gospel affirms that the wages of sin is death. Secretes will be made known. Our conscience will alternately defend us, alternately accuses us. Even without the moral standard of God, the digital recorder of our own standard will be played. And we know in advance that we will not live up. We cannot even plead that we misunderstood the standard. Enough of the moral impulse is left in each of us that, were we honest, we would not dare take a moral defense in the court of God. If it is the doers of the law who will be justified, each of us has access to the fact that we will not be justified. For we have not even done the law we know in our hearts we ought to do, much less the law God would require from us. The moral defense fails. There is no good news here. Not yet.

Reflection questions

1. As you observe the text of Romans 2:1-16, what are a couple of things that stand out to you as strange or interesting or confusing or important?
2. What are some examples of judgments you can hear yourself making against other people that would come back to convict you if you were held up to your own standard of judgment?
3. What in verses 1-5 convicts you in regard to your view of people in society who are not really trying to be moral (as in 1:18-32)? As you point your finger at them, what are the fingers pointing back at you saying? What do you see in these verses you can personally identify with? How do you feel about verse 4?
4. Have you seen chiastic structure in the Scripture before? Was it helpful for your understanding of verses 6-11 to see the text arranged in a chiastic pattern? What stands out to you in these verses?
5. Describe a non-Christian you know who lives out some aspect of the law of Christ. What are traits you admire in him or her?
6. How would you summarize Paul's charge against the moral person in these verses? Is Paul saying that we should strive harder to be doers of the law, so that we might be justified (2:13) or is he saying something else? What is his conclusion?