

Week 4 | Romans 2:1–16

In one of Jesus' parables, a Pharisee standing in the temple prays, "I thank you, God, that I am not like other people—cheaters, sinners, adulterers. I'm certainly not like that tax collector!" Jesus contrasted this religious leader with the "despised tax collector" who "dared not lift his eyes toward heaven" as he prayed, "O God, be merciful to me, for I am a sinner." (Luke 18:11–13 NLT). Which prayer do you think God honored?

Sin is serious. As we saw last week, sin grieves God because it corrupts and distorts those he lovingly created. It should grieve us too. Yet like the Pharisee, we are prone to downplay our own sin while regarding a sin-sick world with judgement rather than compassion. It's easier to focus on the speck in our brother's eye and ignore the log in our own (Matthew 7:3). We can distance ourselves from "*those people*" — the ones committing whatever sin we see as most heinous — while acting like our sin doesn't matter because God likes our group best. Chapter 2 of Romans reminds us that as the righteous judge, God shows no favoritism. His justice is impartial, and his kindness is available to all.

Day 1

Last week we read through a pivotal section of Romans. Paul traced humanity's fundamental problem back to a denial of God and an embrace of idols. He mapped a trajectory from idolatry to futile thoughts, darkened hearts, and unrestrained sin. As we thought about how Romans 1:18–32 fits into the flow of the letter, we considered the scholarly opinion that Paul was using a particular strategy by launching into such strong, descriptive language.¹

Recall that one of Paul's goals in this letter is to remind Roman believers that in Christ they are family and no group is superior to the other. Gentile Christians enjoyed higher social standing and may have been looking down on Jewish believers. Also, it was widely known that the message of the gospel was more readily accepted by Gentiles, while the Jewish mission was meeting with resistance.² Any Gentile smugness would have been confronted as Phoebe read aloud the verses that we studied last week — line after line condemning Gentile idolatry and sinful excess. Meanwhile some Jewish heads may have been nodding in agreement. But not for long. Jewish believers will feel the sting of what Paul says in the verses we'll study this week.

As you read our passage for the week, consider it from the perspective of an ethnic Jew in Paul's day. They were the covenant people of God, chosen to receive his law, enjoy his presence and represent him to the world. Yet, their nation had been under Gentile control for centuries. Every day they watched pagan people worship idols and violate the laws of God.

¹ Scot McKnight, *Reading Romans Backwards*. Unpublished manuscript, 2018.

² Sarah Heaner Lancaster, *Romans*, *Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2015), 23.

They may have thought they were far better than the Gentiles. How would Paul's message have landed on them?

Like last week, I'm including the verse that comes before our central passage so we can keep the flow of Paul's thought in mind.

Read the Word

Romans 1:31–2:16 (NIV)

³² Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them.

***2** You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge another, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things. ² Now we know that God's judgment against those who do such things is based on truth. ³ So when you, a mere human being, pass judgment on them and yet do the same things, do you think you will escape God's judgment? ⁴ Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, forbearance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness is intended to lead you to repentance?*

⁵ But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed. ⁶ God "will repay each person according to what they have done." ⁷ To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life. ⁸ But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger. ⁹ There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile; ¹⁰ but glory, honor and peace for everyone who does good: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. ¹¹ For God does not show favoritism.

¹² All who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who sin under the law will be judged by the law. ¹³ For it is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God's sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous. ¹⁴ (Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law. ¹⁵ They show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts sometimes accusing them and at other times even defending them.) ¹⁶ This will take place on the day when God judges people's secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares.

- How would you describe Paul's tone in this passage? If you were a 1st century Jew, how would you be feeling?

- Notice that Paul has shifted from “they” language (3rd person) to “you” language (2nd person). Do you think that is significant? Why?
- I think there are a couple of tricky verses in this passage. Are there any that leave you scratching your head? Record your thoughts and questions.

Reflect

Passing judgment on others comes fairly easy to us, doesn't it? Romans 2 reminds us that God is the only righteous judge. While we should be sobered by that thought, God's righteousness as revealed in the gospel also gives us hope. It tells us that we are so broken and sinful that Jesus had to come and die for our sins. But it also tells us that we're so loved that he was willing to do it.

Pray

If it's helpful, use the following to begin your own prayer time with God.

Father, I praise you for your righteousness. Thank you that you don't show favoritism and that you call us to repentance with your kindness. As I study your Word this week, reveal any ways that I am being judgmental or hypocritical. I want to repent of my own sin and show compassion to those who struggle.

Day 2

Before a tough conversation, have you ever rehearsed what you needed to say in your head? You imagine how you'll get your point across and anticipate the objections that will come your way. Paul may have done something similar as he was writing Romans. We can picture him discussing the situation in Rome with Timothy and other leaders as he constructed a message to help believers understand the gospel's impact on their relationship to God and others.

The Holy Spirit inspired Paul to record the argument we find in Romans. We'll find that the wisdom reaches beyond the first century world. It's not hard to see how these first few verses we'll focus on this week are just as relevant now as they were then.

Read the Word

Romans 2:1–5

2 *You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge another, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things. ² Now we know that God's judgment against those who do such things is based on truth. ³ So when you, a mere human being, pass judgment on them and yet do the same things, do you think*

you will escape God's judgment? ⁴ Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, forbearance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness is intended to lead you to repentance?

⁵ But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed.

- How many times do you see the word judgment or judge? In each instance, who is doing the judging?
- What is God's judgment based on?

Reflect on the Word

Paul switches from talking about “them” to talking directly to “you” in this diatribe. He has focused his attention on his Jewish kin because he recognizes how dangerous their hypocrisy is. They are judging others by a standard they're unable to meet and counting on their special relationship with God to exempt them from judgment. Paul is direct; they are just as guilty as the Gentiles on whom they look down (verse 1).

There is some debate among scholars as to whether Paul is talking to Jewish Christians or all Jews. His argument is effective against either. As descendants of Abraham, the people of Israel did have a unique covenant with God. It was a relationship intended to bring God's blessing to all the nations. Yet in Paul's day, many Jews saw the outward signs of that covenant — circumcision, a special diet, keeping the Sabbath — as boundary markers that not only set them apart from the Gentiles, but were unique demonstrations of their privileged status before God. Some Jewish followers of Jesus insisted that you must continue to follow these laws and were judging Gentile believers for not living as they thought they should. Paul's point is that judging others instead of recognizing your own moral failures only shows how effective you are at suppressing the truth (verse 2).

Jewish believers may have also been impacted by a common assumption among Jews. Many were under the misapprehension that God would “go easy” on his chosen people. Like the child of the principal who thinks his mom will be less strict with him than the other students, they were hoping for some kind of pass. Paul sets them straight. God's patience and kindness should not be taken as a sign that he will forever overlook sin. It is a sign of his great love and desire to draw people to himself (verse 4). The proper response to God's forbearance is to seek his forgiveness and repent of wrongdoing. But many Jews had responded with stubbornness and unrepentant hearts (verse 5).

While the world has changed dramatically in nearly 2000 years, the human heart hasn't. We still judge others for sins that we readily commit ourselves. We can judge other groups of believers because we think we've discovered the inside track to God and their way of “doing church” isn't as spiritual as ours. When we behave in this way, we show contempt for God's patience and kindness. We should run to him and experience his love, obey him because he's our Father, and rejoice as he brings others into the family.

- Why do you think people find it easy to judge others? Do you struggle with being judgmental?
- Do you ever take God's grace for granted? How have God's kindness and patience led you to repentance?

Pray

If it's helpful, use the following to begin your own prayer time with God.

Father, help me respond honestly to my sins and failures. Draw me to you so that I can confess and repent. I don't want to take your immense grace and love for granted. Help me respond to other's sin with compassion and love, knowing that when I show your kindness, I can help direct others to you.

Day 3

As Christians we believe that we rely completely on God's grace to save us. When we stand before God at the end of our lives, he does not consult a great, cosmic spreadsheet where our sins are subtracted from our good deeds and we cross our fingers that the balance is positive. Being a basically "good person" is not what reconciles us to God. We are all guilty of sin and rebellion. It is only because Jesus died for our sins that we are saved.

Because we believe so strongly that it is by grace through faith that we are saved, some of the verses we will read today confuse people. Read through our passage and see if you can identify which ones might cause believers to scratch their heads and wonder.

Read the Word

Romans 1:5–11

⁵ But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed. ⁶ God "will repay each person according to what they have done." ⁷ To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life. ⁸ But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger. ⁹ There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile; ¹⁰ but glory, honor and peace for everyone who does good: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. ¹¹ For God does not show favoritism.

- Which verse(s) might cause concern? What do you think those verses might mean?
- Why might verse 11 be the key verse in this paragraph?

Reflect

In these verses Paul is stressing God’s impartiality. At the final judgment, God will not play favorites. As he did in Romans 1:18–32, Paul shows here that evil brings his wrath (verse 5). Paul asserts that good is rewarded with eternal life (verse 7). Paul is illustrating that this is true in principle, but with the exception of Jesus, no human being has ever been approved by God based on how they lived their life. Paul is building up to his declaration that “all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:21), but first he is settling the question of whether or not Jews will have an advantage over Gentiles at the last judgment. The short answer is “no.”

Although his audience for this section of Romans seems to be Jews, in his description of “doing good,” Paul uses words that would have also resonated with Gentiles because glory, honor and immortality were valued pursuits in ancient Rome.³ But as Paul explains, eternal life (verse 7) and “glory, honor and peace” (verse 10) are gifts from God. Paul contrasts them with selfish pursuits made by people whose allegiance is not to God or his truth. Those faithfully committed to God will live to please him.

Merely having the law of Moses, as Israel did in the past, nor having the gospel, as Christians do today, is evidence of a relationship with God. At various times in their history, God reprimanded the Jewish nation for wandering from him and living in disobedience to his law. He also accused them of making token sacrifices that expressed no real loyalty or love. Today, many people would check “Christian” on a religious survey and say they believe in Jesus without exhibiting his integrity, compassion, or mercy. While how we live doesn’t *make* us right with God, it can demonstrate that we *are* right with God.

- How do you show your faithful commitment to God through the way you live? How do you try to reflect the character of Jesus?

Pray

If it’s helpful, use the following to begin your own prayer time with God.

Father, thank you for your grace and that I am not getting the penalty for my sins that I deserve. I am so grateful for the mercy you’ve extended to me through Jesus. Help me live an obedient life, not to earn your acceptance, but out of love and gratitude because you have already accepted me. Show me specific areas where I need to change and grow.

Day 4

³ Dunn, James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1–8* vol. 38A, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998),91.

As we've seen so far in Romans, Paul is determined to show that the gospel is for everyone, and also that everyone needs the gospel. As one scholar puts it, "If the good news of God's saving righteousness in Jesus Christ is for everyone, then the bad news that all stand under condemnation apart from God's righteousness is also for everyone."⁴ We saw last week in Romans 1:18–32 that sin is serious and will be judged. As we're discovering this week in Romans 2, Paul is dealing with a certain Jewish presumption that their covenant relationship with God and his continued mercy would exempt them from judgment. Paul wants them to see that God's justice will be applied without favoritism.

Read the Word

Romans 2:11–16

¹¹ For God does not show favoritism.

¹² All who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who sin under the law will be judged by the law. ¹³ For it is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God's sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous. ¹⁴ (Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law. ¹⁵ They show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts sometimes accusing them and at other times even defending them.)

¹⁶ This will take place on the day when God judges people's secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares.

- Jews have the law. How will they be judged?
- Gentiles don't have the law. But what do they have?

Reflect

As we've seen, Paul's main point in this passage is summed up in verse 11, "God does not show favoritism." In the final judgment, all people will be judged based on what they have done. But since God had given Israel his law, does that give them some advantage? Perhaps it's like getting a copy of a pop quiz ahead of time: you may not be given the answers, but at least you know what's on the test. This might be an advantage, but only if you actually prepared for and passed the test. The Jewish people had been given the law and knew how they'd be judged on the last day. But because they hadn't followed it, the law will only serve to condemn them.

Paul is clear that Gentiles will also be judged by what they do and are accountable for their actions because their consciences bear witness to God's truth. Sometimes they do the good things prescribed by the law without recognizing the source of the impulse. We see this all the time when we witness non-Christians living good lives and doing wonderful things for others.

⁴ Frank Thielman, *Romans*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018), 118.

God's grace abounds in this world. Even without being given an advanced copy of the test, people may get a few questions right.

Paul is using courtroom language in this section and notice that in verse 16 he tells us who the final judge will be. King Jesus presides over the courtroom and it is his responsibility to declare those on trial either guilty or righteous. When he vindicates someone by declaring them literally, "in the right," they are considered righteous from then on.⁵ They walk into a new reality as someone right before God.

Paul will go on to explain in chapter 3 that everyone who puts their faith in Jesus gets that declaration. Jesus' righteousness becomes theirs. But Paul is not quite ready to expound this good news to the Romans yet. He has a few more Jewish objections to deal with, and we'll focus on those next week.

- Why should we be grateful that God is an impartial judge and shows no favoritism? Why should we also be grateful that we can rely on Jesus' righteousness and not our own at the final judgment?

Pray

If it's helpful, use the following to begin your own prayer time with God.

Father, thank you that you are an impartial judge who always does what is right. Thank you even more that by faith I can receive Christ's righteousness so that in the last judgment I will be declared righteous.

Day 5

Happy Friday to you! Let's devote some extended time to God today. On Day 5 of our guide each week, we reflect on what we've learned, connect it with our lives, pray through the Scripture and consider our next steps in following Christ. Take a deep breath, ask the Spirit to guide you and enjoy your time with the Father.

Reflect on what you've learned

While we're moving through Romans 2, let's try and keep the letter's big picture in mind. Recall a big idea we discovered in Romans 1:17, "for in the gospel, the righteousness of God is revealed." In Christ, God is moving to make all things right. God desires a right relationship with humanity, and he will bring justice to his creation. Romans 2 and 3 remind us of a cosmic

⁵ Tom Wright, [*Paul for Everyone: Romans Part 1: Chapters 1-8*](#) (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2004), 34.

courtroom where the judge is impartial, the truth will come out, and all will be made right in the end. No sin will be left unpunished, yet mercy flows freely. The gospel makes all this possible. We'll have to let this scene unfold and it will take us a couple of weeks to understand how this is accomplished, but Paul is laying the groundwork in Chapter 2 by insisting that by God's standard we're all guilty, and the Lord doesn't play favorites.

In your Bible or Romans Passage Guide, read Romans 2:1–16 one more time.

- What has been your biggest, personal takeaway based on what you've learned this week? Who can you discuss it with?

Make Connections

If you pay attention to social media at all, you'll recognize the judgmental attitude Paul describes in these verses. Fueled by a sense of outrage, a daily drama unfolds on our screens based on something that someone somewhere said or did. Sometimes the outrage is justified. We should be grieved and angered over sin and injustice. But sometimes it's just an opportunity to appoint ourselves as judges over others. Righteous anger against genuine evil gets distorted by partisan politics, ideological loyalty and just plain old hypocrisy.

Christians can be guilty of assuming this posture, and not just on social media. We can delude ourselves into thinking we're standing for God's truth, when in reality we're doing the same thing Paul describes in Romans 2. It's a dangerous practice that will blind us to the sin that is crouching at our own door waiting to devour. We cannot shake our heads over the moral failings of our culture without confronting our own. Collectively, this prideful blindness can wound Christ's body, as shown by the recent public uncovering of sexual abuse within some evangelical churches. Individually, we can injure others with harsh, judgmental and unmerciful words and actions. In our effort to hide from our own sin, we might find momentary relief in shining an exposing light on others. But ultimately, we'll prevent the Holy Spirit from revealing and healing our dark and broken places.

In asserting our moral superiority over others, we're like toddlers building a mountain out of couch cushions so we can climb atop, look down on the other children and declare ourselves kings. But our perch isn't stable, and no matter how hard we try, we really can't get that high. Ultimately our rigid stance and blatant hypocrisy will send us crashing to the floor. If we'd wait for our Father to lift us up, we'd experience the honor he has reserved for his children. By harshly judging others we somehow think we're elevating ourselves, but Jesus says, "for all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted" (Luke 18:14 NLT).

Pray

Based on what you've read and reflected on this week, spend some time with your Father in prayer. To help you get started, here are a few prompts based on our passage for the week. What else could you pray for based on our passage this week?

- Ask God to convict you of ways you judge others. Come clean about your own sin. (Romans 2:1). Ask for a spirit of humility and compassion toward others, especially when speaking God's truth.
- Praise God for his kindness and patience. Ask the Spirit to bring to mind specific ways you have experienced both. Allow them to lead you to repentance (Romans 2:4).
- Ask for the Spirit to give you endurance as you seek to do good and strength to resist evil (Romans 2:6–7).
- Praise God that he is impartial in his judgment (Romans 2:11) and that you have been declared righteous in Christ.

What's Your Next Step?

Again this week, we have been reminded that we have sinned against God and are without excuse. Let that reminder give you all the more reason to show gratitude to Jesus for redeeming you! Commit once again to living according to God's good design. Allow the Spirit to root out sin in your life. Repent, accept God's full forgiveness and then follow his guidance in making changes to your life that will help you break sinful habits. Write down changes you would like to make and then consider sharing them with a trusted, Christian friend who will pray for you and support you.