

PAUL'S LETTER TO THE ROMANS

CHAPTER 2

Executive Summary *When you criticise somebody's bad behaviour, you are criticising yourself, because you also behave badly at times. Do you really think you avoid God's condemnation by trying to deflect his judgment to other people? Even if nothing bad happens to you now, do you not realise God is giving you more time to sort yourself out? One day there will be a day of reckoning. Life in God's Kingdom is for those who patiently do good, not for those who are selfish and disobey the truth. Those who choose injustice will get trouble and distress—Jews first, and equally the rest of us.—but there will be glory, honour and peace for those who choose justice—Jews first, and equally the rest of us. God does not have favourites.*

Those who know the Jewish Law and break it will be judged accordingly, but those who do not know it will be treated differently. 'Hearing' a commandment does not make you right before God—you have to 'do' it. Those who are not Jews do not have the Jewish Law as part of their culture, but when they, without knowing them, do what the commandments say, they show that something of the Jewish Law is reflected in who they are.

But suppose you are Jewish, and your hope for God's approval rests on the Jewish Law. You know this Law well, and you see yourself as a guide to the blind, a light in the darkness, and a teacher for those who know less than you do. What happens if you fail by breaking one of the Laws you are teaching others to observe? This is what Isaiah and other prophets accused Jewish teachers of doing, and thereby making God's name stink.

Being a circumcised Jew is great, but if you break the Jewish Law, you are denying your circumcision. So if uncircumcised people obey the Jewish Law, don't they then become 'virtually' circumcised? So 'Virtual' Jews who keep the Jewish Law can rightly condemn 'Real' Jews who break it. 'Virtual' Jews, whose hearts are circumcised, and who obey the spirit rather than the letter of the Jewish Law, get praise not from people, but from God.

Nobody's Perfect

At the end of chapter 1 Paul painted a picture of what can go wrong with people. "Evil is what you get when the mind is twisted out of shape and the body goes along for the ride.... What we see in Romans 1 is the chilling sight of future death casting its dark shadow forwards into the present." It is easy to criticise other people for the bad things they do, but while we may not murder or commit adultery on a regular basis, none of us is perfect.

But surely God won't mind if we occasionally do something a little bit wrong?

This is a key point in Paul's argument: yes, it does matter, it matters very much. Sin is not a matter of degree, it is not a matter of relative badness, it is an absolute. When Jesus suggested that anyone without sin should throw the first stone, he was making the same point as Paul now makes at the beginning of chapter 2. When you point your finger at someone, three fingers are pointing back at you. You may not have committed murder, but you have been angry, and Jesus bracketed these together.

"Seneca thought deeply about moral and philosophical issues, and held himself aloof from what he regarded as common immorality. Yet his own colleagues sometimes caught him out breaking rules he had laid down for others.

How large was the church in Rome?

Forget St Peter's and the Vatican: the church was probably made up of no more than 100 people in a population of at least one million. About 6-8 years before Paul is writing, the Emperor Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome, so the church members were probably mainly non-Jews. When Claudius died in 54 AD, the new emperor Nero allowed the Jews back, so this is the context of the letter. Returning Jewish Christians would probably have found the non-Jewish Christians had branched off into new areas and ideas, and this was causing tension

He and other philosophers of the classical world reflected, in a puzzled fashion, on this problem: how could it be that you might know what was the right thing to do and yet fail to do it?"

A Final Judgment?

Absolutely, says Paul, it will definitely happen.

"Neither Greek nor Roman religion or philosophy had any doctrine of a final judgment. But it was central to Judaism, and Paul places it firmly against the ancient pagan world in this passage. There is a God who, as creator, is responsible for the world and he will put it to rights. And when he does so, he will act with complete impartiality, as accords with strict justice.

Broken Glass

"The moral law is like a sheet of glass.

If it is broken, it is broken."

Paul, as a Christian theologian, does not unsay any of this Jewish doctrine. There will indeed be a last judgment, and it will accord with the totality of the life that each person has led.”

Paul never says that ‘justification by faith’ means the abolition of a final judgment according to works. But if faith in Jesus means ‘no condemnation now I dread’ then surely the idea of a final judgment is irrelevant? This is not what Paul says. “The contrast between judgment according to works and justification by faith is not between a system God would have liked to have operate and a system he has chosen to operate instead. It is the contrast between the future judgment, which will indeed be in accordance with works, and the present anticipation of that verdict, which is simply on the basis of faith.”

How Odd of God to Choose the Jews

Ogden Nash wrote: “It wasn’t odd, the Jews chose God’.

And Leo Rosten added: “Not odd of God, the goyim annoy’im,”

So what part do we goyim have in the purposes of God? We do not have the tradition of male circumcision, so does this mean we are somehow inferior? Christians point to Baptism as being the New Covenant sacrament corresponding to circumcision in the Old Covenant.

Paul looks through this, to see the reality behind the badge, or the label or the sacrament. If it says ‘Beer’ on the label, but is clearly water, then the label has no real relevance. If somebody labelled ‘Jew’ does not keep the law, but somebody without a label does indeed keep the requirements of the law, who is the real Jew?

Paul says quite robustly that the label on the package is irrelevant. “He takes the holy and wonderful word ‘Jew’ itself, and declares that when God works by the spirit in a Gentile or Goyim heart to produce the true fulfilment of the law, that Gentile is to be called ‘Jew’, even though he or she was not born into a Jewish family.”

The Messiah will sort it all out

If Brian was not the Messiah, but just a naughty boy, what did Brian’s mates expect the Messiah to be like?

He (nobody seemed to think it might be a woman) is the coming king who will be David’s true heir, through whom God would bring judgment to the world, and in particular would rescue Israel from pagan enemies. The Hebrew word means literally ‘anointed one’, hence in theory either a prophet, priest or king. In Greek this translates as *Christos*; ‘Christ’ in early Christianity was a title, and only gradually became an alternative proper name for Jesus. The Dead Sea Scrolls speak of two ‘Messiahs’, one a priest and the other a king.

“The universal early Christian belief that Jesus was Messiah is only explicable, granted his crucifixion by the Romans (which would have been seen as a clear sign that he was not the Messiah), by their belief that God has raised him from the dead, so vindicating the implicit messianic claims of his earlier ministry.”

So is there no advantage in being Jewish and being circumcised? Well actually there is, says Paul in Chapter 3.

“The Hebrew name ‘Judah’, from which the word ‘Jew’ derives, actually means ‘praise’ (see Genesis 29:35 and 49:8). Despite the fact that Paul is writing in Greek, where the point doesn’t work, he is thinking in Hebrew. If it’s ‘praise’ you want, he says—if you want the name that says you can lift up your head and claim your special dignity—then don’t look for it from other human beings, by boasting of your ethnic status as ‘Jew’. Get it from God, when God writes his law on your heart by the spirit.”

To Think About:

- 1. What would you say to a Jewish friend who expressed the view that the Holocaust proved there was no God?**
- 2. Does it worry you that you are not perfect? In your heart of hearts, where do you think God draws the line? Do you ever step over that line?**

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**A VERSE TO MEMORISE THAT MIGHT BE HELPFUL TO YOU:
Romans 2:11 For God does not show favouritism.**