

When in Romans Do as the Righteous Do

"You Be the Judge"

2:1-16

If you were on the top of the Empire State building looking down, could you tell the difference between a man five feet tall and another man six feet tall? You couldn't. But, returning to the ground floor, the difference is obvious. Looking down from a high vantage point everyone looks the same, even though there are real differences among them.

God, in a very real sense, is looking down upon the whole human race from a high vantage point. He is not looking upon your *height*, but upon your *heart*. From His perspective, what He is described in Romans 3:10 and 3:23,

Romans 3:10 As it is written: "There is none righteous, no, not one...
Romans 3:23 ...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,

Since God is infinitely holy, God's standard of righteousness is absolute perfection. It matters little in heaven whether one man is better in some ways than another because all still fall short of perfection.

Our problem is that we don't look *down* from heaven, we look *around* on earth. Looking around we can see the obvious differences between the righteousness of men. Not all men are as bad as they can be; some men are better than others; we are usually better than most. When we compare ourselves to human standards of righteousness we look pretty tall. But from God's vantage point we are short the righteousness needed to be accepted into His presence.

When you quit looking around and look up, you quickly understand how very short you are of the perfect righteousness God requires.

The two main biblical divisions of the human race are dealt with.

1. Verses one through sixteen deal with the Gentiles

2. Verses seventeen through Chapter 3:8 deal with the Jews.

In these verses God is not looking at their righteousness as compared with other men; He is looking upon the heart. In 2:16 you read, "God will judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ, according to my gospel." In 2:29 you read, "...he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart..."

Anyone not born a Jew is considered a Gentile. **We** are Gentiles.

But what if you are unaware of God's standards? After all, Gentiles were not privileged to the things that belonged to God's special nation of Israel. They were not privileged to what Paul calls in chapter three "the oracles of God."

You might reason that, if you had been given God's commandments, you would have kept them. As it is you've done your best; surely God cannot hold you accountable for being unrighteous.

Yes He can, and yes He will! He will hold you accountable for your unrighteousness before Him because you were not without a witness. True, you didn't have His commandments. But you did have your conscience, which testifies you of His commandments.

Romans 2:1 Therefore you are inexcusable, O man, whoever you are who judge, for in whatever you judge another you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things.

The fact that you can recognize and condemn what is wrong in others shows that you know the difference between right and wrong. If you know it is wrong for someone to, for example, covet your goods, then you know it's wrong for you to covet someone else's goods.

We call this conscience. Conscience is your mental faculty by which you judge your actions and those of others and pass a judgment on those actions.

Conscience is an internal witness in your heart that you live in a moral universe of God's design and are responsible and accountable for your decisions and actions. While not a full revelation of God's law, it is essentially in agreement with what God further reveals in His law.

Conscience is a *goad*, not a *guide*. If you listen to your conscience you cannot help but understand that you fall short of God's perfect righteousness and therefore need His help.

Since you have this internal witness you condemn yourself, "for you who judge practice the same things."

Look at some of the things listed in the end of chapter one. Who among us can say we've never coveted anything, or had envy, or pride, or have never been disobedient to your parents, or have never been unloving, unforgiving, or unmerciful?

Romans 2:2 But we know that the judgment of God is according to truth against those who practice such things.

Your conscience further tells you that God is right for judging such things as you judge in others.

Romans 2:3 And do you think this, O man, you who judge those practicing such things, and doing the same, that you will escape the judgment of God?

Conscience is intended to lead you to the conclusion that you, too, deserve judgment and are lost in your sin.

Romans 2:4 Or do you despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance?

Nonbelievers like to point out that God doesn't seem to be doing anything about the sins of men - about the presence of evil in the world. It's not a delay; it is God's "goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering," waiting for more to be saved.

God is not looking forward to men perishing. He waits for “repentance.” Repentance is a turning **to God from sin.**

Romans 2:5 But in accordance with your hardness and your impenitent heart you are treasuring up for yourself wrath in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God,

Everyone can relate to saving up and storing up for the future. A person who ignores conscience and refuses to turn towards God is storing up for their future. But it is not the kind of treasure that will sustain you. It will result in “wrath” and “judgment.”

When can we expect God’s judgment? That is the subject of verses six through ten.

Romans 2:6 who "will render to each one according to his deeds":

Romans 2:7 eternal life to those who by patient continuance in doing good seek for glory, honor, and immortality;

Romans 2:8 but to those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness; indignation and wrath,

Romans 2:9 tribulation and anguish, on every soul of man who does evil, of the Jew first and also of the Greek;

Romans 2:10 but glory, honor, and peace to everyone who works what is good, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

These verses must be understood in their context. Taken by themselves it almost sounds as if you can perform certain “deeds” and by them earn salvation. No, that’s not the case.

Look at verse six. God “will render to each one according to his deeds” is a review of your life. God looks back to reward you for your works. But only believers have any works that are rewardable.

Good works do not begin until *after* a person is saved. When asked, “What shall we do that we might work the works of God?”, Jesus answered, “This is the work of God, **that you believe on Him whom He has sent**” (John 6:28-29). The first ‘good work’ anyone can do, then, is to believe and be saved. *Before* and *until* you get saved, you cannot do anything that is good.

After you are saved you are empowered to discover the good works God has before ordained for you.

After you are saved, verse seven describes you. Unless you get saved, verses eight and nine describe you.

It doesn't matter if you are a "Jew" or a "Greek," meaning a Gentile. By saying "the Jew first" Paul was acknowledging the advantage Jews had since they were in possession of a fuller revelation than the Gentiles. But both Jew and Gentile were subject to the same judgment, and both would be judged accordingly.

Romans 2:11 For there is no partiality with God.

Romans 2:12 For as many as have sinned without law will also perish without law, and as many as have sinned in the law will be judged by the law

Men will be judged based upon the amount of revelation they were given. If creation and conscience are your only witness, you can respond favorably and God will see to it you receive further revelation. If you reject the revelation you have, you will "perish" even though you did not have the law.

Those who have God's law in a greater revelation will be "judged" by how well they kept it. If they have not kept it perfectly, they, too, will perish.

Romans 2:13 (for not the hearers of the law are just in the sight of God, but the doers of the law will be justified;

Romans 2:14 for when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do the things in the law, these, although not having the law, are a law to themselves,

Paul teaches elsewhere that it is impossible to be justified by obedience to the law. Even if you could keep it from a point in time moving forward, you could still not be justified because God requires that which was in the past as well.

So what was Paul getting at? Remember he was dealing with an argument folks have that it isn't 'fair' for God to hold men accountable for being sinners when they did not have a full revelation of the law. Paul was simply

pointing out, again, that even those who have only creation and conscience still know right from wrong.

In fact, other than the Sabbath commandment, which requires revelation, it could be argued that men everywhere have some understanding of the rightness of the other nine commandments.

Romans 2:15 who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves their thoughts accusing or else excusing them)

Romans 2:16 in the day when God will judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ, according to my gospel.

The fact men know right from wrong “show[s] the work of the law written in their hearts.” In other words, even without having God’s written revelation men act in accordance with what is written in it. At least they act in accordance with it until they reject God. Then they spiral downward, as we read at the end of chapter one.

Your conscience bears witness that this is a moral universe subject to God's perfect righteousness. Conscience does one of two things: It either "accuses" you, or it "excuses" you.

1. It either "accuses you" of your unrighteousness, leading you to repentance.
2. Or it "excuses you" for your unrighteousness as you harden your heart against God's conviction.

Either way, you see that conscience condemns you as unrighteous before a holy God Who will "judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ." That is, He will judge you based on what you did with Jesus.

Wait a minute! We’re talking about people with very limited revelation who have probably never heard of Jesus. How can God judge their “secrets,” their hearts, by Jesus if they’ve never heard of Him to receive or reject Him?

Let me ask you this. Had Adam and Eve ever heard of Jesus? Did Abram know who Jesus was? What about Job?

No, **none** of them had a very complete revelation of Jesus, but they could nonetheless “believe God,” believe what they did know, and have it count for righteousness and be saved.

Or they could reject it as all those on earth prior to the flood with the exception of Noah and his family.

Even though all these had incomplete revelation of Jesus, it was still His work on the Cross that ultimately saved them. The fact that salvation is through Jesus Christ alone does not mean you must know everything there is about Jesus in order to be saved.

If it's still hard to wrap your head around the idea of someone being saved by believing who never heard of Jesus, listen to this quote by a Reformed theologian.

People who die without hearing the gospel will be judged according to the knowledge they have. They will be judged guilty for rejecting God the Father... If men reject Christ, they face the double judgment of rejecting both the Father and the Son.

God holds you accountable for what you know, based on what you might not be able to know - the finished, final, full work of His Son, Jesus Christ.

Paul called this message “my gospel.” Some were accusing Paul of adding to or subtracting from the message of salvation. Indeed, a little later on in Romans he'll let us know that some of his critics accused him of giving believers a license to sin because of his seeming over-emphasis on grace.

When Paul said, “my gospel,” he meant that the gospel he was preaching - Paul's gospel - was THE gospel, the same one preached by all the followers of Jesus Christ.

It leaves everyone without excuse... But offers “whosoever will believe” salvation in Jesus Christ!

