

Romans 2¹

Leon L. Combs, M.A., M.Div., Ph.D.

Living the Life of a Child of God

The Revealed God Leaves No Room for Excuses

Romans 2:1–3

Therefore you are without excuse, every man of you who passes judgment, for in that you judge another, you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things. And we know that the judgment of God rightly falls upon those who practice such things. And do you suppose this, O man, when you pass judgment upon those who practice such things and do the same yourself, that you will escape the judgment of God?

Again, I recommend the writings of James Montgomery Boice (1), Martyn Lloyd-Jones (2), and Martin Luther (3) for more insight on chapter 2 of Romans. The first verse starts with “therefore” to make us look at what has preceded so that we can understand what the “therefore” is there for. In light of the previous discussion toward the end of chapter 1, however, it is not difficult to see the reason for the word “therefore.” This is almost a “duh” in today’s slang. God has revealed Himself to all creatures through all of His creations—a “virgin birth” of the universe! Think about that a bit! As we discussed in chapter 1, this is called “general revelation,” meaning everyone readily sees such a revelation. Special revelation, which we also discussed in chapter 1, is only available to those whom God chooses to receive it. General revelation is sufficient, however, so that nobody will be able to plead ignorance when he or she dies and appears before God. Everyone, therefore, is under the judgment of God, but for those God chooses, He provides a perfect advocate, Jesus Christ so that for all people of all time everywhere, the result is the following: “He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him” (John 3:36).

Even secular writers generally agree that humans habitually attempt to excuse their sinful behavior, but this Scripture is clear in that, before God, there is no excuse. Everyone will stand exposed before God, and only His children will have Jesus there to give them proper clothing.

Many have raised the question of whom Paul was addressing here. Some think he is writing to the Jews and some think he is writing to the Gentiles, both of whom were members of the church that received this letter (1:7). Considering Paul did not write using chapters and verses, however, he is addressing this to: (1) any hypocrite who is judging people by criteria other than those set up by God Himself, and (2) any hypocrite who thinks that he or she can be in total obedience to any of God’s commandments. The Jews were given The (Mosaic) Law, which set them apart from the Gentiles. But non-Jews who are members of the visible church have also

¹ The indication of which books are referred continues the method of putting the number in parentheses after the name such as Boice(1) using the references for each chapter at the end of the chapter.

been given the Bible and much information about what Christ has *done* for us. Non-Christian (unsaved) church members can also make the same judgmental mistakes as the proud Jew who has The Law.

The following verse is often thrown in the face of Christians: “Do not judge lest you be judged” (Matt. 7:1). However, another verse tells us something that seems different: “Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment” (John 7:24).

Is there a contradiction here? We know that the only seeming contradictions in God’s Word are those perceived by us through our natural biases. When we read the context of each verse, we see that God is telling us the same thing in Romans 2:1, Matthew 7:1, and John 7:24, which is that we are not to set up our own standards for judgment. We are to use only the standards that God has set for us in His Word, the Bible. Of course, judgment must first start with our own behaviors, but that is getting into another topic.

The point here is that God has revealed Himself in general to everyone so that nobody has the excuse of not knowing that God exists, and that He has set His judgmental standards in His revealed Word to be our standards of judgment. We have the Ten Commandments, which the world wants buried away where nobody can see them. We have Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, which even many Christians do not want to hear. We also have the “Golden Rule” in Matthew 7:12, but certainly we do not always follow it. The bottom line is: we are all guilty by whatever external biblical standards we wish to name, so humanity attempts to redefine morality—which contains rules of behavior—according to the rules they think they might be able to obey. But even then, everyone is guilty at some point in his or her life. We are unable to consistently obey any standards anyone wants to establish, so, in conclusion, this first verse of Romans 2 is addressed to everyone.

Several pop psychologists have tried to make people think there is nothing really wrong with anyone. One famous such book was *I’m OK, You’re OK* (4). The positive thinking books by Norman Vincent Peale (5) were read by millions as they attempted to feel better about themselves. Another similar book started an entire cult movement of “warm, fuzzy feelings” we were supposed to have toward everyone, complete with everyone giving each other little teddy bears. Today we often hear that everybody is basically good. The Word of God, however, says that nobody is OK. It says that we are all sinners and the only chance we have of being OK with the Holy God is through Jesus Christ. Read John 3:36 again for the basic reason for the message of the entire gospel.

Patience of God

Romans 2:4

Or 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?

All of us deserve the wrath of God completely poured out upon us forever, but God in His kindness prepared a way for us to not only be righteous, but also to be adopted as God's children. The following verses from Paul's letter to the Ephesians are so beautiful (for more details see the study of Ephesians on <http://LivingTheology.com>) and fall in perfectly within our current discussion:

And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience. Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest. But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places, in Christ Jesus, in order that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. (Eph. 2:1-7)

“But God” are two of the most wonderful words we can hear! Although we justly deserve the wrath of God, He has prepared our path to righteousness even while we were sinners. We were sinners, “but God”; you were a sinner, “but God,” etc. Praise the Lord for His kindness and mercy. John H. Gerstner (6) uses the name of Paul, as an acrostic:

P: polluted sinner

A: anguishing Christian

U: uncompromising Christian

L: loving Christian

Paul gives us a thorough description of how polluted he was, even though he thought he was serving God. We were also polluted sinners. In the seventh chapter of Romans, Paul methodically tells how he anguishes in his quest for righteousness in his walk in the world (“I do what I do not want to do, I do not do what I want to do,” he says, even after his conversion, which we will get to later). If each of us does not also anguish over our daily behavior, then we should question our salvation and/or our understanding of the total holiness of God and the nature of our hearts. Paul is also clear that he will not compromise the teaching of Jesus Christ, and neither should we. He also clearly shows us in 1 Corinthians 13 and other places that love is to be our top priority. Of course, Jesus also clearly tells us the importance of love in His eleventh commandment to us Christians.

To think lightly of this unbelievable kindness and forbearance of God is just mind-blowing, but we all sometimes act as if we take lightly the fact that Jesus has saved us from what we deserve: God's wrath. To take for granted or to think we had any part in this awesome act of God

is the height of arrogance. John Piper² has an excellent saying: “God is the most glorified in us when we are the most satisfied in Him.” Our single most important goal should be to glorify God in all of our lives. To be unsatisfied with what God has given us robs God of glory and shows that we are still thinking too highly of ourselves. It is also good to think about what Jesus knows about us:

- He knows the worst about us, and He loves us anyway. He knows far worse things about us than we know about ourselves. We have more potential for horrible sins existing within ourselves than we could ever imagine. Yet, He loved us enough to die for us.
- He also knows the best things about us regarding our capabilities for good here and now, even more good things within us than we could imagine, because many of them are still dormant.
- Jesus also sees the glorious, wonderful, sinless, wise, loving creature that we are going to become in heaven, one day. Without the kindness of God that leads us to repentance, we would never become this wonderful being. So never take the kindness of God lightly, because without it, we would all be under the wrath of God forever.

God’s Wrath Will Come

Romans 2:5–8

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, who will render to every man according to his deeds: to those who by perseverance in doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, eternal life; but to those who are selfishly ambitious and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, wrath and indignation.

Again, we can take “your” consistently to mean not just the Jew who has been given The Law, but also those dwellers in the visible church who are not Christians. Those who are truly saved are saved from God’s wrath. These verses, in the context of being addressed to unbelievers who appear to be believers, should remind us of the following haunting verses in Matthew:

“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven; but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven. Many will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.’” (Matt. 7:21–23)

² John Piper is the Pastor for Preaching at [Bethlehem Baptist Church](#) in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

What a terrifying day that will be for people who thought they were followers of Jesus Christ! We can think of this concept in terms of an old story (author unknown) regarding what we think we believe vs. what we really believe to the point of action:

A man stretched a tightrope across Niagara Falls and pushed a wheelbarrow across it. Next, he filled the wheelbarrow with 200 lbs. of cement and pushed it across. The onlookers were astounded. Then, the tightrope walker asked the crowd, “How many of you believe I could do this with a man in the wheelbarrow?” The hands flew into the air. He pointed to a man who had his hand up and said, “All right, sir. You get in first.” Well, you could not see the man for the trail of dust he left behind!

Many people think their presence in a visible church proves they are believers. But real faith from God causes a person to test every belief before acting upon it. The true believer, therefore, is not just a member of a local church. In actuality, such a person works out that faith in the world by testing every possible action before becoming involved in any practice.

So how do we test all of our possible actions? We cannot trust just any standard of behavior. We must have some external, non-changing standard upon which we can test a particular behavior. There is only one external standard upon which we must test all of our beliefs, and that is the Bible.

For example, if someone believes he has permission to contact the dead, he is wrong, for Deuteronomy 18:10–12 specifically tells us not to do that:

There shall not be found among you anyone who makes his son or his daughter pass through the fire, one who uses divination, one who practices witchcraft, or one who interprets omens, or a sorcerer, or one who casts a spell, or a medium, or a spiritist, or one who calls up the dead. For whoever does these things is detestable to the Lord; and because of these detestable things the Lord your God will drive them out before you.

True faith, therefore, will not lead us to act upon that the belief that one can speak to the dead, because it is false. Similarly, if anyone believes he or she can practice homosexuality and be living as a true believer, he or she is mistaken, because the Bible specifically tells us that this is an abomination to the Lord:

- For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions; for their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural,²⁷ and in the same way also the men abandoned the natural function of the woman and burned in their desire toward one another, men with men committing indecent acts and receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error. (Rom. 1:26–27)

- Or do you not know that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals. (1 Cor. 6:9)
- . . . and immoral men and homosexuals and kidnappers and liars and perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound teaching. (1 Tim. 1:10)

True faith, therefore, will not lead us to act upon the belief that homosexual behavior is acceptable, because that belief is false.

What about Christians having tattoos? The following refers to such: “You shall not make any cuts in your body for the dead, nor make any tattoo marks on yourselves: I am the Lord” (Lev. 19:28).

The origin of this command comes from the practice of asserting one’s membership in an ungodly religion with tattoos. So the command is actually to not participate in heretical religions. In modern days, tattoos might not refer to such a membership, but Christians should consider this issue and not make any tattoo marks on their bodies if such marks indicate rebellion and/or offend another Christian.

The true child of God will, then, always test any possible action or belief system with biblical teaching before acting upon anything that seems appealing. Such a testing of behavior demonstrates to ourselves and others that we have indeed died to self, and we are now totally living for Christ, trusting Him and not our own behavior.

People who are not willing to test their actions against the Word of God demonstrate that they are like those to whom Romans 2:5 is referring. They have stubborn and unrepentant hearts, for they still want to do whatever they deem “good,” and ignore biblical teaching about such acts. The problem is, they are storing up even more wrath for themselves than someone who never goes to church, because every Sunday the pastor tells them what they should be doing. God will render to everyone according to his or her deeds. People who choose to act against the will of God, who choose not to test their actions against Scripture, and who choose to ignore such teachings are storing up wrath for themselves, because they demonstrate selfish ambition when they choose to obey unrighteousness. Such people will receive wrath and indignation (see Rom. 2:8).

But, Romans 2:7 states that those who have a driving need to test every action against Scripture “by perseverance in doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality,” will receive eternal life.

The test is really very simple: are we choosing to totally serve God or ourselves? Only God and each individual know the answer to that question. We cannot see anyone else’s heart but our own. Of course, we all fail every day. But we also know whether our driving ambition is to be pleasing to God in all that we do. He is always willing to lead us into more and more earthly conformation with what has already happened to us spiritually.

But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, ⁵even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), ⁶and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places, in Christ Jesus, ⁷in order that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. (Eph. 2:4–7)

We should all have only one driving ambition: “Therefore also we have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him” (2 Cor. 5:9).

All Will Be Judged by God’s Standards

Romans 2:9–11

There will be tribulation and distress for every soul of man who does evil, of the Jew first and also of the Greek, ¹but glory and honor and peace to every man who does good, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For there is no partiality with God.

These verses are a promise from God to all people in the world now and for all time before the second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. The Jews are mentioned first in both verses because they received the truth of Scripture before the Greeks (everyone was considered either a Jew or a Greek). But note that both categories of people are judged not by what they know, or by what they were given, but by their actions based upon what they know. Note that God will judge both the Jew and the Greek impartially. The person in the deepest part of Africa who has never heard of Jesus before he or she dies will receive judgment according to his or her actions based upon knowledge, just as the highest-ranking official in a Christian church.

Each day we study God’s Word we receive more knowledge toward the judgment we will receive because of our actions. So do we stop going to church, stop reading the Bible, and stop praying so that we will be ignorant and thus not judged as harshly? No, that will not work either, for we are commanded to gather in group worship, and we are commanded to know and to act upon that which we believe. “So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling” (Phil. 2:12).

As most of you know, working out our salvation does not mean that we are working to earn our salvation, but rather, that we are using what we know to the fullest extent in our lives and that we are studying to know more about the desires God has for us. We call this process “sanctification,” for what God has done within us is expressed in our actions and thoughts more and more.

The Basis for God's Judgment

Romans 2:12–16

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; for not the hearers of the Law are just before God, but the doers of the Law will be justified. 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, 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, on the day when, according to my gospel, God will judge the secrets of men through Christ Jesus.

C. S. Lewis (7) explains this behavior very clearly. The people who are selfishly living according to their own rules do not want to admit there is an external standard by which they should be judged. But there is indeed an external reference against which all actions will be judged, and that reference is God Himself. Whether we have actually heard the Law is not critical to our eternal existence. The critical part is what we do in light of God's Word. "And inasmuch as it is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment" (Heb. 9:27).

After our death, judgment will come through Jesus Christ. We may be the world's leading theologians and still be judged guilty for what we do. Our actions show to what we are really committed, and God Himself gives us the Law regardless of our ethnicity:

"But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days," declares the Lord, "I will put My law within them, and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people." (Jer. 31:33)

With the Law written on our hearts, our consciences are turned toward God and we condemn ourselves when our actions are not from faith according to the following: "But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and whatever is not from faith is sin." (Romans 14:23)

God has placed us in such a wonderful era! We are living under the New Covenant, the time in which the law is written upon our hearts. We have the writings of hundreds of God's children to help us understand the Word of God. We are indwelt by the Holy Spirit so that we have the very presence of God within ourselves to guide us into all truth. So why is not everything perfect and done according to God's law?

The answer is that the New Covenant sanctification is a process, not a complete happening where every believer is instantly cleansed of all evil. As a result, we do not even act perfectly on what we know, because all evil is not totally removed from our hearts. The writing of the Law on the hearts of God's children is also a process, so all God's children are not even

consciously aware of all of the Law. And just think! This answer is only for those who are truly God's children!

Many people in the world are not God's children. Even though God allows them to do as their hearts desire (within the confines of His sovereignty), Hebrews 9:27 and Romans 2:16 tell us that they will later be judged according to what they knew and how they acted. Sadly, much of God's wrath is still waiting to be delivered upon the heads of so many people in the world. "He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him" (John 3:36).

Now we come upon some more rash statements from God about people who call themselves God's children. Continue to remember that the following applies both to the person calling himself a devout Jew and the person calling himself a devout Christian.

Knowledge and Action

Romans 2:17–24

But if you bear the name "Jew," and rely upon the Law, and boast in God, and know His will, and approve the things that are essential, being instructed out of the Law, and are confident that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of the immature, having in the Law the embodiment of knowledge and of the truth, you, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself? You who preach that one should not steal, do you steal? You who say that one should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who boast in the Law, through your breaking the Law, do you dishonor God? For "the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you, just as it is written."

It is clear that the name of God is not only blasphemed by such Jews as stated in these verses, but also by self-righteous Christians. We have seen the name of God blasphemed many times in recent years by people claiming to be leaders of Christianity.

If we know the Word of God, but do not apply it to ourselves, then we are certainly the worst hypocrites and will indeed receive the awful wrath of God. For if we say we believe something but do not apply it to ourselves, we are liars. As a pastor once said, "You must walky walky your talky talky." That statement might not be considered "PC" today, but it makes the point very well.

External/Internal

Romans 2:25–29

For indeed circumcision is of value, if you practice the Law; but if you are a transgressor of the Law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision. If therefore the uncircumcised

man keeps the requirements of the Law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? And will not he who is physically uncircumcised, if he keeps the Law, will he not judge you who though having the letter of the Law and circumcision are a transgressor of the Law? For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly; neither is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God.

Being born into a Jewish family and/or being circumcised is not sufficient qualification to be a child of God. What makes a person a child of God and a true Jew (a spiritual descendent of Abraham) is what God does inwardly to a person, not what man has done externally (circumcision or baptism). This true meaning is also clearly stated in the following Scriptures:

- Therefore, be sure that it is those who are of faith who are sons of Abraham. (Gal. 3:7)
- And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise. (Gal. 3:29)
- That is, it is not the children of the flesh who are children of God, but the children of the promise are regarded as descendants. (Rom. 9:8)

God is still fulfilling His promise to Abraham as He is spiritually rebirthing more and more people:

- Indeed I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens, and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your seed shall possess the gate of their enemies. (Gen. 22:17)
- For Thou didst say, "I will surely prosper you, and make your descendants as the sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered for multitude." (Gen. 32:12)

Since we cannot count the stars of the heavens, nor can we count the sand on the seashore, we certainly do not know when God will declare His promise completed. All I can say is, "Praise the Lord for His kindness and mercy to us, His children."

Amen.

References

Romans 2

1. James Montgomery Boice, *Romans, Volume I, Justification by Faith, Romans 1–4*, Baker Book House, 1991.

2. Martyn Lloyd Jones, *Romans, An Exposition of Chapter One, The Gospel of God*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985).
3. Martin Luther, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, trans. J. Theodore Mueller (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1954), p. xi.
4. Thomas Anthony Harris, *I'm OK, You're OK*, Harper Paperbacks, 2004.
5. Norman Vincent Peale, *The Power of Positive Thinking*, New York: Prentice-Hall, 1952.
6. John H. Gerstner, "Giants of the Christian Faith," a six-cassette-tape series from Ligonier Ministries.
7. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, New York: the Macmillan Company, 1958.