

THE BOOK OF ROMANS

Lesson 6, Chapter 2

In Bible study, context is everything. So before we open Chapter 2 of Romans, let me say something that I should have said (a few times, probably) about Chapter 1. Chapter 1 was primarily (but not exclusively) speaking to gentiles. It was speaking mostly to people who were not familiar with Hebrew culture and thus things like sexual perversion, which was generally accepted as normal in the gentile world (even though it was traditionally rejected by the Jewish world), were being addressed by Paul. Remember that this letter was meant for the Believing congregations of Rome; this wasn't an open letter to the citizens of Rome. These Believing congregations of Rome were a mix of Jews and gentiles. So the serious sins that Paul was so strenuously and sternly teaching against were not hypothetical, he saw them as a threat to the Believing community of Rome. Apparently he had received word that some Believers living in Rome were directly involved to some degree or another in these sinful behaviors and he responded with what we know today as the Book of Romans.

How could Believers engage in such sins and think it alright? It is a fact of life that we all view the world through the lens of our culture. Customs and habits that are accepted as long-held norms are rarely re-examined to see if they are right or good in God's eyes. For example: in France it is customary for women to go topless at the beach. Of course this is utterly shocking and unacceptable to most of the rest of the world, and in most places it could lead to arrest for public nudity. In Islamic nations it would bring the death penalty. But the vast majority of these same French women who go topless at the beach would never think to do so anywhere else. And, if they are church goers, they would dress modestly for a Sunday service and the congregation would find nothing incongruent or hypocritical with their faith if the day before at the beach they were spotted wearing nothing more than a tiny bikini bottom.

In Rome in Paul's day sexual immorality (and homosexuality in specific) was so rampant that the average gentile Roman thought nothing of it. And so average gentile Believers didn't factor that into their faith because it was embedded in their culture. Thus in Chapter 1 Paul was addressing primarily the gentile Believers of the city of Rome as it applied to sexual perversion, although not everything he said applied only to gentile cultural norms.

Chapter 2 switches gears on us, and it primarily addresses the Believing **Jews** of the city of Rome. I'll repeat that the Book of Romans is addressed NOT to Roman citizens of the Roman Empire in general; but rather it is to the Believers of the **City** of Rome. Certainly its principles can be applied as universal. But as was Paul's custom, all of his letters dealt with specific issues that he perceived as needing to be addressed by the specific congregation he was writing to. The unusually long length of the letter to the Romans tells us that Paul had a lot to say to the Roman congregation probably because he thought there were many issues that needed to be addressed. However this also had at least as much to do with the fact that he had never been to Rome, and the Believing congregations there had been founded by others and so he wasn't the one that had selected their leadership or instilled what he felt was proper

doctrine. Thus he was trying to do so from far away with this letter.

Let's read Romans chapter 2 together.

READ ROMANS CHAPTER 2 all

In Chapter 2 Paul uses a well recognized literary style prevalent in his era called diatribe (the author of the Book of James also uses diatribe). In diatribe a straw man is created; that is, an imaginary dialogue with an opponent, or perhaps a student, is set forth. A line of argument is presented and then emphatic rejections of possible disagreements with that line of argument are incorporated and forcefully responded to. Diatribes are usually frank and passionate, with no room for tolerance or compromise. In other words Paul is not talking to, or debating with, any particular individual because he doesn't seem to know any of the Believers in Rome (Paul doesn't refer to any congregation member by name). Rather he is sort of creating some conversation partners and then rebuking them for their beliefs or behavior.

The bottom line to Romans chapter 2 is that Paul says that Jews sin, too, and simply being Jews doesn't give them a "pass" in God's eyes. Therefore they are going to face judgment just as do gentiles. Let me repeat something critical for our understanding so that we understand exactly who his conversation partners are: Paul assumes he is speaking to Jewish and gentile Believers in his letter to the Romans.

Verse 1 accuses the Believing Jews of Rome of "passing judgment" on the behavior of the Believing gentiles of Rome. And he says when they do this they are essentially passing judgment on themselves because they commit the same sins. The argument is really about why God's wrath should fall on all people without exception. In Chapter 1 Paul explained that gentiles have no excuse for their sin because natural law (what can be seen from Creation itself and what is known innately within all mankind) sets down the basic commandments of God for all people, and especially for the vast majority of people who have no knowledge of the Torah. But as concerns Jews (the primary subjects of Chapter 2) Paul explains that they also have no excuse for their sin because not only do they have the natural law they also have God's Torah but they violate it. Paul backs up this line of thought in verse 2 by saying that God's judgment lands impartially on all humans who do wrong things.

Let me caution you right now; those of you who have been taught (and perhaps continue to insist) that works have nothing to do with your redeemed life are in for a shock because we are going to do what we always do and let Holy Scripture speak for itself and not try to twist it or find a way around it. This entire chapter is much about works and deeds and their pivotal role in how God will judge you, me, and everyone. I'll say this again and again during this lesson: Paul is speaking ONLY to Believers (his letter is not addressed to the general public of Rome, nor is his diatribe against pagans or non-Believers). Nowhere is he warning non-Believers. Rather he is speaking to both gentile and Jewish Believers and making clear exactly what the Apostle John plainly speaks in 1John 3:

1John 3:4 CJB ⁴ *Everyone who keeps sinning is violating Torah- indeed, sin is violation of Torah.*

Paul is telling us that sin is sin in the sense that it doesn't vary individual to individual, and it doesn't vary based on whether one is a Jew or gentile. Further there is only one divine Law even if God has given it to humanity in a couple of different forms. The natural law is one form, and the Law of Moses is the other form; even so the requirements of the natural law are no different from the requirements of the Law of Moses; they express the same ideals and principles of God. The difference between them is that the natural law is more general and it is not written down, while the Law of Moses is much more nuanced and specific and it is written down. Think of it like this: a Kindergartener or 1st grader is taught to read in only the most basic fashion. They learn a few words using the simplest words to form into extremely limited sentences about things that a 5 or 6 year old can relate to in their children's world. But in the adult world reading consists of a large vocabulary, using many difficult words, and sentences are complex and full of nuances and variations. Yet the words and the meaning of those individual words and sentences that the Kindergartner learns to read do not amount to meaning something different from what an adult reads. The adult words don't change or overturn the meaning of the same words that the 5 year old reads. It is the same sort of relationship between the natural law and the Torah. The former is but the Reader's Digest version of the latter and Paul is going to flesh this reality out for us over the next several verses.

So at the end of verse 3 Paul asks his Jewish straw man a question that is actually an indictment; do you think because you throw the spotlight onto the sins of gentiles that somehow the very same sins you commit are excused by God? Or; that if a gentile commits a sin and a Jew commits the same sin, that God will punish the gentile but not punish the Jew? Let's not overlook a very basic principle that Paul and Judaism believed; one that I think modern day Believers often forget: God rewards our good deeds and punishes our evil deeds. Or, God blesses our good works and judges our wrong works or our lack of works. That doesn't end when we become saved. But let's not miss the precise point that is being made here by Paul: God is judge, and we're not. Ironically, for us to judge someone who commits the same sins we commit brings God's judgment upon us. And it doesn't matter if it is a Jew judging a gentile, a gentile judging a Jew, a Jew judging a Jew or a gentile judging another gentile. What Paul is standing on is the fundamental Jewish understanding of the Biblical principle of "measure for measure"; proportional justice. No one is special enough to hold themselves outside of humanity, expecting preferential treatment from the Lord.

Verse 4 essentially repeats to Jews the same warning Paul gave to gentiles in chapter 1 verse 21. It is that to sin and then believe one can find a way to avoid judgment is to show contempt for God's mercy. When Paul speaks of forbearance, kindness and patience he is saying that God, in His loving-kindness, often withholds immediate judgment in hopes that the sinner will repent. The thought Paul is getting at is that perhaps a Believer who does something wrong, but nothing bad happens to him in the days following, says to him or her self: "I knew it! I'm OK. God loves me so much that even when I do wrong He won't do anything to me. So I can relax and know that doing a wrong thing here and there isn't going to cause me any problems." This kind of attitude is not only an affront to God's character of loving-kindness, but it misses the point of why it is that God typically doesn't immediately punish: His purpose is NOT to overlook sin but rather that perhaps the sinner will come to realize his or her sin and change their mind. His hope is that the sinner will notice the great mercy God has shown him,

and take this opportunity to turn from sin if nothing else as an expression of gratitude to God for not being so quick to punish. The wrong kind of attitude assumes that either God is weak or that He is a kindly Grandfather who just can't bring Himself to punish his grandchildren; He just winks at sin. This is a truly dangerous sense of false security. And while this principle applies equally to both gentiles and Jews, Paul is currently aiming this mostly at Jews for a good reason: it was commonly held within Second Temple Judaism that merely being a Jew granted you a get-out-of-jail-free card. It reflected a belief that while gentiles were inherently evil in God's eyes, Jews were inherently good. It exposed a mindset among Jews that they were privileged and operated by a different set of rules than gentiles. Being a Jew meant (generally speaking) immunization against God's wrath. Paul is trying to dispel this mistaken belief among Jews (and apparently the Believing Jews of Rome felt exactly the same as their non-Believing brethren otherwise Paul had no reason to discuss this matter at such length).

In verse 6 we see that Paul has Psalm 62 in mind such that he quotes the last few words of 62:13: "**He (God) will pay back each one according to his deeds**". Let's look at the words of Psalm 62 that precedes this:

Psalm 62:11-13 CJB

¹¹ ***Don't put your trust in extortion, don't put false hopes in robbery; even if wealth increases, don't set your heart on it.***

¹² ***God has spoken once, I have heard it twice: strength belongs to God.***

¹³ ***Also to you, Adonai, belongs grace; for you reward all as their deeds deserve.***

A day is coming, says Paul, when God's pent up anger against you for your sins will manifest. Those with an unrepentant heart are in for a big surprise: it turns out that whatever they counted on to keep them safe from God's wrath was a false hope. There is no safety from God for your sins when you refuse to repent. Once again: Paul is addressing Believers, not pagans. Your salvation is a mirage, says Paul, if you do not have a repentant heart. Your salvation is a millstone around your neck if you think that you can go right on sinning, contemptuously, as before your supposed redemption because it will NOT deliver you from God's wrath.

Hebrews 10:26-27 CJB ²⁶ ***For if we deliberately continue to sin after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins,*** ²⁷ ***but only the terrifying prospect of Judgment,***

Rather, says Paul echoing Psalm 62, each person will be paid back according to their deeds. Uh oh. How can this be? It is standard Christian doctrine that once we've prayed the sinner's prayer henceforth our deeds count for nothing. In fact, even good deeds can be a bad thing because works are for Jews, not for Christians. Certainly that can't be!

But then comes Romans 2 verse 7: ***"To those who seek glory, honor and immortality by perseverance in doing good, he will pay back eternal life."***

What? To Believers who seek eternal life BY **doing** good, God will pay back with eternal life? Let's put that in proper context for the passage we're in: for those who seek eternal life by doing good deeds, God will reward with the eternal life that they seek. "Doing" is not the belief in an ideal, and it is not merely possessing a good intent. Neither are "doing" and "faith" synonymous terms. And "doing" is especially not about any warm fuzzy feeling in our hearts. Doing is a verb that involves tangible action; it is usually about our behavior. Doing can only be about a deed or a work (which is exactly what Paul is literally saying). Needless to say these passages about doing, works and deeds have caused great heartburn especially among the Evangelical denominations because it sounds as though it is a direct repudiation of Paul's other statements that salvation is by grace and grace alone.

Ephesians 2:8-9 CJB

⁸ ***For you have been delivered by grace through trusting, and even this is not your accomplishment but God's gift.***

⁹ ***You were not delivered by your own actions; therefore no one should boast.***

So what are we to think? How are we to deal with this conundrum? In Romans 2 Paul is clearly focused on our works and deeds as playing a big role in our salvation; yet in Ephesians he seems to contradict himself. We'll talk about that more in just a bit. But one thing is clear: there are only two possible outcomes for every human being as they stand before God to be judged. We will either receive eternal life or we will receive God's wrath. There is no middle ground, there is no third option. And as Paul is making it abundantly clear, this reality applies to all humans, gentile or Jew. Verse 9 gives us a clue as to where Paul is going with this line of thought because there he highlights disobedience to the truth as what it is that brings on God's righteous wrath. Then he goes further and says as regards God's wrath because of our disobedience, it is "to the Jew first then to the gentile". What this means is "to the Jew **especially**", and there is a reason for this: as God's chosen people they bear a greater responsibility to God to obey Him. Jews get a priority when it comes to blessings; therefore in "measure for measure" they get a different kind of priority for wrath. But gentiles are still liable as well.

This brings up another issue; since it is disobedience that brings about God's wrath, and disobedience brings the same negative consequences to either Jew or gentile, then what is this disobedience in reference to? That is, disobedience to what? Are we to think that the Jews are to be obedient to one thing while gentiles are to be obedient to something else? Because if that's the case then sin for a Jew is fundamentally different than sin for a gentile. Folks, a goodly portion of Christianity says "yes" to that; sin is different for a Jew than for a gentile. A Jew is to obey the Law of Moses but a gentile is to obey the Law of Love. In fact, it is thought by much of Christianity that for a gentile Christian to obey the Law of Moses is itself sin. Even more, a common refrain among Christians is "what is sin for me isn't necessarily sin for you". Or, "Whatever the Holy Spirit tells me is sin is only sin for me, and whatever the Holy Spirit tells you is sin is only sin for you". So the idea is that there is no standard for sin any longer; since Christ has come, sin has been fully customized, individual by individual. If that is the case then God has set a double standard; one standard for Jews, another for gentiles. One law

for Jews, another law for gentiles; maybe even a different and unique standard of sin for every single gentile Believer.

Numbers 15:15-16 CJB

¹⁵ For in this community there will be the same law for you as for the foreigner living with you; this is a permanent regulation through all your generations; the foreigner is to be treated the same way before ADONAI as yourselves.

¹⁶ The same Torah and standard of judgment will apply to both you and the foreigner living with you."

A foreigner means a gentile. And this passage is emphatic that there is but one law and regulation for all, Jew and gentile.

James 4:12 CJB ¹² *There is but one Giver of Torah; he is also the Judge, with the power to deliver and to destroy. Who do you think you are, judging your fellow human being?*

So we learn from Holy Scripture that there is but one law, one judge, and one law giver; therefore disobedience can only mean disobedience to the same law since there's only one. And gentiles and Jews are beholden to the same judge who judges us under the same standard because there's only one judge and one standard.

What then do we do with Paul's declaration that good deeds lead to eternal life and bad deeds to God's wrath? Paul is not claiming that salvation happens by good deeds; rather it is that good deeds are the obvious and expected outward fruit of salvation. If good deeds are not present, then it defies a person's claim to salvation. But even more, judgment is part of the future for all people, saved and not. We are all going to be judged by our deeds in the end. Listen yet again to Matthew 5:17 -19.

Matthew 5:17-19 CJB

¹⁷ "Don't think that I have come to abolish the Torah or the Prophets. I have come not to abolish but to complete.

¹⁸ Yes indeed! I tell you that until heaven and earth pass away, not so much as a yud or a stroke will pass from the Torah- not until everything that must happen has happened.

¹⁹ So whoever disobeys the least of these mitzvot and teaches others to do so will be called the least in the Kingdom of Heaven. But whoever obeys them and so teaches will be called great in the Kingdom of Heaven.

So here we see that when woven together, what Paul says and what Christ says gives us a better picture of the place of obedience, works, and deeds in the lives of Believers. I'll say it again: Paul is ONLY talking to Believers. Everything he has to say about the importance of works and deeds as it applies to our coming judgment before God, he is saying ONLY to

Believers. So indeed salvation by grace makes us a member of the Kingdom of Heaven. But thereafter our obedience to God's Torah commandments (the Law of Moses) has substantial determination at judgment on God's determination of our level of status in the Kingdom of Heaven (apparently a status that shall remain unchanged for an eternity). In a sense, the salvation granted by God for the person who trusts in His Son Yeshua is taken into account at the time of judgment when our deeds are weighed. Our salvation grants us membership in the Kingdom of Heaven. However it is our works and deeds that happened during our lifetimes that confirm our actual level of faith and trust in God, and measure for measure that level of faith and trust will determine our level of status in the Kingdom of Heaven.

2Corinthians 5:9-10 CJB

⁹ Therefore, whether at home or away from home, we try our utmost to please him;

¹⁰ for we must all appear before the Messiah's court of judgment, where everyone will receive the good or bad consequences of what he did while he was in the body

Paul makes it clear in his 2nd letter to the Corinthians that everyone, including Believers, will appear for judgment in front of Messiah our Lord. And what is it that will we be judged upon? Says Paul, it will be upon what we **did** while we were in the body (that is, while we were still alive).

And yet, there is another aspect of good deeds versus bad deeds; of obedience versus disobedience. It is as Paul explained in Romans chapter 1 that when we don't know God (and that is ALWAYS because we don't WANT to know God), and God has therefore abandoned us to our sins and lusts, when we adopt lifestyles of sexual perversion, greed, dishonestly, and a laundry list of other vices, these wrong behaviors are the outward proof of our inward condition regardless of what we may claim or think of ourselves (that is, claiming that we are Believers while at the same time being disobedient and knowingly doing evil things). The fruits of our wickedness reveal who we really are.

So while we can't merit our deliverance and redemption by our good deeds, nor necessarily be refused for our past bad deeds IF we have repented and changed, if we are accepted into the Kingdom by means of our faith and trust in Yeshua then our status before God after our death will be judged solely by our deeds while we were still alive. Folks: these lives matter. What we **do** matters. In fact our deeds and works matter infinitely more AFTER we are saved than before. So if you are allergic to the Biblical fact that your works and deeds are critically important in your relationship with God, and will be to your dying breath and thereafter into eternity, then you need to get over it in a hurry. Sadly most of the time worshippers of God think this way is because of some pretty bad doctrine that has been taught in a number of our evangelical denominations; doctrines that simply defy Holy Scripture.

Verse 13 continues with the theme of "doing". ***¹³ For it is not merely the hearers of Torah whom God considers righteous; rather, it is the doers of what Torah says who will be made righteous in God's sight.***

Paul is primarily talking to Jews (Believing Jews). So Paul continues to demonstrate that he thinks the Torah must continue to be observed. At the same time, Paul is also making it clear to Jews that just because they listen to the Torah doesn't mean that they will do the Torah. God isn't impressed with career students; God wants career doers. But before Paul says this, let's back up one verse to verse 12. Here he says something that can be confusing to the casual reader.

When Paul speaks of those operating without the Torah, he is speaking of gentiles in the sense that they didn't receive the Torah from God. Therefore when he refers to those operating within the Torah, he is referring to the Hebrews (Jews) because God gave the Torah to them, through Moses, at Mt. Sinai. So Paul is not thinking of the gentiles in terms of being lawless; they are not outlaws, thugs. Rather it is that it is the Law of Moses, the Torah, which makes the Jews who they are; it is what defines their identity as God's set apart people. So the distinction between gentiles and Jews, to Paul, is that the Jews live within the sphere of the Law, and gentiles live outside of it. He is saying this: those who sin outside the sphere of the Law (gentiles) will perish, just as those who sin inside the sphere of the Law, Jews, will be judged by the Law. Remember: Paul has already explained that the natural law that gentiles follow is essentially the same as the Law of Moses that the Jews follow. So the sin of gentiles will be judged according to the natural law, and the sin of Jews will be judged according to the Law of Moses. The standard of judgment and the outcomes for both people groups is the same. So back to verse 13: it is because of this logic that Paul can say that even those who live according to the Law of Moses (the Jews) will nevertheless be condemned by the Law when they sin. And since we have carefully studied the Law (the Torah) here at Seed of Abraham Torah Class, then we know what this means. The Law of Moses not only defines behavior in a nuanced and extensive way, it also lays out the penalties for violation of these defined behaviors. These penalties are called the curses of the Law. They vary from restitution for stealing, to loss of life for kidnap and murder.

Paul expands on this line of thought in verse 14 as it applies to gentiles. He says that when gentiles who don't have the Law of Moses nonetheless follow the spirit and principles of the Law, then they themselves **are** the Law. Again: this means that they follow the natural law, which is but a general version of the Law of Moses. "Being themselves a law" means that the Law is "within them"; it is made part of them. The law (meaning the natural law) is contained in their innate sense of right and wrong (something that all humans have in common). Then we get a familiar promise from a distant past in verse 15. Paul says that the lives of these gentile Believers demonstrate outwardly the behaviors that the Law of Moses demands; and this is because the desire to do what is right before God (that is the desire, and the knowledge, to follow God's laws) is written on their hearts. Where have we heard this phrase "written on their hearts" as regards the Law, before?

Jeremiah 31:30-32 CJB

³⁰ ***"Here, the days are coming," says ADONAI, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Isra'el and with the house of Y'hudah.***

³¹ ***It will not be like the covenant I made with their fathers on the day I took them by their***

hand and brought them out of the land of Egypt; because they, for their part, violated my covenant, even though I, for my part, was a husband to them," says ADONAI.

³² *"For this is the covenant I will make with the house of Isra'el after those days," says ADONAI: "I will put my Torah within them and write it on their hearts; I will be their God, and they will be my people.*

Jews also have the natural law written on their hearts since even though they are set apart from gentiles, yet they obviously remain part of humanity in general. So since the natural law is written on every human being's heart since the days of Adam and Eve, then why in Jeremiah do we find that the "Law" will be written on the hearts of the houses of Israel and Judah as a sign of a new covenant with God? Because the Law of Moses, which was given to Israel on stone tablets, something external to them, will eventually be given to all Israel in their hearts. Will it be an entirely different law than the Mosaic Law or the natural law, which itself is nothing but a more or less condensed version of the Law of Moses? No; it is as David Sterns, the author of the CJB says: God will put the Torah (the Law of Moses) into Israel's heart because it is fully compatible with the natural law that is already in Israel's heart. In fact, it is the completed Torah that will be written on their hearts just as Yeshua said that He came to complete the Torah, not to abolish it.

We'll continue with Romans chapter 2 next time.