

Romans Chapter Two¹

Leon L. Combs, Ph.D.

November 20, 2003

Picked up again June 5, 2004

(We went through R.C. Sproul's video series on Romans in the interlude.)

(Many of my thoughts have been developed by reading references 2-4)

Rom 2:1 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.

Rom 2:2 And we know that the judgment of God rightly falls upon those who practice such things.

Rom 2:3 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?

The first verse starts with a therefore to make us look at what has proceeded so that we can understand what the “therefore” is there for. Remembering our previous discussions toward the end of chapter one, it is not difficult to see the reason for the word “therefore”. This is almost a “duh” in today’s slang expressions. God has revealed Himself to all creatures through all of His creations (a “virgin birth” of the universe! – think about that a bit!). This revelation is called a “general revelation”, meaning that everyone readily sees such a revelation. There is also a “specific revelation”, which is a revelation from God that is only available to those whom God chooses to receive this further revelation about Him. However the general revelation is sufficient so that nobody will have an excuse of ignorance when he/she dies and appears before God. Therefore everyone is under the judgment of God, but for those whom God chooses He has provided a perfect advocate, Jesus Christ so that the result for all people of all time and everywhere the result is the following.

John 3:36 “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.”

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

The question about to whom is Paul addressing these verses has been raised. Some think he is writing to the Jews and some think he is writing to the Gentiles. However, considering that Paul did not write with chapters and verses, I believe that he is addressing this to any hypocrite who is judging people by criteria other than that set up by God Himself and also to any hypocrite who thinks that he/she can be in total obedience to any of God’s commandments. The Jews were given The Law, which set them apart from the Gentiles. But also people who are only members of the visible church have also been given the Bible and much information about what Christ has done

for us. Non-Christian members of churches can also be making the same judgmental mistakes as the proud Jew who has The Law.

We read in Matthew the following (and this is often thrown in the face of Christians):

Matt 7:1 “Do not judge lest you be judged.”

But then we read in John:

John 7:24 “Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment.”

So is there a contradiction here? Of course, we know that there are only perceived contradictions in God’s word – perceived by us in our natural biases. We go back and read the context of each and we see that God is telling us the same thing in Rom 2:1, Matt 7:1, and John 7:24, which is that we are not to set up our own judgmental standards. We are to only use the standards that God has set for us in His Word: the Bible. Of course judgment must first start with us also, 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 for 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 many Christians also don’t want to hear. We also have the “Golden Rule” in Matt 7:12, but certainly we always do not follow it. The bottom line is that we are all guilty by whatever external standards we wish to name, so humanity attempts to redefine morality – which contains rules of behavior – according to the rules that they think that they might be able to obey. But even then, everyone is at some point in his or her life guilty. We are unable to consistently obey any standards anyone wants to establish, so this first verse is addressed to all sinners.

I remember several pop psychology attempts at trying to make people think that there is nothing really wrong with anyone. One of those was the book “I am OK, and you are OK”. Do you remember that? Then there was the “warm, fuzzy feelings” that we were to have toward everyone (I forget the title of that book and movement, but I remember people were giving each other little teddy bears as a way of expressing this movement). Then today we hear very often that everybody is basically good. However the Word of God says that nobody is OK. It says that we are all sinners and that the only chance we have of being OK with the Holy God is through Jesus Christ. Read John 3:36 again and you have the basic message of the entire Gospel.

Rom 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 ourselves forever, but God in His kindness has prepared a way for us to be not only be righteous, but also leading to His adoption of us as His children. The following verses from Paul’s letter to

the Ephesians are so beautiful. I refer you to my writing on Ephesians for a more detailed study of them, but I have to list them below for they fit in so well with the current discussion.

*Eph 2:1 “And you were dead in your trespasses and sins,
Eph 2:2 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.
Eph 2:3 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.
Eph 2:4 But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us,
Eph 2:5 even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved),
Eph 2:6 and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places, in Christ Jesus,
Eph 2:7 in order that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.”*

“But God” are two of the most wonderful words that we can hear! Although we justly deserve the wrath of God, God has prepared our path to righteousness even while we were sinners. I am a sinner, “but God”, you are a sinner, “but God”, etc. Praise the Lord for His kindness and mercy. Gerstner⁵ uses the name of Paul, as an acrostic that I think is very good:

P: polluted sinner
A: anguishing Christian
U: uncompromising Christian
L: loving Christian

Paul thoroughly tells us how polluted he was, even though he thought that he was serving God. We also are polluted sinners. Paul also thoroughly tells us how he anguishes in his quest for righteousness in his walk in the world (“I do what I don’t want to do, I don’t do what I want to do”, he says even after his conversion – we will get to that 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 heart. Paul is also clear that he will not compromise the teaching of Jesus Christ, and neither should we. Paul also clearly shows us in 1 Cor 13 and other places that love is of 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 unbelievable, but I am afraid that we all sometimes act like we do take it lightly that He has saved us from what we deserve: His wrath. To take for granted or to think that we had any part in this awesome act of God is the height of arrogance. John Piper has an excellent saying: “God is the most glorified in us when we are the most satisfied in our

life”. Our single most important goal in life is to glorify God in all of our life. 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. And 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 than we could imagine that are within us, because many of those 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. Without this kindness we would all be under the wrath of God forever.

Rom 2:5 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,

Rom 2:6 who will render to every man according to his deeds:

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

Rom 2:8 but to those who are selfishly ambitious and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, wrath and indignation.

Again, I am consistently taking this “your” to mean not just the Jew who has been given The Law, but to mean also those dwellers in the visible church who are not Christians. These verses, in the context of being addressed to true unbelievers who appear to be believers, remind me of the haunting verses:

Matt 7:21 “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.

Matt 7:22 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?'

Matt 7:23 And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.'”

What a terrifying day that will be for people who thought that they were followers of Jesus Christ!

Here is an old story regarding our surface beliefs and what we really believe to the point of action in our lives, but it is worth another look:

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 he said, "All right sir. You get in first." Well, you couldn't see the man for the trail of dust he left behind!

Many people think that their presence in a visible church proves that they are believers. But real faith from God causes a person to test every belief **before** acting upon it. Therefore, the true believer is not just a member of a local church, but he/she 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 can't 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 you believe that you can talk to the dead, you are wrong for the Bible specifically tells us not to do that:

Deut 18:10 "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,

Deut 18:11 or one who casts a spell, or a medium, or a spiritist, or one who calls up the dead.

Deut 18:12 "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."

Therefore true faith will not lead us to act upon that belief because it is false.

If you believe that you can practice homosexuality and be a Christian, you are wrong because the Bible specifically tells us that such is an abomination to the Lord:

Rom 1:26 "For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions; for their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural,

Rom 1:27 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."

Therefore true faith will not lead us to act upon that belief because it is false.

How about tattoos? Read the following:

Lev 19:28 "You shall not make any cuts in your body for the dead, nor make any tattoo marks on yourselves: I am the Lord."

Therefore, after becoming a Christian we should not make any tattoo marks on ourselves.

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

People who are not willing to do this testing before actions demonstrate that they are like the people to whom Rom 2:5 is referring. They have a stubborn and unrepentant heart for they still want to do first whatever they themselves deem “good” and they **choose** to ignore the Biblical teaching about such acts. But they are storing up wrath for themselves more than someone who never attends a church because they are informed every Sunday of what they should be doing. God will render to everyone according to his or her deeds and people who choose to act against the will of God are storing up wrath for themselves. People who choose to refuse to test their actions against Scripture or choose to ignore such teachings are demonstrating selfish ambition and a choosing to obey unrighteousness. Such people will receive wrath and indignation (Rom 2:8).

But to those people who really have a driving need to test every action against the teaching of Scripture, these are the ones who “by perseverance in doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality”. Rom 2:7 says that these people will receive eternal life.

The test is really very simple: are we choosing to totally serve God or ourselves? Also only God and the individual know the answer to the question. We cannot see anyone else’s heart but our own. I know that I fail every day, but I also know that my driving ambition is to be pleasing to God in all that I do. He is leading me into more and more earthly conformation with what has already happened to me spiritually.

Eph 2:4 “But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us,

Eph 2:5 even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved),

Eph 2:6 and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places, in Christ Jesus,

Eph 2:7 in order that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.”

I pray that you also have only one driving ambition:

2Cor 5:9 “Therefore also we have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him.”

Rom 2:9 “There will be tribulation and distress for every soul of man who does evil, of the Jew first and also of the Greek,

Rom 2:10 but glory and honor and peace to every man who does good, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

Rom 2:11 For there is no partiality with God.”

These verses are a promise from God to all people in the world now and in all time before the second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. The Jews are mentioned first in both verses because they had received the truth of Scripture before the Greek (everyone is/was either a Jew or a Greek). But note that both categories of people are judged not by what they know or have given but by their actions based upon what they know. Note that both the Jew and the Greek will be judged impartially by God. The person in deepest Africa who has never heard of Jesus before he/she dies will receive judgment based upon actions based upon knowledge, just as the highest-ranking official in a Christian church. Each day that I study God’s Word, the more knowledge I receive toward which judgment of my actions will be received! 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 together in group worship and we are commanded to know and to act upon that which we believe. So:

Phil 2:12 “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;”

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

Rom 2:12 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;

Rom 2:13 for not the hearers of the Law are just before God, but the doers of the Law will be justified.

Rom 2:14 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,

Rom 2:15 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,

Rom 2:16 on the day when, according to my gospel, God will judge the secrets of men through Christ Jesus.

C. S. Lewis⁶ relates about this behavior of people very clearly. The people who are selfishly living according to their own rules do not want to admit that there is an external standard by which they should be judged. But there is indeed an external reference against which all actions can be judged and that reference is God Himself. It is not critical to our eternal existence whether or not we have actually heard the Law. What is critical is what we do in the light of God’s Word.

Heb 9:27 "And inasmuch as it is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment,"

After our death there will be a judgment and that judgment is through Christ Jesus. We may be the world's leading theologian and still be judged guilty for what matters is what we do. Our actions show to what we are really committed and God Himself gives us the Law regardless of our race:

Jer 31:33 "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."

With the Law written on our hearts, our consciences are turned toward God and we condemn ourselves when our actions are not in faith.

Rom 14:23 "But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and whatever is not from faith is sin."

God has placed us in such a wonderful era! We are living in the New Covenant time and 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 in ourselves to guide us into all the truth. So why is not everything perfect and done in God's law?

The answer is that the New Covenant is a process, not a complete happening resulting in every believer being totally cleansed of all evil. The writing of the law on the hearts of God's children is also a process so that all God's children are not even consciously aware of all of the law. So even God's children are not aware of all of the law and we don't have all the evil totally removed from our hearts so that we don't even act perfectly upon what we do know. And this answer only involves those who are really God's children!

There also are the many people in the world who are not God's children. God allows them to do as their hearts desire (within the confines of His sovereignty) and they will later be judged according to what they did know and how they acted (Heb 9:27 and Rom 2:16). Certainly there is a lot of God's wrath still waiting to be delivered upon the heads of so many people in the world:

John 3:36 "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."

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

Rom 2:17 “But if you bear the name "Jew," and rely upon the Law, and boast in God,
Rom 2:18 and know His will, and approve the things that are essential, being instructed out of the Law,
Rom 2:19 and are confident that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness,
Rom 2:20 a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of the immature, having in the Law the embodiment of knowledge and of the truth,
Rom 2:21 you, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself? You who preach that one should not steal, do you steal?
Rom 2:22 You who say that one should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples?
Rom 2:23 You who boast in the Law, through your breaking the Law, do you dishonor God?
Rom 2:24 For "the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you," just as it is written.”

Certainly the name of God is not only blasphemed by such Jews as stated above but also by the Christian who is only self-righteous. 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 and do not apply it to ourselves then we certainly are the worst hypocrites and will indeed receive the awful wrath of God for if we say that we believe something but do not apply it to ourselves then we are a liar. As one of my favorite pastors used to say: “you must walky walky your talky talky”. That is probably not a “pc” statement now but I think that it makes the point very well.

Rom 2:25 “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.
Rom 2:26 If therefore the uncircumcised man keeps the requirements of the Law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision?
Rom 2:27 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?
Rom 2:28 For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly; neither is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh.
Rom 2:29 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 the race of the Jew and being circumcised is not enough qualification to be a child of God. What makes a person a child of God and then a true Jew (a true descendent of Abraham) is what is done by God inwardly to the person, not what has been done by man externally (circumcision or baptism). This true meaning is also clearly stated in the following Scripture verses:

Gal 3:7 “Therefore, be sure that it is those who are of faith who are sons of Abraham.”

Gal 3:29 “And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.”

Rom 9:8 “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.”

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

Gen 22:17 “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 32:12 “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.'”

Since I cannot count the stars of the heavens nor can I count the sand on the seashore, I 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

1. All Bible quotations are from the New American Standard Bible, Moody Press, 1975.
2. James Montgomery Boice, “Romans, Volume I, Justification by Faith, Romans 1-4, Baker Book House, 1991
3. Martyn Lloyd Jones, “Romans, An Exposition of Chapter One, The Gospel of God”, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985).
4. Martin Luther, “Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans”, trans. J. Theodore Mueller (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1954), p. xi
5. John H. Gerstner, “Giants of the Christian Faith”, six cassette tape series from Ligonier Ministries
6. C. S. Lewis, “Mere Christianity”, New York: the Macmillan Company, 1958.