



## Righteous Judgment for All

Romans 2:12-16

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This morning we will be looking at Romans, chapter 2, specifically verses 12-16. Please give attention to the reading of God's Holy Word. For the Word of the Lord is completely inerrant, the Word of the Lord is completely sufficient, and the Word of the Lord is completely authoritative. Romans, chapter 2, beginning at verse 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. For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified. For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus."*

Thus far the reading of God's Holy Word. Let's pray for his blessing upon it. Heavenly Father, we ask that by your Spirit you would open up your Word to us. Help us to see great things in your Word. Point us to the Lord Jesus Christ. Help us to understand more who Jesus is and what he has done, that we might be made more and more like him. This we ask in Christ's precious name, amen.

As we have been going through the book of Romans, we need to constantly remind ourselves that the overarching theme of this book is that Paul wants to preach the gospel to those who are in Rome, and he does this for the benefit of the church that is gathered there but also so that the lost might be brought into the church. Paul has started out this letter by answering objections to the need for the gospel. We've said it before: this is one cohesive argument Paul is making, and it is remarkable how he anticipates the common objections and questions that would be asked. He started by showing us that all people know God, but they suppress that knowledge, so they can continue on in a life of sin. Then he showed that living a life of external conformity to the law, an external moral life, was not enough because God does not grade on a curve. What is required from God is perfection, not just good enough. Now he is about to explain the standard of God's judgment and how it applies to everyone, Jew and Gentile alike.

I'd like us to see three things this morning from our text. First, we see that *those who are under the law will stand before God*. Secondly, we see that *those who are without the law will stand before God*. Then thirdly, we see *the day of judgment* in which both those who have the law and those who are without the law will stand before a holy God. Let's begin, then, by looking at the state of those who are under the law.

## **Those Under the Law Will Stand Before God**

What Paul is doing here, not just in these verses but up until this point, is trying to make everyone uncomfortable. If it has seemed to you over the past few weeks that Paul is talking a lot about sin, he is. He keeps bringing it up over and over, and he's doing this with a purpose. He's not just trying to criticize people and their actions. He's not just trying to condemn others. What he wants us to see is that there is no hope for any of us anywhere except with Jesus. Every place else we were to go or turn or look is vanity.

Right now in this specific text he is focusing on the Jews of his day. If we think about God's people, the Jews of Paul's day, they took great pride in the blessings God had given to them. After all, they were separated from all other people. They were called to the Promised Land, but most of all, they had been given the law. God's law is what made them different.

That's how they knew not to eat the wrong food. That's how they knew not to do the wrong things. That's how they knew which actions were expected of them. The Gentiles, after all, did not. They didn't have the law. In the mind of the Jews, that meant the Gentiles had no hope of salvation, because salvation, in the Jews' minds, was tied up with the law and the knowledge of the law. Their belief was that having the law, that literally it being read in their hearing was enough.

Now put yourself in the place of a first-century Jew. They didn't have Bibles lying all around at their house. They didn't have recordings of the Bible. They didn't have computer programs with the Bible. They certainly didn't have phone apps with the Bible. The only way they got the Bible was with the public reading of Scripture. That's what Paul is talking about. That's how they knew the Scripture. That's how they knew the law. They had it read to them.

They thought that was enough, that that differentiated them from all of the other people, an awful lot of other people who didn't know the law, didn't care about the law, and didn't hear the law. How could it be that the Jews thought the mere hearing of the law was enough? Didn't they know God was a just judge? They thought, perhaps, that the law could be kept. It might not be very easy to keep the law, but it could be done. Just by hearing the law, the battle was won.

It was like they felt they were on the same page with God. Do you know what that's like? You have a discussion with someone, and as you converse you realize you're on the same page, you think the same thing about a subject, and you think, "This is good. We've resolved this." That's the way they viewed their relationship with God. "God tells us what he thinks. We're on the same page with God. Therefore, we're fine." God would look at them and see they knew right from wrong, and that would be enough before God.

But Paul says it very directly. He says it is not the hearers of the law but the ones who *do* the law who are righteous. Everyone will stand before the living God, the Judge of all. Some may think God will count them

righteous because they know the law, because they know the rules. After all, that's what separates them from most people, but Paul says that will not happen.

What does that mean, then, for you and me here this morning? What it means is you cannot count on your church attendance as you stand before God. It is good that you hear God's Word. It is good that you attend on the preaching of God's Word, but just knowing is not enough. It is not enough to just hear the Word. Paul is plain here: hearing is not enough. He says it is the doers of the law who will be justified.

So what does this mean? Well, in one sense, it addresses the hypocrite who says he knows God's law but never does it. What does it mean to be a doer of the law? How much doing is necessary? This is where Paul addresses his second point to those who are under the law. He says that *some* doing is not enough. It is not enough to try to find the break point where enough doing has been done.

Paul gives us two hints in the text to understand this. First, in verse 13 he says the "doers of the law." He calls them *doers*. This does not mean an occasional doer. This is not like someone who dabbles in a hobby. The word Paul uses here is a noun that defines someone with respect to the law. They are always known as doing the law.

For just a moment, stop and think about how broad and all-encompassing the law of God is. Often, when *we* think of the law we think about just the Ten Commandments. They're not very long. They can be read in just a minute or two. That gives us some sense that the law is manageable. After all, there are only 10 commandments. There aren't 100 commandments. They're not a paragraph long each. I think I can manage this.

That's because we don't understand the law. If you look in your Bible, the law is actually included in Exodus, the book of Leviticus, the book of Numbers, and the book of Deuteronomy. As a matter of fact, there are a great many laws in there, so many that my guess is no one in this room here right now could even recite them all, let alone claim to have done them.

While some of these laws are indeed ceremonial and have been done away with...we can all enjoy bacon with lunch...there are a great many of these laws that are *not* ceremonial. To understand how the books of the law work, Calvin, when he wrote his commentary on this section of the Bible, rearranged the books in his comments. He took all of the sections in these four books that dealt with each one of the commandments and pulled them under the commandments.

So under each commandment was a series of laws, a series of regulations. There were a great many. What does that mean? It means that in order to be a doer of the law you have to do more than you could have ever imagined, more than is possible. Let me illustrate this for you with one commandment. Let's take a relatively easy one: the third commandment. "You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain."

For some of us, we think this means we can't curse God. Others of us will go the extra mile and say that means we can't use any foul language or curse words either. If that's all that was encompassed by that commandment, I think we could agree we could try with a good deal of effort to keep that commandment. Sure, we have to be careful when we're using a hammer or when we stub our toe, but it's not *that* hard.

I want to give you an exposition of this commandment. It's found in the questions in the Larger Catechism on what the third commandment means, what it covers, drawing upon all of the law and all of Scripture. Take a breath. "The third commandment requires that the name of God, his titles, attributes, ordinances, the word, sacraments, prayer, oaths, vows, lots, his works, and whatsoever else there is whereby he makes himself known, be holily and reverently used in thought, meditation, word, and writing; by a holy profession and answerable conversation to the glory of God and the good of ourselves and others."

We're only halfway there, because now, "The sins forbidden in the third commandment are the not using of God's name as is required; and the abuse of it in an ignorant, vain, irreverent, profane, superstitious, or wicked mentioning or otherwise using his titles, attributes, ordinances, or works by blasphemy, perjury; all sinful cursings, oaths, vows, and lots; violating of our oaths and vows, if lawful; and fulfilling them, if of things unlawful; murmuring and quarreling at, curious prying into, and misapplying of God's decrees and providences; misinterpreting, misapplying, or any way perverting the word, or any part of it..."

I've also left off a good 20 or 30 words. It goes on. I trust you get my point. When we see *that* as the law, then we're undone. There's no way we can do this. I can behave myself when I stub my toe, but how do I keep every oath perfectly? How do I never take an oath for something unlawful? How do I treat God as holy and reverent in everything I think, say, and write all of the time? When *that* happens, we are undone. How ready are you now to think of yourself as a doer of the law?

Secondly, in verse 12 Paul says all who have sinned will be judged by the law. This is the second way Paul hints that a partial doing of the law is insufficient. Paul is saying the standard we need to meet in every way and all the time is perfection before the law. Now, one way to define sin (Paul does it here when he speaks of sinning)... It's not the only way in the Bible that sin is defined, but one way to define sin is by using a Greek word that means to miss the mark. You may have heard of this.

Illustrations abound from preachers about archery. I've never picked up a bow and arrow in my life, so I wouldn't know what that would be like, but I do know about targets and a bit about target shooting. What is very important, especially if you're using a rifle, is to try to hit the target. Twofold. First, you want to fulfill it. Secondly, you don't want to be off and have an accident.

What Paul is saying about sin here is sin is not hitting the mark, missing the mark. Paul is saying that every person who ever misses the mark of the standard of the law, which includes every law in the Bible, is someone

who will be judged *by* the law. James puts it much more succinctly. He says, "Whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all."

You see, it's not that we can do *some* of the law and be righteous before God. Paul is telling us we can't be hearers; we have to be doers. Then he says, "Surprise! There's no way you can do enough." We can deceive ourselves into thinking as long as we do more than other people we are fine, but Paul strips that away from us. He takes away every place we could look apart from Jesus, because Jesus is the place where we find refuge. Jesus did all of the law all of the time.

Peter puts it this way: "He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth." Paul says, "For our sake God made Christ to be sin who knew no sin." Not just *little* sin...*no* sin. Jesus is the only hope for doers of the law. Because of the way Paul describes the law and our relationship to it, we might be tempted to see the law as a bad thing. We might think, "If only we were ignorant of the law. Then we couldn't be held to its standard."

### **Those Without the Law Will Stand Before God**

Some have looked at this and said, "Well, if the Gentiles don't have the law, how could they be condemned? How could they even be said to have sinned? They don't know the law." The classic hypothetical this brings up is the story of the proverbial pygmy in Africa, the person in deepest, darkest Africa who has never received the Bible, who doesn't know God's Word. The question is...*How could he possibly be accountable before God when God has not given to him his Word?*

Paul answers that objection. He's very clear about universal guilt. Look in verse 12. "For all who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law..." Paul says that's no excuse for you to say, "I don't have the law." What does this mean? Does it mean God is being arbitrary? Does it mean God doesn't even need a standard, that he's not using one? How could that be fair?

I think what we need to understand is that when he says they are without the law, what he means by "law" is the revealed law given to Moses. It is the revealed Mosaic law. Of course they are without that law. What he *doesn't* mean is the concept of right and wrong every person has. He has been talking about this since Romans, chapter 1, how we understand the nature of the universe, how we have a knowledge of God but suppress it.

He goes on to say, "For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves..." I have to disabuse you of a modern idiom. When we use the phrase a *law to themselves*, we think of "Anything goes." They're their own standard. They're a law to themselves. That's not what Paul means here. Paul is saying when they do the things of the law, when they do things that are right and do *not* do things that are wrong, when they see right and wrong, they become their own source of law.

They reveal to themselves they know what's right and wrong, that they know there is a standard, that they know they must obey God's law substantively. It's what we would call *natural law*. Now, how do they know

this law? Once again Paul says, "I'm glad you asked." We know they know this law because they do the things of the law...that is, what the law requires. They do what the law requires, which shows they understood what the law is all about in substance.

We see this all the time. We see nations that pass laws against theft or against murder. They understand right and wrong. Have you ever had the opportunity to confront someone who feels they've been unjustly treated? Say you're driving in a parking lot and hoping to find a space, and you see one and zip into that spot. Maybe you didn't notice there was someone waiting with their blinker on to get in that spot.

Does that person exit their car and say to you, "I was looking at that spot, but I understand you have your own abstract system of morality that you follow, and I have my own abstract system of morality to follow. For you, it's okay to cut into a spot. I understand that. It's not okay for me, but I don't want to impose my abstract system of morality on you." Is that what they say?

My guess is it's much shorter, something like, "What are you doing? I was here first." That's like the rule of life. The person who's there first gets the spot. When you cut someone in line, what do they say? They say, "What are you doing? That's wrong to do that."

"What do you mean it's wrong to do that? Where are you getting this standard of 'wrong'?"

"Well, everyone knows you don't cut someone in line."

Where does everyone get that standard of wrong from? You see, those who don't have the law in their everyday lives live as if the law exists. They *have* to or they wouldn't be able to survive. As a matter of fact, the small percentage of people who do not act this way... We call them crazy and lock them up. We say, "You're not living according to the rules of society. We don't know what to do with you." That's what Paul is saying. C.S. Lewis in his book *The Abolition of Man* called this the *Tao*. That is, it is the standard of natural law everyone has ingrained in them.

He puts it this way: "The Tao, which others may call Natural Law or Traditional Morality...is not one among a series of possible systems of value. It is the sole source of all value judgments. If it is rejected, all value is rejected. If any value is retained, it is retained. The effort to refute it and raise a new system of value in its place is self-contradictory. There has never been, and never will be, a radically new judgment of value in the history of the world."

Lewis is observing what we see in Europe, in Africa, in Asia, in every kind of culture. There is a basic concept of right and wrong. Paul says that in the actions of people they show that the work of the law is written on their hearts. This is the first witness against them. The second witness is what we call *conscience*. Paul says this

clearly in verse 15. "...while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them..."

Perhaps when I talk of *conscience* what you think of is Jiminy Cricket, some sort of cute cartoon character who tells Pinocchio what he should be doing or what he shouldn't be doing, but that's not quite right. Conscience is rather an awareness of right and wrong internally to us, and it goes beyond the objective standard. The conscience sees the relationship I have to the standard, whether I am breaking it or not. It's that inner voice that speaks to us regarding our actions.

Kids, it's what causes you, when no one is around (at least you think), not to take that candy. You may think it's Mom's voice in your head. It's not. It's a conscience. We understand what right and wrong are, and we understand what the consequences of our actions contrary to right and wrong are. Paul describes this clearly for us. He says it can accuse us when we seek to do wrong.

I can think of no better example of this than in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. You remember that Macbeth kills the king in order to gain the crown, and you may recall that his wife, Lady Macbeth, pushes him to do it. She keeps telling him over and over that this is what they should do and that everything good will come of this and that if he does this their lives will be perfect.

The only problem is after the deed is done we see Lady Macbeth in the washroom, and she's continually washing her hands. She keeps saying, "Out! Out, spot!" There's no blood on her at all, but her conscience continues to accuse her. She cannot get free from it. She knows what is right and wrong. She may talk like it doesn't matter. She may talk like she can get past it, but you cannot surgically excise your conscience.

The conscience can also, Paul says, *excuse* us. It can defend us against accusations of wrongdoing. When someone accuses us of doing something wrong and we know we didn't do it...we weren't there...our conscience excuses us. Again, that native sense of right and wrong kicks in, and we say, "This is not right that you're making this judgment. I'm free from guilt in this."

What this means is even though someone does not know God's law as revealed, he shows he's a part of God's creation. God has created the world with a sense of order, of right and wrong, and we can't escape that just because we don't study it as we should. Our very inner being shows we are accountable to an external standard of right and wrong.

## **The Day of Judgment**

All of this leads in verse 16 to *that* day. "...that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus." Paul has been consistent in his application. Everyone sins before a holy God. Everyone falls short of his glory. God is a just judge, so judgment comes for everyone, those who are *with* the law and those who are *without* the law. It all culminates in a day of judgment.

Paul does use an interesting phrase here. He says "according to my gospel." Does this mean the gospel judges people, that the gospel condemns people? Let's go back to our hypothetical person in deepest, darkest Africa. He has never heard the gospel. Why should he be judged? That doesn't seem fair. Is he judged by the gospel? Paul is not saying here that the gospel condemns or judges. What he is saying is that the *law* does that, whether it's written revelation or written on the heart.

What Paul means when he says "according to my gospel" is that the gospel has a proclamation of judgment built into it. The gospel is indeed good news, but it also has bad news. The gospel tells us that God will judge, that he will judge everyone and there is no escaping his judgment. To fail to make that a part of the gospel is cruel and deceptive. I know I need a Savior because I know I will be judged and I know I can't stand in the judgment.

This judgment is more penetrating than anything I can imagine. Paul says God judges the secrets of men. I want you to stop for a minute and think about what you keep secret. I don't mean things that aren't public knowledge. I mean the things that are so secret you won't tell a parent, you won't tell a spouse, you don't want a family member to know, you never whisper to the closest of friends. Those secrets God will judge.

Jesus tells us this in Mark 4. He says, "Nothing is hidden except to be made manifest; nor is anything secret except to come to light." In Matthew 12 he says, "I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word." I don't know about you, but that frightens me. I don't mean just everything you've ever tweeted. I don't mean discussions on Facebook you thought better of later and deleted. I don't mean things said in a restaurant.

What Jesus means here is every word you speak you will have to give account for. That's terrifying, because there is no way we can meet God's standard for every word we have ever spoken. We have to realize there is no way we can stand in the judgment by ourselves. Where do we turn, then? If every single person cannot stand before a holy God, what do we do? If those who are under the law are condemned by the law and those who are outside of the law are condemned *without* the law, where do we go?

If we even accuse ourselves with our own conscience and our own actions, what is our hope? Our hope is the gospel. The gospel, dear friends, is not the opposite of justice. Sometimes we think the gospel and God's grace are the opposite of justice. We hope God will simply put aside his law and holiness and will let us walk on by because he's being gracious.

This kind of thinking is what causes us to forget about the judgment. We hear that God has grace, and we think that negates the judgment so there's no need to even think about it, but the truth is the gospel is perfectly consistent with justice and judgment. The grace of God comes to us through the justice of God. He has placed our sins on his Son, Jesus Christ. God has dealt with sin. God is just in forgiving sinners. He has punished Jesus for our transgressions.

Only Jesus, because he is God, could bear the punishment of our sin, and Jesus has been lifted up and vindicated in his work. Paul shows us this victory in that Jesus himself is the one who judges. God places judgment into Jesus' hands because he has earned it. He has won the victory. Sin is a serious thing. We cannot pretend it doesn't exist. We can't hope God will forget about it because we know his law or because we've done some good things.

God judges all people by his perfect standard, and our own inner selves cry out that this is true, but God *has* made a way for us to escape judgment: the gospel. Come and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. Believe that he is God himself, able to bear the judgment for your sins, *willing* to bear that judgment so you could be right before God.

There *is* a law. There *is* judgment, but praise be to God that he sent his Son Jesus to save us from what we deserve and draw us to himself. Don't wait. Don't try to see if you could possibly do enough. Don't let your conscience accuse you any further. Run to Jesus right now today.