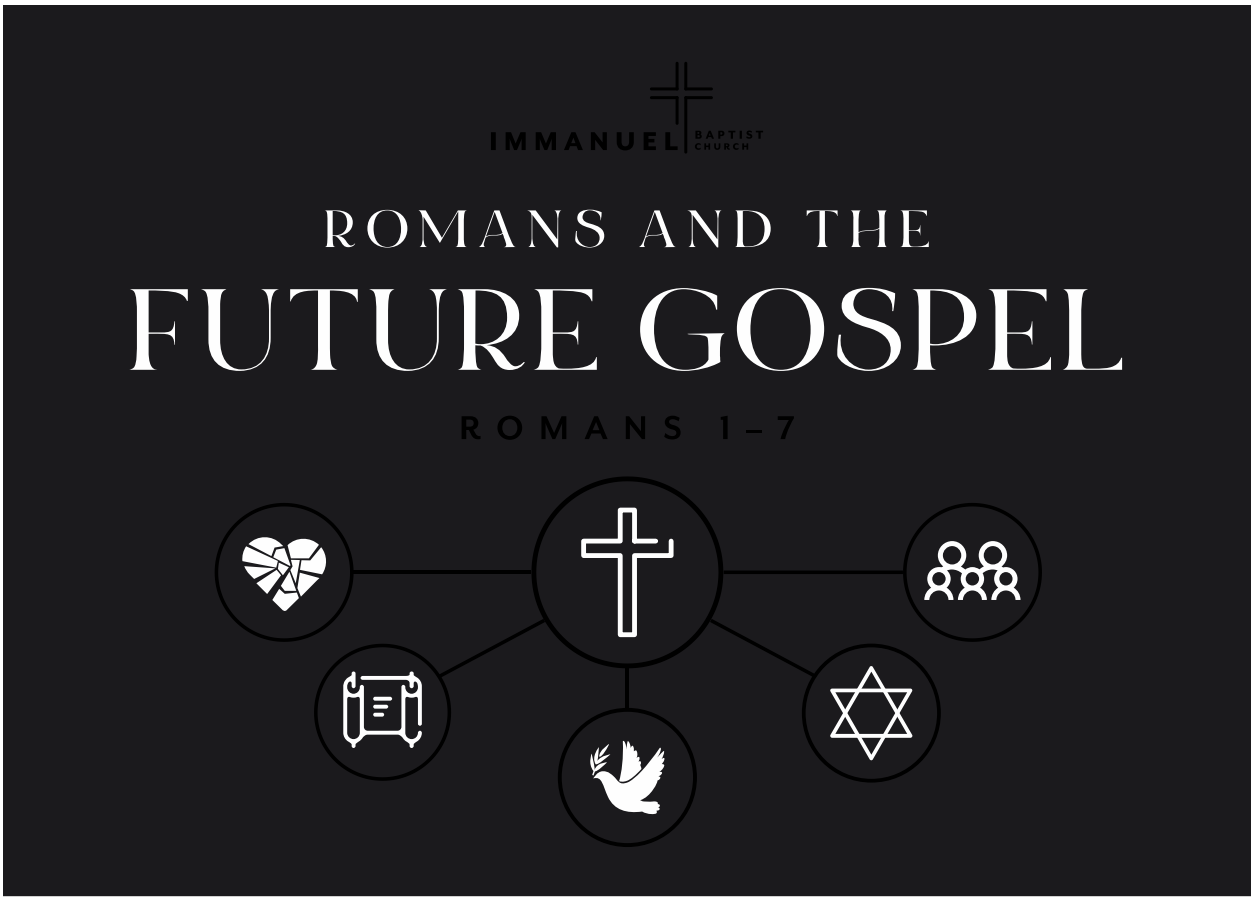



**Title: Romans and the Future Gospel**
**Text: Romans 2:11-29**
**Date: October 16, 2022**

**Main Idea:** God shows no partiality.

## Personal Study Guide

**READ ROMANS 2:11-29**

## Highlight – What stands out?

1. Who are the two groups of people that Paul is addressing? Who had the law and who didn't?

2. What is the difference between sin of someone who has the law and those who don't have the law? (v. 12)

3. What stands out to you in this passage?

4. How does Paul describe God in this passage?

5. How does Paul describe the human condition in this passage? What unites us? What divides us?

6. Do you notice any familiar ideas that have come up previously in Romans?

## Explain – What does this mean?

1. Are the Gentiles held to the standard of the law even though that they're mostly unaware of it? Look up Acts 10: 9 – 48 to help prove your point.

2. In verses 14-15, Paul argues that the Gentiles know the law because their consciences bear witness. This is the second time that Paul mentions Gentiles being able to know God's standard (Romans 1:18-32 is the first). How do their consciences bear witness? Can you think of examples of unbelievers knowing the law and obeying it?

3. In verses 17-20, Paul sets up a lot of "if/then" statements that look like righteousness. Make a list of everything he says in these verses that looks like righteousness.

4. In verse 21, he shifts (through 24). What is the shift?

5. Paul seems to be making the distinction between "true Jews" and "false Jews" in verses 24-29. What is that distinction?

6. Verse 11 seems to be the purpose statement for this section. How do verses 11-29 show that God shows "no partiality?"

7. Based on what Paul says in verses 25-29, what was the Jewish people's problem regarding circumcision? Look up the following verses and answer

how these verses help explain circumcision and what God is looking for with the Jewish people:

- Philippians 3:3
- Colossians 2:11-12
- Galatians 5:1-6, 6:15
- Jeremiah 9:25-26
- Deuteronomy 10:14-16

## Apply – How does this change me?

1. How do I consider myself 'better' than others because of what I know about God? Can you make a list of external righteousness that we lift up as holiness today? How is that not enough to save us?

2. How would Paul respond to someone who said: "I am saved because I came from this family" or "I am saved because I grew up in the church?" How does this text answer that assumption?

3. According to Paul, who is under God's judgment? How does this change how we think about ourselves? And how we think about others?

## Respond – What's my next step?

1. Who do you know that needs to hear that God shows no partiality? How can you use this passage to help point them towards Jesus?

2. What external righteousness are you trusting in that won't actually be enough to save you?

3. Read Matthew 7:1-5. How does this passage help you understand Romans 2:11-29?

## Commentary: Taken from Colin Kruse's Commentary on Romans

**Note to Group Leaders: You also have the F.F. Bruce commentary on Romans that you received on Team Night. If you don't, please reach out to Courtney Reissig to get your copy.**

**2:12–13** These verses open with the words, [*For*] *all who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who sin under the law will be judged by the law*. The NIV omits the conjunction 'for', obscuring the fact that what Paul says in 2:12–13 explains God's impartiality in judgment stressed in the previous verse. God will judge with an even hand both those who sin apart from the law (Gentiles) and those who sin under the law (Jews). Living 'under the law' was one of the chief factors, if not the chief factor, that distinguished Jews from Gentiles. Paul says that Gentile people who sin apart from the law will 'perish' without reference to the law. While God shows no favoritism when he judges, he does nevertheless take into account the revelation

people have received. Therefore, when speaking of the Jewish people the apostle says, 'all who sin under the law will be judged by the law'.[155]

Those who are privileged to have the law will be judged in accordance with that law. And there will be no immunity for them simply because they know the law. Paul explains: *For it is not those who hear the law* [lit. 'hearers of the law'] *who are righteous in God's sight, but it is those who obey the law* [lit. 'doers of the law'] *who will be declared righteous*. Paul's point here is that being a 'hearer' of the law does not guarantee righteousness in God's sight. One must be a 'doer' of the law as well.[157] His purpose is to show that Jewish knowledge of the law is no ground for being 'declared righteous' by God. Jewish people will be judged in accordance with their obedience to the law. And shortly Paul will argue that his Jewish dialogue partner and those whom he represents are guilty of disobedience to the law, despite their possession and knowledge of it (2:17–24). When Paul says that 'it those who obey the law who will be declared righteous', he employs the future tense, suggesting that it is future justification that he has in mind (cf. 2:16).

When Paul speaks of those who will be 'declared righteous' here, he uses for the first time a verb found in fifteen places in Romans. Many of the instances of Paul's use of this verb relate to those who are 'justified by faith', that is, those who are declared to be righteous by God on the basis of the redemption provided through his Son and because of their faith in him (3:24, 26, 28, 30; 4:2, 5; 5:1, 9; 8:30, 33). In 3:20 the apostle will emphasize that 'no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin'. Therefore, Paul's statement here in 2:13 that 'it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous' appears to run counter to, or even contradict, what he says in the rest of the letter. However, this is not actually the case, as becomes clear when each text is read first in its own context. For a discussion of the apparent contradiction see the commentary on 3:20 below.

**2:14–16** These verses explain how Gentiles who do not possess the law of Moses as do the Jews may nevertheless still be judged on the principle of performance, as will the Jews. They constitute one long sentence in the original, which the NIV renders as two sentences, and the first of which (2:14–15) is interpreted as a parenthesis: *(Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts sometimes accusing them and at other times even defending them.) This will take place on the day when God will judge people's secrets through Jesus Christ*, *as my gospel declares*. A better translation that preserves the flow of the original (reflecting exegetical decisions to be taken and admittedly rather stilted) would read:

> For when Gentiles who by nature [as Gentiles] do not have the law do what the law requires, these, though not having [the] law, are a law to themselves, who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their consciences confirming [what the law says] and their thoughts among themselves accusing or even excusing on the day when God judges men's secrets according to my gospel through Jesus Christ.

These verses present the interpreter with several problems. First, the NIV's translation, 'Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law', is open

to question. What is the significance of 'by nature' in this clause? Does it qualify the verb 'do', thus yielding a translation like that of the NIV: 'Gentiles, who do not have the law, *do by nature things required by the law*'. Or does it qualify 'Gentiles', thus yielding a translation like 'Gentiles, *who by nature do not have the law*, do the things required by the law'. There are good reasons for adopting the latter option, including the fact that when Paul uses 'by nature' elsewhere it always qualifies a state of being, never an action, and the fact that in 2:12 he speaks of those 'who sin apart from the law' (Gentiles) perishing 'apart from the law' and so characterizing the Gentiles as those who do not have the law by virtue of being Gentiles. In 2:14, then, it is better to see 'by nature' qualifying what the Gentiles *are* (those who do not have the law) than what they *do* (the things required by the law). So Paul's point is that these Gentiles who, as Gentiles, do not have the privilege of possessing the law nevertheless do what the law requires.

A second problem is the meaning of the 'things required by the law' (lit. 'the things of the law') that the Gentiles carry out. Those who say that the Gentiles of 2:14 are pagans argue that 'the things required by the law' can refer only vaguely to some of the things the law requires, and that it cannot have any comprehensive sense. However, Gathercole rightly points out that while the scope of the phrase 'the things of' is general in its NT usage, it is also nearly always inclusive and comprehensive in meaning. Thus, for example, the contrast between 'the concerns [lit. 'things'] of God' and 'the concerns [lit. 'things'] of men' referred to in Matthew 16:23/Mark 8:33 is comprehensive in meaning. Even when a contrast is not implied Paul uses such phrases in a comprehensive way (cf. 14:19; 1 Cor. 13:11; 2 Cor. 11:30). There is, then, nothing to suggest that the meaning of 'the things required by the law' is anything but comprehensive here in 2:14, and that it therefore should be understood to denote generally the demands of the Mosaic law.[164]

The third problem is: if 'the things required by the law' refers generally to the demands of the Mosaic law, who then are the Gentiles who do the 'things required by the law'? They are unlikely to be, as some have suggested, either pagans who unknowingly observe some of the things demanded by the Mosaic law or pre-Christian Gentiles (like Ruth) who lived godly lives. They are more likely to be Christian Gentiles upon whose hearts the law has been written by the Spirit, those in whom the new covenant promise to Israel finds fulfillment (Jer 31:33: ' "This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time", declares the LORD. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts" '). Paul certainly believed that the law is 'fulfilled' (though not observed in all its detail) by those who believe in Jesus Christ and walk in the Spirit (8:3–4; 13:10; Gal. 5:13–25). This is the interpretation adopted in this commentary. For a more detailed discussion of the debate surrounding this problem see 'Additional Note: Gentiles Who Do the Things Required by the Law', 136–40.

A fourth issue is the interpretation of Paul's statement regarding the Gentiles, 'they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law', and his explanation of this with the additional statement, 'they show that the requirements of the law [lit. 'the work of the law'] are written on their hearts'. A likely explanation of those whom Paul has in mind is that they are Gentile Christians on whose hearts God has written his law according to the new covenant promise found in Jeremiah 31:33. Lamp argues against an allusion to Jeremiah 31:33 here on the grounds that in 2:15 Paul speaks of '*the work of* the law' being written on their hearts, not 'the law', as in Jeremiah 31:33, but this appears to be a splitting of hairs. Mathewson also argues against an allusion

to Jeremiah 31:33, suggesting instead that Paul has in mind 'a moderate moral intuitionism', a 'natural ability of the mind to grasp immediately God's moral demands in an a priori manner', adding: 'We are born with the capacities to apprehend immediately and directly and non-inferentially know the created order around us'. However, there seem to be more reasons to see an allusion here to Jeremiah 31:33, where there is a reference to the work of the law being written on the heart, than there is to adopt a reference to moral intuitionism when there are no indications in the text that this is what the apostle intended (for a fuller discussion see 'Additional Note: Gentiles Who Do the Things Required by the Law', 136–40).

A fifth matter needing explanation is the significance of the words, 'their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts sometimes accusing them and at other times even defending them'. There is no word in the original corresponding to the NIV's 'also'. Its inclusion by the NIV (and NRSV) skews the meaning of 2:15b so that it implies there are three witnesses: the work of the law, the consciences of the Gentiles, and their thoughts. In fact there are only two witnesses, the consciences of the Gentiles and their thoughts, and these confirm 'the work of the law written on their hearts'.

The verb translated 'bear witness' (*symmartyreō*) is found only three times in the NT, all of which are in Romans: here and in 8:16 and 9:1. While etymologically it might be argued that it means 'to bear witness with or alongside of', its use elsewhere indicates that it should be construed more generally to mean 'to confirm'. In 8:16 Paul says, 'The Spirit himself *testifies* with our spirit that we are God's children' (italics added). In this case the Holy Spirit and the believers' spirits are not joint witnesses, but rather the Holy Spirit bears witness to the human spirits of believers, confirming that they are children of God. In 9:1 Paul says, 'I speak the truth in Christ—I am not lying, my conscience *confirms* it through the Holy Spirit' (italics added). In this case Paul's conscience confirms to him that he is speaking the truth in Christ. Here in 2:15 the consciences of the Gentiles bear witness to them, confirming the effects of 'the work of the law' in their hearts (see 'Additional Note: Conscience', 91).

As their consciences confirm the effect of 'the work of the law' written on their hearts, Paul says there is another witness: 'their thoughts sometimes accusing them and at other times even defending them'. This clause is not easy to translate. A literal rendering would be: 'and the thoughts among themselves accusing or even excusing' (cf. NRSV, 'and their conflicting thoughts will accuse or perhaps excuse them'). The context implies that the witness of the Gentiles' thoughts takes place in the future when it says, 'This will take place on the day when God judges people's secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares'. Paul appears to be saying here that, while the Gentiles' consciences are confirming the law written on their hearts in the present, their thoughts may either accuse or excuse them on the day of judgment in the future.[171] Schreiner objects to this view on the grounds that if Gentile Christians are meant it is odd that Paul speaks of their thoughts bringing accusations on the Day of Judgment. Wright responds: 'The Jewish law, which is now in some sense or other written on their hearts, and which in some sense they "do", nevertheless has a sufficiently ambiguous relation to them for them still to be concerned that the eventual issue might be in doubt. Hence as judgment day approaches, they may well find inner conflict as they reflect on their situation. They would not have this inner conflict were they not Christians'. We might add that Paul's statement in 2 Corinthians 5:10 ('For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us

may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad') is sufficient to cause even believers to approach the Day of Judgment with some apprehension.

The accusing or excusing of the thoughts of the Gentiles, Paul says, 'will take place on the day when God will judges people's secrets'. Already Paul has spoken about 'the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed' against those with stubborn and unrepentant hearts (2:5). Here he says that the thoughts of the Gentiles will accuse or defend them when God himself pronounces judgment. When Paul says that on that day 'God will judge people's secrets', he probably has in mind the revelation of God's judgment concerning even their secret thoughts and motives. That the apostle thought in these terms is confirmed by 1 Corinthians 4:5, where he says, 'He [God] will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of the heart. At that time each will receive their praise from God'. Here 'what is hidden in darkness' stands in apposition to 'the motives of the heart'. It is noteworthy that when Paul speaks about the judgment of believers in 1 Corinthians 4:5, he says that this will also include appropriate commendation ('at that time each will receive his praise from God').

Paul affirms that God will judge men's secrets 'through Jesus Christ'. That God has entrusted judgment to his Son, Jesus Christ, is stated explicitly in only one other place in the Pauline letters, that is, in 2 Timothy 4:1, where the apostle issues his charge to Timothy 'in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead'. Here in 2:16 Paul asserts that God will exercise judgment 'through Jesus Christ', 'as my gospel declares' (lit. 'according to my gospel'). God's judgment of humankind through his Son, Jesus Christ, Paul claims, is part of his gospel message. This may be illustrated by Luke's account of Paul's preaching in Acts. 17:31: 'For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead'. In two other places the apostle refers to important truths that are 'according to my gospel', but it is only here in 2:16 that he refers to God's judgment being according to his gospel.

Paul's main point in 2:14–16 is not to praise the Gentiles but to remind his dialogue partner of God's impartiality. The Jews cannot boast simply because they possess the law, for it can be shown that Gentile Christians who do not possess the law exhibit such good behavior that they put the Jews, represented by his dialogue partner, to shame. Summing up, it can be said that in 2:1–16 Paul does indeed speak of impartial judgment according to people's works, but that this must not be equated with judgment based upon works of the law. The works upon which people are judged are to be understood as the way they respond to the goodness of God that they have experienced. In all cases this is meant to lead people to repentance and so to the experience of forgiveness and justification. Failure to respond to the goodness of God, no matter what form the experience of his goodness may take, renders people liable to wrath on the day of wrath. In particular the Jews cannot boast about their possession of the law as if that puts them in a better position as far as the judgment of God is concerned. Indeed, Paul says that (Christian) Gentiles 'who do not have the law' fulfill it in a way that puts to shame those (unbelieving Jews) who have the law but do not obey it.

## ADDITIONAL NOTE: THE USE OF *PHYSEI* IN 2:14

Paul uses the dative *physei* in three other places in his letters that may throw some light on its use here in 2:14. In each case *physei* is used to denote what people or gods *are* by nature (Gal. 2:15: 'We who are Jews by birth [*hēmeis physei Ioudaioi*] and not 'Gentile sinners'; Gal. 4:8: 'Formerly … you were slaves to those who by nature are not gods [*tois physei mē ousin theois*]'; Eph. 2:3: 'Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath [*tekna physei orgēs*]'). If we allow this other usage to determine our approach to 2:14, we would interpret it to mean, 'Gentiles by nature do not have the law'. Dunn has argued against this approach on the grounds that in the other three cases *physei* is used within the phrase it qualifies (see transliterations of Gal. 2:15; 4:8 and Eph. 2:3 above), not after it as here in 2:14 (*ethnē to mē nomon echonta physei).* However, it must be noted that it is not found within the following phrase (*ta tou nomou poiōsin* ['they perform the things of the law']) either, and so neither interpretation can be supported by the position occupied by *physei*. The choice between the two alternatives must be made on other grounds.

The view that *physei* qualifies the preceding phrase (*ethnē ta mē nomon echonta* ['Gentiles who do not have the law']) is argued by Gathercole on several grounds, including the following: (i) When Paul uses *physei* elsewhere, it always qualifies a state of being, never an action. Thus in 2:14 it is better to see it qualifying what the Gentiles *are* by nature (those who do not have the law) than what they *do* by nature (the things required by the law). (ii) In 2:27 Paul says that those 'not circumcised physically' obey the law, and this is similar to the statement in 2:14 that Gentiles who by birth do not have the law, do the things required by the law. (iii) Paul nowhere else suggests that Gentiles spontaneously observe even some aspects of the law (and 1 Cor. 5:1 and Phil 4:8–9 are no exceptions to this rule). In addition, the flow of Paul's thought in 2:12–16 supports this view. In 2:12 he speaks of those 'who sin apart from the law' (Gentiles) perishing 'apart from the law'. Thus he is already characterizing Gentiles as those who do not have the law by virtue of being Gentiles.

## ADDITIONAL NOTE: GENTILES WHO DO THE THINGS REQUIRED BY THE LAW

There appear to be essentially three different identifications of the Gentiles who do the things required by the law: (i) pagan Gentiles who observe some of the moral precepts of the Mosaic law without being acquainted with the law itself; (ii) godly Gentiles referred to in the OT upon whose hearts the work of the law had been written by the Spirit of God; and (iii) Christian Gentiles on whose hearts the law of God has been written in accordance with the new covenant promise of Jeremiah 31:33. We will look at each of these in turn.

### (1) Pagan Gentiles Who Observe Some of the Moral Precepts of the Mosaic Law

Origen, writing in the early third century, is typical of those early church fathers who speak of Gentiles who have the moral law written on their hearts. He says: 'The Gentiles need not keep the Sabbaths or the new moons or the sacrifices which are written down in the law. For this law is not what is written in the hearts of the Gentiles. Rather it is that which can be discerned naturally, e.g., that they should not kill or commit adultery, that they should not steal nor bear false witness, that they should honor father and mother, etc. It may well be that since God is the one Creator of all, these things are written on the hearts of the Gentiles.… For the natural law may agree with

the law of Moses in the spirit, if not in the letter. For how would anyone understand by nature that a child should be circumcised on the eighth day?'

In similar vein Yates argues that all Paul was saying in this passage is that, as a matter of fact, we find pagans conforming formally and externally to the moral precepts of the law about which they are unaware. Byrne's approach is similar: 'Paul points to the performance on the part of some Gentiles of deeds corresponding to the dictates of the Mosaic law. In so far as they are human beings they find in their very nature … a moral order corresponding to what the law prescribes. Paul need not have more than a few outstanding individuals in mind (so that what is stated here does not really counter the pessimistic judgment of the Gentile world as a whole formulated earlier on [1:19–32; cf. 3:9, 23]). Nor does he mean that these few "righteous Gentiles" carry out the law in its entirety. The point is that their exceptional pattern of life overthrows any exaggerated claims made for the law as sole moral guide and criterion of judgment'. Witherington says: 'Paul assumes that sometimes some Gentiles fulfil some of the requirements of the Law, just as Jews do. This does not mean they always do so, or do so perfectly, for Paul will go on to call all sinners. It does mean that there is some obedience to the will or Law of God among those who are not Christians, with Gentiles in focus here'. Schreiner comments: 'Paul … is describing non-Christian Gentiles who have written on their hearts the moral norms of the law. Occasionally they obey these moral norms, although they usually fail to keep the law, and thus their consciences will accuse them on the eschatological judgment day'.[187]

Martens' approach falls generally into the category of those who argue that Paul is referring to pagan Gentiles who observe some of the moral precepts of the Mosaic law. However, he argues specifically that when Paul speaks of 'doing the law by nature' he is dependent upon the Stoic theory of the law of nature, according to which only sages could understand it and so be in a position to perform it. He also argues that both Paul and his audience would have known that the Stoics believed that there were only a few sages, if any, who had ever managed to do so. Martens concludes that Paul adopts the Stoic view, according to which it is theoretically possible to keep the law of nature, but practically it is out of the question.

### (2) Godly Gentiles Referred to in the Old Testament

Davies argues that Paul does view the status of some Gentiles in a positive light, that the apostle seeks to show that God's impartiality has always extended to the Gentiles, and that God saves those upon whose hearts has been written the work of the law (he points to such OT figures as the citizens of Nineveh, Job, Melchizedek, Rahab, Ruth, and Naaman as examples). Davies' conclusion is that 2:12–16 refers to 'pre-Christian Gentiles, who are not only doers of the law but who are also justified before God'.

### (3) Christian Gentiles on Whose Hearts the Law of God Has Been Written

If there is an allusion to Jeremiah 31:33 in 2:14–16, then 'the law written on their hearts' means much more than an innate moral sense. It means a godly moral disposition. What is implied by Jeremiah 31:33 is expressed more fully by Ezekiel 36:26–27: 'I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws'. Wright emphatically supports this

view: 'I find it next to impossible that Paul could have written this phrase, with its overtones of Jeremiah's new covenant promise, simply to refer to pagans who happen by accident to share some of Israel's moral teaching. More likely by a million miles that he is hinting quietly, and proleptically, at what he will say far more fully later on: that Gentile Christians belong within the new covenant'.

Gathercole also argues in favor of the view that the Gentiles here are in fact Christian Gentiles. He rejects the claim made by others that 'the antithesis between Jews and Christian Gentiles [implied in these verses] is never found elsewhere in Paul', pointing out that 9:30 and 11:11–14 contain that very antithesis. He also notes that the language of 2:14 has a close parallel in 9:30, where believing Gentiles are contrasted with unbelieving Jews, and therefore claims that there is no reason in principle why the Gentiles of 2:14 may not be understood to be Christian Gentiles.

This view is also supported by Jewett: 'The most likely of these views from a rhetorical point of view is that Paul is here describing the status of converted Gentiles. Having assented that wrath is already evident among unconverted Gentiles (1:18–31) and that Jews are not exempt from God's impartial judgment (2:1–13), the audience, consisting mainly of converted Gentiles, would assume that their current situation is described in these verses which provide a preliminary form of Paul's strategy of touting Gentile conversion in order to provoke Jewish conversion through jealousy (11:11–14). The alleged contradiction between these verses and chap. 3 is removed if one takes the latter as claiming that all unconverted Gentiles and Jews have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, and that salvation is by grace alone for Jews as well as Gentiles'.

There are, however, scholars who put forward reasons to reject this view. Witherington contends: 'Paul does not speak here of the Law written on pagans' hearts, but rather of the effect of the Law written on their hearts, so Jer. 31:33 is not in view here, any more than Gentile Christians are'. Byrne says: 'It is hard to see, however, how Paul could say of Gentile Christians that, lacking the law of Moses as a moral guide, they attain such guidance by the enlightenment of "nature"; for Paul, those "in Christ" find moral guidance and capacity through the Spirit, which creates in them the "mind" or attitude of Christ (cf. 8:1–13; 12:1–2; 13:8–10; cf. 6:17; Phil. 2:5). The tension is best resolved when seemingly inconsistent statements across Romans 1–3 are not played off against one another in a systematizing way but seen as individual stages in a total rhetorical construction. Paul's passing endorsement of the possibility that some Gentiles fulfill the law's requirement is designed to highlight the failure on the Jewish side'.

Schreiner, who regards 2:14–15 as an aside, rejects the Gentile Christian interpretation of these verses on the grounds that (i) Paul holds that the Gentiles who do not have the law 'are a law to themselves'—an odd way of describing the law of God that Jeremiah 31:33 says is written on people's hearts under the new covenant, and (ii) if Gentile Christians are meant, it is also odd that Paul speaks of their thoughts bringing accusations on the day of judgment. However, Schreiner does argue that Paul has Gentile Christians in mind in 2:7, 10, 26–29, on several grounds, chief among which is that in 2:26–29 uncircumcised Gentiles will be regarded as if they were circumcised because true circumcision is not outward and physical but inward and 'by the Spirit, not by the written code', and that only Christians have the Holy Spirit and are thus able to fulfill the law (cf. 8:3–4), and that this is in line with Jeremiah 31:33.

Summing up, we may say that for Paul's argument to stand he must have believed that some Gentiles at least did observe something of what the law demands; therefore, the hypothetical approach is unsatisfactory. The view that Paul adopts a Stoic view is also unsatisfactory, for to enable Paul's argument to stand it is not enough to say that he implies that, while it is theoretically possible to obey the law, it is practically impossible. The view that Paul was expressing, that some pagans conform formally and externally to the moral precepts of the law of which they are unaware, is unlikely in the light of Paul's previous statements about the Gentile world in 1:18–32. Davies suggestion that Paul has in mind 'pre-Christian Gentiles, who are not only doers of the law but who are also justified before God' is feasible but is not an argument Paul advances anywhere else in his writings, nor are there any clues in the context which point in this direction. However, the view that the Gentiles who do the things required by the law are Gentile Christians in whose hearts the law had been written finds support in the promise of Jeremiah 31:33 despite the pedantic objection that 2:15 speaks of 'the work of the law' written on people's hearts, rather than the law itself, as in the case of Jeremiah 31:33.

## ADDITIONAL NOTE: CONSCIENCE

The word 'conscience' is found more often in the Pauline corpus than in the rest of the books of the NT put together. Unlike the Stoics, Paul did not regard conscience as the voice of God within, nor did he restrict its function to a person's past acts (usually the bad ones), as was the case in the secular Greek world of his day.[200] For Paul the conscience was a human faculty whereby a person either approves or disapproves his or her actions (whether already performed or only intended) and those of others. The conscience is not to be equated with the voice of God or the moral law; rather, it is a human faculty which adjudicates upon human action in the light of the highest standard a person perceives.[202] Seeing that all of human nature has been affected by sin, both a person's perception of the standard of action required and the function of the conscience itself (as a constituent part of human nature) are affected by sin. For this reason conscience can never be accorded the position of ultimate judge of one's behavior. It is possible that the conscience may excuse one for what God will not excuse, and, conversely, it is equally possible that conscience may condemn a person for what God allows. The final judgment, therefore, belongs only to God (cf. 1 Cor. 4:2–5). Nevertheless, to reject the voice of conscience is to court spiritual disaster (cf. 1 Tim. 1:19). We cannot reject the voice of conscience with impunity, but we can modify the highest standard to which it relates by gaining for ourselves a greater understanding of the truth.

## ADDITIONAL NOTE: JUSTIFICATION FOR THE DOERS

On first reading 2:1–16 seems to contradict the basic thrust of Romans that no one will be justified by works of the law, but only by grace through faith. However, in this passage Paul maintains that God 'will repay each person according to what they have done' (v. 6); 'there will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil' (v. 9), 'but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good' (v. 10), and that doers of the law will be declared righteous (2:13). In addition to these surprising statements, Paul says in 2:14–15: 'Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature

things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts'.

Snodgrass claims that more often than not scholars who discuss these texts spend more time explaining them *away* than explaining them. He lists the following 'common ways of evading the text':

1. Paul is speaking only hypothetically *as if* the law could be fulfilled and *as if* the gospel had not come. What Paul really believes one finds in 3:9f. and 3:20f.
2. Paul was speaking of Gentile Christians who fulfill the law through faith in Christ and a life in the Spirit.
3. This section (like other texts which speak of judgment) is an unexpurgated and unnecessary fragment from Paul's Jewish past.
4. This chapter is merely a contradiction in Paul's thought which must be allowed to stand.
5. Paul only means to say in 2:14–15 that Gentiles have a law and therefore are responsible and will be judged. There is only one outcome for both Jews and Gentiles on the basis of works, and it is negative.

If these are all evasions of what the text really says, how should it be explained properly? Did Paul really teach that God's judgment of human beings is based upon their works? And did he really mean to say that, whereas Jews who have the law did not keep it, the Gentiles who did not have the law practiced what the law demanded? It must be recognized that Paul *did* say that God judges all people according to their works (2:6–10). It must also be realized that the point Paul emphasized in saying this was that God's judgment is entirely impartial. This is in line with his overall purpose in 1:18–3:20, which is to show that the Jews have no special immunity where God's judgment is concerned. Modern interpreters have no problem with impartiality in judgment. The problem is how to relate this impartial judgment on the basis of works to Paul's doctrine of justification by faith. The difficulty is exacerbated because it is often assumed that the basis of judgment is to be human success or otherwise in fulfilling the demands of the law.

However, it is evident from Paul's emphasis upon repentance in this passage that he did not have in mind judgment according to human success in fulfilling the demands of the law. Paul says that it is by their hard, impenitent hearts that those who judged others while excusing themselves are storing up wrath for themselves on the day of God's wrath. They do not realize that the goodness of God is intended to lead them to repentance, and so to forgiveness according to his grace (vv. 4–5). God judges people impartially according to their works when out of his kindness and forbearance he gives eternal life to the repentant who seek glory and immortality by persistence in well-doing (vv. 7, 10). He also judges people impartially according to their works when he repays with wrath and anger the unrepentant who reject the truth and follow evil (vv. 8–9).

The residual problem of this approach is that it still seems to leave justification dependent upon persistence in well-doing. But the problem is more apparent than real. No one would want to say, for instance, that Paul thought that there was justification for those who persist in doing evil. The fact of the matter is that, while Paul believed that justification is for those who receive the gospel by faith, independently of works of the law, he strenuously resisted the blasphemous suggestion that those

who are so justified would persist in evil-doing (cf. 3:8). On the contrary, they would persist in doing good (yielding their members instruments of righteousness; cf. 6:11–14).

It is evident from Paul's writings that those who are justified by faith will also be judged according to their works, something the apostle implies in 1 Corinthians 3:12–15 and makes abundantly clear in 2 Corinthians 5:10: 'For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad'. The question is how these two things are related to each other. The answer appears to be that Paul expected those who were justified by faith, as a result of the Spirit's activity in their lives, to produce the fruit of good works and be judged by these on the last day. Käsemann says: 'The decisive thing is that the doctrine of judgment according to works not be ranked above justification but conversely be understood in the light of it … although this perspective is not yet apparent here. Again, the difficulties in exposition are largely connected with a failure to pay due regard to the power-character even of the righteousness of God received as a gift, since this involves a radical separation of gift and Giver, and of Giver and Judge. If the gift is finally the sign and content of Christ's lordship in earth, we can no longer live by our own will and right but constantly stand in responsibility and accountability.... To this degree the last day does not differ from each earthly day'. Similar conclusions are reached by a number of modern interpreters of Paul.[211]

*b. Having the Law and Circumcision Provides No Immunity, 2:17–29*

In 2:1–16 Paul, using the rhetoric of the diatribe and addressing a hypothetical dialogue partner, warned him and those he represented of the judgment of God stored up against those who take the high moral ground; those who judge others for the evil they practice while practicing the same things themselves. Though what he said applies to all who take the high moral ground, the apostle had in mind primarily fellow Jews who were guilty of these things (2:10: 'first for the Jew'). What is implied in 2:1–16 becomes explicit in 2:17–29, where Paul clearly addresses a Jewish dialogue partner, and accuses him of failing to live in a way that is consistent with the great privileges he enjoys as a Jew—notably having the law and circumcision yet failing to obey that law and manifest true circumcision of heart and by so doing bringing into disrepute the name of God. It is important to remember that Paul is engaging this hypothetical dialogue partner as a rhetorical device in his overall presentation of the gospel and humanity's need for it. He does so for the benefit of his audience for whom he has high regard (1:8; 15:14). He is not implying that they are guilty of the presumption he ascribes to his dialogue partner. Carras describes 2:1–29 as 'an "inner Jewish debate" where Paul and his objector are debating points regarding the essential nature of the view that what Paul found wrong with the Jewish religion (as perceived through the "critic") was that the Jew violated central tenets of his own religion by claiming a criterion of judgement for himself different from all others'.

The passage 2:17–29 falls into two sections. In the first, 2:17–24, Paul takes his Jewish dialogue partner to task for bragging about his possession of the law while disobeying it. In the second, 2:25–29, the apostle reminds his dialogue partner that circumcision is of no value if one is a lawbreaker, and that true circumcision is a matter of the heart and effected by the Spirit.

*(i) Bragging about the law while failing to obey it, 2:17–24*

Paul has structured 2:17–24 quite carefully. In 2:17–18 he lists five privileges that the one who calls himself a Jew claims to enjoy; he relies upon the law; he brags about his relationship with God; he knows God's will; he is able to approve what is superior; and he is instructed by the law. In 2:19–20 he lists the things the Jew claims he can do because of these privileges: he can guide the blind; act as a light for those in darkness; instruct the foolish, and teach infants, all because he has in the law 'the embodiment of knowledge and truth'. Next, in 2:21–23, Paul points out the dissonance between these privileges and what the Jew claims he can do on the one hand, and his actual behavior on the other hand. Then in 2:24 Paul brings this section to an end with a scriptural quotation to show that such behavior dishonors God.

**2:17–18** Paul opens his address to his dialogue partner by reciting in these verses five Jewish privileges of which he could be legitimately proud if only his behavior was consistent with his claims. He begins: *Now you, if you call yourself a Jew*. The address is in the singular number: 'if you [sing.] call yourself a Jew'. The word translated 'Jew' can mean 'Judean' and denote those whose identity is tied up with their land of origin (Judea) even if they do not presently live in Judea.[215] It can also denote those whose identity is defined by adherence to the Mosaic law. Obviously these two things are not mutually exclusive. However, as Paul continues his argument, it becomes clear that his use of the term 'Jew' here denotes one whose identity is defined by the Mosaic law: *if you rely on the law and boast in God*. The Jewish privileges alluded to here are possession of the law and a special relationship with God. To rely upon the law and God's revelation through it was both legitimate and praiseworthy for the people of Israel to do. Jewish delight in the law is expressed in Psalm 19:7–10: 'The law of the LORD is perfect, refreshing the soul. The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple. The precepts of the LORD are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the LORD are radiant, giving light to the eyes. The fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever. The decrees of the LORD are firm, and all of them are righteous. They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the honeycomb'. Even more fulsome is Psalm 119, which celebrates at length the glories of God's law. Jewish reliance upon the law is reflected in *2 Apoc. Bar.* 48:22–24:

> In your law we have put our trust, because, behold, your Law is with us, and we know that we do not fall as long as we keep your statutes. We shall always be blessed; at least, we did not mingle with the nations. For we are all a people of the Name; we, who received one Law for the One. And that Law that is among us will help us, and that excellent wisdom which is in us will support us.

'To boast in God' is to celebrate another of Israel's great privileges: that the Creator of the world is her God, and Israel is his people. To boast in God is not only legitimate but is something that Israel was exhorted to do. The prophet Jeremiah charged the people of Israel: 'This is what the LORD says: "Let not the wise boast of their wisdom or the strong boast of their strength or the rich boast of their riches, but let the one who boasts boast about this: that they have the understanding to know me, that I am the LORD, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight", declares the LORD' (Jer 9:23–24). Paul does not criticize his dialogue partner for relying on the law or boasting of his relationship with God but, as we will see, only for doing so while he disobeys the law and dishonors God by his behavior. Moses

reminded Israel of their privileges in his address to the nation on the plains of Moab: 'What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the LORD our God is near us whenever we pray to him? And what other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today?' (Deut 4:7–8).

Paul continues to rehearse the privileges of the Jew: *if you know his will and approve of what is superior because you are instructed by the law*. Jewett notes: 'There are many examples of the formula "to do your will" or "to do God's will", but nowhere can I find a precise parallel to "knowing" God's will. Although pious Jews could exclaim, "Happy are we, Israel, because we know what is pleasing to God" (Bar 4:4; see also Wis 15:2–3), it is quite a different manner *(sic)* to claim knowledge of God's inscrutable will'. While there are many things about God's 'inscrutable will' that we cannot know, the point Paul is making here is that by possession of the law and the instruction it provides Jews can know God's will in relation to the way they should live. The law was a lamp to their feet and a light for their path (cf. Ps 119:105).

Paul further underscores the privileges of Israel when he refers to his dialogue partner's ability 'to approve' of what is superior because he has received instruction by the law. The verb translated 'approve' carries the sense of 'approval following testing'. Later in the letter Paul informs his audience that they 'will be able to test and approve what God's will is' as they allow themselves to 'be transformed by the renewing of your mind' (12:2). A similar idea is expressed in Paul's letter to the Philippian believers: 'And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ', where it also denotes things that are superior or the best (Phil. 1:9–10). In the context of 2:18–20 'what is superior' is the knowledge of God's will in terms of moral instruction that Jews have access to through the law and therefore could pass on to others.

**2:19–20** In 2:17–18 Paul listed five privileges Israel enjoys; here in 2:19–20 he lists things his dialogue partner and those whom he represents claim they can do because of these privileges: *if you are convinced that you are a guide for the blind, a light for those who are in the dark, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of little children, because you have in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth*. Here the apostle describes the basis upon which his dialogue partner, as a Jew, can teach others. He can be (i) 'a guide for the blind'—those who do not know the law; (ii) 'a light for those who are in the dark'—a role that Israel was intended to have vis-à-vis the Gentiles (cf. Isa 42:6; 49:6); (iii) 'an instructor of the foolish'—one who not only informs but disciplines and corrects (cf. Heb 12:9); and (iv) 'a teacher of little children', all because he has 'in the law the embodiment[225] of knowledge and truth'. Certainly Jews had the potential to do these things because of their possession of the law. Nowhere is this more clearly affirmed than in Psalm 119, which describes the function of the law in providing understanding and guidance for living, perhaps best summed up in the words, 'The unfolding of your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple' (Ps 119:130).

**2:21–24** In 2:17–20 Paul listed those things of which his dialogue partner could be legitimately proud, if only his behavior was consistent with what he claimed. In 2:21–24 Paul exposes the hypocrisy of his dialogue partner insofar as he taught others but did not teach himself, and bragged about the law, but by disobeying it dishonored the God who gave it. As Moo notes: 'Such a charge was certainly not new. The OT (cf. Ps.

50:16–21), Judaism (cf. *'Abot R. Nat.* 29[8a]), and Jesus (e.g., Matt. 23:3) made similar accusations'.

Paul begins by attacking the hypocrisy of his dialogue partner. In 2:21–23 he asks five questions: *You, then, who teach others, do you not teach yourself? You who preach against stealing, do you steal? You who say that people should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who boast in the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law?* Paul's depiction of his dialogue partner's hypocrisy with the rhetorical questions, 'Do you steal?' 'Do you commit adultery?' 'Do you rob temples?' presents problems. Are they to be taken literally or metaphorically? If they are taken metaphorically, Paul would be speaking like the prophets of the OT who accused Israel of robbing God of what was due to him, of acting like adulterers when they went after other gods, and, we might add, robbing temples when they did not bring in their tithes. Whether Paul would expect his predominantly Gentile audience in Rome to understand such allusions to the teaching of the prophets is doubtful. It is more likely that he would expect what he said to be taken literally.

Particularly problematic is the question, 'Do you rob temples?' Attempts have been made to interpret this metaphorically. For example, Garlington argues for a metaphorical interpretation of robbing temples by noting that the one Paul accuses of perpetrating this act is one who boasts in the law. For Paul, then, the new idol is the Torah, and the sacrilege to which Paul was referring is 'Israel's idolatrous attachment to the law itself'. Another way of interpreting 'to rob temples' metaphorically is to interpret it as withholding the temple tax that Jews were obliged to send to the Jerusalem temple. Josephus records a particular instance of this kind of temple robbery, the so-called Fulvia scandal:

> There was a man who was a Jew, but had been driven away from his own country by an accusation laid against him for transgressing their laws, and by the fear he was under of punishment for the same; but in all respects a wicked man:—he then living at Rome, professed to instruct men in the wisdom of the laws of Moses. He procured also three other men, entirely of the same character with himself, to be his partners. These men persuaded Fulvia, a woman of great dignity, and one that had embraced the Jewish religion, to send purple and gold to the temple at Jerusalem; and when they had gotten them, they employed them for their own uses, and spent the money themselves; on which account it was that they at first required it of her. Whereupon Tiberius, who had been informed of the thing by Saturninus, the husband of Fulvia, who desired inquiry might be made about it, ordered all the Jews to be banished out of Rome. (*Ant.* 18.3.5)

To interpret Paul's reference to temple robbery literally and as a failure of his Jewish dialogue partner and those whom he represents also raises particular problems. The practice of actual temple robbery was well known in the ancient world. What is puzzling is Paul's indictment of Jews for this offense when the practice of idolatry was absent in Israel at the time he wrote. Several approaches have been adopted to explain this. Krentz draws attention to the extensive use of the verb 'to rob temples' in vice lists of Greek authors prior to A.D. 200, where it always carries the literal sense of robbing temples, and argues that its use here in 2:22 should be understood in the same way. Chrysostom writes: 'It was strictly forbidden for Jews to touch any of

the treasures deposited in heathen temples, because they would be defiled. But Paul claims here that the tyranny of greed has persuaded them to disregard the law at this point'.[235] Derrett argues that ' "temple robbery" includes profiting in any way from a heathen religious endowment's assets, whether directly or indirectly'. Opportunities for such profiting occurred, he says, when, due to negligence, dishonesty, mishaps, or war, stolen items from pagan shrines entered the market, and then Jewish businessmen took the commercial opportunities this presented to them. Cranfield adopts a similar approach when he says: 'Paul would presumably be referring to ... the use by Jews of articles stolen (whether by themselves or others) from idol-shrines and the casuistry of Rabbis who invented various exceptions to the categorical prohibitions of Deut 7:25f—and probably also to still more subtle forms of complicity in idolatry'.

Other scholars who take the literal approach insist that Paul's statement about robbing temples is not an indictment of all Jews but that the apostle is speaking rhetorically. Byrne says: 'There were undoubtedly Jews who stole and Jews who failed in sexual morality. Less easily understandable in a literal sense is the charge of robbing temples.... But Paul is not asserting that all Jews failed in the areas suggested or that the vices were characteristic of the nation as a whole. Within an established rhetorical pattern, he is attempting to drive home the point that possession of the law has not prevented Jews from failing to abide by its key moral precepts as formulated in the Decalogue'.[239] While it is difficult to be certain about the precise meaning of Paul's reference to robbing temples, the overall purpose of 2:21–22 is clear enough. It highlights the hypocrisy of his dialogue partner and those whom he represents, that is, Jews who teach others but do not practice what they preach.

The NIV's translation, 'You who boast in the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law?' could also be translated as a statement: 'You who boast in the law dishonor God by breaking the law',[240] and this would seem to be preferable in the light of the change in sentence structure (the switch from the use of participles in the preceding questions to the relative pronoun and the finite verb here), and the fact that this statement and the quotation from Isaiah in 2:24 flow together.

Possession of the law was a legitimate ground for boasting in the good sense because such boasting was rejoicing in the great gift of God to Israel (cf. Deut 4:7–8). Paul is saying that his dialogue partner's boasting is reprehensible because he was not obeying the law in which he boasted. More than that, his disobedience dishonored God. Paul explains what this means with a scriptural quotation: *As it is written: 'God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you*'. He is citing Isaiah 52:5 (LXX): 'The Lord says, "Because of you my name is always blasphemed among the Gentiles" '. Isaiah was speaking of the Jews' Babylonian captivity, during which time God's name had been blasphemed among the Gentiles. As his people were punished for their disobedience to his law, it provided occasion for God's name to be profaned among the Gentiles.[242] Paul implies that his dialogue partner's failure to obey the law is likewise bringing God's name into dispute. Possession of the law is of no value unless one obeys it.

*(ii) True circumcision, 2:25–29*

In this section Paul reminds his dialogue partner that physical circumcision is of no value if one is a lawbreaker, and that true circumcision is a matter of the heart and

effected by the Spirit. By so doing he removes another basis of unacceptable Jewish boasting over against Gentiles and a false basis of confidence about acceptability before God.

**2:25** In 2:23–24 Paul stated the effect of his dialogue partner's disobedience to the law—it brought dishonor to God's name. Here in 2:25 he states that disobedience also invalidates Jewish circumcision. *Circumcision has value if you observe the law, but if you break the law, you have become as though you had not been circumcised*. That Paul states that circumcision has value for people who obey the law is noteworthy in the light of his relativizing its importance in both Romans and Galatians. The importance of circumcision as the mark of covenant relationship with God is spelled out clearly in Genesis 17:9–14:

> Then God said to Abraham, 'As for you, you must keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you for the generations to come. This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you. For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised, including those born in your household or bought with money from a foreigner—those who are not your offspring. Whether born in your household or bought with your money, they must be circumcised. My covenant in your flesh is to be an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant'.

However, if Jewish people disobeyed the law, Paul says, the physical mark of circumcision was emptied of its significance for them. They became as if they 'had not been circumcised' (lit. 'your circumcision as become uncircumcision').[244] For Paul to say that the circumcision of Jews who disobeyed the law had become uncircumcision was tantamount to saying that they were no better than pagan Gentiles.

**2:26–27** In 2:25 Paul implied that Jewish people who were circumcised but disobeyed the law were no better than pagan Gentiles. In 2:26–27 he asks his dialogue partner: *So then, if those who are not circumcised keep the law's requirements, will they not be regarded as though they were circumcised?* If disobedience on the part of Jewish people means their circumcision is regarded uncircumcision, then obedience to the law on the part of Gentile people will mean that their uncircumcision will be regarded by God as circumcision. For the uncircumcision of the Gentiles to be regarded as circumcision means that in God's sight they are counted as members of the covenant people.[247] The law's 'requirements' are the demands of the Mosaic law as indicated by the extensive use of the term translated as such with this meaning in the LXX. However, Paul's understanding of Gentiles keeping of the law's requirements was quite different from that of Rabbinic Judaism of his day. Barrett states it well:

> Paul makes clear beyond doubt what he means by keeping, and by transgressing, the law. It is possible to neglect so weighty a command as circumcision—and fulfil the law; it is possible to observe the letter of the law, including circumcision—and transgress the law. This is not Rabbinic Judaism, or any other orthodox kind of Judaism. Paul's new Christian conviction, that Jesus, whom the law had cast out, crucified, and cursed, was the risen Lord in heaven, led him to a revaluation of religion, and in particular of the law, the basis of his own national religion, far more

> radical than is often perceived. He not merely had new faith, and a new theology; in the light of these he came to the conclusion that the old faith—the Old Testament and Judaism—meant something different from what he had thought. It was not a closed system, complete in itself, requiring only strict and unimaginative obedience; for those who had eyes to see it pointed forward to Christ, and the Gospel which was the power of God unto salvation—for everyone who had faith.

The fact that Paul's question, 'will they not be regarded as though they were circumcised? (lit. 'will not his uncircumcision be reckoned as circumcision?'), employs the future passive tense of the verb ('will … be reckoned') suggests that the reckoning will be a future determination by God. As Byrne comments: 'The "reckoning" in question is that of God (cf. 4:4–6), the divine assessment set to be given at the great judgment'.

To drive home his point, Paul writes: *The one who is not circumcised physically and yet obeys the law will condemn you*. 'The one who is not circumcised physically' (lit. 'the uncircumcision by nature') is of course the Gentile.[250] This person, Paul says to his dialogue partner, will condemn you (sing.) *who, even though you have the written code and circumcision, are a lawbreaker*. This is the first of three references to the Mosaic law as 'the written code' found in Romans (2:27, 29; 7:6). In 2:13–16 Paul implied that the Gentiles who do what the law requires put to shame Jewish people who do not obey their law. Here in 2:27 Paul makes an even more drastic statement: the obedient Gentile will condemn the Jew who, though privileged to have the written code (the law) and to bear the mark of the covenant in his flesh (circumcision), is nevertheless a 'lawbreaker'. The apostle has in mind not so much Gentiles acting as judges but rather as witnesses for the prosecution. Their obedience to the law will constitute the 'evidence of what the Jew ought to have been and could have been'.

This text raises the question of which Gentiles Paul believes will condemn lawbreaking Jews. Some argue that Paul is speaking without reference to the gospel and that he is referring to Gentiles who carry out some aspects of the law.[255] Others argue that the apostle has in mind Gentile Christians, those on whose hearts the law has been written by the Spirit according to the promise of the new covenant. Given the context, in particular what the apostle says about true circumcision being a matter 'of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code' in the following verses, the latter option (that the Gentiles in mind are Gentile Christians) seems preferable. (see 'Additional Note: Gentiles Who Do the Things Required by the Law', 136–40).

**2:28–29** To drive home his point further, Paul tells his dialogue partner what is involved in being a 'true' Jew and what constitutes 'true' circumcision. Stating his point negatively, Paul insists: [*For*] *a person is not a Jew who is one only outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code*. The NIV omits the conjunction 'for', obscuring somewhat the fact that this verse provides an explanation as to *why* the law-keeping Gentile will judge the law-breaking Jew. The behavior of the law-abiding Gentile will throw into bold relief the reprehensible behavior of the law-breaking Jew, and thereby function as a witness for the prosecution in condemning the law-breaking Jew. To make his point about the 'true' Jew and 'true' circumcision Paul employs three antitheses: outward/inward, of the flesh/of the heart, and by the written code/by the Spirit. By so doing, he

contrasts what we might call the 'nominal' Jew and the 'true' Jew. The 'nominal' Jew is described as a Jew 'who is one outwardly', that is, one who is seen to observe those practices that characterize a Jewish person. The true Jew, however, is described as a Jew 'who is one inwardly' (lit. 'the one in secret'), that is, one who receives the approval of God, who knows the secrets of people's hearts.[259] The NIV's translation 'inwardly' could be misleading. What is implied is not a Platonic contrast between what is visible and invisible, but between what is seen by human beings and what is seen by God.[260] God sees the secrets of human hearts.

Circumcision in the flesh is described as 'outward', while true circumcision is described as 'circumcision of the heart', effected 'by the Spirit' and 'not by the written code'. In the previous verse (2:27) Paul referred to the law as the 'written code', and elsewhere he contrasts life and ministry in the Spirit with life and ministry under 'the written code' (cf. 7:6; 2 Cor. 3:6–7). Therefore, to say that circumcision of the heart is 'by the Spirit, not by the written code' is to say that it is something that only the Spirit can bring about in the heart of a person, in contrast physical circumcision in obedience to the law.

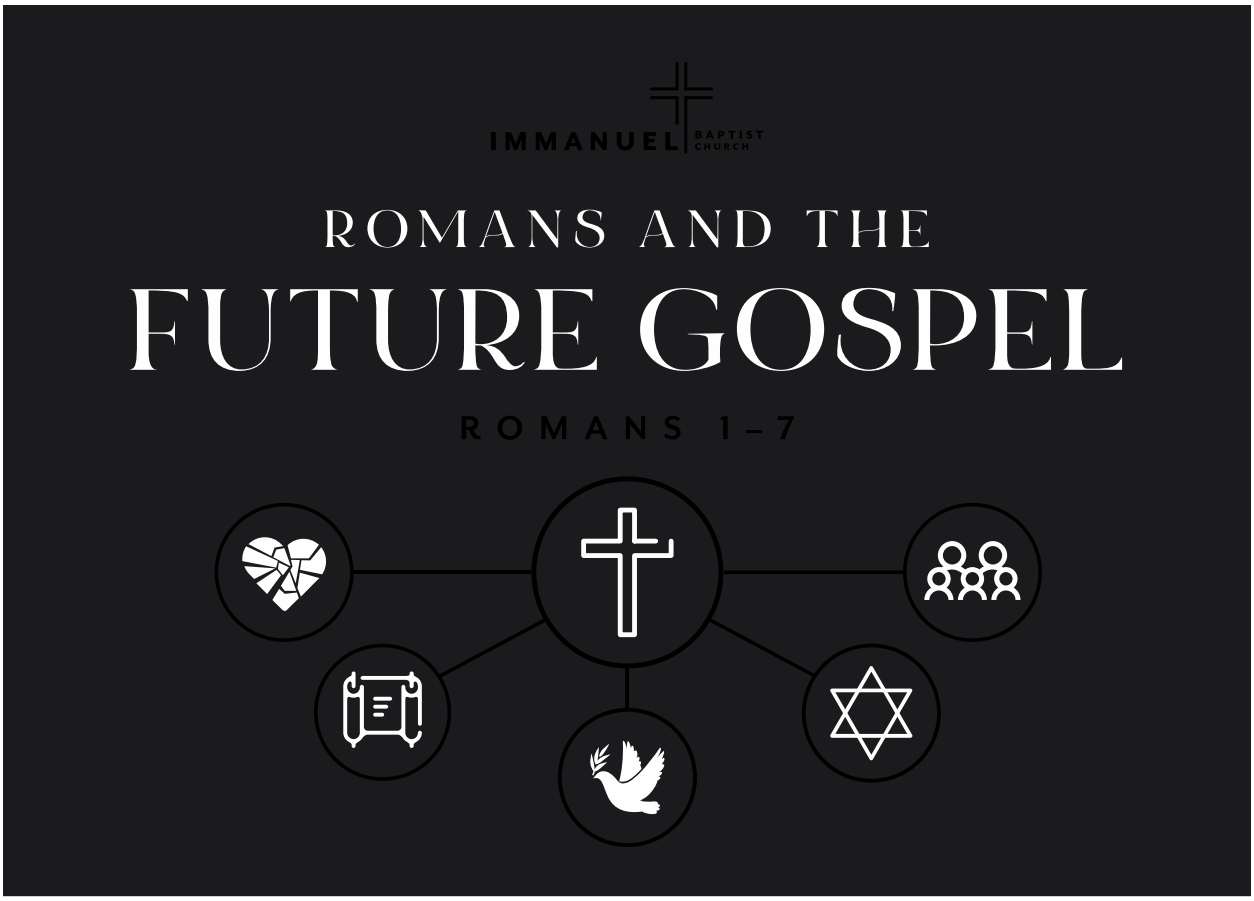
When speaking about circumcision of the heart, Paul is reiterating well-known teaching of the law and the prophets. The prophet Jeremiah accused Israel of being 'uncircumcised in heart': 'Egypt, Judah, Edom, Ammon, Moab and all who live in the wilderness in distant places. For all these nations are really uncircumcised, and even the whole house of Israel is uncircumcised in heart' (Jer 9:26). The same prophet exhorted the Judeans to circumcise their hearts: 'Circumcise yourselves to the LORD, circumcise your hearts, you people of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem' (Jer 4:4). And Moses exhorted the Israelites: 'Circumcise your hearts, therefore, and do not be stiff-necked any longer' (Deut 10:16), and even promised that God himself will circumcise their hearts: 'The LORD your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live' (Deut 30:6). Jeremiah complained of the uncircumcised ears of his hearers, expressed in their unwillingness to obey the word of the Lord (Jer 6:10). The same teaching is found in the Qumran literature (1QS 5:5; 1QH 2:18; 1QpHab 11:13), the Pseudepigrapha (*Jub.* 1:23; *Odes Sol.* 11:1–3), and Philo (*Spec. Leg.* 1.305; cf. *Mig.* 92).

This material from the OT and postbiblical Jewish literature identifies those with uncircumcised hearts as those who resist the word of the Lord, and those with circumcised hearts as those who are obedient to it. It was appropriate, then, for Paul to rebuke his Jewish dialogue partner for bragging about the law while he disobeyed it, and to remind him that true circumcision is a matter of the heart and effected by the Spirit. In the light of the overall stance adopted by the apostle in this passage, it is evident that for him the 'true' Jew is the Jewish Christian believer. It is also evident that he relativizes the importance of physical circumcision, even for Jews.

Paul's final comment concerning the 'true' Jew, the one who is circumcised in heart, is that *such a person's praise is not from other people, but from God*. By addressing such a comment to his dialogue partner Paul implies that those who brag about the law and put their confidence in being circumcised physically are seeking praise from other people, but not from God, and by so doing show that their hearts have not been circumcised by the Spirit. Those who adopt Paul's radical definition of

a ‘true’ Jew and ‘true’ circumcision would, as Barclay says, ‘have to reckon on getting his praise from God, not from fellow Jews’.[2671]

[1] Colin G. Kruse, *Paul’s Letter to the Romans*, ed. D. A. Carson, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Cambridge, U.K.; Nottingham, England; Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; Apollos, 2012), 128–157.




## Group Study Guide

*This lesson is for the Group Leader to use to teach the lesson and facilitate the discussion. It is not intended that you will use every question in this guide during your group time. You will likely only be able to cover 4-5 questions, depending on how discussion goes. This guide is longer than what you will need but provides the freedom and flexibility to pull questions out for discussion that will best serve your group time.

**Tip:** You may want to pull one question from each section for discussion or spend more time on a particular section than another on. It's totally up to your discretion.

# Introduction

**Icebreaker Question:**
Can you think of a scenario where two groups of people are trying to reach the same destination but have 2 separate sets of rules to get there?

Example: Major League Baseball has 2 leagues, American League and National League, the American League is allowed use a 'designated hitter' to bat for the pitcher in their ballparks whereas the National League requires the pitcher to bat for himself. Both teams bat 9 players but the 9 players batting aren't exactly the same.

# Group Study Guide

**READ ROMANS 2:11-29**

# Highlight – What stands out?

1. Who are the two groups of people that Paul is addressing? Who had the law and who didn't?

2. What is the difference between sin of someone who has the law and those who don't have the law? (v. 12)

3. What stands out to you in this passage?

4. How does Paul describe God in this passage?

5. How does Paul describe the human condition in this passage? What unites us? What divides us?

6. Do you notice any familiar ideas that have come up previously in Romans?

# Explain – What does this mean?

1. Are the Gentiles held to the standard of the law even though that they're mostly unaware of it? Look up Acts 10: 9 – 48 to help prove your point.

2. In verses 14-15, Paul argues that the Gentiles know the law because their consciences bear witness. This is the second time that Paul mentions Gentiles being able to know God's standard (Romans 1:18-32 is the first). How do their consciences bear witness? Can you think of examples of unbelievers knowing the law and obeying it?

3. In verses 17-20, Paul sets up a lot of "if/then" statements that look like righteousness. Make a list of everything he says in these verses that looks like righteousness.

4. In verse 21, he shifts (through 24). What is the shift?

5. Paul seems to be making the distinction between "true Jews" and "false Jews" in verses 24-29. What is that distinction?

6. Verse 11 seems to be the purpose statement for this section. How do verses 11-29 show that God shows "no partiality?"

7. Based on what Paul says in verses 25-29, what was the Jewish people's problem regarding circumcision? **Have your Group look up the following verses and answer how these verses help explain circumcision and what God is looking for with the Jewish people:**

    - Philippians 3:3
    - Colossians 2:11-12
    - Galatians 5:1-6, 6:15
    - Jeremiah 9:25-26
    - Deuteronomy 10:14-16

## Apply – How does this change me?

1. How do you consider yourself 'better' than others because of what you know about God? Can you make a list of external righteousness that we lift up as holiness today? How is that not enough to save us?

2. How would Paul respond to someone who said: "I am saved because I came from this family" or "I am saved because I grew up in the church?" How does this text answer that assumption?

3. According to Paul, who is under God's judgment? How does this change how we think about ourselves? And how we think about others?

## Respond – What's my next step?

1. Who do you know that needs to hear that God shows no partiality? How can you use this passage to help point them towards Jesus?

2. What external righteousness are you trusting in that won't actually be enough to save you?

3. **Have someone read Matthew 7:1-5.** How does this passage help you understand Romans 2:11-29?

# Additional Resources:

**Podcast:** Knowing Faith on Romans 2