

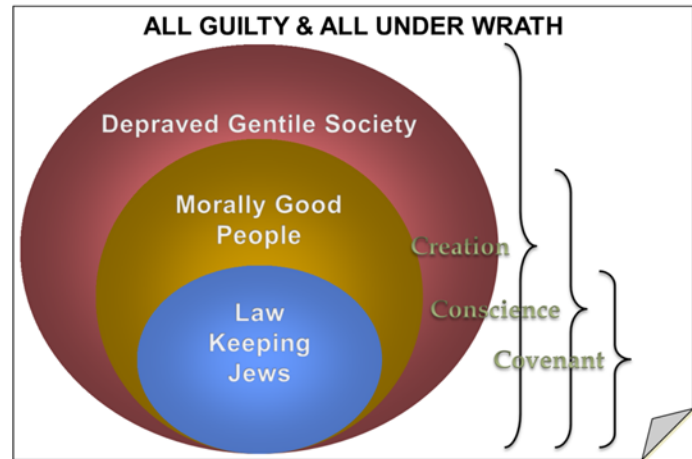
Sin's Gentile Condemnation

Romans 2:1-16²

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God will judge unbelievers. This is what the Bible says. We as Christians recognize and accept that.

That God will judge the depraved and deeply wicked sinners, we agree it right and just. Paul describes those on whom the wrath of God abides, “²⁹ They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, ³⁰ slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, ³¹ foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless....”



But what about the morally decent unbeliever? Will they be judged? Is it fair to condemn the good, decent, moral people all of us know? Your neighbor? Your boss? Your mom? We all know them. Good, solid, moral, kind, helpful, maybe even religious people. What about them? Are they condemned as well? Are they not doing the best they can? Won't God take their good works into account?

Well, *they*, the depraved sinners, have no excuse (1:20). Now, *you*, the good moralists have no excuse (2:1). Paul turns from the universal revelation of the wrath of God that condemns to the universal presence of the law that condemns. He turns from talking about *them* to talking to *you*, from the outer circle where we generally say we are not to one of the inner circles where we sit exposed for what we really are.

Having shown the inexcusability of our sin, Paul now turns his attention to condemning the self-righteous moralists. In the face of our tendency to self-justification, Paul announces and describes the judgment of God. Within the circle of critical, self-righteous moralists will be Gentiles like Seneca, Plato and Aristotle, as well as unbelieving conservatives of all ages like Rush Limbaugh. Also within that circle are Jews who are also self-righteous moralists.

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It is Inescapable

(v.1-4)

Their condemnation is unavoidable.

¹ Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things. ² We know that the judgment of God rightly falls on those who practice such things. ³ Do you suppose, O man—you who judge those who practice such things and yet do them yourself—that you will escape the judgment of God? ⁴ Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?

Man's No Excuse (v. 1)

“Therefore” connects the statement with the context. In the face of universal depravity, there is now universal accountability. Man has no excuse. They not only live under the judgment revealed from heaven, but they also condemn themselves when they judge others. The moralist passes judgment on others not realizing he has condemned himself in the process. They are doing themselves what they condemn in others.

God's Righteous Judgment (v. 2)

God's judicial condemnation is passed against the moralist. The sinner who thinks of himself as a moral person rightly receives the judgment of God. Why? Because they are practicing the same things. They are sinning sinners. Their morality is narrowly defined and self-righteously held. God is not fooled by any of it. He sees through the cloak of morality and uncovers the nakedness of their sinning. So, it is right for God to judge even the good, moral people.

Paul's Probing Questions (v. 3-4)

Paul asks two penetrating questions.

Do you think that you can get away with this? Do you think you will be able to escape from the judgment of God? Do you think that you have the right to judge others but are not vulnerable to being judged by God? Do you see the thrust of the question? You think you have the right to judge others and yet not be judged by God? Aren't you just setting yourself up as a god?

Do you presume that because you have not been judged yet that you never will? Do you imagine that God's patience, forbearance and temporary mercy will simply never end? Do you think that you will never come to the end of God's patience?

God's kindness is designed to bring sinners to repentance. It is not designed as leniency. It is not designed to allow sinners to keep on sinning. Kindness not to allow rebellion but to bring repentance.

The fact that we pass judgment on the behavior of others is indisputable evidence that we understand there is right and wrong. It is also evidence that the source of that deter-

mination lies outside of ourselves. It betrays that we do not see the goodness and kindness of God as leading us to inward and outward transformation, to repentance. The self-righteous moralist never sees himself as vulnerable and exposed to the wrath of God.

It is Inflexible

(v.5-8)

Their condemnation is unyielding.

⁵ But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed.

⁶ He will render to each one according to his works: ⁷ to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; ⁸ but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury.

God's Judgment stored up Wrath (v. 5)

The successful and happy sinner atheist does not understand that God's judgment is being stored up because of his lack of repentance. He ignores God. He seems happy, adjusted, successful. But because of his impenitent heart, God's wrath is being laid back and will suddenly and fully fall on him at the last day.

The self-righteous moralist does not see that it is the inflexible and inescapable standards that are applied to the heart. So, our very moralism functions as stubbornness and unrepentance.

God's Judgement based on Works (v. 6 -8)

God will render to each one according to his works, according to what he has done. Several times in this section of Romans, Paul is going to assert this. God will reward people according to their works. So, we should not say that God does not reward people for their works. He most certainly does. To anyone who meets the standard, God will give eternal life. To all who fail to meet the standard, God will pour out His wrath.

Yet the standard will not change. God will reward and punish, according to Psalm 62:12, on the basis of deeds. Do not let verses 7-8 shake you. Here is the standard: those who always (meaning without ever failing) do good will receive eternal life. Those who persist in doing evil (in both heart and action) will receive punishment. The problem is that no one meets the standard. Only one person has lived out the standard and this because He Himself is the embodiment of the standard, the Lord Jesus.

John Stott helps us to understand this better when he writes, "The presence or absence of saving faith in our hearts will be disclosed by the presence or absence of good works of love in our lives. The apostles Paul and James both teach this same truth, that authentic saving faith invariably issues in good works, and that if it does not, it is bogus,

even dead. 'I by my works will show you my faith,' wrote James. 'Faith [works] through love,' echoed Paul." (Stott, p. 83)

It is Impartial

(v.9-11)

God's judgment is unbiased.

⁹ There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, ¹⁰ but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. ¹¹ For God shows no partiality.

Its Absolute Surety

"There will be..." This is an assurance that the judgement and blessing absolutely will be meted out. Moral people often deny the surety of judgment. Their very self-perceived morality leads them to seek escape hatches. No, it is not "There may be..." but rather "There will be..." The moralist stands warned that God's impartial judgment is sure.

Its Definitive Universality

The judgment and blessing will be for all, without regard to their historical or ethnic relationship with God. No Jew can expect to be exempt because of their history. No Gentile can expect to be exempt because of their morality.

This standard will be applied without distinction to all by an impartial God. The moralist always sees himself as having a special standing in God's sight. Here, Paul levels the playing field. Both Jewish and Gentile moralists are subject to God's wrath.

It is Inclusive

(v.12-16)

God's judgment is all-encompassing.

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. ¹³ For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified. ¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ 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 ¹⁶ on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus.

In Regard to the Moral Law (v. 12-13)

God's judgment is on all whether they have the Law or not. The moralist who has the Law will be judged by the Law. The Law here may be referring to Scripture in large, but is more likely referring to the Mosaic Law. The moralists in the religious world often appeal to the Bible and to the Law to justify themselves. But the Law will be turned to condemn them. Those who know or have been exposed to the Law will be judged by the Law.

The unbelieving moralist who does not have the Law will come to an ultimate end without it. Knowing the Law is not the issue. Doing what God requires is the issue. Some know what is right and wrong from the Law. But those without the Law still know there are things that are right and things that are wrong. Yet, they still do the things that are wrong. Doing what is wrong whether it comes from the Law or from some other system of ethics is still sin.

Paul emphasizes that it is not a matter of knowing what the Law says. It is a matter of doing what your ethical system demands. If you are a pagan and your ethics says it is wrong to cut down oak trees and you cut down oak trees, you have condemned yourself as a sinner. You do not obey the ethical system you live under whether it is righteous or not. So, God will condemn even moral people who don't know the Mosaic Law because they do what they know is wrong.

In Regard to the Natural Law (v. 14-15)

This doesn't sound fair. How can people be judged for what they do not know? Paul points out that even the pagans have a basic ethical system. Even the most wicked of people believe it is wrong for you to hit them or to take their stuff. This is built into the conscience, this innate sense that some things are wrong. No one lives as though nothing is wrong. Everyone has a "don't do that" at least for others. But when they violate that themselves, they have condemned themselves.

So, moral pagan people who do not have the Law are condemned by their conscience. The conscience is a function of the inner person, the soul, the heart. It is the mechanism by which a person is aware that they have violated their ethical system. Their conscience has basic information in it, probably as a result of being in God's image. The conscience is then trained from birth to know that certain things are right and wrong. When the person contemplates or does something that is against the way the conscience was trained, then the person is guilty and the conscience accuses the person. So they have a sense of doing what is wrong. That sense comes because of their conscience and the violation of their moral, ethical system.

God judges those lacking God's Word by how well they live according to the sense of right and wrong in their hearts. Sweden's great theologian Anders Nygren states this very exactly: "The heathen's conscience stands as an objective witness ... showing that he actually knew what he did wrong." God's judgment is so perfect that he takes into account one's moral perception in rendering judgment. To be sure, no one escapes condemnation. All fall short. None measure up to their own moral perceptions of right or wrong, let alone God's Law. No one will ever be able to rise before God and declare that he has been unfair. His judgment is so precise that he takes into account the delicate moral perceptions of each person. (Hughes, p. 57)

In Regard to the Gospel (v. 16)

There will be a sure future judgment when all moral people will face God for judgment. That is a part of the declaration, the message, of Paul's gospel. Universal sin

and universal condemnation are the back story for the gospel. Because the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all men, the vile, depraved pagans, the moral but unbelieving sinners then we need the gospel. They need the gospel. Without the gospel, there is no hope for them.

It includes those who have the Law and those who do not. Those who have God's will in His Word will be judged by that Word. Those who do God's will without His Word will be judged by the conscience that allows or disallows. The argument comes to thundering conclusion here in verses 14-15. Everyone is subject to being indicted under law. The Jews have the law written in Scripture. The Gentiles have the law written on their hearts in their consciences. In the end, all will be judged according to the gospel; or as Paul puts it, "my gospel."

Reflect and Respond

God's just judgment will be against moral unbelievers.

 Their condemnation is unavoidable.

 Their condemnation is unyielding.

 God's judgment is unbiased.

 God's judgment is all-encompassing.

Are you under the condemnation of God?

 Do you know the Law and it condemns you?

 Does your conscience condemn you?

 Are you prepared to face the living God in His wrath?

As a Christian...

 Have you contemplated the seriousness of sin?

 Do you see those you love who are unbelieving as under the just judgment of God?

 What about your children?

Have you believed in Christ and bowed to Him?