

2. Its Universality (2:1-3:20)

Having established in three related contexts the fundamental principle that all men are defined by self-idolatry, and that this idolatry incurs the wrath of being given over by God, Paul proceeded to draw out and develop a very important inference. This inference ultimately implicates the entire context of 1:18-32, but proceeds most closely from his summary statement in the final verse of that context. Before examining Paul's argument in chapter two it is helpful to make some introductory observations.

The first thing to observe by way of introduction is that the second chapter of Romans serves at least three important roles in the movement of Paul's argumentation regarding men and their fractured relationship with God:

- It provides the summary inference to his argument from 1:18-32, as evident from his introductory conjunction *therefore* (2:1).
- Verses 2:1-16 provide a transition moving from a universal context to a more particularistic one. That is, 1:18-32 addresses the idolatry and culpability of *man* in his fallen state, whereas in 2:17-3:8 is concerned specifically with the *Jews*.
- As well, chapter two establishes a crucial truth with respect to the gospel, namely that a formal system of explicit commands and ordinances - i.e., the Law of Moses - is irrelevant to the establishing of man's righteousness before God. In this way Paul put his finger on the heart of the Jewish perspective and problem: *the Jews, who had the Law and so looked down on the Gentiles as lawless heathen, were no more righteous than those without the Law* (2:11-16). Israel's trust in their possession of and performance under the Law was a delusion.

Second, the transitional nature of 2:1-16, together with Paul's pronoun shift from the third person plural *they* of chapter one to the second person singular *you*, has provoked different opinions about how this context is to be viewed. Many commentators argue that 1:18-32 addresses *Gentile* sin and unbelief, while 2:1-3:20 is concerned with the *Jews*. This change in referent from Gentile to Jew is said to be supported, along with other considerations, by Paul's shift in pronoun use. Although this view is widely held, several considerations seem to indicate that it is overly simplistic:

- 1) The first consideration is the most obvious, and that is the universalistic quality of 1:18-32. Paul's language is generic, which is consistent with his intention to paint a portrait of *fallen man* and his estrangement from God. To make this a Gentile context is to effectively exempt the Jews from the fraternity of Adam's offspring.
- 2) Second, the fact that 2:1-16 represents a summary inference from 1:18-32 seems to argue against a sharp change in referent. For if the latter part of chapter one pertains to the Gentiles, it is somewhat awkward for Paul to shift his focus to the Jews by the inferential statement, "*Therefore you are without excuse...*"

Nevertheless, many do understand Paul's inference as indicting Jews who condemn Gentiles for doing the things of 1:29-32 when they also practiced them.

- Another apparent problem with this view is that it has the Jews practicing the same flagrant expressions of unrighteousness as the pagan Gentiles. This seems to be inconsistent with the entire thrust of Paul's argument in this chapter, which is that the Jew of his day believed he stood secure in his own righteousness because he possessed the Law of Moses and led a life characterized, for the most part, by outward restraint (cf. 2:17-29). While it is true that even the most pious Jew was ultimately guilty of the "spirit" of self-idolatry described in 1:18-32, few Jewish people would have regarded themselves as guilty of the gross practices Paul noted at the end of chapter one (ref. Matthew 15:1-9, 23:1-28, etc.).
 - However, it seems evident that Paul did indeed intend to indict the Jews along with the Gentiles for doing the things enumerated in 1:29-31. This conclusion is best supported by his repeated use of the phrase, "*those who practice such things,*" where "such things" clearly refers back to 1:29-31 (ref. 1:32, 2:2-3).
- 3) A third consideration is that Paul's grammar identifies the antecedent of the pronoun *you* as being "*every man of you who passes judgment.*" While it is true that the movement of the context is toward the Jews' self-righteous judgment of the Gentiles, Paul here specifically made his indictment generic. This suggests that he was not *simply* addressing the Jews, but every person who passes judgment on another, both Jew and Gentile. In turn, this all-inclusive indictment provides the legitimizing basis for his later focus upon the Jews.
- 4) Fourth, even apart from the inferential tie between chapters one and two, the subject matter of 2:1-5 is undeniably applicable to all men, not just the Jews. The practice of self-righteously finding fault with others while being guilty of the same charges is a *human* phenomenon expressive of fallen man's self-idolatry, not something associated with a certain ethnic or religious tradition.
- 5) Finally, verses 2:11-16 are clearly universalistic inasmuch as they address the lack of partiality with God; He will judge the secrets of *all* men through Christ Jesus.

Together these considerations lead to the conclusion that, as he moved into his inference drawn from 1:18-32, Paul was still speaking broadly of both Jew and Gentile. As all men suppress the truth in unrighteousness in their insistence upon worshipping and serving themselves, so their self-idolatry - whether Jew or Gentile - expresses itself in the various manifestations listed by Paul at the end of the first chapter. This is not to deny Paul's intention to shift his consideration specifically to the Jews; it is, however, to recognize that it was only by arguing for the unrighteousness and guilt of all men that Paul was able to effectively bring his indictment against his Jewish brethren and prove to them their need of the gospel and the righteousness of God acquired through faith.

A third introductory observation concerns the structure of chapter two. As noted, verses 2:1-16 constitute a transitional context. While they advance Paul's argument of universal sin and universal culpability, they also provide an introduction to his explicit treatment of the Jews and their relationship with God (2:17-3:8). Thus the second chapter of Romans may be partitioned into the two primary contexts of 2:1-16 and 2:17-29.

- For its part, 2:1-16 may be further subdivided:
 - 1) Verses 2:1-5 address the culpability and folly of *human presumption* associated with finding fault with others while exonerating oneself. In this context Paul insisted that all who pass judgment in this way also condemn themselves because they do the same things as those whom they judge. As the Scripture and experience teach that this pattern of behavior characterizes all human beings, they reinforce the conclusion that Paul's indictment in these verses is universal and not strictly limited to the Jews.
 - 2) Subsequently, verses 2:6-11 advance Paul's argument by presenting and insisting upon *divine impartiality*. For since God's judgment is righteous, and therefore falls upon all who practice unrighteousness, it is absolutely impartial. It pertains to the Jew as well as the Gentile. Although this conclusion is clearly evident in 1:18-32, Paul found it necessary to show explicitly that the Jews were equally implicated with the Gentiles. This is because, given their possession of the Law of Moses and their covenant status, the Jews would have tended to exempt themselves from Paul's previous charge of idolatry and disobedience. By their own estimation, they were covenant sons who both possessed and observed the Law, not heathen idolaters like the Gentiles.
 - 3) Finally, in 2:12-16 Paul established *the irrelevance of the Law* with respect to righteousness. Whether a person stands under the Law or not, each will be judged impartially according to the secrets of his heart.
- The second section comprised of 2:17-29 continues to build upon Paul's insistence of Jewish culpability by articulating how, specifically, the Jew who has the Law is regarded by God as bearing the same guilt as the Gentiles. Most simply, their guilt lies in the fact that, though they "*rely upon the Law, boast in God, know His will, and approve the things that are essential,*" the Jews fail to keep the Law and so prove their boasting to be hypocritical.

Fourth, it is vital to discern the reason for Paul's pronoun shift from *they* to *you*. As noted this shift has led many scholars to perceive a change of referent between chapters one and two. But if it does not indicate an immediate change of referent from Gentile to Jew, then what explains it? The answer lies in recalling that chapter two constitutes Paul's inference from his previous argument. Whatever the precise relation of his inference to what precedes it, it is clear that he viewed the depravity and its manifestations portrayed in the previous chapter as being universal, and therefore universally condemning.

In pressing out his inference Paul resorted to a form of argumentation known as *diatribe*. This was a common device in the ancient world, and involved a writer (or speaker) interacting with an imaginary antagonist and his imagined arguments. Often it is characterized by the posing of questions and answers in a “back and forth” dialogue. The use of diatribe is common in Paul’s epistles, but also occurs throughout the Scripture (cf. Romans 3:1-9, 4:1-12, 6:1-3, 9:14-21, 11:13-21; also Malachi 1:1-14, 2:13-14, 17, 3:7-15; James 4:13-17, 5:1-6; etc.).

Because it simulates a person’s viewing of a debate between two contenders in which both parties present their own arguments and answer those of their opponent, diatribe is a particularly effective device for making a powerful and compelling case for something. Given Paul’s assertions in 1:18-32 and the direction he was moving with them, it is readily apparent why he employed it here. Furthermore, in that the *you* of 2:1ff represents Paul’s imaginary adversary, it must not be concluded that he was addressing his readers directly. In context, the “person” being addressed is the man who passes judgment hypocritically, not specifically the saints at Rome.

One final thing to note by way of introduction is the conspicuous absence of the concept of faith, not only in chapter two, but in the entire context of 2:1-3:20. Its absence is not accidental: *having introduced the central gospel principle of righteousness reckoned by faith, Paul’s intention was to demonstrate the glory and necessity of this principle by setting it in sharp contrast with the antithesis of faith, which is “suppression of the truth.”* He accomplished his intention by showing the condemnation and wrath that come to all men who, as truth-suppressors, live apart from faith, whether they suppress the truth through flagrant and self-indulgent autonomy like the Gentiles or by seeking to establish their own righteousness like the Jews.

- a. With respect to the content of chapter two, it was seen that it may be partitioned into three sub-contexts. The first spans 2:1-5, and is concerned with the matter of *human presumption*. Specifically, Paul had in mind the presumption of condemning others in their unrighteousness, and then exonerating oneself while being guilty of doing the same things. Again it is important to observe that this context constitutes an inference drawn from 1:18-32, especially verse 32. Thus Paul’s statement is best understood in the following way:

Because men know the ordinance of God that those who practice unrighteousness are worthy of death, they are without excuse before Him when they pass judgment on others, for they who stand for the vindication of righteousness against sin are guilty of the same things. Thus they are calling for their own condemnation.

Five particulars about this context are to be noted:

- 1) The first was previously introduced, namely that Paul’s indictment cannot be entirely constrained to the Jews. Again, this does not deny that he was advancing his argument in such a way as to focus upon the Jewish people; clearly that was the case, as is evident from 2:17ff.

But the inference of 2:1 stands upon what was previously stated about the nature and operation of depravity as a universal human phenomenon, and so must be viewed first and foremost in that light. The indefinite antecedent - "*every man of you who passes judgment*" - of Paul's pronoun *you* further indicates the universality of his statements. In fact, as previously observed, were Paul not speaking universally he would not have been able to raise his later contention with the Jews. His larger intention was to demonstrate that all men are in need of the gospel and righteousness by faith. In order to accomplish his goal he had to prove that sin - epitomized in the idolatry of suppressing the truth - is a universal condition. In this way he hoped to convince his own countrymen that their confidence of righteousness under the Law was a damning delusion.

- 2) The second thing to observe is Paul's reiteration of the knowledge possessed by depraved men. Throughout 1:18-32 he insisted that men's problem is not a lack of knowledge or insight, but self-idolatry and the willful suppression of the truth that accompanies it (1:18-21, 25, 28, 32). So also in the present context he affirmed the same things.

Men know their own sinfulness; they are aware that they practice the same things as those they judge. At the same time, *men know God's righteousness*; they understand that His judgment upon those who practice unrighteousness is perfectly just - it is "according to truth." Together these two arenas of knowledge confirm Paul's previous insistence that all men are conscious of an objective standard of righteousness (1:32). This is the very reason they so naturally and readily pass judgment on others; all men are able to see the speck in their brother's eye without the least difficulty.

- 3) But despite this knowledge of an objective standard and their readiness to impose it upon others, men refuse to hold *themselves* accountable to it. While they pass judgment on others, they continue to practice the very things that provoked their condemnation of their fellow man. Once again, the self-serving nature of human depravity insures that men will suppress the truth in unrighteousness. To not do so would be to obligate themselves to a proper response to the truth of God, namely the obedience of faith (cf. 1:1-5), and all men are innately aware that no one can serve two masters. As long as self is god, true faith is an absurdity as well as an impossibility.
- 4) The fourth thing to observe is the implication this hypocrisy raises: *If men - in agreement with God's holy standard and in recognition that His own judgment against sinners is righteous - pass judgment on others, how is it to be explained that they themselves continue in sin and yet retain confidence of their own standing before God?* This is a crucial implication, especially given the direction Paul was going with his argument, and he opens it up for his readers through the means of two pointed questions.

The first question indicates that men suppose they will escape God's judgment, though they affirm that others will not (2:3). The hypocrisy of this position is emphasized by Paul's use of the emphatic pronoun: "*Do you suppose this, O man, ...that you will escape the judgment of God?*" This sort of hypocritical thinking was especially true of the Jews, for the popular conception among them was that their covenant status secured for them God's mercy and forgiveness and insured their continuance in His favor (cf. Luke 3:7-8; John 5:45-47, 8:31-37, 9:24-34, etc.).

Only one of two possible explanations can be given for this conviction. The first is the confidence of *personal righteousness*, which confidence Paul expressly disallows, both in the present context and later (3:9-20). The second is that God is *partial* in His judgment and overlooks the sin of some. This belief in the principle of divine partiality Paul will reveal to be the basis of the Jews' confidence before God (ref. 2:6-29).

The second question (2:4) has been viewed in different ways, but probably the best view is that Paul was posing a rhetorical question that served to emphasize the significance of the first one. The relation between the two questions then becomes: *Do you suppose that you, a sinner, will escape God's judgment? Don't you realize that such an assumption amounts to despising God's kindness, forbearance, and patience? For God's kindness has as its intention your repentance and faith, and you believe you have no need of repentance; you believe your lot with God is already secured.*

In a twist of irony men naturally view God's kindness and patience as evidence of His favor toward them. This was especially true of the Jewish mindset. But rather than testifying of His favor, God's kindness testifies of His present *disfavor* in that its intent is to provoke in men repentance and faith in Christ. *In the end, whether it is the outright denial of God as with the Gentiles or the self-delusion of the Jews, the foundation of men's confidence and consolation is their trust in their own righteousness.*

- 5) Whatever their pretense, in verse 2:5 Paul put his finger on the real issue in men's confidence: they live as they do because of their "*stubbornness and unrepentant hearts.*" By this pronouncement he effectively reiterated what he previously declared, that as depraved creatures men insist upon worshipping and serving themselves. For this reason their interaction with God is always from the position of ultimate self-determination and self-righteousness. They take God's kindness and patience as evidence of their privileged and/or righteous standing, which leaves them confident in their refusal of the divine righteousness that comes through faith. This disobedience to the gospel is the greatest act of human rebellion, for it is rebellion against God's kindness and grace as well as His righteousness. How could a man better store up wrath for himself "*in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God*"?