

- b. In the first five verses of chapter two Paul presented his fundamental inference drawn from 1:18-32, namely that every person who condemns someone else also condemns himself, for all men are guilty of the same things - if not the same specific acts, certainly the self-centered, self-seeking principles that underlie those acts. Because self-idolatry is the very essence of human depravity, it characterizes every person regardless of cultural, ethnic, or social distinctions. Furthermore, Paul has shown that the nature of depravity is such that fallen men have not lost the knowledge of God, of righteousness, and of their own sinful and guilty condition; rather, they insist upon suppressing the truth in unrighteousness. This suppression of truth expresses itself in manifold forms of *exchange*, all of which have as their intention the worship and service of oneself. At bottom, men do not see fit to acknowledge God as God, for to do so is to obligate themselves to their proper response to Him, which is the obedience of faith.

As seen, Paul's ultimate intention was to bring the Jews under the same indictment of unrighteousness and guilt as the Gentiles they so readily condemned. The awareness of universal condemnation was foundational to his thesis that "*the gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.*" The only way a Jew - whose confidence resided in his covenant status and righteousness under the Law of Moses - could be made to see his own need of the gospel was for him to realize that his standing before God was no different than the "lawless" Gentile.

Paul's first step toward this end was to show that all men are guilty of the same unrighteous lives, even as all suppress the truth in unrighteousness (1:18-2:1). Therefore, if all - Jew and Gentile alike - are guilty before God and under the same righteous condemnation, then when men judge others while believing they will escape God's judgment, the only basis they have for doing so is the conviction that they will not be judged according to the same standard applicable to others. Again, this supposition was especially true of the Jews who saw themselves as being in a unique class as covenant sons.

But having first stripped both Jew and Gentile of the confidence of self-righteousness, Paul next stripped the Jews of their confidence in their privileged status. Contrary to their supposition, *there is no partiality with God*; He will "*render to every man according to his deeds*" (2:6). As the Jew could not claim a *righteousness* above the Gentile, neither could he claim a *favored status*. Supplying the "bookends" of 2:6-11, God's impartiality with respect to men is the main point of the passage, and Paul laid out his argument in three distinct stages:

- 1) The first involved his introduction of *biblical support* (2:6). Paul's use of the Old Testament scripture to support his contention is important for at least two reasons. First, it provides a good indication that he was indeed transitioning in his thinking and argumentation to focus upon the Jews. For the use of biblical citations to prove a point would have been much more appropriate and effective with a Jew than a Gentile.

The second reason proceeds out of the first, namely that Paul's deference to the Scripture would have silenced any Jewish contender. For how could one who claimed to find his spiritual confidence in his adherence to the word of God openly stand against it?

The text cited by Paul has been subject to much discussion since it cannot be directly referred to any single verse. Quite the opposite, it is reflected *in principle* in countless contexts throughout the Old Testament, particularly with respect to Israel's covenant relation with Yahweh (cf. Deuteronomy 28:1-68; 2 Chronicles 6:28-31; Psalm 28:1-9, 62:12, 94:1-23; Proverbs 24:11-12; Jeremiah 17:10, 21:13-14, 25:1-14, 32:17-19; Ezekiel 24:1-14, 36:16-19; Hosea 4:1-9, 12:1-2; etc.). The centrality of the principle of *divine recompense* to Israel's covenant identity is most evident from its presence in the Decalogue which served to introduce Israel's covenant with God (Exodus 20:4-6).

*In this way Paul's citation represents a **biblical and covenantal maxim** with which every Jew was familiar and to which none could object.* Almost certainly this was his specific reason for using it. If there were any theological truth that every Jew roundly affirmed, it was that God would repay men according to their deeds.

Because of its broad theological and covenantal significance, the contextual meaning of Paul's citation must be determined from the broad witness of the Old Testament scriptures rather than any particular verse.

- At the most foundational level this maxim addresses the nature and operation of God's interaction with men. God's recompense of men according to their deeds began with His cursing of Adam and Eve and their expulsion from Eden. From there it finds its next great expression in the Flood. And as Abraham - and later the nation descended from him - was brought into a formal covenant union with God he was instructed that God's covenant demand is *blamelessness* (Genesis 17:1-2).
- Thus the principle of *just recompense* takes on important covenantal significance in the outworking of redemptive history. For inasmuch as the principle of righteousness is fundamental to every covenant structure between God and men, so also is the principle of righteous judgment. The entire history of Israel focuses upon the nation's performance under the obligation of righteousness imposed by God's covenant at Sinai and the just penalty that attended its miserable and perpetual failures. As attested in the passages listed above, Israel's "recompense according to her deeds" came to its pinnacle in the destruction and dissolution of the Israelite kingdom in the captivities.

- In turn, the captivities of the Northern and Southern kingdoms provided the historical platform for God’s further prophetic message of just recompense, this time respecting the judgment and destruction of the enemies of His covenant people and their deliverance and recovery. *What is crucial to note is that the same righteous judgment bringing punishment upon the covenant people would result in their deliverance from the oppression of their enemies and their entrance into everlasting blessing.* This principle of judgment and destruction bringing redemption and blessing is fundamental to the theme of the Day of the Lord, whether used in reference to the desolation of the captivities (Isaiah 13:1-8; Ezekiel 13:1-23; Amos 5:1-27; Zephaniah 1:4-13) or the antitypical fulfillment of this theme in the winnowing of men in relation to Christ (cf. Isaiah 13:9-13; Joel 1:1-20, 2:1-11; Zephaniah 1:1-3, 14-18; Malachi 3:17-4:5; etc.).

All of these historical realities associated with the biblical maxim of “righteous rendering” were well understood by Paul. Even more, he understood their redemptive-historical significance; that is, *he understood how the principle of “God rendering to every man according to his deeds” would find its fulfillment in “the ends of the ages.”* Indeed, apart from this understanding it is easy to be confused by Paul’s citation in verse 2:6 in relation to the gospel he was so adamantly propounding. For how does a message of *free grace* correlate with a pronouncement that every person is to be judged according to his *deeds*, whether good or bad? This issue will be addressed at length in a later paragraph.

- 2) From his citation of the Old Testament Scripture Paul moved to its interpretation in verses 2:7-8. Of first importance is the fact that God’s commitment to “*render to every man according to his deeds*” is interpreted by Paul as subdividing mankind into two opposing groups who are to receive opposite final dispositions from one another.

- The first group is identified as those seeking “*glory and honor and immortality.*” In context these nouns function together to indicate the person whose interest, focus and orientation of life are “heavenward.” Such are individuals who, contrary to his previous description in 1:18-32, do indeed acknowledge God and seek to honor and show gratitude to Him. Accordingly, Paul observed that they will receive the reward they seek, which is eternal life.

- In contrast, all other men are identified as self-seeking, disobedient to the truth, and slaves to unrighteousness. Their “minds are set on earthly things,” and Paul’s categorization of this group of people directly replicates the essential ideas presented in his indictment in 1:18-32. The reward they will receive is wrath and indignation.

The clear parallelism of these descriptions with 1:18-32 immediately raises an important question: given that Paul previously declared that all men are unrighteous self-idolaters who suppress the truth of God in their worship and service of themselves, how is it that he could now separate some and put them into a different category? How could he now speak of those who “*by perseverance in doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality*”? Was he simply expressing a theoretical possibility in order to make a point? And even if there are such individuals, doesn’t this constitute the very “works righteousness” that Paul has previously denounced (1:16-17; cf. also 3:19-20)?

- Some have attempted to resolve this dilemma by referring Paul’s statement here to **non-Christians**. It is argued that he was talking about men who, according to natural or religious conviction, strive to obtain eternal life by persevering in doing good. This is the most natural conclusion, since it is evident that all of human religion finds men doing this very thing. They seek their own eternal well-being - however they may envision it - by applying themselves to some standard of religious and practical righteousness. Furthermore, this interpretation is consistent with Paul’s transition toward the Jews and their self-righteous confidence before God.

The problem with understanding Paul in this way is that it entirely misses the point of his argument. He was not referring to the naturally religious man; such men ultimately are the self-seeking truth-suppressors of verses 2:8 and 1:18-32. Indeed, if this were his meaning, the contrast he was painting would cease to exist. *Rather, he was speaking of men who, when impartially judged “according to their deeds,” are rewarded with eternal life.*

This being the case, the door is opened for all sorts of problems, the most notable being a doctrine of *works salvation*.

- a) Some commentators openly embrace this interpretation, arguing that Paul was clearly referring to non-Christians who *actually obtain* eternal life as a result of the lives they lead. This is explained in various ways, a common one being that their faithful submission to the “light” they have been given by conscience and creation gains them the reward of heaven (1:18-20). The obvious difficulty with this conclusion is that it is flatly unbiblical; it denies Paul’s *gospel* doctrine, both in Romans and throughout his letters. For, in addition to being a form of salvation by works, it contends that salvation is found outside of informed interaction with the gospel of Jesus Christ and conscious faith in Him.

- b) For this reason, others who hold that Paul was referring here to unbelievers argue that the intermediary principle of *faith* is implicit in his statement. Thus his argument was that those who seek for glory and honor and immortality will be given the faith that brings justification and, with it, eternal life. Although this view does not deny Paul's doctrine of justification by faith, it is unlikely, primarily because it reads too much into Paul's statement.
 - c) Still others believe that Paul was merely arguing *hypothetically*; that eternal life would indeed be obtained through one's own righteousness were it not for the reality of sin. The instances of Adam in his created state, and more especially of Jesus Christ, are argued as proof. Of the three here described, this view is the most supportable in terms of the context, Paul's doctrine, and the witness of Scripture.
- Conversely, other scholars and commentators contend that Paul was here referring to **Christians**. While recognizing and upholding his insistence upon justification by faith, they argue that he was speaking of the persevering good works that characterize those who have been joined to Christ and are being transformed into His image by the Spirit (Galatians 5:16-26, 6:7-10; Ephesians 2:8-10, 4:1-3; 1 Timothy 2:1-10, 6:17-19; Titus 2:11-15, 3:1-8; etc.). As they continue in these "good deeds" they do so with the hope of eternal life secured through faith in Christ.

This interpretation, then, understands Paul's point as follows: *It is not those who regard themselves as righteous or enjoy spiritual privilege or spiritual heritage who can rightly be confident before God, but those whose lives are characterized by the pursuit of glory, honor, and immortality through faith in Jesus Christ.*

These views notwithstanding, the answer is best determined by a careful consideration of the context, and this seems to suggest that Paul's concern was not with Christians or non-Christians *per se*. For his larger argument pertains to the human conviction - most prevalent among the Jews - that personal status or privilege enables a person to escape the judgment of God even though he may be guilty of unrighteousness.

Paul's purpose was to establish the reality of God's impartiality in judgment: the fact that God will judge every person according to the practice of his own life, and that only the *truly righteous* stand in God's favor, both in this life and the one to come. As noted, this is the constant insistence of the Scripture from the point of the Fall forward, and it was the principle that governed Israel's covenant life with Yahweh.

And so Paul was simply restating what no Jew could deny: a right standing before God - and specifically eternal life - is founded upon objective, personal righteousness. Every person will receive his just recompense in the judgment to come. The perpetual drumbeat of the Scripture is that blessing and glory belong to the righteous, but the wicked will be entirely cut off. As the psalmist so concisely proclaimed:

“The Lord is in His holy temple; the Lord’s throne is in heaven; His eyes behold, His eyelids test the sons of men...Upon the wicked He will rain snares; fire and brimstone and burning wind will be the portion of their cup. For the Lord is righteous; He loves righteousness; the upright will behold His face” (Psalm 11:4-7).

At face value this seems to lend support to the previous view that regards Paul’s argument as merely hypothetical, but in truth he was going beyond the hypothetical to what is frighteningly real for every human being.

- For his concern was not ultimately with what would be conceivable for men in the absence of sin, *but what is the just requirement obligated of all men who would gain eternal life.*
- As God is Himself the definition of righteousness, so those who would enjoy the fellowship of His presence must be as He is; they must be righteous as He is righteous.
- Paul will go on to show that the righteousness demanded by God is conformity to the true, inward demands of the Law, not simply performance of its external obligations. Outward conformity means nothing (2:28-29). Biblically, as well as in the present context, this required righteousness transcends moral and ethical conduct; it speaks of men’s restoration as image-bearers and their deliverance from the depravity of their own self-idolatry. This is all the more evident from Paul’s contrasting portrait of the second category of men: those who are condemned in their *selfish ambition* (2:8).

First and foremost, Paul’s intention in this context was to insist upon God’s impartiality in judgment and show how it effectively partitions the human race into two opposing categories enjoying opposite outcomes. His specific concern was not with the Christian or non-Christian as such; his design was to reiterate the biblical criterion for eternal life and thereby insist that nothing short of meeting this objective criterion will suffice to gain life. The obvious implication is that, if a person is to gain eternal life, he must meet the divine criterion of righteousness himself or have it met on his behalf by another. This is precisely the reason for Paul’s previous display of man’s universal calamity: no man can himself satisfy the obligation of righteousness, *nor can any other person stand in his stead.*

When it is recalled that Paul's argumentation in 1:18-3:20 was founded upon his introduction of the gospel as the power of God for salvation - the gospel in which God's own righteousness is revealed from faith to faith - the direction of Paul's argument becomes readily evident: *The man who meets the obligation of righteousness, and so gains eternal life, is the man who obtains God's own righteousness that comes solely by faith in Jesus, the righteous God-man who alone is a suitable substitute* (ref. 3:9-26).

This understanding of Paul's meaning brings clarity to verse 2:8 as well. For this verse represents simply the negative reflection of 2:7. Every person falls into one or the other of the two opposing circumstances, with the point of differentiation being *objective* rather than *perceived* righteousness. Notably, Paul characterized the second group of men in terms of *selfishness*, which he previously established for his readers as the defining principle of humanity. Being driven by self-directed lust men effectively worship and serve the creature - specifically, *themselves* - rather than the Creator (1:25). In order to justify doing so they suppress the truth in unrighteousness (1:18), refusing to acknowledge God as God and so honor and serve Him (1:28). Human depravity is *self as God*, and those enslaved by it give themselves to the obedience of lust in submission to themselves rather than to the obedience of faith in submission to God.

- 3) Finally, in verses 2:9-10 Paul applied his dipartite framework of 2:7-8 to the categories of *Jew* and *Gentile*. In this regard there is a crucial observation to make: rather than applying the "positive" category (2:7) to the Jews and the "negative" one (2:8) to the Gentiles, as would be the tendency of the Jewish mindset, *Paul distributed Jew and Gentile into both categories*. In other words, those who meet the obligation of righteousness will receive "*glory and honor and peace*," whether Jew or Gentile. Conversely, those who fall short - Jew and Gentile - will suffer "*tribulation and distress*." For there is no partiality with God (2:11).

And so, in the development of his argument Paul made it clear that all men stand on equal footing before God. Personal, ethnic and/or religious status and privilege are irrelevant. There is no advantage for the Jew over the Gentile with respect to righteousness, and therefore no exemption from the impartial judgment of God that reaches to the innermost secrets of men. In the end, all will be judged on the basis of the righteousness that characterizes God Himself, even as it does His image-bearers in their true humanity. For this reason every son of Adam must find his righteous standing before God ever and only through union with the true Man, who is the Last Adam. And yet, by the power of His Spirit according to the will of the Father, all who are so joined to this Man are transformed into His likeness "*from glory to glory*," so that in their own renewal they, too, will bear the fruit of authentic righteousness. As they were predestined to be conformed to His image, so on the day when at last they see Him as He is, they will be fully like Him; they will be true men as God intended.