

- c. In the preceding context Paul divided the entire human race into two categories: those who gain *eternal life* and those who incur *wrath and indignation* (2:7-8). This partitioning of mankind results from God's impartial, righteous judgment that "*renders to every man according to his deeds.*" Every person will be judged according to same divine criterion, with no distinction being made between Jew and Gentile. This is the heart of Paul's argument in the larger context of chapter two, and its purpose was to remove the Jew's confidence of a privileged status before God that he believed would result in him being judged according to a different standard than the Gentile.

That same line of argumentation continues in 2:12-16, with Paul specifically addressing the Jew's confidence of special favor with God on the basis of his historical covenant status in having the Law of Moses. Although a contemporary Gentile reader may view this confidence as an act of unwarranted presumption, there is understandable reason for the Jews to have it:

- First and foremost, the Jews of Paul's day (as well as today) knew themselves to be the *descendants of the patriarchs*, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They understood that God's promise of covenant status and blessing pertained to Abraham and *his seed*, of which they were a part. Since the Gentiles do not share the same line of descent, they do not stand in the same covenant favor. The only way a Gentile could become a "son" of Abraham was by joining himself to the Jewish faith and the Hebrew nation through circumcision.
- Second, the fulfillment of the promises to Abraham came through the vehicle of the *Law of Moses*. For God had promised Abraham that He would make him a great nation and give to him and his descendants the land from the Euphrates River to the Mediterranean as far south and west as the Nile River in Egypt (Genesis 12:1-3, 13:14-18, 15:18-21). Moreover, God would be their God, and they would be His people as an elect, beloved covenant "son" (Exodus 4:21-23; Deuteronomy 7:6-8). This promise of a theocratic kingdom for Abraham's descendants entered upon its fulfillment in God's call to Moses and his act of delivering the sons of Israel from their Egyptian bondage (cf. Genesis 15:1-21; Exodus 3:1-10).

As Moses led Israel out of its slavery toward the kingdom inheritance promised to Abraham, God established with the nation the covenant or *theocratic treaty* that would define and direct their lives as His "sons" in His kingdom. This covenant, entered into at Sinai, was the Law of Moses. Thus the purpose of the Law was not to provide to Israel a list of rules or commandments for them to follow, *it was the treaty that established their identity and unique status as God's people*. They alone - through their father Abraham - had been chosen by God and set apart to be a holy nation and a kingdom of priests (Exodus 19:1-6). It was hardly a matter of wonder that the Jews regarded themselves with distinction (ref. 2:17-18).

This background is crucial in order to understand the impact of Paul's contention upon a Jewish reader. With two thousand years of ethnic and covenant distinction informing their consciousness, for him to place the Jews on equal footing with the Gentiles was a radical assertion, and one very difficult to embrace. How could he deny God's own declaration that Israel was His unique people, chosen and set apart from all the nations of the earth? At first glance, such may have been the appearance, but in reality Paul was simply affirming what the Old Testament constantly insisted upon.

When Paul's argument is examined closely, it is seen that he was not at all denying Israel's privileged heritage or the significance of the Law. It was not his contention that the Law itself served no purpose or provided no point of distinction between men. Quite the opposite, inasmuch as it reflected the righteousness of God and expressed to the sons of Israel what they must be in order to stand in covenant favor with Him, the Law served the fulfillment of the biblical maxim that every man is to be rewarded according to his deeds (2:6). *This maxim indicates that the criterion for fellowship with God is righteousness, and the Law of Moses showed to Israel how that criterion was to be met.*

The partitioning of men according to the principle of *righteous recompense* upholds the Law, but at the same time does not allow for a distinction between those who have the Law and those who do not. The Law is not irrelevant with respect to the righteousness of God: it represents His standard for judging men, and so provides the basis for identifying those who will enjoy fellowship with Him. According to Paul, its irrelevance lies in two other arenas:

- a) First of all, the Law does not provide a privileged status or exemption to those governed by it. It is irrelevant whether or not a person *possesses* the Law, as was the case with the Jews. For it is not the hearers (possessors) of the Law who are just before God, but the doers of the Law. This is Paul's contention in verses 2:12-29.
- b) Second, the Law is irrelevant in terms of *providing for a person's righteousness* before God. Although it defined and informed Israel's righteousness, it could not *secure* it. The Law has no relevance for bringing righteousness precisely because all men are sinners. This assertion rounds out Paul's argument and is presented in 3:1-20.

Conformity to the Law is ultimately the determining issue, and in this respect it is indifferent to Jew/Gentile distinction. For the Jew who possesses the Law has no advantage over the Gentile who does not unless he keeps its demands. The determining ethic for every person is that each will be rewarded according to his deeds in accordance with the absolute impartiality of God. Indeed, it must be so or God is not God. For if there is any deference or altered standard for anyone upon any basis whatsoever, then the Law's obligation of objective righteousness becomes discretionary, and God's own righteousness as Lawgiver is impugned.

Biblically, righteousness is shown to be defined by and embodied in the *character* of God Himself. Righteousness does not have its origin and definition in precepts and laws instituted by God - at some level, such righteousness would ultimately be arbitrary. It is the unchanging, objective character of God that determines righteousness, so that it is neither arbitrary nor discretionary: *if a man would be righteous, and so stand in fellowship with God, he must be as God is; he must be holy as the Lord God is holy.* The objective, immutable nature of righteousness and its absolute necessity for man if he would enjoy divine favor is the reason that God judges all people impartially according to their deeds, and that there is “glory, honor and peace to all who *do good.*”

This principle of objective righteousness and, therefore, impartial judgment, is the heart of Paul’s argument; as it opens and closes the preceding context (2:6, 11), so also verses 2:12-16 serve to elaborate on it. It is because “*there is no partiality with God*” that “*all who have sinned without the Law will also perish without the Law; and all who have sinned under the Law will be judged by the Law; for not the hearers of the Law are just before God, but the doers of the Law will be justified*” (2:12-13).

As previously noted, in verses 2:12-16 Paul introduced into his argumentation the matter of the ***Law of Moses***, which constitutes a crucial transition. This shift in emphasis is important for at least two reasons: *first*, it provides an indication of how the Jews - and Paul himself prior to his conversion - viewed the Law in relation to personal righteousness; *second*, the relationship between the Law of Moses and righteousness that Paul here introduces stands as the contextual foundation for the balance of his discussion through chapter seven. In that forthcoming discussion Paul will be seen to move from the Mosaic Law in particular to the principle of law/works as a proposed basis for righteousness, both with respect to justification and sanctification.

The context of 2:12-16 develops as follows:

- 1) The first two verses open up the *implication* of God’s impartiality and righteous recompense as it pertains to the Law of Moses (2:12-13). In other words, how does the principle of impartial judgment according to righteousness interact with the reality that the Jews alone have the “righteousness code” that is the Mosaic Law? Does it not stand to reason that this fact would introduce some disparity or differentiation into the basis or process of God’s judgment of men? Paul’s answer to this question shows that the Law is both *relevant* and *irrelevant* with respect to judgment. That is, those “under the Law” will be judged in accordance with it, while those “without the Law” - the Gentiles who do not possess it as members of the Israelite community - will be condemned on the basis of objective righteousness apart from the Law’s ministrations. Thus Paul’s point: *sin brings judgment consistent with the righteousness of the Law of Moses regardless of whether one possesses and is accountable to it.*

The issue in God's impartial judgment of men is conformity to the righteousness articulated in the Law, not proximity to it or possession of it. It is not the *hearers* of the Law who are just before God, but those who are *doers* of it (2:13). Previously Paul insisted that God's judgment against sinners is according to truth - every person will be judged according to what is objectively true concerning his righteousness and relationship with his Creator and God (2:2, 5-6). Here he simply reiterated the same thing: possession, as a covenant Jew, of the Law of Moses with its moral/ethical code avails nothing of privilege or exemption with respect to judgment.

- 2) Building upon his insistence in 2:13, Paul went on to show the *extent and manner of the jurisdiction* of the Law (2:14-15). Although the Gentiles do not have the Law of Moses, they are not "without law" in every sense. Paul already made clear that, as image-bearers, all men have an innate knowledge of God, and so also a corresponding intuitive awareness and approval of the righteousness that defines Him *and them* in their true humanity (1:18-20, 32).

Therefore, in that the Law of Moses represents a formal, comprehensive articulation of that righteousness, the Gentiles who are not directly under its jurisdiction still interact with its principles both cognitively and practically. When they "*do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves, in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness, and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them.*" In other words, when the Gentiles practice instinctively the righteousness articulated in the Law of Moses, they bear witness to their innate knowledge of God's righteous demands. And to the extent that they practice righteousness, they are "doers of the Law" though not possessors of it.

Paul's point is that it is not necessary to formally stand under the Law to exercise oneself toward its demands. More importantly, since it is *keeping* the Law - that is, conforming to its righteousness - that matters rather than possessing it, he was insisting that all men will be rewarded - positively or negatively - on the basis of their righteous conformity alone.

At this juncture it is crucial to note that Paul was not indicating that Gentiles are saved by doing instinctively the things prescribed by the Law. This would contradict the larger context (3:9-20). Rather, his intention was to show that *authentic conformity to righteousness* is the issue in God's judgment; the criterion for salvation and "eternal life" is "*perseverance in doing good*" (2:6-7). It does not matter whether a person obeys the Law's obligations instinctively as a Gentile "doer of the Law," or because of direct commandment as a Jewish "doer"; God equally regards both as righteous. Conversely, failure to conform brings condemnation regardless of one's direct relation to the Law.

- 3) Finally, in verse 2:16 Paul indicated to the Romans the *operation* of the Law in final recompense. As every person's conscience bears witness to his innate knowledge of and obligation to the Law's demands, so the conscience's *accusation* - which overarches its selective *excusal* - provides a fearful foretaste and expectation of a day of final reckoning. The unchanging standard for the obtainment of eternal life is conformity to the righteousness embodied in the Law - *every man will be recompensed according to his deeds*.

Even more, Paul's declaration that God will judge the "hidden things" of men reveals that the Law will condemn or acquit on the basis of *inward* conformity rather than external compliance. This is a crucial qualifier, for inasmuch as Paul's language throughout chapter two is concerned with *deeds*, it would be easy otherwise to reduce the demand of righteousness to outward performance. Nevertheless, careful consideration would have led to Paul's qualification even were it not expressly stated. For given the fact that righteousness is defined by the *character* of God - and therefore implicates the character of His image-bearers - it is obvious that it is a matter of *being* rather than *doing*. This is why the Old Testament was adamant that the upright will commune with God; if one would have fellowship with God he must be as He is (Psalm 1:1-6, 11:7, 17:13-15, 37:27-29, 140:13; etc.). In fact, inward conformity to the divine character is exactly what the Mosaic Law was ultimately concerned with (Leviticus 11:44-45). For this reason Paul could treat the Law as the proper basis for God's judgment of men "according to their deeds" in relation to it.

Recalling that Paul's larger contextual thrust is toward highlighting the glory and necessity of the gospel and its righteousness for all people, it is easy to see why he emphasized heart righteousness: *while anyone can conform his conduct and speech to the Law's demands, no one can transform his heart and recover in himself the spotless splendor of the image of God*. Only the power of God's righteousness acquired through faith in Christ can accomplish this (1:16-17). This observation further helps to clarify Paul's statement that God's final judgment of men will be "through Christ Jesus" "according to my gospel."

- a) With respect to the first prepositional phrase, it seems apparent that Paul meant that God's final judgment will be executed through His Son, Christ Jesus. This assertion has two implications. The first is that Christ Himself will *preside as Judge* on that day of reckoning, which is consistent with Jesus' own teaching (cf. Matthew 19:28, 25:31-46; John 5:19-29) and Paul's understanding (Acts 17:30-31; 2 Corinthians 5:9-10; 2 Timothy 4:1; etc.). The second implication is that *men will be judged upon the basis of the person and work of Christ*. In other words, their guilt or innocence before God will be determined by their relation to Him (Matthew 7:21-23, 25:31ff).

- b) The second prepositional phrase, “according to my gospel,” has been variously interpreted. There are two possible meanings that are most likely. The first is that Paul meant to say that the message of a day of reckoning over which Jesus would preside as Judge was integral to the gospel he preached. This view can be supported by such contexts as Acts 17:30-31 and 2 Thessalonians 1:1-10, and is fairly commonly held. The second interpretation is that he meant that the final judgment *itself* has reference to the gospel; it is a judgment that takes into account the realities of the gospel.

If the latter is assumed, both prepositional phrases modify the verb: *God will judge through Jesus Christ even as He will judge according to my gospel*. Stated differently, Christ’s final judgment of all men will be based on the realities of His gospel and each individual’s relation to those realities. Although this interpretation is perhaps more subtle, it is arguably more directly suited to the context and the flow of Paul’s argumentation. It is particularly consistent with the previous observation that God’s judging of men through Jesus Christ includes the idea of their being judged upon the basis of His person and work. If it is true that men’s personal relation to Christ and His redemption is the determining issue in their final disposition, then it is true to say that He will judge according to the gospel.

And so, in the advance of his argument, Paul did not leave the Jews in their comfortable delusion of ethnic and covenantal self-righteousness. God’s righteous judgment extends to all men equally, for He judges *in truth*. This means that possession of the Mosaic Law does nothing except bring under its condemnation those who fall short of its righteousness. Nor could the Jew object that he was subject to a standard to which the Gentile was exempt. Those “without the Law” would likewise be judged in accordance with it, for the righteousness of the Law is written in their hearts as attested by their doing instinctively the things it prescribes. Paul’s insistence was that the Law of Moses - *as a formal articulation of what man must be and do to enjoy blessing and covenant fellowship with God* - necessarily extends its reach and authority to all indiscriminately. Regardless of whether a person stands under its jurisdiction as an Israelite, the righteousness it presents and demands is justly applicable to all. Far from providing a privilege to the Jew, the Law brought him under a curse, for “*cursed is everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law, to perform them.*”

More specifically, the Law curses men because the righteousness it requires is that of God Himself; the person who would fulfill its obligations must be as God is. This means that he must either be untarnished as an image-bearer, or he must gain God’s own righteousness. The surpassing excellence of the gospel is its promise that, in Christ, men obtain *both*: even as He cleanses them and clothes them with His *divine* righteousness, so He also bestows upon them His Spirit by which they are transformed into His perfect *humanity*. This being so, it is no wonder that the gospel was the focal point of Paul’s life, passion, and ministry.