

***Romans 2, Pt. 2***

Last week, we considered the idea that God's judgment is according to our works and that neither a **well-developed conscience** nor the **frequency of our moral judgments** is able to cover over the heinousness of our actual sin. This morning we are called to consider yet a third kind of false standard of judgment - **the status of being a member of Israel**. Judgment will be according to our works, and knowledge of the law nor circumcision cannot atone for actual sins. What are the implications of the gospel for the Jewish person in the first century?

This is, of course, a rather tricky question that has produced such a vast scholarly literature that even the trained professional can find yet more to read and study. I fear, however, that we have in this case rather overcomplicated things and that the answers have been clearly before us since the writing of the New Testament itself. A few key ideas are all we need to sort out the mess:

- 1. Judgment will be according to what people actually do.**
- 2. The blessing given to Israel was a vocation to preach the reality of God to the world.**
- 3. Faith has always been the means by which God has saved his people.**

The third idea is one that we will take up in our study of the third and fourth chapters. The first two ideas will show up in the presentation that follows. But maybe it would be helpful to pause a moment and think of an illustration. We have always made use of online shopping and, of course, that use has intensified over the last six months. It is common to find packages on our front porch 2-3 times a week. The kids like to drag the boxes in and open them up. And most of all they like to find bubble wrap. I have more than once come home to find bubble wrap strewn across the living room floor as the after effects of a mad play session. My children may disagree, but what is most important in each delivery is the actual content of the box. The

packaging is but a secondary matter. It would be silly to get the box, open it up, throw away the thing ordered, and prominently display the various types of wraps and cushioning as if they were the treasure. I don't want to push this illustration too far, but I think it gives us some help. The people of Israel were given **a precious gift to give to the world** - a relationship with the righteous God who made all things. They were **blessed to be a blessing**. In Romans 2:19, Paul is calling out the hypocrisy of those who think that knowledge of the law entitles them to be a "guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness." But whatever Paul's rhetorical intentions here, it is important to note that God had really intended for Israel to be a guide and a light. That was their vocation to the world. Many of the practices that they were given were but temporary means of guarding their precious gift so that the gift of the knowledge of God could be broadcast to the world. The weakness in this illustration is that the promises and commands of the covenant which God gave to Israel were of far more value than the comparison to bubble wrap suggests, as these various commands and promises were reflections of the character of a holy God. Nonetheless, Paul's point in Romans 2 seems to be that when it comes to dealing with the actual cost of our actual sin, **the laws, commandments, and ordinances in and of themselves apart from living faith in Jesus could do nothing to atone for human sin**. Knowing the law or being circumcised were as able of providing escape from judgment as bubble wrap. The knowledge of the law is yet another false standard of judgment.

**The knowledge of the Jewish law.** Even the law of God given to the Jewish people as a rule of behavior is not enough to meet the righteous standard of God. The same argument applies here as in the case of right judgments and developed conscience. **Knowledge of the Jewish law does not guarantee obedience to that law.** Knowing that stealing is wrong because it violates one of the Ten Commandments does not make up for actually stealing. Circumcision does not give anyone a pass for breaking the law (v. 25). In all of these arguments, Paul is making something abundantly clear. Everybody sins. Everybody actually falls short of the standard of God. Sin is not just some hypothetical. God judges with no partiality.

In this passage the people in question are "instructed" by the law, and they know God's will. They approve what is excellent. They understand

themselves as teachers and bearers of knowledge and truth. They are circumcised. Presumably, they are faithful to other external markers of the law. But they also steal and commit adultery and rob temples and break the law. **And if judgment is according to works, then God will hold them accountable for the things they have done.** Remember that God sees our works in their fullest possible form. He sees our behavior as well as the deep movements of our hearts. He knows and judges accordingly. Knowledge of the law or external markers of religion do not guarantee obedience. Something deeper is required. Paul tells us what this is in v. 29 - "But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter." It is **the faithful disposition of heart** which will meet God's standard of righteousness, not by actually being morally perfect but by trusting the merciful God who extends mercy to people who need it.

Remember the first chapter. Paul has told a story. To summarize - people exchanged the glory of God for lies. And the consequence was that people have been judicially given over to sin. This has happened. This is the true story of the world. So now Paul talks to us in light of how the world really is. This reminds us of our story of auto mechanics from last week. A mechanic can know the how and why of a car. But the mechanic will never encounter a car in which no repair is necessary. I hope that they do understand combustion and exhaust systems and how a stereo works. They must really have the knowledge. But what really matters at the moment is the history of the car before them. What has happened to it. What has gone wrong. Paul is not approaching the world from some idealized abstraction. He is approaching the world as it is - **under the righteous judgment of God because of actual unrighteousness.**

As our passage ends today, it is appropriate to let our reflections end as well. We need to feel the weight of what is being claimed here. The simple, hard truth is that **everyone of us has done what we ought not to have done.** As a consequence, we rightly stand under God's judgment. Our Bible knowledge won't save us. Our bank account won't save us. Our political views won't save us. Our family history won't save us. We will stand before God in judgment. And he shows no partiality.

It is true that most of us - if not all of us - are not ethnically Jewish, and as Gentiles, we have been given the gospel without the requirement to become law-obedient Jews. But never let us think that this state of affairs somehow lifts us from the possibility of making the same kind of errors as some first-century Jewish people. Presbyterians can have a profound knowledge of our form of government, can have many of the right standards of external behavior, and get to the end of their lives and hand our good, American Presbyterianism to God as if it was a bargaining chip. It's not. **Only the blood of Jesus is enough.**

But maybe there can be a further application to **how we do evangelism**. In telling others about Jesus, it is tempting to want the other person to become just like "our type of person." If we are suit-wearing Christians, then we want other people to wear suits. If we are more the skinny-jeans type, then we don't want people to become suit-wearing legalists. If we don't believe in tattoos, we want other people to join the church who have clean skin. If we like tattoos, then we secretly suspect that any Christian without one is not radical enough in their faith. We could add to this list any number of issues which are non-essential to the faith and yet become sources of pride and judgment. Let us be careful about such things. The people around us need to know about Jesus and not about our particular preferences and biases. He alone is the one who can save.