

Lesson 23 at StudyRomans.org

Romans 2:1, Continued

Romans 2:1 — 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.

When we ended last week we were looking at the final phrase of verse 1 — “because you, the judge, practice the very same things” — and we were asking how the Jews could have been guilty of the very same things.

We looked at three possibilities. First, maybe the same things in verse 1 were not the identical things. Second, maybe verse 1 was directed only to the handful of Jews who actually did live like Gentiles. And third, maybe the same things in verse 1 referred to only some of the sins in chapter one.

None of those possibilities was very appealing. So, let's look now at a fourth possibility.

Fourth possibility: Paul is accusing the Jews of effectively practicing the very same sins.

What do I mean by the word “effectively?” What I mean is that it is possible to commit a specific sin without ever actually doing the specific deed itself. Jesus told us that.

Matthew 5:27-28 — You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that every-

one who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

Has that person committed the physical act of adultery? No, he has not. Has that person committed adultery? Yes, he has. Jesus said that such a person has “committed adultery with her in his heart.” That is what I mean by the word “effectively” — he has *effectively* committed adultery.

I think Paul gives us another example — *effective* idolatry.

Colossians 3:5 — Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.

Were the Jews guilty of physically bowing down to metal images of Greek gods and Roman caesars? No, they were not. Were the Jews guilty of covetousness? Yes, I suspect that many of them were — and that means they were *effective* idolators. That is what Paul just told us in Colossians 3:5 — “covetousness, which is idolatry.”

And so, while the Jews may not have been guilty of the *physical* acts of sexual immorality and idolatry, maybe they were guilty of the *spiritual* acts of sexual immorality and idolatry, where by *spiritual act* I mean what Jesus meant — they committed those acts **in their hearts**. That is how Jesus described it.

And this view fits very well with what the prophets had told the Jews. Even at times when the Jews were not physically bowing down to metal images, the prophets accused Israel of spiritual idolatry. Instead of trusting and relying on God, they were trusting and relying on their ancestry, on their wealth, on their temple, on their military

might, and on their foreign military alliances. Their worship of God had become a worship of themselves. We saw that when we studied Zechariah.

Zechariah 7:5-6 — Say to all the people of the land and the priests, ‘When you fasted and mourned in the fifth month and in the seventh, for these seventy years, was it for me that you fasted? And when you eat and when you drink, **do you not eat for yourselves and drink for yourselves?**’

Were they bowing down to metal images? They were not. Were they guilty of idolatry? Yes, they certainly were.

And so maybe that is the point that Paul is making here. The Jews just heard Paul accuse the Gentiles of idolatry, sexual immorality, and murder. And they, no doubt, were thinking to themselves (as we might also be thinking to ourselves), “I’m sure glad I’m not guilty of doing any of those terrible things!”

But then Paul says, “Really? Are you sure you haven’t done any of those terrible things? Idolatry? Have you ever coveted? Sexual immorality? Have you ever lusted? Murder? Have you ever hated your brother? Have you looked in a mirror? Are you really in a position to judge and condemn those who are guilty of such things?”

Of those four possibilities, I think this fourth view is by far the strongest view. Did the Jews practice the very same sins we saw in chapter one? Yes, they did — either directly or indirectly. Some sins they committed directly, while other sins they committed indirectly in their hearts as both Jesus and Paul described.

Either way, they were in no position to judge the Gentiles — especially in view of the far greater knowledge and the far greater privileges that the Jews had always enjoyed in their relationship with God. The Gentiles were just now at this moment hearing about God. The Jews had been hearing about God for millennia.

And I think there is a lesson there for us as well. We often hear questions today about those who have never heard about Jesus. And we could discuss that issue. But I think the much bigger issue for us today is the opposite issue — those who have heard about Jesus year after year and week after week and day after day — and yet who continue to reject the gospel. “Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required” (Luke 12:48). That was certainly true of the Jews. They had been hearing about Christ for thousands of years.

And, again, we need to step back and admire Paul’s rhetorical strategy here. In Romans 1:18-32, Paul described Gentile sin in ways that would make his Jewish readers nod vigorously: “Yes! That’s exactly what those pagans are like! They’re idolaters, sexually immoral, God-haters. They deserve God’s judgment!”

But now in this verse, Paul springs the trap: “Therefore you have no excuse, O man, whoever you are, when you judge others, for in passing judgment you condemn yourself.”

It’s brilliant. Paul has gotten his Jewish readers to pronounce judgment on Gentile sinners, and now Paul turns that judgment back on them. You’re doing the very same things. And you have even less excuse, because you have the Law.

And let's also step back and think about where Paul is heading with all of this. Paul is not making these arguments to prove that all people have committed some specific sin. Instead, Paul is making these arguments to prove that all people have sinned. We will see that very soon:

Romans 3:23 — For **all** have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

Paul's point is that **everyone** needs the gospel of Christ — both Jew and Gentile. We will also see that point later, but we have already seen it.

Romans 1:16 — For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to **everyone** who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

In this section, Paul is slowly proving that statement. Do the Gentiles need the power of the gospel? Yes, they do — see chapter 1. Do the Jews need the power of the gospel? Yes, they do — see chapter 2. And how do we experience the power of the gospel? Keep reading!

Before we leave verse 1, we have one more question: Is this verse directed to a real person? That question is discussed at length in the commentaries, but I think the answer is rather simple. And I think the answer is both yes and no.

Do I think Paul has some specific person in mind when he uses the pronoun “you” or says “O man” in Romans 2? I do not, and especially not in a letter to a city he had never visited. But do I think Paul has a specific type of person in mind when he uses that language? Yes, I do.

And there is a word for what Paul is doing here — Paul is employing a rhetorical device known as a **diatribe**. In a diatribe, the author or speaker addresses an **imaginary opponent** rather than a specific, named opponent. But that imaginary opponent represents very real people who would make the same arguments and responses if they were here in person to do so. The purpose of the diatribe is to bring that opponent out on stage, so to speak, so that Paul can debate them.

The phrase “O man” that we see twice here in Romans 2 and that we will see again later in Romans 9 was a standard way of addressing the imaginary opponent in a Greek diatribe.

But there are two types of diatribes — effective diatribes and ineffective diatribes. What is the difference? The difference is whether the imaginary opponent in the diatribe is accurately represented. If we put words in their mouths that they would never say, then our diatribe is not very effective. But if instead we depict them accurately, then our diatribe can be very instructive. Paul’s diatribe, of course, falls in that second category, which is why the answer to whether this person is a real person is both yes and no. He is an imaginary opponent who very accurately represents the views of a real opponent.

At this point in Romans 2, we **think** Paul is addressing the Jews, but very soon we will know that for sure. (See, for example, verse 17.) And so Paul may still be setting the rhetorical trap that we saw in Romans 1. And it is interesting, as we read these arguments, to wonder whether Paul used the same arguments and set the same traps when he was teaching in the synagogues. Paul may be showing us one of his sermon outlines!

Romans 2:2

Romans 2:2 — We know that the judgment of God rightly falls on those who practice such things.

Paul was very skillful in how he proclaimed the gospel, and I think we could learn a lot from his example. For starters, Paul knew the art of persuasion. Our goal in proclaiming the gospel is not just to teach people; our goal is to persuade people (2 Corinthians 5:11). And Paul was a master at doing that.

For example, look at what Paul does here in verse 2. He has just made some harsh statements in verse 1 — statements with which many would likely disagree. But Paul then pivots in verse 2 to a statement with which all would agree. Even those who disagreed that they were doing those same things would agree that the judgment of God rightly falls on those who do practice those same things.

And that is a classic technique of persuasion. Find a point of agreement, and start there. Use that point of agreement as a foundation on which to build your argument. That is what Paul is doing here in verse 2.

Paul is talking here about what “we know,” and I think every Jew listening or reading this statement in verse 2 would have agreed with it — “we know that the judgment of God rightly falls on those who practice such things.” But, agreeing with the principle in verse 2 is very different from agreeing with the application of that principle in verse 1.

The Jews would have had two counterarguments. First, they would have argued that they had never practiced such things. And second,

they would have argued that their special relationship with God would have protected them from this judgment on the Gentiles. As we will see, Paul will deal with both of those arguments. But the starting point for Paul is this general principle in verse 2.

And the key word in this principle is the word “rightly.” Paul is not just saying that the judgment of God falls on such people, but rather Paul is saying that the judgment of God **rightly** falls on such people. What does that mean? There are several possible meanings, all of which may be intended here.

First, the Greek phrase translated “rightly” literally means “according to truth” (as in the KJV) or “based on truth.” What that means is that this judgment is completely aligned with the law and the facts. Human judgments often swerve away from one or both of those things, but not God’s judgment. God’s judgment is always perfectly aligned with the truth — perfectly aligned with the law and the facts.

Second, a judgment that is perfectly aligned with the truth must be a judgment that is completely just and proper. You can’t defend yourself by arguing that God misapplied the law, and you can’t defend yourself by arguing that God got the facts wrong.

Third, a judgment that is perfectly aligned with the truth must be a judgment that is completely impartial. A judgment according to truth is not a judgment according to nationality, privilege, status, or social group. A judgment that is perfectly aligned with the truth is blind to such things.

Finally, what can we say about this **judgment** in verse 2? Is it present judgment or future judgment? I think the answer is that it is a future judgment with a present-day aspect.

We see the present-day aspect here in verse 2 — this judgment is a judgment that *rightly falls* rather than a judgment that *will rightly fall*. And I think we also saw that present aspect of God's judgment in Romans 1 when we saw God giving people up — but that present judgment was not God's final judgment. Those people still had time to repent.

There is also a future sense of God's judgment on the last day when there will be no opportunity to repent. Although verse 2 may be focused more on the present-day aspect of God's judgment, the entire chapter is focused more on the future aspect of God's judgment. In fact, we will see God's future judgment three times in Romans 2.

- **Verse 5:** “you are storing up wrath for yourself **on the day of wrath** when God's righteous judgment will be revealed.”
- **Verse 12:** “all who have sinned under the law **will be judged** by the law.”
- **Verse 16:** “**on that day** when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus.”

And so, anytime we see the word “judgment,” we need to think about the timing of that judgment. Judgment can have a present-day aspect, and, of course, judgment has a future aspect that will be revealed **on the final day**. But judgment also has a future aspect that will be revealed **on my final day** — the day of my death. The rich man

and Lazarus in Luke 16, for example, were both judged on the day of their death, and they both immediately knew the outcome of that judgment.

Romans 2:3

Romans 2:3 — 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?

Paul's diatribe continues in verse 3, and once again we see the phrase "O man" in reference to Paul's imagined opponent.

And, again, that Paul is not speaking here to an actual person does not mean that there were no actual people who were in this position. We know that such people existed because they are the reason Paul was making these arguments in the first place. Paul is simply anticipating their arguments and objections — which is something we will see Paul doing again and again in this letter.

Verse 3 is where Paul ties things together from the previous verses. In verse 1, Paul accused the Jews of doing the same things, and in verse 2, Paul reminded them that God's judgment rightly falls on people who do such things. Verse 3 is simply the conclusion that logically follows from verses 1 and 2: If they do such things, and if God's judgment rightly falls on people who do such things, then God's judgment rightly falls on them. That conclusion, like God's judgment, is inescapable!

Verse 3 is the logical outcome of verses 1 and 2. What does that mean? It means that if you agree with verses 1 and 2, then you *must* agree

with verse 3. In fact, I would say something even stronger: if you agree with verses 1 and 2, then you have **already agreed** with verse 3, whether you realize it or not. That is how logic works — the conclusion is embedded in the premises.

But here's the critical question: Can we say that a logical conclusion is always a true conclusion? No. We cannot say that at all.

Logic has rightly been called a system of thought by which you can reach the wrong conclusion with confidence! All logic does is maintain *consistency* — logic does not guarantee *truth*. If my premises are wrong, then my conclusion may be wrong even if it is perfectly logical.

Let's consider an example from the Bible.

John 7:41-42 — Others said, “This is the Christ.” But some said, “Is the Christ to come from Galilee? Has not the Scripture said that the Christ comes from the offspring of David, and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David was?”

Those two verses contain a perfectly logical argument that Jesus could not be the Messiah. And here is that argument:

- Jesus was born in Galilee.
- The Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem.
- Therefore, Jesus could not be the Messiah.

That conclusion is both completely logical and completely wrong. It is completely logical because it follows immediately from the two

premises on which it is based. If those premises are true, then the conclusion is inescapable.

But those premises are not both true — the first premise is false. Jesus was not born in Galilee. They may have thought that he was, but we know Jesus was born in Bethlehem. Their perfectly logical conclusion was perfectly consistent with their premises, but it was also perfectly wrong. Their logic was flawless, but their logical conclusion was false.

Logic is a tool for preserving truth, not for creating truth. If you start with falsehood and apply perfect logic, you can end up with a perfectly logical falsehood as your conclusion.

And the lesson? The lesson is to check the premises! We have a tendency to trust conclusions that seem to “make sense,” even when they rest on faulty foundations. And so we need to check those foundations just like the Bereans did in Acts 17:11 — “they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.”

Paul was an expert at logic. He uses logical reasoning more than any other Biblical writer. He lays out the premises, and then he lays out the logical conclusions of those premises. We see that here, and we will see that again and again in this letter.

And we can trust Paul’s logical conclusions. Why? Because of inspiration. We know Paul’s premises are true because they are God-breathed.

And another lesson for us is that logic is our friend. Logic is how we can think clearly and teach clearly about Bible subjects. And, yes,

there is a place for an emotional appeal, but there is also a place for a logical argument. And if we focus on one but not the other, then we have strayed from the example of Paul. We will see both his logical arguments and his emotional appeals all throughout this letter to Rome.

Romans 2:4

Romans 2:4 — 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?

I think verse 4 confirms what we said earlier about chapter 1. In that chapter, we saw God giving people up three times — and we said that was God's last-ditch effort to reach them and to wake them up to their true condition.

Verse 4 is describing God's attitude toward those same people he gave up — God was trying to lead them to repentance. God did not want them to perish, and that is why God gave them up — so that they would wake up, so that they would repent, so that they would obey the gospel, and so that they would not perish. That is God's will for everyone, including the people Paul described in Romans 1.

What is God's attitude toward those who are lost in sin? What is God's attitude toward those who have not yet obeyed the gospel? What is God's attitude toward those who are sexually immoral and idolatrous? What is God's attitude toward those he gave up in Romans 1? What is God's attitude toward those who judge and condemn here in Romans 2?

Verse 4 answers all of those questions: God's attitude toward them is filled with the riches of his kindness and his forbearance and his patience.

And here comes the inevitable uncomfortable question: Is that also my attitude? Is that also your attitude? When we see people entrenched in sin and captured by sin, are we filled with kindness and forbearance and patience?

In short, is my attitude toward such people the same as God's attitude, or do I instead judge and condemn them? If it is ever the latter, then Romans 2 is the chapter for me! Why? Because Romans 2 is specifically addressing people who judge and condemn rather than display the kindness, the forbearance, and the patience of God.