

Lesson 26 at StudyRomans.org

Romans 2:14-16, Continued

Romans 2:14-16 — For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus.

When we ended last week, we were looking at two facts about the Gentiles that Paul has told us so far in this letter. We know from Romans 1:19-20 that God had plainly shown his eternal power and divine nature to them, and we know from Romans 2:14-15 that God had given them a law so that the work of that law was written on their hearts with their conscience witnessing whether or not they had followed that law.

And so, with those facts under our belts, now may be the right time to consider this question: were any Gentiles saved prior to the days of Christ, and, if so, how were they saved? That question is both difficult and widely debated, and the Bible does not reveal everything about it, but I think this book of Romans may be the most helpful source of information that we have on that issue.

For starters, we have the two points we just listed — (1) the Gentiles knew about God, and (2) the Gentiles had a law that God expected them to follow. And we also have Paul's use of Habakkuk 2:4 in Romans 1:17 — "The righteous shall live by faith." But that is not all this

letter tells us about that issue — we will find a great deal more information about it when we get to Romans 4. So my plan is to hold off on this question until we get there.

But let's make one more point about what we discussed last week — the false notion that Gentiles today who have never heard about Jesus can somehow be saved apart from the gospel. Last week we saw why that idea is wrong.

And there is a lesson for us there: we need to be careful not to read more into these verses than what was intended. Paul is most certainly not describing some path to God in these verses that bypasses Christ — there is no such path (John 14:6). As with the Jews, these Gentiles also had a law, and, as with the Jews, these Gentiles had not obeyed that law. That is Paul's point here. Yes, Paul will later tell us **how** to be saved, but here Paul is focused more on **why** we need to be saved — we all need to be saved because we have all sinned.

And I think we see that when we read the remainder of verses 14-16: “while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus.”

“You knew it was wrong, but you did it anyway.” Other than Christ, is there anyone who, knowing right from wrong, could not rightfully be charged with that accusation? “You knew it was wrong, but you did it anyway.”

And if that were the charge against me in a court of law, who would be the most effective witness to establish the truthfulness of that accusation? Paul tells us right here — “while their **conscience** also

bears witness.” The best witness against these Gentiles would be their own conscience. And, yes, some people have had their conscience seared with a hot iron (1 Timothy 4:2), but, absent that, our conscience knows every single time we do something that we believe is wrong.

Our conscience is the source of the “conflicting thoughts” in verse 15. Part of me says do it, while another part of me says maybe I shouldn’t do it. That is a conflicting thought, and that conflicting thought comes from my conscience.

And Paul says that those conflicting thoughts “accuse or even excuse them.” What does that mean? I think it means that sometimes I listen to my conscience and sometimes I don’t. Sometimes these Gentiles wanted to do something wrong, their conscience told them they shouldn’t do it, and they listened to their conscience. In those situations, their conscience would be a witness *excusing* them rather than *accusing* them.

But which would happen more often — the accusing or the excusing? I think Paul answers that question right here with the little word “even” — “their conflicting thoughts accuse or **even** excuse them.” That word “even” suggests that this conscience in verse 15 is finding much more to accuse than to excuse.

These conflicting thoughts in verse 15 are the secrets in verse 16 that will all come to light “on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus.” But there will be no Gentiles on that day who are not accused in large part by those conflicting thoughts. There will be no Gentiles on that day who never broke that law from God that was written on their hearts.

And that is Paul's point here in verses 14-16. Paul is still showing that the Jews and the Gentiles are in the same boat. Yes, they have different laws, but they have both broken the law that they have. No Jew (other than Christ) ever followed the Law of Moses perfectly, and no Gentile ever followed the law written on his heart perfectly — and if we don't believe it, we can just ask their conscience. Their conscience will be a witness against them.

And, no, these verses are not teaching a Jiminy Cricket gospel — let your conscience be your guide. Paul will explain that later. Today, we have much more than just a law written on our hearts — we have a law written by God on paper. We have the inspired word of God — we have the law of Christ.

But, more to the point, Paul's point here is not that these people were led by their conscience and were saved — Paul's point is that these people were led by their consciences and were lost! While they may have heeded their conscience and been excused on occasion, more often than not their conscience accused them! As with the Jews, the Gentiles were law-breakers.

Before we leave verse 16, let's pause and notice two things about that phrase “according to **my gospel**.”

First, when Paul says “my gospel,” he is not suggesting that there is more than one gospel or that we can each have our own different gospel. Instead, when Paul refers to the gospel as “my gospel,” I think he is just restating what he told us about the gospel in the first verse of Romans — that he had been set apart for the gospel. Paul had a special mission from Christ himself to proclaim the gospel with which he had been entrusted (1 Timothy 1:11).

Second, we should notice that, according to verse 16, the final day of judgment is part of the gospel. Yes, the gospel is good news, but the bad news is why the gospel is good news. And the bad news is that we have all sinned and, absent the gospel, we will all hear a guilty verdict on that last day.

And so, yes, the day of judgment is part of the good news — it is the reason why the good news is good news. And if we are trying to proclaim Christ without proclaiming the coming day of judgment, then we are not proclaiming the gospel of Christ. No one will ever believe the good news until they first believe the bad news — and to believe the bad news, they must hear the bad news — we have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, and we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ. That is why we all need to obey the gospel.

Introduction to Romans 2:17-29

As we will soon see, Paul returns to his diatribe in verse 17 by switching back to the second person pronoun “you.” And, again, the better view is that Paul is addressing a specific type of person here rather than a specific person. Paul’s purpose here is to teach us through debate, and so Paul brings an imaginary opponent forward with whom he can debate. That is how a diatribe works.

We saw this same diatribe back in verses 1-5, and verse 17 will confirm something we said about that earlier diatribe — this imaginary opponent is a Jew. Verse 17 tells us that — “if you call yourself a Jew.” This person at least thought he was a Jew. Was he really a Jew? Paul will get to that question at the end of Romans 2.

Why does Paul return to the diatribe here? What is the purpose of the lengthy subsection that starts here in verse 17 and that ends in verse 29?

There are several proposed answers to that question. Some say that Paul is showing us why the Jews cannot claim to be doers of the law. Others say that Paul is proving what he said back in verse 3 — that the Jews do the same things as the Gentiles. But I think Paul has a different point here.

If we look at verses 17-29, we see two primary subjects: the law of Moses and circumcision. As shown on the Handout for Lesson 26, Paul talks about the law in verses 17-24, and then Paul talks about circumcision in verses 25-29. There is a clear division between those two topics, and together those two subjects make up the entirety of this subsection.

What can we say about those two subjects — the law of Moses and circumcision? What we can say is that those two things, more than any others, were relied upon by the Jews as evidence of their special status with God. The Jews were not like any other people — why? Because they had been given the law of Moses and because they had been given the sign of circumcision. And the Bible confirms the importance of the law and of circumcision.

Deuteronomy 4:7-8 — For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the LORD our God is to us, whenever we call upon him? And what great nation is there, that has statutes and rules so righteous as all **this law that I set before you today?**

Genesis 17:11 — You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and **it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you.**

The law and circumcision were the twin pillars upon which the Jews relied — and Paul shows here in these final verses of chapter two why that reliance was misplaced. As Paul will explain, neither knowledge of the law nor physical circumcision had any value absent faithfulness to God.

But Paul was not the first person to say that to the Jews. The prophets had also proclaimed that same message to them. If you look at the Handout for Lesson 26, you will see verses about the Law of Moses on the left and verses about circumcision on the right. And these verses show both the ideal relation to the law and to circumcision and, sadly for many at that time, the actual relation to the law and to circumcision.

The law had been intended as the way the people could show their love for God and enjoy blessings from God by walking in the ways of God and keeping the commandments of God. But, as Jeremiah 8:8 tells us, the people had made the law into a lie, thinking they were wise and untouchable as long as they possessed the law.

Likewise, circumcision had been given as a sign of the covenant between God and his people. And circumcision had always had both a physical and a spiritual significance. But, as Jeremiah 9:25-26 tells us, the people had turned circumcision into something that was only a change of the flesh without any change of the heart.

For the Jews, circumcision and the law gave them a sense of ironclad security based on their covenant with God. They had the law and they had circumcision, and so why did they need Christ? Why should they rely on Jesus rather than on circumcision and the law? Paul responds to that argument starting in verse 17.

And, as we said before, I think we can be sure that Paul had earlier had these same discussions with the Jews he taught in the synagogues where he often proclaimed the gospel. I think we can be sure that Paul had often taught Jews who had responded with these very same arguments: We don't need Jesus, we have the law! We don't need Jesus, we have circumcision.

I am sure that Paul had responded to these arguments many times — and that he had done so while standing face-to-face against his opponents. Paul was not a preacher who lived in his comfortable study. Paul was not a preacher who preached only to the choir. Paul was a preacher who lived on the battleground!

And before we look at these verses, let's pause and consider an important lesson for ourselves. Yes, it is true that we don't rely on the Law of Moses and circumcision today — but are there any other similar things upon which we rely?

- I was raised in the church, so I must be right with God.
- I come from a family of elders and preachers, so I must be right with God.
- I am here every time the doors are open, so I must be right with God.

- My name is in the church directory, so I must be right with God.
- I was baptized years ago, so I must be right with God.
- I was baptized by a very famous preacher, so I must be right with God.
- I know the Bible backwards and forwards, so I must be right with God.
- I teach Bible class, so I must be right with God.
- I attend a sound congregation, so I must be right with God.
- I give lots of money to the church, so I must be right with God.
- I am a deacon or an elder, so I must be right with God.
- I am not like those terrible sinners out in the world, so I must be right with God.

Each of those items belongs on the list right along with the Law of Moses and circumcision. If we are relying on any of those things to be right with God, then our reliance is misplaced. Our reliance must be on the gospel of Christ. We must obey that gospel, and we must be faithful to God unto death. We must “rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead” (2 Corinthians 1:9).

And so, as with all of Romans, let’s be sure that we see ourselves in these final verses of Romans 2. The Jews were not the only people ever to have a misplaced reliance.

Romans 2:17

Romans 2:17 — But if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast in God

Paul is on the attack in this diatribe right from the very beginning: “if you call yourself a Jew!” As we say today, those are fighting words! Paul is questioning their Jewishness — not whether they are *physically* Jewish, but (as we will see) whether they are *spiritually* Jewish.

And this distinction was nothing new. The Jews had heard about it many times. God’s faithful people in the Old Testament were not just physical Jews; they were also spiritual Jews. We often see that distinction in the Old Testament when it comes to the sign of circumcision.

Deuteronomy 10:16 — Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn.

Jeremiah 9:25 — Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will punish all those who are circumcised merely in the flesh.

And, of course, if we look ahead to verses 28-29 of Romans 2 we can see that that same distinction is exactly where Paul is headed with his arguments here. But what Paul will say *explicitly* in verses 28-29 is the same thing that Paul is saying *implicitly* here in verse 17. These people were calling themselves Jews — but were they really?

Paul also tells us two more things about these people in verse 17 — they relied on the law, and they boasted in God. But were those things wrong? Were they wrong to rely on the law? Were they wrong to boast in God? I think we can say, yes and no.

There was certainly a sense in which it was right for them to rely on the law. We see that, for example, in Deuteronomy 30:16, which is on the Handout for Lesson 26.

Deuteronomy 30:16 — If you **obey** the commandments of the LORD your God that I command you today, by **loving** the LORD your God, by **walking** in his ways, and by **keeping** his commandments and his statutes and his rules, then you shall live and multiply, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to take possession of it.

If by “relying on the law,” we mean obeying the law, loving God, walking in the ways of God, and keeping the commandments of God — then relying on the law was certainly a good thing for them to do. In short, it was right to rely on the law as the way to know how to be pleasing to God.

But there was also a wrong way for them to have relied on the law, and Paul tells us about that elsewhere.

Galatians 3:10 — For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, “Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.”

That reliance on the law was the wrong way to rely on the law. Such people relied on the law, not to know how to please God, but rather as proof that they must be pleasing to God. God gave me the law, I have followed these things in the law, and so God owes me something because of all that work.

And, yes, that is exactly what some of the Jews believed. In fact, Paul, the former Pharisee, knew all about such people. The Talmud lists

seven types of Pharisees, one of which is called the “ever-reckoning Pharisees.” They kept a moral ledger of all their good deeds so that they could make sure that God gave them every bit of the reward that they deserved for those good deeds.

Jesus may have had that group in mind in his parable of the Pharisee and the publican in Luke 18. Recall what that particular Pharisee bragged about:

Luke 18:12 — I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.

That sounds to me like an ever-reckoning Pharisee! I have done this, and I have done that — so, God, you owe me! That sort of reliance on the law was certainly wrong. In fact, as Paul told us in Galatians 3:10, those who relied on the law in that way were under a curse. Why? Because they could not keep the entirety of the law.

What about the final description in verse 17 — boasting in God? Was it wrong to boast in God? Again, yes and no.

There is a right way to boast in God. Paul tells us about it elsewhere.

Galatians 6:14 — But far be it from me to boast **except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ**, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.

And we also see the right way to boast in God in the Old Testament.

Jeremiah 9:23-24 — Thus says the LORD: “Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, **but let him who boasts boast in this**, that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD who prac-

tices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the LORD.”

But there is also a wrong way to boast in God. We saw that with the Pharisee in Jesus’ parable. That Pharisee’s claim of fasting and tithing was a boastful claim based on what he had done rather than on what God had done. Not, look what God has done for me, but rather, look what I have done for God.

Paul also tells us about that wrong kind of boasting elsewhere.

Ephesians 2:8-9 — For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, **so that no one may boast.**

If we want an example of that wrong kind of boasting, I think we could also look to the church in Corinth. The word “boast” appears 60 times in the New Testament — over 40 of which appear in just two books: 1st and 2nd Corinthians. In fact, over half of the appearances of the word “boast” appear just in 2nd Corinthians. And what did Paul tell them?

2 Corinthians 10:17-18 — “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.” For it is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends.

“It is not the one who commends himself who is approved.” That is not just a lesson that Corinth needed to hear; that is a lesson that we all need to hear. So often today, we see people, parties, and nations waving their Bibles around while boasting that God is on their side! The question is not whether God is on my side; the question is whether

I am on God's side! "It is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends."

So yes, there was a right way to rely on the law and a wrong way. And yes, there was a right way to boast in God and a wrong way. But what about these Jews here in verse 17? Were they relying and boasting in the wrong way or the right way? Based just on how Paul started verse 17, I suspect it was the wrong way — but let's keep reading.

Romans 2:18

Romans 2:18 — and know his will and approve what is excellent, because you are instructed from the law;

The list continues in verse 18 — not only did they rely on the law and boast in God, but they also knew God's will and approved what is excellent. And why did they do those things? Because they had been instructed from the law. That is what verse 18 tells us about them.

And there can't be anything wrong with that, right? Well, let's look a bit closer at that list — I have been taught what is right and what is wrong, and so I know what I should do, and I agree that I should do it. Is there anything missing from that list? Yes — do it! I know what I should do, and I agree that I should do it — but have I done it? Where does verse 18 answer that question?

I know that I am talking to people who delight in the word of God and who really enjoy digging deep into the word of God. No other type of person would sit through over 80 lessons on Hosea and Joel, as many of you recently did! But there is a danger that comes with a love of Bible study — and it is the danger of turning the means into the end.

Our study of God's word is the means by which we grow spiritually and become more like Christ. We study the Bible to know how to be saved and to know how to live faithfully unto death. We study God's word to "be complete, equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:17).

King David delighted in the law of God, but David's delight in the law had a purpose.

Psalm 40:8 — I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart.

Psalm 119:174 — I long for your salvation, O LORD, and your law is my delight.

David delighted in the law of God, but David also delighted in obeying the law of God. And David delighted in the law of God because David longed for salvation from God. David's delight in the word of God was not the end but rather was a means to an end.

How about me? How about you? Do I delight in God's word just because I love ancient history? Do I delight in God's word just because I want to run the Bible column in Jeopardy? Do I delight in God's word just because I love making all the pieces of a difficult puzzle fit together? Do I delight in God's word just because I like to beat people over the head with it? Yes, I delight in the law of God, but why?

There's a pretty simple test, and King David just gave it to us. Yes, I delight in God's word — but do I also delight in obeying God's word? Yes, the law of God is my delight — but is that because I long for salvation? Or do I have another motive?

Perhaps the crux of the problem is the same issue we discussed when we looked very closely at Hosea 4:6 — “My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge.”

As we said then, the knowledge that the people lacked in the days of Hosea was much more than just academic knowledge about God or about the law of God. The problem was that they did not know God. They did not have a relationship with God. And remember, the word “know” in Hosea 4:6 is the same word that is used elsewhere to describe the intimate knowledge between husband and wife.

We can study the Bible all day, we can delight in that study, we can even agree with all that the Bible tells us — but if that is all the knowledge we have, we will be destroyed just like the people in the days of Hosea. We must not only know the word of God, but we must know God. And knowing God must be our motive for knowing the word of God.

And if we have read the word of God, and if we have obeyed the gospel that is revealed to us in the word of God, and if we are walking faithfully in the footsteps of Christ, then we do know God. We do have a relationship with God. Why? Because we have been added to the church, and everyone in the church knows God. In fact, that knowledge of God is a great prophecy about the church.

Jeremiah 31:34 — And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.

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“They shall all know me.” Yes, there is always room for spiritual growth, but everyone in the household of God knows God. We live in his household. We are part of his family. We don’t just know about God; we know God!