



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Doers of the Law

Romans 2.12-16

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“God shows no partiality.” That was where we left off with Paul last week in our study of Romans. Paul wrote that God will render to each one according to his works. If you’ve been patient in well-doing and if you’ve pursued glory and honour and immortality, you will have the life of God’s age to come. On the other hand, if you’ve pursued self and have rejected the truth, if you’ve pursued injustice and anger, well you will experience the tribulation and distress of God’s judgement when it finally comes. It will fall first on the Jew and then on the Gentile, Paul says. Why? Because it wouldn’t be just for God to judge the sins of the Gentiles before he has judged the sins of his own people. Salvation came to them first and from them went out to the nations. Judgement will come the same way. Again, Paul stresses, “God shows no partiality”. God does not play favourites.

Now, as I said last week, in Chapter 2 Paul is engaged in a debate with hypothetical Jewish opponent. And as we come to verse 12, Paul anticipates his opponent’s objection. “Okay,” this person says, “God is impartial in his judgement. He will judge every person according to his or her works. But aren’t we Jews already standing on a solid footing? After all, we’re the ones who have God’s law. Because we have God’s law, we know the sorts of works God is looking for. If that’s the case, doesn’t it show partiality on God’s part? Doesn’t it show that we Jews are his favourites?”

This question will come up throughout Romans. What about Israel? What about the Jews? Don’t they have an

“in” with God? And Paul will explain that the Jews do in fact have a privilege in having God’s law. But Paul will also go on to stress that this privilege hasn’t done Israel any good, because they’ve done such a terrible job of keeping the law. Imagine a courtroom scene. Paul could call Old Testament prophet after Old Testament prophet to testify against Israel for her wickedness and idolatry and failure to keep God’s law. If Israel thinks that she can escape God’s judgement by invoking the law she’s only going to demonstrate just how unrighteous she’s been. Again, God shows no partiality. In verses 12-16 Paul now goes on to explain what this means. Here’s what he writes:

For 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.

God will judge each accordingly. Sinners who sinned without knowing the law will be judged apart from the law and sinners who sinned knowing the law will be judged by that law. Either way, the outcome is the same.

Before going further, it’s important to understand that when Paul talks here about “law” he’s talking about what the Jews called the *torah*, the law that was given through Moses at Mt. Sinai. The Lord had just rescued his people from their slavery in Egypt. He led them through the Red Sea and into the wilderness on the other side and there he gave them his law so that they would know what it meant to be his people and how to live as his people. Remember, going all the way back to Abraham, God had called Israel to be his light to the nations. They were to live in a way that witnessed the goodness and faithfulness of the one, true God to the nations. This is what Paul means when he talks about the law. Philosophers sometimes talk about “natural law”, meaning a law that’s self-evident in Creation itself. But that’s not what Paul is talking about. He’s talking very specifically

about the law, the *torah* that God gave to Israel.

So Jews who know God’s law will be judged by God’s law. The nations, the pagan who have no knowledge of God’s law will also be judged, but they will be judged apart from the law. Again, remember that Paul has already said that truth about God—at least the basic truth that we have a Creator who is worthy of our worship—is evident in the world around us. No one who rejects God has any excuse. But Paul’s focus here is on Israel, on the Jews. Don’t they have a leg up already since they have the law? No, not really, because they haven’t kept it. Paul goes on in verse 13:

For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified.

It’s not enough to hear God’s law. It’s not enough just to have God’s law. You have to *do* it. You have to *live* it. And, what’s more, God will judge us based on whether or not we’ve done that. We read this and we might think, “But Paul, that’s justification by works! What about justification by faith?” As I said last week, we’ll have to take Paul at his word here and wait for him to explain this and flesh it out later—and Paul will do that. As he’ll explain later, to be justified by faith means that those who believe that Jesus, who was crucified and rose from the grave, is the world’s true Lord, are declared by the Judge to be in the right based on that faith. Based on that faith they are God’s people. They belong to him and their baptism marks them out as people whose sins have been forgiven. The baptismal waters that we pass through in faith incorporate us into the new covenant community that God has created in Jesus. It is indeed by faith and not works.

But we also need to remember—or maybe we need to realise it as something we’ve never before realised—that our faith in Jesus marks

us out as God's people here in the *present*. Our faith—especially when our faith has been expressed through baptism—it gives us assurance that we really have been forgiven and that we really are God's people. In the present we are justified by faith in anticipation of a final judgement in the future, at the end of the age. Whenever Paul writes about that judgement to come at the end of the age, he's just as clear that it will be based on the lives that we have lived. He said this very clearly in the first part of Chapter 2 that we looked at last week. Those who are patient in doing well and in seeking glory, honour, and immortality will receive the life of the age to come while those who are selfish, angry, and refuse the truth about God will die. Paul will stress this again in Chapter 14. Each of us will stand before the judgement seat of God to give an account of what we have done.

Christians have wrestled with this for a long time as we've tried to understand Paul. What some see Paul doing here is setting out a hypothetical situation: God would like to be able to judge us according to our works, but since no one would ever be able to measure up and pass the test, God now has to fall back on a different sort of judging—one based on faith. But that's not what Paul is saying here and it's not what he writes in other places. In 2 Corinthians 5:10 he writes, "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil." In Ephesians 6:8 he writes, "Whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord." And in 2 Timothy 4:1 Paul writes about Jesus judging the living and the dead, as we confess in the Creed. We need to take Paul at his word. Judgement by works and justification by faith isn't a matter of either/or. It's not a matter of two types of judgement as if God wishes he could judge us by our works, but since he can't he's come up with something else. This is a contrast

between God's *future* judgement at the end of the age, which Paul stresses will be according to our works, and the anticipation of that final verdict in the *present* time, which is according to faith. Again, we've tended to turn this into an either/or thing, but it's really not. It's may be hard to grasp at this point because, so far, Paul's only giving us a rough sketch. He'll start filling it in when we get to Chapter 3. We just have to be patient for him to get there. Remember in the meantime that he's still in the middle of this *diatribe*, this classical method of argumentation, and he's laying out the preliminaries of his argument along Jewish lines of thought. This isn't the end of the discussion; it's the very beginning!

Remember, also, that Paul so far has been talking about the *future* judgement. He'll work his way back to the present in a little while. But he introduces a vitally important technical term here and it's very important we understand what it means. It's the word "justified". As the ESV translates it, Paul writes in verse 13 that those who do the law are the ones who are *righteous* and then he says that they are the ones who will be *justified*. The same basic Greek word lies behind "righteous" and "justified". One is a verb and the other is an adjective derived from the verb and the ESV confuses things a bit by using two different English words to translate them. If we're consistent we might translate verse 13 as saying, "For it is not the hearers of the law who are in the *right* before God, but the doers of the law who will be *declared to be in the right*." The word "justified" has been dragged through so many theological debates over the years that we have to dig through several layers to get to what Paul is really saying. Here's the basic idea: It's the idea of being declared to be in the right or being declared to be just.

It's a word borrowed from the courtroom. Paul writes in verse 16—jumping ahead a little bit—that God

will judge us all through Christ Jesus, through Jesus the Messiah or Jesus the King. This was what the Jews expected the Messiah to do. He was to be the great Judge. They expected that when the Messiah came he would judge or declare Israel to be in the right and he would judge the nations to be in the wrong. This is why the Pharisees were so concerned about getting Israel to shape up and start doing the law. They saw Israel's failure to keep the law and feared that if the Messiah came back and saw that failure, he would judge Israel with the nations. So "to justify" is what the judge was expected to do after he had heard all the evidence. Picture a courtroom. The judge is at his bench and standing in front of him are the plaintiff and the defendant. The whole point of the trial is to find in favour of one of these two. The judge listens to the evidence—there was no jury in a Jewish court—and then he issues his decree. He declares one of them, either the plaintiff or the defendant, to be in the right. If he finds the plaintiff to be in the right, the defendant now has to make restitution. Or maybe the defendant was falsely accused of some crime, but the judge finds in his favour and issues his legal decree. The defendant is the one in the right. He can go home a free man. Whichever it is, that person has the legal standing of having been found to be in the right. The judge has declared it on his authority. That's what it means to be justified.

Hopefully, now, we see what Paul's saying here. Again, remember that what he's talking about at this point is that *future* judgement. Even here it's complicated by more than one future judgement. Paul is anticipating the future judgement on Israel that Jesus said would happen in a generation. It's now twenty years closer for Paul at the time he writes this. But that judgement on unbelieving Israel anticipates the greater judgement that will one day fall on the nations. But Paul's main point here is that God is an impartial judge. He's anticipating a

Jew objecting to all this and saying, “Well, what about us, Paul? Don’t we have an advantage when it comes to God’s judgement because he gave us his law?” And Paul’s answer is an emphatic, “No”. God will judge each person according to what they know or where they’re at. The Gentiles are outside the law and so he will judge them apart from the law. The Jews are inside the law and will accordingly be judged according to the law. What matters isn’t so much whether or not you have or know the law, but whether or not you *do* the law. After all, what good is the law if you hear it without doing it?

That means it’s actually worse for the Jews, not better, because as Paul stresses over and over, the Jews have the law, but they’ve failed miserably at doing it. But what about the Gentiles? Paul gets to them in verses 14 and 15:

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...

Here’s where it gets tricky—as if it weren’t tricky enough already. These verses are notoriously difficult and bible scholars disagree on who Paul is pointing to in these verses. I’ve spent a lot of time pouring over their different conclusions as to whom Paul is talking about here and I can’t say for certain. Some think that Paul is speaking hypothetically, as if to say, “If there were Gentiles out there who, not having the law, still somehow managed to keep it, God would declare them to be in the right...hypothetically speaking...but there really is no such animal.” We could also read Paul to be talking about Gentile Christians like you and I. We keep the law in the sense that

the Holy Spirit has made us new and written the law of love on our hearts, but I don’t find this very compelling because Paul talks about these people having conflicting thoughts and lacking assurance. I think the best option is to take Paul as referring to Gentiles like the Roman centurion, Cornelius, whom we read about in Acts 10. Before his conversion the Jews described him as a “righteous man who fears God”.

So Paul’s point running from the beginning of Chapter 2 is that there will be a day of judgement, a day when God’s wrath finally confronts human ungodliness and unrighteous, human idolatry and human sin. He concludes in verse 16, writing:

...on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus.

We’re back where we started. The proclamation of the good news about Jesus, crucified and risen, reveals the righteousness of God. It reveals his righteousness on the one hand through redemption and as he makes all things new and also in his judgement and wrath as he wipes away all those who seek to corrupt his Creation. But God’s judgement also reveals his justice, his righteousness in that he is impartial. And Paul makes this clear to the Christians in Rome by bouncing the argument off a hypothetical Jewish opponent. Paul makes clear the very thing Jesus made clear: Judgement is coming in the Messiah, but that judgement isn’t going to come the way they thought it would. The Jews—most of them at any rate—were convinced that when judgement came they would be on one side because they had the law and on the other side would be the Gentile nations who did not have the law. But Jesus stressed that that’s not how it works. God did not give the law to Israel so that she could judge other. He gave her the law so that she could be a light to others, so that she could show the

world what it means and what it looks like to be in covenant with our Creator God. Israel was meant to shine her light into the darkness, but as Jesus said, she instead hid it under a basket. She kept it to herself and then condemned the nations for being lost in the dark. Paul now stresses the same thing. Having the law, even hearing the law is worthless if you don’t do it and when judgement comes, the line won’t be drawn between those who have the law and those who don’t, but between those who do the law and those who don’t. Judgement will come, on the Jew first and then on the nations. Both will be judged for what they have done.

But, some will ask, what about God’s promises to Abraham and to Israel that he would make them a blessing to the nations? Now we get a glimpse into what one commentator calls the “deep logic” of the gospel as Paul reveals it in Romans. Paul is going to show us an alternative to judgement and that alternative is a new community called into existence apart from the law. It’s a new Israel made up of those who find their being in Jesus. As the old tree was to be cut down in judgement, the Lord caused a shoot to spring forth just at the right time. That shoot is Jesus. He became Israel’s representative. He fulfilled God’s promises to Israel. And he forged a new way of being Israel. And he called to himself, first Jews, and then as his disciples spread his good news around the empire, the Gentiles began to flock to him. But whether Jews or Gentiles, this new Israel is made up of people who have given up their old allegiances in order to find a new identity in Jesus. And it’s these people who will live, as the prophet Habakkuk had called Israel to do so many centuries before, they will live by faith.

Of course, we’re getting ahead of Paul now. The take-away from these verses is that in a world filled with injustice we can take comfort in

knowing that there is a righteous Judge. About a month after I started my studies as Regent College the O. J. Simpson trial ended and the verdict was announced. I was at dinner with some friends and we were talking about it. There was one friend from Germany. He wasn't very familiar with the trial and he wasn't familiar with the American phenomenon of celebrity trials and all that went with them. He asked, "How long do you think until they find the guy who did it?" We all looked at him in disbelief and said that they already knew who did it. It was O. J. And he said, "But the court found him innocent!" He was working under the naïve assumption that the system had actually worked. As we explained what had happened he got very agitated. How could a country like the United States allow for such injustice? Brothers and Sisters, the world is full of that sort of thing. It's full of people who do evil and never face justice. It's full of people who suffer and never have the justice of deliverance and relief. But Paul reminds us that despite the mess we've made, God remains sovereign. He is good. He is faithful to his promises. And when the time is right he will judge the earth as the secrets of our hearts are revealed before his just and righteous gaze. And that is indeed good news for a world in which justice is so hard to find.

Let us pray: Almighty God, as we acknowledged in our invocation this morning, all hearts are open to you, all desires known to you, and no secrets are hidden from you. You know the injustices that go on around us, even the ones we cannot see. Teach us to take comfort in the good news that you are a righteous Judge and that you will bring justice the world, that you will make all things right. Give us the patience to wait for your good timing. And as we wait, fill us with your Holy Spirit and cleanse the thoughts of our hearts, make us faithful doers of your Word, that on the day when you judge the earth, we might be numbered with

the righteous. We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.