

Romans 2:1-29

The Revelation of God's Righteousness in Wrath against the Wickedness of the Jews (A)

We can subdivide this part of Romans (2:1-29) into three sections, to show the apostle's argument:

1. 2:1-11: God's judgment falls upon everyone who judges others.
2. 2:12-16: God's judgment thus falls upon Gentiles as well as Jews.
3. 2:17-29: In God's judgment neither the possession of the law (vv.17-24), nor the privilege of circumcision is an advantage to the Jew (vv.25-29).

A. Notes on the Text

Verse 1

"Therefore": that is, because God's wrath is revealed over sinful life, it follows that anyone who is guilty of the sins mentioned is under God's judgment.

"For at whatever point you judge the other" means: for at the moment in which you judge another.

Verse 2

"Is based on truth" means that God's judgment is in accordance with the truth (truth: knowledge through revelation). The Jews have more revealed knowledge than the Gentiles (Psalm 147:19,20). When the Jews commit the same sins as the Gentiles, God will lay more to their charge.

Verse 4

"Forbearance" [RSV] is also used in 3:25. (See Glossary #7,20,28.) The NIV uses the word "kindness" instead.

"Lead you toward repentance" means: attempts to lead you to repentance.

Verse 5

"The day of God's wrath." Paul sees that the judgment of God's wrath is in the process of falling not only on the Gentiles, but on the Jews also.

Verse 11

"For God does not show favoritism." Showing no partiality, is judging without regard of persons. (For this rule of judgment and its various applications, cf.: Leviticus 19:15; Deuteronomy 10:17; 2 Chronicles 19:6,7; Matthew 22:16 [Mark 12:14, Luke 20:21]; Acts 10:34; Galatians 2:6; Ephesians 6:9; Colossians 3:25; James 2:1ff.; 1 Peter 1:17.)

Verse 14

"By nature": that is, on their own impulse, which impulse is determined by many factors: remnants of earlier revelation; practical realizations, for instance, that stealing is not profitable, etc.

"A law for themselves" is not only judging according to their own consciences, from the heart which is evil (subjectivism, which is wrong because it ignores God's law!), but also being "a law for each other." See what follows: amongst themselves they use their own thoughts and ideas as a standard by which to judge one another, so that they accuse or excuse themselves.

Verse 15

Note that the *requirements* of the law are written on the hearts of the Gentiles. It is the privilege only of true believers to have the law of God written on their heart (see Jeremiah 31:33, cf. Hebrews 8:10). Thus the reference to "Gentiles" does not refer to Christian Gentiles, as some commentators think (Augustine, Karl Barth¹, among others). There are other objections against the opinion of Augustine and Barth as well.

Note that Paul does not say here that all Gentiles always do everything the law requires. We should read, also in connection with chapter 1 (the sins of the Gentiles): sometimes there are Gentiles who, sometimes, act in accordance with God's law, although they do not know God's law (this is guilty ignorance too!). Paul does not say that "some Gentiles" will be saved because they "sometimes" happen to act in accordance with God's law. On the contrary, in v.12, it is clear that those who do not know God's law and sin in ignorance of the law will perish.

See other commentators on these two verses.

Some read here that man, also the Gentile, has knowledge of the law and of God by nature. "By nature" would, thus, mean that God has created knowledge regarding himself and his law ("inborn [innate] knowledge of God") in man. They base a natural theology on this, which purports to know quite a lot about God and matters pertaining to God outside of the Scriptures (as some Reformed people did in the past, and as Roman Catholics still do even today).

We must maintain that the only thing given to man at birth is the ability to perceive God's revelation, which comes to him in two ways (see Belgic Confession, Article 2). (See Glossary #29.)

B. Main Thoughts

1. After Paul has stated in 1:18ff that God's wrath is against all wickedness in the life of the Gentiles, his aim is to get to the point he wants to make in 3:9ff:

¹ Ed. Note: Augustine (354-430) was one of the great leaders of the early Christian church. His writings had an influence on such Reformers as Martin Luther and John Calvin. Karl Barth (1886-1968) was one of the world's best-known scholars, a theologian and an author. He was born in Switzerland and educated in Germany, and taught there until 1934, when he fled Hitler and Naziism. He then taught in Basel until 1962.

all men, Gentiles and Jews alike, are sinners. From 2:1 onward he specifically addresses the Jews, who have a high opinion of themselves (2:17-22), for they boast of their possession of the law (2:17-24) and of the privilege of circumcision (2:25-29).

2. Paul is going to expose this false boasting and show that they have no righteousness before God: all men, Jews included, are breakers of God's law. The apostle strips every man – both Jew and Gentile – of everything, to make room for faith in Christ.

He lifts the building of the Jewish idea of salvation off its foundation, not for the sake of destroying it, but in order to point to the solid foundation of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. (W.H. Velema)²

There is no self-righteousness, as if man were good by nature. There is no righteousness by the law, as if man were able to fulfil God's law in his own strength. There is only the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ, whose perfect obedience has fulfilled for us all the righteousness of God's law (Form for the Celebration of the Lord's Supper).³

3. Paul does not say that the law and circumcision are only external things, of no real consequence. No, man cannot do without the law as revelation of the Father's will, and he cannot do without the signs of God's covenant (circumcision and baptism). The covenant contains two things: a promise and an obligation, (plus a threat, when the obligation is not being fulfilled!). God promises the circumcision of the heart (the cutting away of sin; in baptism: the washing away of sin -- both are essentially the same; only the metaphor differs). In order to share in this spiritual matter here portrayed, he now demands faith and repentance (2:25-29). (See the Form for the Baptism of Infants¹¹, Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 26 and 27, and Belgic Confession, Article 34).
4. Two more particulars about circumcision:

- (a) Circumcision also took place in the countries surrounding Israel. Infants were never circumcised there, but only boys (and sometimes girls) in the 12 to 16 year old range. It signified their full acceptance into the tribe as adults. In Israel, circumcision took place on the eighth day, for God claimed the child of the covenant right away, immediately!

Never use this eighth day as an argument against timely baptism! Do not say: "In Israel they waited till the eighth day, so we can wait till, for instance, the second or third Sunday after the child is born." We should remember that in

² Ed. Note: Quote is from *Verkenningen in Romeinen* (1962).

³ Ed. Note: Form for the Celebration of Lord's Supper and Form for the Baptism of Infants are to be found in the *Book of Praise, Anglo-Genevan Psalter*, Winnipeg, MB (1987), pg. 594 and 585, respectively.

Israel a baby was unclean for seven days, so that no holy ritual could be performed before then. Those unclean days were a shadow, waiting for the Christ and his holiness (the Old Testament advent). Now that Christ has come, the shadow is gone, so that baptism can take place already on the first day after birth, yes, if possible even the day of birth itself, which of course has nothing to do with the baptism of the Roman Catholics! For that reason our fathers wrote in Article 57 of the Church Order that baptism should take place "as soon as feasible."

- (b) In Israel only boys were circumcised. Why? Because girls cannot be circumcised? No, for that did happen in various heathen tribes around Israel, and still happens today. The most likely answer is: girls were counted with the boys, as the wife is counted with the husband, as one. This does not mean discrimination against women! It emphasizes the unity between husband and wife, boy and girl, in the covenant.

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