

## RIGHTEOUS DOERS AND UNRIGHTEOUS HEARERS ROMANS 2:12–16

### INTRODUCTION

Since introducing **the heart of the good news message** as **the righteousness that God provides through faith**, Paul has been working hard to show that everyone, both Jews and Gentiles, needs this righteousness.

In short, Paul has spent his time thus far in Romans arguing that both Jews and Gentiles need to be justified by faith alone.

The reason why Jews and Gentiles need **the righteousness that God provides through faith** is that God will judge everyone in a **future and final, eschatological judgment**.

As we learnt last week, this future judgement is based upon **the principle of fruit**, or necessary evidence, that proves whether or not we have **genuine, saving (justifying) faith**.

**The evidence that God considers** in His judgement is our works, and when a believer's works prove the genuineness of their faith, **God finally and publicly declares them righteous** on the basis of faith alone—that is, He justifies them.

On the other hand, when a person's works prove that they have **rejected the gospel offer** of the righteousness that God provides through faith and instead have been relying upon their **own self-righteous works**, they are condemned to suffer the affliction and turmoil of **God's eternal wrath and anger**.

As Paul established then, the **standard of God's judgement** proves the **sameness of His judgment**.

In other words, **God's judgment according to works** proves that **there is no partiality with God**.

That brings us to the **next part of Paul's argument** which we will study today.

**Paul picks up the principle** of **verse 11** that there is **no partiality with God**, and **further develops this principle** in order to show the Jews specifically that they have just as much need for the righteousness that God provides through faith as the Gentiles do.

To put it simply, Paul wants to show the Jews that any advantages they may enjoy **do not mean that they are right with God**.

**The Jews need the gospel** just as much as the Gentiles do.

**The Jews need to be justified by faith** just as much as the Gentiles do.

This section we'll consider today, of **verses 12–16**, is Paul's **transition in his argument** from speaking about **"good people" generally**, albeit with a special eye on the self-righteous Jew, to **unbelieving Jews specifically**.

In the remainder of **chapter two**, Paul is going to demonstrate that **two of the primary advantages** that the Jews were counting on to **make them right with God** actually don't do anything to save them from God's future judgement of their sin.

Those two advantages are **their possession of the Torah**, the Law of Moses, as we see in **verses 17–24**, and **their practice of circumcision**, as we see in **verses 25–29**.

**In order to lay a foundation** for his demonstration that possessing the Torah is no indication of being right with God, Paul uses the section we're studying today to show the **importance of not just knowing God's will, but obeying His commands**.

Paul is going to use the **familiar concepts of hearing and doing** in order to show us that we need to be **righteous doers of God's law and not just unrighteous hearers only**.

These concepts are easy to understand and are familiar to most, **but especially to the Jews** who were the primary target of his argument that **"good people," even religious people, need the gospel**.

For the Jews, the language of the **Hebrew word for "listen"** included the idea of not only hearing, **but obeying or acting upon what is heard**.

Therefore, **listening to and obeying the words of God** is vital to the **theology of the Old Testament**, as the Jews would have understood.<sup>1</sup>

We can see this in the **teaching of James**, the brother of Jesus and the pastor of the church in Jerusalem.

He applies the Old Testament concepts to New Covenant believers as he writes in **James 1:22**, **“Become doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves.”**

**Before we can explore** how Paul uses these same familiar and easy to understand concepts in his argument, **we need to consider the term “Law.”**

When Paul writes in **verse 12** of those who **either do or don’t have the Law**, it is the **first time in this letter** that he uses the term **“Law.”**

As we progress through the letter, we’ll come to see that Paul **uses the term to mean different things.**<sup>2</sup>

However, the primary sense in which he uses the **Greek word νόμος**, or law, is usually as a reference to **the Law of Moses.**<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Mark L. Strauss and Tremper Longman III, eds., “Listen,” in *The Baker Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books: A Division of Baker Publishing Group, 2023), 489–490.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Wayne G. Strickland, “A Dispensational View,” in *Five Views on Law and Gospel*, ed. Stanley N. Gundry, Zondervan Counterpoints Collection (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999), 246–248.

<sup>3</sup> “In Pauline literature νόμος usually refers to the Pentateuch and often more specifically to the law given to Moses.” Thomas R. Schreiner, *The Law and Its Fulfillment: A Pauline Theology of Law* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1998), 38.

That is certainly what he intended in **verses 12–13**.<sup>4</sup>

What we have to consider specifically, then, is **the Christian's relationship to the Law of Moses**.

Having a clear understanding of this will help us to **make sense of Paul's argument** in **verses 12–16**, a passage that many commentators **struggle to interpret with certainty**.<sup>5</sup>

Though there is reason to approach such a passage with the **humility that carefully considers every view**, there is also **no reason to shrug our shoulders** and give up hope of a clear and accurate understanding of Paul's words.

As you'll see, having a **clear understanding** of a **Christian's relationship to the Law of Moses** will greatly aid us in understanding this text **with clarity and confidence**.

So then, turn with me to **Matthew 5** and what may be **one of the most important passages** on the subject of our relationship to the Law.

Here we see that Jesus presents Himself as **the New Covenant Lawgiver who gives New Covenant instruction** for His followers.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, ed. Robert W. Yarbrough and Joshua W. Jipp, Second Edition, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic: A Division of Baker Publishing Group, 2018), 128.

<sup>5</sup> "The arguments for each view are so strong that I am not sure what Paul intends." Andrew David Naselli, *Romans: A Concise Guide to the Greatest Letter Ever Written* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022), 45, fn. 7, 8.

<sup>6</sup> Michael J. Vlach, *The New Covenant Lawgiver: Jesus and Law in Matthew 5:17–48* (Theological Studies Press, 2022), 61–62. The following section draws on Vlach's work repeatedly.

Look at **verses 17–18**—

**17 Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfil.**

**18 For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished.**

Briefly, when Jesus said that He did not come to abolish “**the Law or the Prophets**,” that was a common Jewish way of **referring to the Old Testament**.

Jesus declared, then, that His ministry is **perfectly harmonious with the entire Old Testament**.

Not only does Jesus **not discard any of the old Testament**, but as He said, He came to **make sure that everything in them happens**.

That’s what he meant by coming to “**fulfil**” “**the Law or the Prophets**.”

As we see in **verse 18**, Jesus even clarified that “**fulfilment**” meant **literally fulfilling the Old Testament**—He came to make sure that everything in them happens.

This includes the promise that Messiah will bring **a New Covenant that supersedes the older Mosaic Covenant**.

Look at **verse 20** as Jesus continues—

**For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.**

Here Jesus says that His followers must have **a practical, lived-out righteousness** that exceeds that of the self-righteous religious leaders of the Jews.

Just as Paul taught in **Romans 2**, Jesus **does not mean that salvation based on works or merit**, or the people can be righteous on their own.

Rather, He means that His true followers will exhibit a **righteousness as evidence of their faith in Him**.

The type of righteousness that Jesus is referring to is **explained in the remainder** of **Matthew 5**.

Here, in **verses 21–48**, Jesus sets forth **His authoritative New Covenant instructions**.

We should rightly understand these instructions to be the announcement of a **New Covenant Law** that **replaces the Mosaic Law**.

This New Covenant Law is **expanded and explained through the New Testament epistles** and is what Paul refers to in **Galatians 6:2** and **1 Corinthians 9:21** as, “**the Law of Christ**.”

James, **in chapter 2, verse 8**, calls it “**the royal Law**,” which is **the Law of the King, Jesus**.

In other words, Jesus declared in **Matthew 5** that He fulfils the Mosaic Law and Old Testament Messianic prophecies, and as such is the **New Covenant Lawgiver** who replaces the Mosaic Law with **the New Covenant Law, or the Law of Christ**.

This is a shift **not from bad to good**, but **from good to better** as He explains in **Matthew 5**.

Under the New Covenant, God's people, both Jews and Gentiles, are held to a **higher standard of morality and righteousness** because of the **greater provisions of the New Covenant**.

Most importantly, we read in **Jeremiah 31:33** that God promised the **ability to demonstrate the fruit of righteousness** and **do the works of obeying His Law** because He would write His Law on the hearts of His people—

**“This is the covenant which I will cut with the house of Israel after those days,” declares Yahweh: “I will put My law within them, and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.”**

Now, with the clarity that **God does not expect Christians to do works of righteousness according to the Mosaic Law**, but **according to the greater Law of Christ which He writes on their hearts**, let's turn our attention to Paul's instruction in **Romans 2**.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> For further treatment on the subject, see Wayne G. Strickland, “A Dispensational View,” in *Five Views on Law and Gospel*, ed. Stanley N. Gundry, Zondervan Counterpoints Collection (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999), 276–279.

See also, Thomas R. Schreiner, *40 Questions About Christians and Biblical Law* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2010).

## PROPOSITION

In **Romans 2:12–16**, Paul takes us through **the principles and application of God's impartial judgement** in order to emphasise the **importance of being a righteous doer of God's Law**, and not an unrighteous hearer only.

So we'll study the text under two main headings:

1. **The principles** of God's impartial judgement (**12–13**)
2. **The application** of God's impartial judgement (**14–16**)

### 1. THE PRINCIPLES OF GOD'S IMPARTIAL JUDGEMENT

To remind you, **Paul is continuing his argument** from where we left off in **verse 11**—

**For there is no partiality with God.**

Paul draws a **further inference** from this statement as he writes in **verse 12**—

**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.**

Here Paul gives us **the first of two principles** of **God's impartial judgement**.

**The first principle** is that **God will judge according to your revelation**.

## a. God will judge according to your revelation (12)

Paul's aim is to show the unbelieving Jew that **possessing the Law does not mean that they are right with God**, or that they are any better off than the Gentiles who don't possess the Law.

So Paul explains that **God's impartial judgment** on the final day will take into **consideration how much God has revealed** to you, and judge you accordingly.

As you see here in **verse 12**, Paul **divides unbelieving humanity** into **two categories**—those who have the Law and those who don't.

Since Paul uses the Greek term the **Greek word νόμος**, or "**Law**," a number of different ways, we have to make sure that we accurately understand **which nuance He intended to use**.

Because Paul is **primarily addressing Jews now**, it is most likely that he means **one of two meanings**—either as a reference to the Old Testament as a whole, or specifically to the Pentateuch, which is the Law of Moses.

As you can see, Paul is referring to **those guilty of sinning against the Law**, which points decisively to his intention to refer to **the Law of Moses**.

This certainly indicates that Paul has **shifted his focus** in **Romans 2** from **good people and religious people in general**, to the unbelieving Jews specifically.

In order to prove to them that possessing **the Law of Moses, or the Torah** as they would have referred to it, didn't necessarily indicate that they were right before God, he points out that **those with the Law are still subject to God's future and final judgement.**

However, since **God is impartial and fair in His punishment,** He will not hold those who don't have the Mosaic Law—obviously the unbelieving Gentiles—accountable for violating its commands.

Instead, **God will judge each category,** those with the Law and those without, **according to the revelation they received.**

For the Gentiles, Paul writes that, **“all who have sinned without the Law will also perish without the Law.”**

The Greek word translated as **“perish”** means **to ruin, destroy, or perish.**<sup>8</sup>

Paul is referring then to the same **“wrath and anger”** that he did in **verse 8,** and the **“affliction and turmoil”** of **verse 9.**

In other words, those who **“perish”** are those who are **condemned to hell** as they suffer the **eternal, conscious torment** of God's punishment for their sin.

Contrary to those Gentiles whose works of **verse 7 demonstrate their faith in Christ** by which they are declared righteous, these unbelieving Gentiles **cannot escape God's punishment for their sin.**

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<sup>8</sup> BDAG, ἀπόλλυμι.

Nevertheless, **God will punish them fairly**, which means that He will take into consideration that they **did not have access to the same revelation as a Jew** who could read the Mosaic Law and its righteous requirements.

This principle of God judging according to revelation is particularly **helpful in answering the common question** about the pagans on remote islands or in deep jungles so that they do not hear the gospel.

As we've already established from our series in Romans, these unbelievers who die without faith in Christ **will be condemned** under the wrath of God for **rejecting God's revelation in nature**.

However, they will **not be judged as strictly as those who have access to the Bible** and the gospel message it contains, so they will receive **a fair and impartial sentence** that **takes their limited revelation into account**.

As Paul says in the **second part of verse 12**, though, the **unbelieving Jew has no such hope**.

Instead of proving that they are right with God and will not be judged for their sin, **their possession of the Torah makes them liable to a stricter judgement**.

That's what Paul means when he writes, "**all who have sinned under the Law will be judged by the Law.**"

The parallel here between being "**judged**" and "**perishing**" tells us that Paul is referring to the **same future and final punishment of sin**.

Since the Jews sinned “**under the Law**,” they would also be punished **according to the greater revelation of the Law**.

The Law revealed with **more clarity and detail** what God requires of man, and so the Jews were held accountable for a **greater rebellion** as they failed to live according to God’s moral standards.

Turn quickly to **John 9** so we can look at **Jesus making the same point** to the Jews who rejected Him.

Jesus had just **healed the man born blind**, which served as an **analogy for the spiritual blindness** of the Jews.

As He confronts the Jewish leaders, he says in **verses 39–41**—

<sup>39</sup> **And Jesus said, “For judgment I came into this world, so that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may become blind.”**

<sup>40</sup> **Some of the Pharisees who were with Him heard these things and said to Him, “Are we blind too?”**

<sup>41</sup> **Jesus said to them, “If you were blind, you would have no sin; but now that you say, ‘We see,’ your sin remains.”**

In other words, **if the Jews were limited** in the revelation they had received, God would have taken that into account.

But since they had received **the greatest revelation of witnessing and speaking to Jesus** in His incarnation, their “sight” instead of “blindness” will count against them because **God will judge them accordingly**.

Turn on a few chapters to **John 15** and look at **verses 22–25** as Jesus makes the point explicitly—

**22 If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have sin, but now they have no excuse for their sin.**

**23 He who hates Me hates My Father also.**

**24 If I had not done among them the works which no one else did, they would not have sin; but now they have both seen and hated Me and My Father as well.**

**25 But this happened to fulfil the word that is written in their Law, ‘THEY HATED ME WITHOUT CAUSE.’**

**As you turn back to Romans 2**, you can see that Paul has made a **very important point to the Jews** who rejected the righteousness of God through faith.

Having the Law didn’t mean that they were right with God—it meant that they would be **held accountable for their unrighteousness**, and that with **a greater strictness** because they had received **greater revelation**.

That brings us to **verse 13**, and as you look there you’ll see that **Paul provides a reason** for **verse 12**.

In doing so, he gives us **the second principle** of **God’s impartial judgement**.

**The second principle** is that **God will judge according to your response**.

## b. God will judge according to your response (13)

Look at **verse 13**—

**For it is not the hearers of the Law who are just before God, but the doers of the Law will be justified.**

In essence, **verse 13** restates what Paul wrote in **verse 6** that God, “**will repay to each according to his works.**”

Now, there is a **significant contrast** that we need to take note of between **verses 12 and 13.**

In **verse 12**, Paul is clearly describing **unbelievers who will be condemned in the final judgement**, but here in **verse 13** he is **describing believers who will not be condemned** but who will be “**justified.**”

As you look at **verse 12**, you can see that Paul uses **two parallel phrases**, being “**just before God**” and being “**justified.**”

The **Greek word δικαίωω**, translated here as “**justified**” refers to **a favourable verdict in judgement**, and so means **to be found in the right.**<sup>9</sup>

It means be be **declared righteous**, and as we learnt from our previous sermon, **justification refers to God's verdict of not guilty on the day of judgment.**

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<sup>9</sup> BDAG, δικαίωω.

We made the argument that we should **take note of now again** that this **future form of the verb**, “**will be justified**” refers to the **future judgement of God**.<sup>10</sup>

In other words, as we established last week, justification is **primarily an eschatological event**.

Based on what we know from **verses 6–11**, we can also say that “**doing the Law**,” **or obeying the Law**, is what produces the “**works**” which will be **evaluated in the final judgement** as an indicator of genuine faith.

As always, we want to be **perfectly clear** that righteous works of the Law **are not something added to faith to make it more acceptable**—these obedient works are the **necessary evidence** of the faith by which believers are justified.

Therefore, as Paul indicates here in **verse 13**, a believer’s **present justification by faith** will become **publicly manifest** on the future, final day of God’s judgement.

Once more, though, Paul **differentiates two groups** in this verse.

**Believers will be justified according to their obedience** to the Law, but those who have the Law and **do not obey it will tragically NOT be justified**.

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<sup>10</sup> “The future passive form here refers to the ultimate eschatological verdict of God.” David G. Peterson, *Romans*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander, Thomas R. Schreiner, and Andreas J. Köstenberger, *Evangelical Biblical Theology Commentary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2021), 146.

“The verb δικαιωθήσονται here is probably eschatological instead of being a logical future.” Schreiner, *Romans*, 128.

This is the group that Paul **distinguishes from believers** as those who merely “**hear**” the Law.

This is the group that Paul obviously uses to describe **unbelieving Jews who reject the gospel**.

Thus far in the argument, we’ve seen that the Jews of Paul’s day, **just like the good people of our day**, wrongly rely upon their **ethnic identity, relative morality, or religious activity** to make them right with God.

Here we encounter the **fourth false confidence** of unbelieving religious people like the Jews—**possessing the Law**.

As Paul’s argument builds, we can see that the Jews were **relying on the mere fact** that they had the Torah which **taught them about God’s moral standards**.

However, they failed to understand that having the Torah, or even being well taught in the Torah, **is not sufficient to be justified** on the day of judgement **because you also need to obey what the Torah teaches**.

Now there are many good, religious people in our day who **need to be warned of the same false confidence** that they are trusting in to make them right with God.

**Many good people possess a Bible**—perhaps even more than one.

They have study Bible and books written to teach them more about the Bible, and of course, they go to church and listen to sermons so that they are **exceptionally well taught**.

However, what is going to surprise many **Bible-owning, church-going, sermon-listening people** on the day of judgment is that **these things alone will not justify you.**

**You must also obey the Word of God** so that your life bears **the fruit of righteous works** that conform to God's moral standards.

Knowing His standards is not enough to be right with God—you need the righteousness that God provides through faith alone, but a faith which will also never be alone because **genuine faith produces fruit of obedience.**

As Paul clearly teaches, **those who are justified by faith alone** will prove to be **“doers of the Law.”**

This is **the second principle** of **God's impartial judgement.**

**God will judge according to your response to the Law.**

Those who respond as **fruitless hearers only** will be **condemned** and those who respond as **fruitful doers** will be **justified.**

So as Paul **develops the implications** of God's impartial judgement, he has established that the future judgement will reveal **righteous doers and unrighteous hearers** of the Law.

**The two principles** of God's impartial judgement now need to be **applied to the case of Gentile Christians specifically** so that Paul can further demonstrate to unbelieving Jews that God is impartial in His judgement of both Jews and Gentiles.

## 2. THE APPLICATION OF GOD'S IMPARTIAL JUDGEMENT

Under our second main heading, we'll see that Paul continues to develop the idea of **righteous doers and unrighteous hearers** by explaining how can God fairly declare Gentiles who don't have the Law to be right with Him.

Paul has shown that the **principles of God's impartial judgement** apply to unbelieving Jews and good people by condemning them.

When God judges those who reject the gospel according to their revelation and according to their response to that revelation, He will find them guilty and so they will perish under His eternal punishment.

Now as we will see, those same principles of God's impartial judgement apply to believing Gentiles by vindicating them as right with God.

### a. The obedience of Gentile Christians (14)

Look at **verse 14** and take note of the **response of these Gentile Christians** to **what was revealed to them**—

**For when Gentiles who do not have the Law naturally do the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves**

**As Paul applies the principles** of God's impartial judgement, here we find the **first element** of **the obedience of Gentile Christians**.

**Clearly Paul is emphasising** in **verse 14** to his Jewish opponent that **Gentiles don't possess the Torah** like the Jews do, but are **nevertheless** obedient to God's moral standards.

That emphasis **serves to prove his main point** that possessing the Law is **no indication of one's righteousness**.

**One key to understanding** what Paul is saying here in **verse 14** is the word "**naturally**."

It can either modify "**having the Law**" or "**doing the Law**."

**Our Legacy Standard translation** suggests that it modifies "**doing the Law**," in the sense of **instinctively doing what the Law demands**.

However, in Paul's writings the word **normally describes identity rather than behaviour**.<sup>11</sup>

**It's position in the sentence** also suggests that its more likely **modifying the preceding idea of having the Law**.

So it is more likely that Paul intends to communicate the idea that **Gentiles do not have the law by virtue of their birth**.

In other words, Gentile Christians were born into pagan people groups who **did not possess the Torah** like the Jews who received it by virtue of their birth.

Despite this, Paul says that they **obey the moral standards of the Law** because they are "**a law to themselves**."

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<sup>11</sup> Peterson, *Romans*, 147.

This may **sound like an odd expression to our ears**, but in Paul's day it was a **stereotypical expression** used by Greek writers to refer to a **man of superior virtue who does not need the guidance of external law**.<sup>12</sup>

Simply put, it describes **someone who follows a moral standard from the heart**.

So while Gentiles were not brought up in the teaching of the Torah like the Jews, **they now prove to know it, and earnestly desire to obey it**.

This understanding of what Paul wrote is further strengthened by the **next verse** which **explicitly refers** to this idea of **following a moral standard from the heart**.

### **b. The hearts of Gentile Christians (15)**

**As Paul applies the principles** of God's impartial judgement, here we find the **second element** of **the hearts of Gentile Christians**.

Look at **verse 15** which **continues the thought and explains verse 14**—

**in that they demonstrate the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them**

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<sup>12</sup> C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, International Critical Commentary (London; New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), 157.

Gentiles are a law to themselves, as Paul explains, “**in that they demonstrate the work of the Law written in their hearts.**”

To begin with, notice that Paul uses **the singular expression, “the work of the Law”**—it’s **not “works,”** but “**work of the Law.**”

**By using the singular,** Paul is referring to the **unified whole of everything that the Law requires.**<sup>13</sup>

Paul then states the **obedience of the Gentile Christians** proves that the Law’s moral requirements are **written on their hearts.**

The verb “**demonstrate**” indicates that there are **present, outward proofs of this heart transformation.**<sup>14</sup>

This seems to be a **clear allusion** to the **promise of the New Covenant** that we read earlier from **Jeremiah 31:33**—

**“But this is the covenant which I will cut with the house of Israel after those days,” declares Yahweh: “I will put My law within them, and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.”**

Indeed, one of the **most significant promises** of the New Covenant is that of **internal transformation,** a change that the Bible describes as a **change of heart.**

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<sup>13</sup> Peterson, *Romans*, 148.

<sup>14</sup> Peterson, *Romans*, 149.

As we find in **Ezekiel 36:26**—

**I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.**

So when Paul says in **verse 15** that “**the work of the Law [is] written in their hearts,**” he is clearly referring to **God writing His moral standards on the hearts** of His New Covenant people **so that they obey His Law** in works of righteousness that evidence their faith.

Now this is where **the clarity we established in the introduction is important.**

**The New Covenant replaces the Mosaic Covenant,** as God announced through Jeremiah in **Jeremiah 31:31-32**—

<sup>31</sup> **“Behold, days are coming,” declares Yahweh, “when I will cut a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah,**

<sup>32</sup> **not like the covenant which I cut with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, but I was a husband to them,” declares Yahweh.**

But as Jesus explained in the **Sermon on the Mount**, that doesn’t mean that **God’s New Covenant people** do away with His moral standards.

Rather, they are **called to live by the greater standards** of the **New Covenant Law, or the Law of Christ.**

As we can see even in Jesus' sermon of **Matthew 5**, there is **much overlap** between the **old, Mosaic Law** and the **new Law of Christ**.

That is because both laws are a **reflection of the character of God as the Lawgiver**.

What does change, however, is that God's people have the **promise of the indwelling Holy Spirit** and the **Law written on their hearts** so that they are **able to obey God's righteous standards**.

Thus, **murder was always sinful**, but under the New Covenant Law God also expects His people to **avoid sinful anger too**.

Similarly, **adultery was always sinful**, but under the New Covenant Law God also expects His people to **avoid lustful thought and desires too**.

Therefore, as Gentile Christians live according to this **New Covenant Law**, they "**demonstrate**" the **genuineness of their faith and the reality of God's work** in their hearts so that the acts of obedience that result are **used as evidence in God's final judgement** to publicly declare them justified.

**Before we consider what Paul writes next** about the role of the **conscience**, we do need to take note of **one further clarification** regarding the Law.

**We have already clarified** that Christians are not subject to the Law of Moses, **but are under the Law of Christ**.

However, we **also need to clarify** that **the Law of Moses is still useful to us as God's New Covenant people.**

That is because there are **two functions** to the Law of Moses.

The Law was both **regulatory and revelatory**.<sup>15</sup>

That is, the Mosaic Law was given by God to **regulate** how people under the Mosaic Covenant lived and to **reveal** to them His character and standards.

We have established that we as New Covenant people **are not regulated** by the Law of Moses but by the Law of Christ.

Nevertheless, the Law of Moses still serves as a **useful revelation** of the character of God and His moral standards.

For example, the **fourth commandment** is to, **“Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy,”** according to **Exodus 20:8**.

That is **the only one of the ten commandments** that is **NOT repeated in the Law of Christ**, so it is not binding as a command to New Covenant Christians.

Nevertheless, it does reveal to us **God's desire for His people to prioritise their worship** by resting from their usual labours.

**That doesn't change**, and so while we are not commanded to observe the Sabbath, we are commanded in the New Testament to **gather corporately as the church** on “the Lord's Day,” which is Sunday.

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<sup>15</sup> Strickland, *Five Views on Law and Gospel*, 276–78.

So as we seek to obey the command of **Hebrews 10:25** to, “**not [forsake] our own assembling together, as is the habit of some...**” **we can use the revelation** of the **Exodus 20:8** to teach us about **prioritising worship**, even though we are not bound by the regulation of the fourth commandment.

Now, with that clarification that **the Law of Moses is still useful** to us as Christians who are **under the Law of Christ**, let's look back at **verse 15**.

Paul writes of Gentile Christians as he says—

**their conscience bearing witness and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them**

The conscience is, as **Andy Naselli** defines it, “*your consciousness [awareness] of what you believe is right and wrong.*”<sup>16</sup>

The conscience is **an important element in the Christian's obedience**, and Paul will address the matter at length in **Romans 14**.

There we will learn about the **necessity of calibrating our consciences** according to the **standard of God's Word** so that it gives us **accurate feedback on our obedience**, instead of being too strict or too relaxed.

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<sup>16</sup> Andrew David Naselli and J. D. Crowley, *Conscience: What It Is, How to Train It, and Loving Those Who Differ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 42.

The conscience is “man's innate ability to distinguish right from wrong.” John F. MacArthur, *The Vanishing Conscience: Drawing the Line in a No-Fault, Guilt-Free World* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1994), 36.

“Conscience is not an independent way of knowing God's will but simply a “knowledge shared with oneself whether of one's having done wrong or of one's innocence.” Peterson, *Romans*, 149–150.

For now, it's enough to know that the **conscience is part of your inner man, your heart.**

It is your **heart's own self-assessment** as it subjectively assesses whether you are behaving in a manner which is **right or wrong.**

**Your conscience is not,** as the cartoons portray it, an angel sitting on one shoulder and a devil on the other, each trying to persuade you to act the way they want you too.

Your conscience is **not some third-party voice in your head,** but is rather **your own heart as you are conscious** of behaving in either obedience or disobedience to God's moral standards.

**For an unbeliever,** these standards are a reflection of being **made in the image of God,** but are often severely distorted through the effects of sin.

Still, unbelievers are **commonly able to distinguish** right from wrong because of their consciences.

**For a believer,** the moral standards against which your conscience measures you is the **Law that God has written on your heart,** and the "fine-tuning" of the Word of God as it constantly calibrates your conscience to accurately assess your behaviour.

Now as we consider what Paul is saying here in **verse 15,** we see that a Christian's conscience "**bears witness**" to his or her obedience.

Paul intends this “**witness**” here to be a **testimony in confirmation** of the **Law being written on a believer’s heart**, and therefore a **present assurance of a future verdict** of being right with God.

You see, Paul says these Gentile Christians have a **consciousness of God’s moral standards**—a consciousness that is clear enough to allow their own mind to either accuse or defend their actions.<sup>17</sup>

It’s even clear enough for God to use as **evidence on judgment day**.

The trouble is, as Paul writes, a Christian’s conscience is an **imperfect guide** so that their “**thoughts alternately [accuse] or else [defend] them.**”

**Firstly**, while Christians demonstrate works of righteousness as **fruit of our faith**, we are **still imperfect and sin on a daily basis**.

Paul refers to the reality of giving an account for an **imperfect mix of obedience and disobedience** in the final judgement in **2 Corinthians 5:10**—

**For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.**

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. Naselli and Crowley, *Conscience*, 34.

**Secondly**, the subjective nature of our conscience means that **our self-assessment is unreliable**, as Paul describes of his own conscience in **1 Corinthians 4:4-5**—

**4 I am conscious of nothing against myself, yet I am not by this acquitted. But the one who examines me is the Lord.**

**5 Therefore do not go on passing judgment before the time, but wait until the Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and make manifest the motives of hearts. And then each one's praise will come to him from God.**

This explains why Paul says that **though the conscience is a present witness**, one that **may even give evidence** on the future day of judgement, it is **ultimately God's judgement which will be decisive**.

### c. The judgement of Gentile Christians (16)

**Here Paul completes his application** of the principles of God's impartial judgement with the **third element** of **the judgement of Gentile Christians**.

Look at **verse 16**—

**on the day when, according to my gospel, God will judge the secrets of men through Christ Jesus.**

Here Paul is obviously referring to God's **eschatological judgement**, which is clear from the context and the reference to **"the day... when God will judge."**

**Somewhat surprisingly**, Paul refers to this judgement being **part of the gospel message** that he preached.

While we know that the good news has **corresponding bad news**, we should probably understand this as more of a reference to the fact that **for believers, the judgement is part of the good news**.

The final judgement is **when** believers will be vindicated, **when** their righteousness will be publicly announced, **when** their faithfulness will be rewarded, and **when** their salvation will be completed so that they will finally inherit the eternal life they have patiently waited for.

However, **not all will be justified**, and many, such as those who only hear God's Law and don't obediently do it, will be condemned.

Thus, God will "**God will judge the secrets of men**" as Paul says.

As God announced in **Jeremiah 17:10**—

**I, Yahweh, search the heart; I test the inmost being, even to give to each man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his deeds.**

When God judges, it will be "**through Christ Jesus**," meaning that **He will be the One to judge**, **"righteousing"** and **rewarding** His faithful people and **repaying** everyone else for their sinful rebellion.

This includes **His wrathful punishment of every good person**, including the self-righteous Jews, who **imagined that they didn't need** the righteousness of God through faith.

## CONCLUSION

As we conclude, we can **step back and see** that Paul's whole argument indicates that **inner transformation is the true focus of God's judgment.**

God will examine **lifestyle and behaviour as indicators of what is happening in human hearts.**

So it is essential not just to unbelieving Jews and self-proclaimed God people, but for us too as Gentile Christians to **be righteous doers of God's Law and not unrighteous hearers only.**

The principles of God judging **according to revelation and response** assure us that God's final judgement will be **impartial and fair.**

But if we hope to be declared right with God in this final judgement, **then we need the righteousness of God through faith alone.**

Such faith, however, **can never be alone because God writes the law of Christ on the hearts** of all His New Covenant people, whether Jew or Gentile.

Therefore, **you can only anticipate a future justification** if you **demonstrate such heart transformation** through acts of obedience and the assurance of a conscience that testifies to a changed heart.

**So be diligent to be a righteous doer of the Law of Christ.**

## BENEDICTION

*Now a dying Saviour's love,  
a risen Saviour's joy,  
an ascended Saviour's power,  
and a returning Saviour's hope,  
rest upon your hearts and your homes.  
Amen.<sup>18</sup>*

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<sup>18</sup> Dale Ralph Davis, *Grace Be with You: Benedictions from Dale Ralph Davis*, New Edition (Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2019), 14.

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## ADDITIONAL NOTES

“Simply stated it holds that, legally, none of the 613 stipulations of the Sinaitic covenant are binding upon NT Christians, including the so-called moral laws, while in a revelatory and pedagogical sense all 613 are binding upon us, including all the ceremonial and civic laws.”

David A. Dorsey, “The Law of Moses and the Christian: A Compromise,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 34, no. 3 (1991): 325.

“The moral law expressed in the Mosaic law under the old covenant has its parallel in the law of Christ under the new covenant, so that the believer today may know God’s moral will. In addition, the principle expressed in a Mosaic statute may still be preached in the church in the same sense as the fulfillment of the law of Christ furnishes fulfillment of the essence of the Mosaic law.”

Wayne G. Strickland, “A Dispensational View,” in *Five Views on Law and Gospel*, ed. Stanley N. Gundry, Zondervan Counterpoints Collection (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999), 277–278.

“Paul, faith and works do not correlate as a dualism. Works are not an add-on to faith. Rather, faith and works are organically indivisible. Believing and doing good are so intimate that Paul can speak of faith without using either πίστις or πιστεύω. Thus, where faith exists, there are good works; inversely, where good works are manifest, there is faith. Doing good, being doers of the law, and keeping the righteous requirements of the law are impossible apart from faith (1) in God who raises the dead and (2) in him who rewards everyone who seeks him.

Recognition of this indivisible union of faith and deeds fosters understanding of the seamless correlation between the gospel’s initial call to believe in Jesus Christ and the gospel’s perpetual call to faithful endurance in Christ in order to attain salvation, even justification, in the Last Day. Hence, as argued in Romans 2, Paul’s gospel seamlessly and harmoniously correlates justification, judgment, God’s recompense of eternal life, and doing good.”

A. B. Caneday, “Judgment, Behavior, and Justification according to Paul’s Gospel in Romans 2.” *Journal for the Study of Paul and His Letters* 1, no. 2 (2011): 191–92.

Romans 2:12–16 LSB

2:12	For all who have sinned <b>without</b> the Law will also perish <b>without</b> the Law, and all who have sinned <b>under</b> the Law will be judged <b>by</b> the Law.	Illustration/ explanation of 11
2:13	For it is not the <b>hearers</b> of the Law who are just before God, but the <b>doers</b> of the Law will be justified.	Reason for 12
2:14	For	Condition of 14d
b	who	Describes 14a
c	<b>do not have the Law</b>	Continues 14a
d	naturally do the things of the Law,	Reason for 13b
e	these [...] are a law to themselves, <b>not having the Law</b>	Concessive to 14d
2:15	in that they demonstrate the work of the Law written in their hearts,	Explains 14d
b	↑ their <b>conscience</b>	Reason for 15a
c	↑ and <b>their thoughts</b>	Time of 16c
d	↑ or else <b>alternately accusing</b>	Standard of 16c
2:16	↑ <b>defending them,</b>	Continues 16a
b	↑ on the day when,	Agent of 16c
c	↑ according to my gospel,	
d	↑ God will judge the secrets of men	
	← through Christ Jesus.	

## Sermon Notes

### Introduction

In Romans 2:12–16, Paul takes us through the principles and application of God's impartial judgement in order to emphasise the importance of being a righteous doer of God's Law, and not an unrighteous hearer only.

### 1. The principles of God's impartial judgement

- a. God will judge according to your revelation (12)
- b. God will judge according to your response (13)

### 2. The application of God's impartial judgement

- a. The obedience of Gentile Christians (14)
- b. The hearts of Gentile Christians (15)
- c. The judgement of Gentile Christians (16)

### Conclusion