

THE LETTER OF PAUL TO THE ROMANS  
*Commentary by Rev. Msgr. Gregory Mikesch*  
*Lesson 4 - Romans 2:12-3:8*

**Romans 2:12-16**

As we study these verses, it is important to remember that when Paul uses the term “law” he is speaking of the Law of Moses. This Mosaic Law is also called the Torah, and this is the gift which was revealed by God to the Jewish people. The Torah revealed God’s will and showed the people how to lead their lives.

Also, there might be some confusion here about the people Paul is addressing. Since his letter is written to a Christian community, it is presumed that Paul is speaking to the Jewish and Gentile Christians. It is not likely, although not impossible, that Jews who did not convert to Christianity would read his letter too. We know that in the earliest decades of the Church, those members who were converts from Judaism continued to practice many of their Jewish traditions. In Acts 2:26, we are told that soon after Pentecost the Christians “spent much time together in the temple.” And in Acts 3:1, we read, “One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, at three o’clock in the afternoon.” And so, when Paul speaks of the Jews, he is referring to the Jewish Christians who were holding on to many of their Jewish customs and attitudes, particularly toward the Torah and circumcision.

In these early decades, there was not a complete break with Judaism. The complete separation did not come until the year 85 A.D. The temple had been destroyed by the Romans in 70 A.D. when they attacked the city of Jerusalem. This event caused a gradual separation between Jews and Christians because they no longer had a mutual place to gather for prayer. By 85 A.D. the animosity between them became so intense that the Jews added a prayer to the list of prayers a Jewish man would say each morning. This new prayer said, “Cursed be anyone who believes in Jesus.” It is quite obvious that a Jewish Christian would not say this. From this point on, Jews and Christians were divided. It should be noted that today this additional prayer is no longer part of the morning prayer of an orthodox Jew.

In 2:1-11, Paul is speaking to the Jewish members of the Christian community without directly naming them. It is not until 2:17 that he identifies the ones he is addressing. Now in 2:12, Paul brings the Gentiles into the discussion. He says that even though the Gentiles have not been given the law, they will still be judged for their sins. Paul has already expressed his belief, in the earlier part of his letter that the Gentiles should have come to a knowledge of God and of right and wrong. He is not condemning all Gentiles.

Paul is speaking of them in order to show the Jewish members that God shows no partiality. Jews and Gentiles are both subject to judgment, just as both will receive mercy if they call upon the Lord.

This section of Paul's letter addresses a question which is often asked, "How are the people judged who lived before the coming of Christ?" Paul would say that each person is judged according to what that person has had the chance to know. If a person has been given more knowledge and insight, then more is expected. This same thought is reflected in the words of Jesus in Luke 12:48. In the 13<sup>th</sup> century, St. Thomas Aquinas said that if someone has not had the opportunity learn about Christ, that person's effort to seek goodness, as it is understood, is acceptable to God. All goodness comes from the Father through Christ; therefore, if a person is seeking goodness, that person is seeking Christ.

In verse 13, Paul reiterates his point that just possessing the law or hearing the law is not sufficient. The law, or charity, must be put into practice. Again, we must always remember that this "doing" is not our means to salvation. Jesus Christ is our salvation. But the way we know if we have accepted the gift is if we live the faith.

The last few words of verse 14 need special attention. Paul says that when the Gentiles instinctively follow the law that they become "a law to themselves." This phrase can imply that laws are made up as person goes along. This is not what Paul is saying. What he is saying is that if a Gentile is attentive to the innate faculty of conscience, the Gentile will live in accord with the law. Even if the Gentile does not know the particulars of the law, that person will live the spirit of the law by seeking what is good.

In verse 15, Paul repeats the belief that the Gentiles can know the spirit of the law when he says that "What the law requires is written on their hearts." Paul's next thought is difficult to understand. He says, "Their conflicting thoughts will accuse or perhaps excuse them." Commentators give many different meanings to this sentence. The consensus seems to be that the conscience of the Gentile will let the person know the morality or immorality of the deeds performed. On the day of judgment, neither the Jew nor the Gentile will have an advantage. The Jew will be judged according to the law, and the Gentile will be judged according to the innate conscience.

In verse 16, Paul returns to one of his primary themes – everything takes place through Christ. The gospel he preaches is a proclamation that the perfect revelation of the Father is seen in the person of Jesus. At the end of the world there will be no secrets. Everything will be revealed, even the deepest thoughts of the heart, and final judgment will be given. But Paul would be quick to agree with James 2:13 that for those who share God's love, "Mercy triumphs over judgment."

## Romans 2:17-29

In these next verses, Paul addresses one question, “Who is the real Jew?” These two paragraphs would be enough to send a Pharisee of Paul’s time into a rage. The Jews prided themselves on two things: The Law of Moses and their physical circumcision, the sign of their participation in the covenant with God. Paul will reinterpret both of these, and in doing so he will negate the very elements which most of the Jews looked upon as the foundation of their salvation.

In verse 17, Paul identifies the one to whom he is speaking as a Jew. In this verse and in verse 18, Paul tauntingly describes the self-image of the Jews by the use of five verbs. He says that they “call,” “rely,” “boast,” “know” and “determine” because they have been instructed in the law. Having presented their self-image, Paul now uses four nouns in verses 19 and 20 to show the attitude of the Jews toward others. They see themselves as “guide,” “light,” “corrector” and “teacher.” Paul says that they have this condescending view because they think that the law has given them possession of knowledge and truth.

In verses 21 through 23, Paul confronts the Jews by pointing out their hypocrisy. Repeating his style of using short phrases, Paul employs five questions to ask the Jews if they are committing the same sins for which they are condemning the Gentiles. When they claim to be God’s Chosen People, but then consistently break God’s laws, they are bringing dishonor to his name. The Gentiles look at this hypocrisy and they ridicule a religion that says one thing and does the opposite. Although Paul is directing his words to his own Jewish people, his message is one that must also make us pause and take note. In the two thousand years of our Christian history, we too have many dark periods. The wars that have been fought in the name of Christianity call us to our own need for repentance. We, as individuals, must always be aware of our own need for conversion. If the message of Jesus Christ is to be heard by the world, it must be seen as a living reality in our lives.

Verses 25 through 29 form the next paragraph in Paul’s letter. The topic of this paragraph is found in verse 29 as Paul says, “real circumcision is a matter of the heart.” Paul makes his belief very clear as he says that the real Jew is the one who follows God’s law. Externals make no difference. Physical circumcision may be important as a sign of the covenant, but if a person does not live the covenant then that physical mark is meaningless. Paul is saying that being a physical descendant of Abraham carries no advantage if the person’s heart is not turned toward God. This type of thinking must have shocked Paul’s Jewish readers.

In verse 27, Paul makes the point that if the uncircumcised follow the law in their hearts, then they will be the ones who will judge the Jews. This emphasis on interior motivation can be found in several places in the Hebrew Scriptures. In Deuteronomy 10:16 and Jeremiah 4:4, we find passages which call the Jews to a change of heart. The external observance of the law is not the means of salvation. What is needed is a heart that seeks goodness, for this is the sign of God’s presence within every person.

At the end of verse 29, Paul is probably making a play on words. The name “Jew” is derived from the name “Judah.” In the Hebrew language, the name “Judah” and the word “praise” are very similar. Paul is saying that the real Jew is the one who lives the law of God. Similarly, the one who receives “praise” is the one who lives the law, and praise comes from God himself.

### **Romans 3:1-8**

In this opening paragraph of chapter 3, Paul voices the questions that are in the minds of his Jewish readers. He has been saying that both Jews and Gentiles will be judged by God according to their conduct.

If this is so, “Then what advantage has the Jew?” Paul responds in verse 2 that the Jews have the advantage in that they have been given the Torah, the oracles of God. They have been entrusted with a knowledge of God’s will that other nations have not received. The covenant which God formed with Abraham is an eternal covenant. Anyone who shares the fidelity of Abraham will share in the covenant.

In verse 3, Paul has the Jewish reader ask the question about the infidelity of the people. If some of the people are unfaithful, will this mean that God will stop loving them? Paul says that God can never be unfaithful to his part of the covenant. God will never stop loving his people. The people may refuse to accept the gift of God’s love, but the love is always being offered. This shows the complete fidelity of God.

In verse 4, Paul quotes Psalm 51:4 to support his primary teaching that God can never be unfaithful. The quotation implies that even if everyone were unfaithful, God would still be true to his spoken word of love for his people. God is “justified” in his words and will “prevail” in his judging. God can never be accused of not keeping his promise.

The Jewish reader now takes a different approach. In verses 5 and 7, he says that if the infidelity of the people helps to show the complete fidelity of God, then there is good in doing evil. By doing what is wrong, the people are actually giving God an opportunity to show his greatness. Paul will utterly reject this way of thinking. Paul’s first argument is found in the second half of verse 5. He says that God is not unjust in punishing the wicked. This punishment in fact shows the impartiality of God, for both Jews and Gentiles who are sinners will be punished. And if God was unjust, which he is not, then how could God judge the world? If God was unjust, he would have no right to judge others. Paul’s second argument is found in verse 8. He ridicules the notion that evil should be performed so that God can show his greatness by being merciful. God is merciful but the people must desire this mercy by being sorry for their sins.