# An Overview of Paul’s Letter to the Romans (2) God’s Covenant People Need the Gospel Romans 2

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This is the second sermon in an overview of the epistle of Paul to the Romans. Romans is a letter from Paul, a missionary and church planter in the period immediately after ascension of Jesus Christ into heaven, to the church at Rome, a body of believers that he had never met at the time he wrote this letter to them. It is a particularly important part of the Bible because it is the most systematic summary of the gospel in the Bible.

The gospel is the good news about salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. The gospel is the most important good news that we can ever hear because it is the only way that our sins can be forgiven, and our hearts renewed so that we become friends of God rather than enemies of God. Those who are saved by the gospel go to heaven when they die. Those who are not saved go to hell. There are no other options. This applies to all people everywhere. And so, this is a matter of supreme importance to every human being on the face of the earth.

Now one of the things about the good news is that it addresses the very dangerous and precarious situation that we are all in as human beings who have not lived perfectly according to God’s law. In order to understand the good news of what Jesus has done, it is necessary to understand the bad news of our predicament as sinful human beings. So, there is a negative aspect to the biblical message and any biblical exposition of the good news. This part of the biblical message is not welcome and so it is often underplayed or minimized. We want to give uplifting messages. We don’t want to be negative and gloomy. But one of the things that is absolutely clear from the Bible is that the good news only makes sense in the light of the bad news and the good news can only be appreciated in the light of the bad news. Therefore, it is necessary to speak about sin. Therefore, it is necessary to speak about the wrath of God against sinners.

This is what we see in the letter to the Romans that we are studying. Paul in the introduction says a number of things about the gospel – the good news. The letter, as a whole, gives a summary of the gospel. But the first three chapters out of 16 are dominated by instruction concerning human sinfulness. Paul goes into considerable detail. He wants to make sure that everyone who reads his letter understands the reality of sin and its consequences. He also wants to make sure that everyone who reads his letter understands that they are sinners and apart from salvation they are under the wrath of God.

In the second part of the first chapter, Paul described the sinfulness of human beings in general, but the way that he speaks makes it clear that he is speaking about Gentiles. Understanding the Bible requires understanding the distinction between Jews and Gentiles. The Old Testament tells the story of God choosing the Jews to be his people and it teaches us the purpose they were going to play in God’s plan of salvation. The Gentiles are everyone else and in the Old Testament they are mostly ungodly and wicked and enemies of God and of his people. So, Jews, reading or hearing Paul’s letter, would have no trouble agreeing with what Paul was writing about the wicked Gentiles.

The purpose of chapter 2 is to make the point that the Jews, God’s chosen people, were as sinful and as in need of salvation as the Gentiles were. The first few verses of chapter 2 addresses the hypocrisy of the Jews. Now no doubt not every Jew was the same in this regard, but it was common enough that Paul addresses them all. So, he accuses his Jewish readers of passing judgment on other people while they themselves commit the same sins that they condemn in others. And he tells them that they too are under the judgment of God for their sins.

There are a couple of things to be said about this. First of all, there is a tendency among people who belong to the visible people of God to presume that God is pleased with them just because of their connection to that people. In the Old Testament it was the Jewish people. During and after the time of the New Testament, it was and continues to be the church, or the New Testament covenant people of God. There is a tendency of those who have some connection to the church, to think that they are right with God just because of that connection.

This has been a problem throughout the history of the church as it was a problem in Bible times. There are many people today who think that God is pleased with them and that they are going to heaven because they are church members. The broader church is full of people like that because it is so common for preachers and church people alike, to focus only on those parts of the Bible that make us feel good. There are vast numbers of people in churches today who have only the most superficial understanding of the biblical message and who assume that they are saved because they prayed a little prayer or were baptized.

Paul addresses that mentality in this chapter of his letter to the Romans. He says to Jewish people, who tended to look down on Gentile sinners, that they are also sinners and they are also under the wrath of God and his point is going to be that they are also in need of salvation. And this applies to all of us. We are all sinners. We are all in need of the salvation that is based on the person and work of Jesus Christ. And there is more involved in that salvation than just belonging to the Church.

A second remark that I want to make about the point that Paul is making in this first part of Romans 2 is that Paul addresses a tendency that we all have to notice sins in other people, but not to notice them in ourselves. Jesus also addresses this tendency when in Matthew 7:4, he says, “Why do you see the speck that is in your brother’s eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?” Jesus is saying that we will be sure to see a speck of sin in someone else’s life, and not notice a log of sin in our own lives.

The application here is that we must realize that being part of the church does not automatically make us right with God and that we must examine our own hearts and lives so that we are aware of our own sins and the seriousness of our own sins. This is so very important because the only way to be saved is through the gospel and the gospel requires that we understand and confess that we are sinners and that we deserve the wrath of God against our sins. This is the point that Paul is stressing in this second chapter of Romans.

In the next few verses, Paul stresses the importance of repentance. He says in verse 4 that “God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance….” And in verse 5 he says that they are storing up God’s wrath because of their hard and impenitent hearts. The need for repentance is an important part of the gospel message. The problem, Paul is saying, with people who think that they are saved just because they belong to the visible people of God is that they are not repenting of their sins. This is one of the great differences between people who are just presuming on God’s grace and those who are experiencing God’s grace in their lives. People who have been saved by the gospel are people who are recognizing their own sins and who are turning from those sins. This does not mean that they are perfect, but it does mean that one of the characteristics of their lives is that they are aware of their sins and are struggling against them.

In verses 6-10, Paul says something that must be understood in the light of what comes later in this letter. He says that God is going to judge everyone according to his works and that those who do good will receive eternal life and that those who do evil will experience the wrath and fury of God. Taken all by itself it makes it sound like we can earn salvation by doing good works. But the thrust of the letter of the letter as a whole and the thrust of Paul’s teaching as a whole is that our predicament is such that we cannot earn salvation by being good people. We can’t make up for the sins that we have already committed, and we have sinful natures so that are not even capable of living in a way that is pleasing to God except for the inner renewal that God promises to us in the gospel.

So, we must understand what Paul is saying here in a nuanced way. First, of all we will be judged according to our works. Even those who are saved by grace, whose sins are forgiven and who are righteous because of Christ’s righteousness will still be judged at the end of the age according to the works that they have done as Christians. One of the results of salvation is good works and those works are evidence of salvation and in that light Paul is saying that those who do good works will receive glory and honor and peace. They are not saved by their works. Their works are evidence that they have been saved by grace. And those who do the good works that are the result of salvation will experience glory, honor and peace in the final judgment.

On the other hand, those who are not saved, will be condemned because of their evil deeds. And that, Paul is saying here, applies both to church people and to the rest of the world – both Jesus and Gentles in his context. So, there are eternal consequences for how we live. God has created us for his own glory. He has given us his law to tell us how he wants us to live to his glory. Some begin to keep that law by the grace of the gospel. Some continue in their sins and they will be condemned because of those sins.

In the next section – 12-24 Paul brings in the notion of the law. The law is an important subject in Bible. It is an important part of our relationship with God. All the law-talk in the Bible assumes that God is the King of the world. God is the King. We are his subjects. And he rules us through his law.

Now the Jews – the people of God had a much fuller revelation of God’s law. The Old Testament tells the story of how God gave his people his law and much of it is taken up with giving the details of that law. The Gentiles did not receive the law in that way, but that does not mean that they had nothing to do with God’s law. This section refers to Gentiles as those who do not have the law, but it also says that God’s law is written on their hearts. This means that everyone in the world has an internal sense of right and wrong. Everyone has a conscience. That inner sense of right and wrong is God’s law written on their hearts.

Now some worldly people live more upright lives than others do. There are people in the world – unchurched people – non-Christian people - who live relatively moral lives and there are unchurched people whose lives are very evil. That will make a difference on the Day of Judgment. It does not mean that anyone will be saved by living a moral life, but it does mean that those who have lived moral lives will fare better in the final judgment than those who have lived wicked lives. Paul in verses 14 speaks of Gentiles who “by nature do what the law requires” and in verses 15 and 16 he says that that will matter on the Day of Judgment. In the first part of chapter 3 he will make the point that no one is without sin and no one can be saved apart from the gospel, but here is makes the point that sometimes the people from the world live better lives than God’s covenant people who have received instruction in God’s law from God.

The overall trust of the section from verses 12-24 is that the Jewish people – the people of God – had received the law from God and were proud of that fact, but they had not obeyed that law. This does not mean that every single Jew was the same, but it did seem to characterize the Jewish people generally speaking. Paul makes a number of memorable statements in this section that sum up his point. 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.”

This is the danger for church people – to be hearers of the law, but not doers of the law. This is a point that is hugely stressed in the Bible. Those who have belonged to the visible people of God in every age, have often been hearers of the law, but not doers of the law.

One of the results of this is that often the world has often blasphemed God because of the wickedness that they witness in the lives of his people. That is what Paul writes in verse 24, “For, as it is written, ‘The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.’” That is - the Gentiles – or the people of the world - who are not connected to God – they speak and think dishonorably of God because of the hypocrisy of God’s people.

This is a problem that often has to be addressed in evangelism. One of the reasons that many non-Christians give for having no attraction to God or interest in exploring his claims is the wickedness and hypocrisy of so many of the people of the church. Now the standard answer to that objection is that failure of so many of God’s people to live as they should does not negate the truth-claims of the gospel or the rightness of the Christian message or the need of salvation. One of the key truths of the gospel message, as we are seeing right now, is that God’s people are sinners and in need of the gospel like everyone else. That is Paul’s main point in the chapter that we are looking at in this sermon.

So, we come to the last section of this chapter. The overall point is the same, but here Paul discusses it in the light of the fact that the males among the people of God were circumcised. The males represented everyone else. Circumcision was a sign and a reminder and a seal of the covenant relationship between God and his people. In the New Testament era, baptism has replaced circumcision. The meaning of both is essentially the same. Baptism is a sign that we belong to God. It is a sign and a seal of the gospel promises and obligations. But it also marks us off as people of God. So, in the Old Testament period the people of God were “the circumcised” and in the New Testament period the people of God are “the baptized.”

Here is how Paul introduces this paragraph. Verse 25, “For circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law, but if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision.” You see he is saying the same thing that he has been saying throughout this chapter. It is possible to belong to God’s people and be a law-breaker and if that is the case the sign of belonging to God’s people, in this case circumcision, becomes uncircumcision.

We can transpose this idea to our situation by saying that if you are baptized and your life is characterized by law-breaking rather than law-keeping, your baptism becomes un-baptism.

Now I was careful there to use the language of Scripture. I was first going to say that if you are baptized and your life is characterized by law-breaking your baptism becomes meaningless. But that is not what Paul is saying. That is not what the Bible teaches.

In the Old Testament when God spoke of his covenant people whose lives were characterized by law-breaking, he still referred to them as his people – he still reaffirmed his promises to them as he called them to repentance. Their circumcision did not become meaningless. They were still God’s covenant people. They still bore the mark of belonging to him. All of that just made their sin and rebellion all the more serious.

So today a person who was baptized who is living in sin – that baptism is not meaningless. It is still a reminder that God has set them apart as one of his people. It is still a reminder of promises and obligations. It makes their sin all the more serious because they belong to God in a way that the people of the world do not belong to God. Their baptism does not become meaningless. It testifies against them.

So, we stick to the language that Paul is using here. If a circumcised person does not obey the law, his circumcision becomes uncircumcision. If a baptized person does not obey the law, his baptism become un-baptism. It does not become meaningless, but it is a sign that now highlights the curses of the covenant.

The covenant is a relationship between God and his people in which God claims his people as his own and promises them blessings for obedience and warns of curses for disobedience. The signs of the covenant, circumcision in the Old Testament and baptism in the New Testament are reminders of both the promises and the curses. And if a person is not keeping the law, the sign of the covenant is a powerful reminder that he is in danger of God enacting the curses against him.

So, the section as a whole is powerfully teaching that God’s covenant people who do not walk in obedience to God’s law are under the wrath of God. Just being circumcised will not help you if you do not keep the law. Just being baptized will not help you if you do not keep the law.

Then comes his final comment in this chapter. Verses 28-29 “For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly and circumcision is matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God.”

Now a wicked Jew is still a Jew in some sense. Jesus and Paul referred to wicked Jews as Jews. What Paul is saying here is that to be a Jew in the deepest sense there must be a circumcision of the heart as well as the outward sign of circumcision. And the same is the case with baptism. To be a Christian in the deepest sense, one must experience the cleansing of the heart of which baptism is a symbol. The Old Testament referred to circumcised hearts. The New Testament refers to baptism as something that has an inner reality in the lives of those who are Christians in the deepest sense. Paul will use this kind of language in Romans 6 where he will connect baptism with being dead to sin and alive to God.

So – in his presentation of the gospel to the Christians at Rome, Paul spends a whole chapter stressing the fact that if a member of God’s covenant people is living in sin – that is - if his life is characterized by disobedience rather than obedience – he is under the wrath of God and still in need of salvation. The only people who will receive glory and honor and peace on the Day of Judgment are those who have done good. The rest of the book will make it clear that the only people who can do good in that sense are those who have been delivered from the power of sin in their lives and renewed to live lives that are characterized by obedience. I put it that way because no one is without sin in this life, but those who have been saved through the gospel will be repenting of their sins and will be striving to live a life that is pleasing to God.

So, there is a lot about sin. There is a lot of warning that goes with the gospel. It is not the gospel because the gospel is good news and our sin and guilt, and danger is bad news. But Paul is showing us that understanding the gospel and receiving the gospel requires that we are acquainted with the bad news both in general terms and in personal terms. The way that Paul speaks in this chapter makes it clear that unless the gospel is producing the fruit of obedience in their lives, church people are under the wrath of God no less than the people of the world. And this chapter makes it clear that this is not an uncommon problem.

So, this chapter requires that we consider our lives in the light of what Paul has been saying. Outward Christianity is not enough. Outward baptism is not enough. Belonging to the church is not enough. What we need is the change of heart that is signified in baptism and a life that is characterized by the obedience that is the fruit of the gospel.

In this light of this chapter we need to think and to ponder and to evaluate our lives and not to assume. The issue is to momentous to assume anything. We must evaluate our lives in the light of the Word of God. In this part of the Word of God, the focus is on obedience. In the light of the whole Bible we know that it is not perfect obedience in this life, but real obedience – earnest effort and struggle to live in a way that is pleasing to God.

Now this chapter is part of a larger presentation and that larger presentation will include the good news of justification by faith. Reconciliation with God on the basis of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection. The bad news and the warnings make way for the good news of the solution for our sin and our guilt through Jesus Christ and what he has done for us. In chapter 5:1 Paul writes, “Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” This is the good news that Paul preached through the ancient world and this is the good news that has come down to us and this is the good news which is the foundation for our lives.

If we are truly trusting in Christ, it will show in our lives. And all of that is good. The obedience that flows from the gospel is as precious as the forgiveness that belongs to the good news. And all of it is focused on God and our relationship to him. The world lives apart from God. It is the natural condition of every one of us to live apart from God. The good news is that we can be changed so that God is at the center of our lives. That is how we were designed to live. That is how we are saved to live. That is life as it is meant to be lived.