

Lesson 25 at StudyRomans.org

Romans 2:9

Romans 2:9 — There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek,

There is a chiasm in verses 6-11, as we can see on the Handout for Lesson 23. As we recall from last week, a chiasm is a rhetorical device in which the same argument is presented twice — once in a forward direction and then again in the reverse direction.

When we ended last week, Paul had finished his argument in the forward direction in verse 8. Paul is now going to repeat his argument in the reverse direction starting in verse 9. And so what we said about verse 8 should apply to verse 9, what we said about verse 7 should apply to verse 10, and what we said about verse 6 should apply to verse 11. That is how a chiasm works.

And we see that with verse 9. In place of the wrath and fury that we saw in verse 8, we find tribulation and distress in verse 9. But, of course, the message is the same. There are only two roads in life — one toward God and one away from God. And the only things that anyone will ever find at the end of the road away from God are — not freedom — but wrath, fury, tribulation, and distress.

And what do we mean by the road away from God? Verse 9 answers that question — “every human being who **does** evil.” And there we see it again — the verb “do” — what they do. Not what they think, but what they do. And, yes, they are also *thinking* evil things, but Paul’s focus here is on the evil things they are *doing*.

And what does Paul mean by *every* human? Paul answers that question here, and in answering that question Paul's rhetorical trap finally snaps shut — around the Jews. If there is any doubt that Paul has turned his attention to the Jews in Romans 2, that doubt disappears here in verse 9 where Paul directly refers to the Jews — “the Jew first.”

The last time Paul mentioned the Jews was back in Romans 1:16, and so Paul has now gone full circle. Yes, the gospel is the power for salvation to the Jew first and also the Greek — but this tribulation is also for the Jew first and also the Greek. I suspect the Jews all liked being first in line for Romans 1:16, but I don't think anyone wants to be first in line for Romans 2:9!

And why are they first in line for the tribulation that comes from disobeying God and rejecting the gospel of Christ? I think Jesus answered that question.

Luke 12:47-48 — And that servant who knew his master's will but did not get ready or act according to his will, will receive a severe beating. But the one who did not know, and did what deserved a beating, will receive a light beating. **Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required, and from him to whom they entrusted much, they will demand the more.**

As Paul will tell us later in Romans, “the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God” (Romans 3:2), and that fact explains why they are first in each of these two lines — first in advantages, and first in responsibilities.

And, if we are looking for a modern lesson from this verse, I don't think we need to look very far today to find others who are also first

in advantages and first in responsibilities. We need to see ourselves in Romans 2 just as we needed to see ourselves in Romans 1.

Romans 2:10

Romans 2:10 — but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek.

Here in verse 10, as Paul backs out of his argument in the reverse direction, we see the counterpart to verse 7. Those doing good here in verse 10 are those who were engaged in well-doing back in verse 7. And the “glory and honor and immortality” in verse 7 corresponds to the “glory and honor and peace” here in verse 10.

Why the switch from “immortality” in verse 7 to “peace” in verse 10? Those are just two sides of the same coin. While “immortality” (or “incorruption”) emphasizes the permanence of that future life and victory over death, the word “peace” describes the quality of that future life. We will enjoy a state of perfect well-being for all time.

And that blessing will be for everyone who thinks good thoughts? No, that is not what verse 10 says — that blessing is for everyone who does good — “but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good.” Not “well **thought**, thou good and faithful servant,” but “well **done**, thou good and faithful servant.”

Are we keeping track? What have we seen so far?

- “His **works**” in verse 6.
- “Well-**doing**” in verse 7 — a Greek phrase that means “good works.”

- “Obey” in verse 8.
- “Does evil” in verse 9.
- “Does good” in verse 10.

Does that sound to anyone like there is nothing we **can** do to be saved or like there is nothing we **must** do to be saved? Does that sound to anyone like we are saved or lost without regard to what we do? I hope not, because these verses are saying just the opposite, as clearly and as often as Paul can say it.

And guess what? The Jews are first in line for this as well — “the Jew first and also the Greek.” This line is the same line we saw back in Romans 1:16. It is the line for those who are saved by the power of the gospel. And the Jews were first in line for that salvation as we saw in Acts 2.

Romans 2:11

Romans 2:11 — For God shows no partiality.

Verse 11 is just another way of saying verse 6 — “He will render to each one according to his works.” God will apply one standard, and God will apply that same standard to each person. What that means is that God shows no partiality.

Of all of the verses in Romans 2 directed toward the Jews, I think verse 11 might have struck them the hardest. After all, they were God’s chosen people, and so, of course, God would treat them differently from everybody else. Right? Wrong. Verse 11 is impossible to misunderstand: “For God shows no partiality.” No partiality. None. Not any.

And yet, it is amazing how many people today believe and teach otherwise. We will see that when we get to Romans 9-11. Based on misunderstanding of those chapters, many people today teach and believe that God has a special plan of salvation just for the Jews. We will wait until we get there to discuss that false view, but for now I think we can see here in verse 11 the problem with any view that says God shows partiality to the Jews. God does not. Why not? Because “God shows no partiality.” None. Not any.

There is one gospel and only one gospel (Galatians 1:7), and that one gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek (Romans 1:16). We know that truth from those verses, but I think we also know that truth from this verse right here — “For God shows no partiality.” There is one gospel, and that one gospel is for everyone.

Does God have a wonderful plan of salvation for the Jews? Absolutely he does. And it is the same wonderful plan of salvation that God has for the Gentiles. There is one and only one gospel. God shows no partiality.

Romans 2:12

Romans 2:12 — 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.

As you know, we should always be on the lookout for key words in our study of the Bible. And there can be no doubt that we have found such a word here in verse 12 with the word “law.” That word appears four times just in this one verse. We have found a key word!

And “law” is not just a key word in verse 12, or just a key word in chapter 2. “Law” is a key word in the entirety of the letter to the Romans. Of the 220 appearances of the word “law” in the New Testament, over a third of them are found in Romans. There can be no doubt that “law” is a central concept in Paul’s letter to the Romans. No other New Testament book tells us more about the law than does Romans.

And the “law” is a concept that runs throughout almost the entirety of the letter. The Handout for Lesson 25 shows every occurrence of the word “law” in Romans, with the first occurrence found here in verse 12 and the final occurrence found in chapter 13. And, as you can also see from the Handout, while chapter two contains a lengthy discussion of the law, the longest such discussion is found in Romans 7.

And here is the big question: what does Paul mean when he refers to “the law” in his letter to the Romans?

That question sounds simple, but it is one of the most difficult and hotly debated questions about Romans. Why? Because Paul uses the word “law” in many different ways in this letter, and it is not always clear which meaning he intends. We have to proceed carefully, and we have to look very closely at the context and at everything else the Bible tells us about the law.

But how do we know for sure that Paul is using the word “law” in different ways? We know that for sure because Paul specifically refers to different laws, often while comparing and contrasting those different laws.

- In Romans 3:27, we find “a law of works” and “the law of faith.”

- In Romans 7:2, we find “the law of marriage.”
- In Romans 7:25, we find “the law of God” and “the law of sin.”
- In Romans 8:2, we find “the law of the Spirit of life” and “the law of sin and death.”

In addition to finding different laws in Romans, we also find different people with different relations to the law. This first occurrence of the law in Romans 2:12 is a perfect example of that — we find people **without** the law, and we also find people **under** the law.

And so any time we see the word “law” in Romans (and we will see that word 78 times in this letter), the first thing we need to do is identify both the law in question and the people Paul is addressing with regard to the law in question.

And we need to be very careful when we do that. Why? Because the word “law” is often used as a road sign in Romans, with one arrow pointing left and the other arrow pointing right. If we mix up that road sign, we will certainly head off in the wrong direction.

In short, the word “law” in Romans creates a perfect storm for a Bible student. Why? Because with “law” we have a word with different meanings and different applications to different people over different time periods. And we also have a word that appears all throughout the letter as a focus of Paul’s arguments. We need to proceed very carefully if we want to survive that perfect storm!

So, with that background, let’s look at verse 12, which (as we said) uses the word “law” four times.

Romans 2:12 — 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**.

And here are our first three questions: (1) which law or laws are being discussed here, (2) who are these people who are without the law, and (3) who are these people who are under the law?

I think that the most important word in helping us answer those questions about verse 12 is the first word in verse 12 — “for.” That word links verse 12 to the preceding verse. Verse 12 is the evidence for verse 11: “For God shows no partiality.”

And which two groups were at issue in verse 11? Again, we should look at the first word of verse 11 — which is the same as the first word of verse 12 — “for.” Verse 11 is telling us that God shows no partiality between the two groups at the end of verse 10 — the Jews and the Greeks.

So, getting back to verse 12, with that background from verse 10 and verse 11, I think we can say that the two groups of people in verse 12 are the same as the two groups of people in verse 10 — the Jews and the Gentiles.

But which is which? In verse 12, we have one group who have sinned without the law, and we have another group who have sinned under the law. Which group is the Jews, and which group is the Gentiles?

If this law in verse 12 is the Mosaic law, then that identification would immediately answer our questions. Clearly, the Jews were under the Mosaic law, and the Gentiles were without the Mosaic law.

That would make perfect sense, but is that correct? Is the law in verse 12 the Mosaic law? Yes, I think it is. I think we can see that already from the flow of Paul's argument, but we will certainly see it when we get to verses 14 and 17. In those verses, Paul will tell us that it is the Gentiles do not have this law, and it is the Jews who rely on this law. I think those verses confirm that this law in verse 12 is the Mosaic law — the law that the Gentiles were without, and the law that the Jews were under.

But if the Gentiles don't have the law, how can the Gentiles be accused of sin? After all, Paul will later tell us in this same letter that "where there is no law there is no transgression" (4:15). So how can anyone sin without the law, as we are told here in verse 12?

The key to answering that question is to notice that Paul does not say here that Gentiles did not have any law. Instead, Paul says that the Gentiles did not have this specific law — the Mosaic law. We know that the Gentiles were under another law, and we can prove that in two different ways.

First, we can prove it logically. If there is no transgression without a law (Romans 4:15), and if there is a transgression (Romans 1:21-32), then there must be a law. That is, the Gentiles must have been under some law other than the Mosaic law.

Second, we can also prove that just by looking at what we learned about the Gentiles earlier in chapter 1. In that chapter, we saw both the revelation of that law in verses 19-20 and the transgression of that law in verses 21-32. Romans 1 makes no sense if the Gentiles were not under some sort of law.

And if we still have any doubts about that, those doubts will disappear when we get to verse 14 of this second chapter, where Paul will specifically describe the law that was transgressed by the Gentiles — “they are **a law** to themselves, even though they do not have **the law**.” That verse will tell us very clearly that the Gentiles had a law that was not the Mosaic law.

So what then is Paul telling us here in verse 12? He is telling us six things — three things about the Gentiles and three things about the Jews.

- (1) The Gentiles were without the Mosaic law.
- (2) The Gentiles still sinned.
- (3) Therefore, the Gentiles will perish even without the Mosaic law.
- (4) The Jews were under the Mosaic law.
- (5) The Jews sinned by transgressing the Mosaic law.
- (6) Therefore, the Jews will be judged by the Mosaic law.

What then can we say about the Jews and the Gentiles? What we can say is that they are in the same boat, even though they arrived in that boat in different ways.

And what is that same boat? It is the boat of being lost. It is the boat of perishing as a sinner. It is the boat of being judged under a law that you have broken. And everyone is in that same boat. Paul will

tell us later how we can get out of that boat, but everyone who has transgressed a law of God is in that same boat.

But the Jews were special, right? They were the chosen people of God, right? They had the law of Moses. They had circumcision. God would never just lump the Jews in with the Gentiles, would he? How could the Jews and the Gentiles be in the same boat?

We saw the answer to those questions back in verse 11: “For God shows no partiality.” And we see the explanation of that answer here in verse 12: everyone has sinned under one law or another, and so everyone will perish when they are judged by the law that they broke. That is how God shows no partiality.

Romans 2:13

Romans 2:13 — For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified.

In the previous verse, we found the first occurrence of the word “law” in Romans. In this verse, we find the first occurrence of another key word in Romans — “justified.”

The word “justification” in its various forms occurs 38 times in the New Testament — and about half of those occurrences are found in Romans. Again, there can be no doubt that “justify” like “law” is a key word in this letter. If you look at the reverse side of the Handout for Lesson 25 you will find every occurrence of the word “justification” in the letter to the Romans.

But what does “justification” mean? I think we should divide that question into two parts. First, what does it mean to be justified? And second, how does one become justified?

First, what does it mean to be justified? We have likely all heard the popular short and catchy answer to that question — being justified means being just as if I never sinned.

And yes, that is a definitely a catchy definition. But, catchiness aside, is that definition correct? Does that definition work? Well, let’s test it. Let’s try it out with the very first occurrence of the word here in this verse. Does that definition of “justified” work with the word “justified” in verse 13?

I think the answer is no. While that catchy definition might work elsewhere, I don’t think it works here in verse 13. Why not? Because if I am a doer of the law, then I am not “as if” I never sinned — but rather I have never sinned. There is no “as if” about it. I kept the law, and I am justified because I kept the law. I am justified, not because of what Christ did for me, but because of what I did for me. I did the law. I never broke the law. I never sinned. And so, therefore, I am justified. I am a doer of the law.

And that all sounds great — in theory! But it all falls apart in practice. Why? Because no one can live that way. No one can keep the law without ever transgressing it. Paul will make that point later in Romans 3:20 — “For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight.” And again in Romans 10:5 — “the person who does the commandments shall live by them.” Only Jesus was able to obey the law perfectly (1 Peter 2:22). No one else could ever do that. Paul will make that point in the next chapter — we have all sinned.

So where are we when it comes to justification? I think where we are is that we have the standard required to attain justification, and we have found a way to theoretically meet that standard, but sadly the way that we found is impossible for us. If we could obey the law perfectly, then we would be justified (verse 13), but we cannot obey the law perfectly. And so we know the standard, but we cannot meet that standard on our own.

In short, we have a problem — and we have a question: Is there some other way to be justified? The good news of the gospel is that the answer is yes, and Paul will soon tell us all about it. And we will learn that this other path to justification is based, not on something I do, but on something God does (8:33). And we will learn that this path to justification involves the grace of God (3:24), faith in Jesus (3:26), and the blood of Christ (5:9). And we will learn that God has done all of the hard work himself when it comes to this path to justification (10:5-10).

We will have a great deal to say later about justification and how we can attain it, but for now let's focus on what verse 13 is telling us about it. "For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified."

And, again, that first word "for" is very helpful. Verse 13 is explaining verse 12. And what did we see in verse 12? We saw that, while the Gentiles did not have the Mosaic law, they must have had a law, and they sinned by transgressing that law. And we saw that the Jews had the Mosaic law, and they would be judged by that law. And how would that judgment turn out for them? That is what verse 13 tells us.

Verse 13 does not give us the verdict of that judgment — at least not directly. Instead, verse 13 gives us the standard of that judgment. How can one be justified by the law of Moses? The answer is simple — do it! It is “the doers of the law who will be justified.” But, as we have said, that is impossible.

And so, while verse 13 does not directly give us the verdict of the judgment in verse 12, verse 13 does give us that verdict indirectly — and that verdict is guilty. Paul also explains this in another of his letters.

Galatians 3:10 — For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, “Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.”

Jesus was the only one who ever kept the law perfectly. Jesus was the only person who was ever able to “abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.” Everyone else broke the law, and so the verdict for them was guilty. They were not doers of the law, but rather they broke the law.

The Jews had the law of Moses, and they thought they could rely on the law to be right with God. And that was true in theory — they could have relied on the law to be right with God if they kept the entirety of the law. But they could not do that — and so their reliance on the law of Moses was misplaced. Yes, they possessed the law (they had heard it, as verse 13 tells us), but they had not done the law. They were hearers of the law of Moses, but they were not doers of the law of Moses. They had it, but they did not do it.

But what about the Gentiles? They did not have the law of Moses. Does anything that we just read about the Jews also apply to the Gentiles?

Were the Gentiles doers of whatever law that they had? The next verse begins Paul's answer to that question.

Romans 2:14-16

Romans 2:14-16 — 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 on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus.

The Gentiles did not have the law of Moses, but did the Gentiles have a law? Yes, they did. Verse 14 tells us that the Gentiles were “a law to themselves” when “by nature” they did “what the law requires.”

How could they break such a law? Perhaps they murdered someone despite knowing in their heart that murder is wrong. Perhaps they stole something despite knowing in their heart that theft is wrong. Perhaps they dishonored their parents despite knowing in their heart that such conduct is wrong.

And, setting aside sociopaths, I think we can say that everyone who has ever lived has known that such things are wrong. Human society has always been based on such knowledge of what is right and what is wrong. That is how people can live together in cities, and we know that people have lived together in cities almost from the very beginning (Genesis 4:17). And when people live this way, “they show that the work of the law is written on their hearts.”

That is what it means to do these things “by nature.” These things are the natural way for people to live — they don’t kill each other; they don’t steal from each other; they honor their parents; and so on. Even today, when we find isolated tribes with no connection to the outside world, we find that basic knowledge of what is right and what is wrong.

And yes, as Paul says, these moral laws are also in the law of Moses — not everything in the law, but some things in the law. These are things in the law of Moses that the Jews already knew, and that their neighbors also knew. Some of the laws given on Sinai were just re-statements of basic moral norms that were known prior to the law of Moses and that were known to nations that never received the law of Moses. Do not kill. Do not steal. Do not dishonor your parents. Those laws were not laws only for the Jews.

But what about Gentiles today? Can Gentiles today simply follow the law written on their hearts instead of following Christ? What about those Gentiles who have never heard about Christ? Can they just follow the law written on their hearts?

No, they cannot. While that path may have been open for Gentiles prior to the days of Christ (we will look at that question later), it is not a path that is open for anyone today. Just as God does not have some special plan of salvation only for the Jews, God likewise does not have some special plan of salvation only for the Gentiles. Paul told us that when he proclaimed the gospel to the people of Athens.

Acts 17:30 — The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands **all people everywhere** to repent.

It is impossible to misunderstand “all people everywhere!” And, if God was still overlooking their ignorance, then Paul should never have proclaimed the gospel to men of Athens. If they were saved without knowing about Jesus, then Paul should have just left them in that state of ignorance. But they were not, and Paul did not. Paul proclaimed the gospel to people who had never heard about Jesus because Paul knew that the gospel was the only way they could ever be saved — hearing the gospel and then obeying the gospel.

And so we need to be careful not to read more into these verses than was intended. Paul is most certainly not describing some path to God in these verses that bypasses Christ.