

Lesson 27 at StudyRomans.org

Handout for Lesson 27

The Handout for Lesson 27 is intended to show how we can study Romans in the original Greek without ever actually seeing the text in the original Greek. That is, we can study the Greek text just by looking at the English text. The example on the Handout uses the Logos Bible Software, but most computer Bible programs allow you to do something similar.

Before we look at the examples on the Handout, let's answer this question: why do we ever need to do this? To answer that question, we need to know some important differences between Greek and English.

In English, the word "you" is ambiguous. If I say "you believe" absent context, then you have no idea whether I'm talking to one person or to a whole room of people. In Texas, we might say "y'all believe," or we might say "you all believe" to be precise, but if we stick with the pronoun "you," then there is ambiguity in modern English.

Greek does not have that problem. The Greek language builds that missing information directly into the verb ending and into the pronoun itself. For example, in Greek, the singular pronoun "you" and the plural pronoun "you" are completely different words. Old English maintained that distinction with "thou" and "ye," but that distinction has been lost in modern English.

And the Greek verb endings are also different. In fact, the verb ending alone is often enough to tell you the number, even without the pronoun. For example, with the Greek verb translated “believe,” one verb ending means “you believe” (singular) while a different verb ending means “you all believe” (plural). That is why the Greek pronoun is often omitted entirely unless it is needed for emphasis or for contrast.

So, when we study Romans, how can we tell whether Paul is talking to an individual person or to a group of people? Sometimes we can tell from the context in English, but we can also just look at the Greek text. But the problem with that plan is that most of us (including myself) do not speak Greek. And that is where Bible software can be a big help.

With some Bible software, we can study the Greek text without ever looking at the Greek text. The Logos software on the Handout, for example, allows us to create what they call a “Visual Filter” that shows in the English text what is happening in the Greek text.

If we look at the two excerpts from Romans shown at the bottom of the Handout, we can immediately tell whether any particular pronoun or verb is singular or plural. The singular pronouns and verbs have a single box around them, while the plural forms have a double box around them. And we can immediately see that in Romans 1, Paul was talking largely to a group of people — the Gentiles — while in Romans 2 Paul is talking largely to a single person — his diatribe opponent. But we can also tell from the final word in Romans 2:24 (plural “you”) that Paul seems to have the entire group in mind even as he speaks to that single person in his diatribe.

And what about the pronouns in English that do not have a box around them such as in the phrase “do **you** rob temples” in Romans 2:22? That is an example where there is no underlying Greek pronoun. The original Greek text left the pronoun out but the English translation put it back in.

Romans 2:18, Continued

Romans 2:17-18 — But if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast in God and know his will and approve what is excellent, because you are instructed from the law;

When we ended last week we were looking at Paul’s description in verse 18 of Jews who knew God’s will, who approved God’s will, and who had been taught God’s will. As we said, there was only one remaining question: had they done God’s will? They had been taught it, they knew it, and they even agreed with it — but had they done it? Verse 18 doesn’t tell us.

And, as we also said last week, verse 18 reminds us of the people in Hosea 4:6 who were destroyed by their lack of knowledge. The people here in verse 18 had an academic knowledge of God — they certainly knew about God — but did they know God?

Sadly, I think what these verses from Romans 2 are telling us that many of the Jews had not heeded that lesson from Hosea. Yes, they knew about God, but they did not know God. And the best evidence of that lack of knowledge was their rejection of the Son of God. Jesus explains that to us:

John 14:6-9 — Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you had known me, you would have known my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.” Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us.” Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’?”

“If you had known me, you would have known my Father also.” “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.” If we want to know God the Father, we must know God the Son. There is no other way to know God the Father.

So, yes, this list in verse 18 looks great on the surface, but something is missing — or rather *someone* is missing. These Jews knew the law of God, but they did not know God.

Romans 2:19-20

Romans 2:19-20 — and if you are sure that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, — an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of children, having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth -

These two verses may be the best example ever of the old adage that those who can, do, while those who can't, teach! These Jews were not doing, but they were certainly teaching.

And what they were teaching was the law, which Paul describes here as having “the embodiment of knowledge and truth.”

The Greek word translated “embodiment” refers to the outward form or appearance of something. The word is used only twice in the Bible — once in a positive sense here in verse 20, and once in a negative sense in 2 Timothy 3:5 (“having the appearance of godliness”). In verse 20, the word tells us what we already knew — that the knowledge and truth of the law of God was an outward form of the knowledge and truth of God himself.

In short, the Law reflected the character of the Lawgiver, as the Psalmist also tells us.

Psalm 19:7-9 — The law of the LORD is **perfect**, reviving the soul; the testimony of the LORD is **sure**, making wise the simple; the precepts of the LORD are **right**, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is **pure**, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the LORD is **clean**, enduring forever; the rules of the LORD are **true**, and righteous altogether.

That is the law that the Jews had. And what did they do with that law? Verses 19-20 tell us that they were a guide to the blind, a light to those in darkness, an instructor of the foolish, and a teacher of children, right? Well, not exactly. Paul does not actually say that they were those things, but rather that they were sure of being those things. Verses 19-20 are not telling us what these teachers were, but rather what these teachers thought they were.

And you know what? Sometimes what we think we are is not what we really are! James 1:23-24, for example, describes someone who sees himself in a mirror, but who then walks away, forgetting what he was like. And at the end of that same chapter, James describes those who

think they are religious but whose religion is worthless. They are not what they think they are. And there are other such verses in the Bible:

Proverbs 16:2 — All the ways of a man are pure in his own eyes, but the LORD weighs the spirit.

1 Corinthians 3:18 — Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise.

Galatians 6:3 — For if anyone thinks he is something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself.

Revelation 3:17 — For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.

There is always a danger that how we see ourselves is not how we really are. And how do we avoid that danger? There is only one way — we must see ourselves in the mirror of God's word. We must see ourselves as God sees us.

God always sees us in truth, but we do not always see ourselves in truth. And that seems to have been the problem here in verses 19-20. They knew God's will, they approved of God's will, and they thought they were teaching God's will. And so I'm sure they saw themselves in a very favorable light.

In fact, just up through the end of verse 20, I suspect that they were wondering where Paul was going with all of this. I mean, yes, it started out sounding like a criticism, but then Paul just listed all of their best attributes. What's the problem? Maybe there isn't a

problem, but, if I were the suspicious sort, I might think that Paul is setting them up for something here! Let's keep reading.

Romans 2:21

Romans 2:21 — you then who teach others, do you not teach yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal?

And it looks like I was right! Here at last we see the fundamental charge against them — hypocrisy. They relied upon a law that they broke, and they taught others to follow a law that they broke. A classic example of do what I say rather than do what I do.

And, as we also saw last week, Paul might have had the Pharisees in mind:

Matthew 23:2-3 — The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat, so do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do. **For they preach, but do not practice.**

Jesus said, "For they preach, but do not practice." Paul wrote, "While you preach against stealing, do you steal?" With each, the charge is the same — hypocrisy.

"You then who teach others, do you not teach yourself?" That charge reminds us of what we said earlier about delighting in the law of God — what is the reason for that delight? What is our motivation? Is it our love of God — or is it perhaps our love of something else?

Paul elsewhere lists some of the things that should happen to us when we study the word of God — we should be taught, we should be re-

proved, we should be corrected, and we should be trained in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16).

None of that was happening with these thieves here in verse 21 who were preaching against theft. They knew what God's word said on that subject, but they had not taught themselves what God had said — even while presuming to teach others. They had not been reprovved or corrected themselves despite trying to reprove and correct everybody else.

Every time I study the word of God, I should walk away from that experience a changed person. I should be taught something I didn't know before, I should be reprovved about something I have been doing that is wrong, I should be corrected about something I was thinking that is wrong, and I should be trained in righteousness so that I can become more like Jesus than I was before.

But what if none of that ever happens? What if I study the Bible and never change a thing about myself or even see anything that needs changing? What can I say then?

Well, if I were perfect, then that would explain it — but, of course, we know that is not the right answer! A better explanation might be that Bible study has just become another hobby for me, or perhaps I have become as hard-hearted as one of those Pharisees, or perhaps I am like one of the self-righteous hypocrites that we see here, or perhaps I just think I already know all there is to know about the Bible.

In short, if I am deeply studying God's word and not experiencing any spiritual growth, then I have a problem — a very big problem. It is the same problem that we see in Matthew 23 with the Pharisees who laid

heavy burdens on people that they themselves were not willing to lift, and it is the same problem we see here in Romans 2 with those who teach one thing while doing the opposite.

Let's look at the specific examples of hypocrisy that Paul gives us here. The first is theft. "While you preach against stealing, do you steal?"

How were the Jews guilty of theft? We might point to spiritual theft just as we earlier discussed spiritual adultery.

Matthew 5:28 — But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

And, yes, I do think that Matthew 5:28 applies to sins in addition to adultery. For example, if I am on the lookout for how I can steal something and get away with it, haven't I already stolen that item in my heart?

That may be the case here — that Paul is not accusing them of actual theft but rather is accusing them of committing theft in their heart. Perhaps, but the focus here seems to be on what they are doing rather than just on what they are thinking. Also, I don't think we need to limit ourselves to spiritual theft given the number of times God accused them elsewhere of actual theft.

Jeremiah 7:9-10 — Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, 'We are delivered!' — only to go on doing all these abominations?

Malachi 3:8 — Will man rob God? Yet you are robbing me. But you say, ‘How have we robbed you?’ In your tithes and contributions.

Matthew 21:12-13 — And Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who sold and bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons. He said to them, “It is written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer,’ but you make it a den of robbers.”

And we also have the specific examples of theft and greed that we find with the tax collectors, who defrauded people (Luke 19:8), and the Pharisees, who were lovers of money (Luke 16:14).

In short, I think we can show that the Jews were guilty of both spiritualized theft and actual theft — guilty both of theft in their hearts and of theft in their pockets.

And, no, Paul is not saying that every Jew was guilty of theft, but I think he is saying that it was much more widespread than the people liked to admit, that it occurred in all levels of society, and that it was often overlooked or excused by those who knew better.

And we should notice that this issue of theft was very squarely a covenant issue. The eighth commandment was “you shall not steal” (Exodus 20:15). And yet many of the Jews did steal. That is Paul’s accusation against them here. And the accusations continue.

Romans 2:22

Romans 2:22 — You who say that one must not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples?

Verse 22 contains two accusations — one that is easy to understand and one that is difficult to understand. Let's start with the easy one: "You who say that one must not commit adultery, do you commit adultery?"

I think what we said about the charge of theft in verse 21 applies in like manner to this charge of adultery in verse 22.

As with theft, adultery was also squarely a covenant issue. The seventh commandment said, "You shall not commit adultery" (Exodus 20:14). And yet, as with theft, I think we can say that the people were guilty of breaking that commandment — both spiritually and physically. Jesus charged the people with both:

Matthew 5:27-28 — You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

Mark 10:11-12 — And he said to them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her, and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery."

And, again, Paul's point is not that all Jews were guilty of adultery. Instead, Paul's point is that there was a widespread disregard among the people for the covenant and the obligations imposed by that covenant. Many were breaking God's commandments, and many

more who knew better were looking the other way while those commandments were being broken.

The second accusation in verse 22 is the one that is difficult to understand: “You who abhor idols, do you rob temples?” What does that mean?

The first half is easy — “you who abhor idols.” That was certainly true about Jews in the first century — but, of course, that had not always been true about the Jews. Far from abhorring idols, for much of their history, the Jews had seemingly loved idols!

When we think of Isaiah 2, I suspect we all think of the great prophecy of the church that we find at the beginning of that chapter. But to whom was that great prophecy initially directed? It was directed first to a people that God had rejected (Isaiah 2:6) because of their idolatry.

Isaiah 2:8 — Their land is filled with idols; they bow down to the work of their hands, to what their own fingers have made.

And we find that same charge all throughout the rest of the Old Testament — “their land is filled with idols.”

And yet that was no longer true in the days of Paul. The Jews no longer loved idols, and their land was no longer filled with idols. What had happened?

What had happened was Babylon. God exiled his people to Babylon for 70 years to teach them a lesson about idolatry (2 Kings 17:12) — and they seemed to have learned that lesson. Idolatry was never the problem after the exile that it had been prior to the exile.

In fact, history shows us that the Jews were willing to die rather than permit idols to be brought inside the temple or even inside Jerusalem. We see that with the Maccabean Revolt that occurred during the time between the testaments, we see that again when Caligula demanded that a statue of himself be placed inside the temple, and we see that when Pilate brought the Roman military insignia bearing the images of the emperor into Jerusalem. Paul tells us that the Jews of his day abhorred idols, and history tells us that as well.

So far, so good. But, sadly, verse 22 continues: “You who abhor idols, **do you rob temples?**”

Robbing temples? What does that mean? And why the contrast between robbing temples and abhorring idols? How is that evidence of hypocrisy? All good questions — and also all questions with many proposed answers in the commentaries!

Let’s start with this question — whose temple is being robbed? Is it the Jewish temple in Jerusalem, or is it some pagan temple?

We might think that the plural “temples” in verse 22 means that it cannot be the Jewish temple, but that plural is not in the Greek. Instead, the Greek word just means to be a temple robber, no matter how many temples you rob. And that Greek word is found only here, but a related Greek word is found in Acts 19:37, where it is translated “sacrilegious.”

So this temple in verse 22 could be the Jewish temple, and, if so, this robbing of the temple could be the robbing of God that Malachi described.

Malachi 3:8 — Will man rob God? Yet you are robbing me. But you say, 'How have we robbed you?' In your tithes and contributions.

And there is one terrible example of such robbery that would have been well known to every single Jew in Rome. Here is how Josephus described that example of robbery:

There was a man who was a Jew, but had been driven away from his own country by an accusation laid against him for transgressing their laws, and by the fear he was under of punishment for the same; but in all respects a wicked man. He, then living at Rome, professed to instruct men in the wisdom of the laws of Moses. He procured also three other men, entirely of the same character with himself, to be his partners. These men persuaded Fulvia, a woman of great dignity, and one that had embraced the Jewish religion, to send purple and gold to the temple at Jerusalem; and when they had gotten them, they employed them for their own uses, and spent the money themselves, on which account it was that they at first required it of her. (*Antiquities* 18.81-82)

And, yes, that could be the reason for this charge of temple robbing in verse 22, but I don't think so. There is a problem with all of those theories that take this temple to be the Jewish temple, and that problem is this: how is robbing the Jewish temple related to the hatred of false idols? How does robbing the Jewish temple show hypocrisy on the part of those who claim to hate idols? In short, it is hard to make the Jewish temple fit in with Paul's argument here.

So let's consider the other option — that the temple being robbed in verse 22 is a pagan temple. But this option comes with its own difficult question — how were the Jews guilty of robbing pagan temples?

Perhaps our starting point in answering that question is to remember that the first two charges — theft and adultery — were firmly rooted in the Law of Moses, with each charge corresponding to one of the ten commandments.

Is there anything in the Law of Moses that we can point to here? We might start with the first commandment in Exodus 20:3 — “You shall have no other gods before me.” But I think we should look instead at a specific application of that first commandment.

Deuteronomy 7:25-26 — The carved images of their gods you shall burn with fire. You shall not covet the silver or the gold that is on them or take it for yourselves, lest you be ensnared by it, for it is an abomination to the LORD your God. And you shall not bring an abominable thing into your house and become devoted to destruction like it. You shall utterly detest and **abhor it**, for it is devoted to destruction.

You shall abhor it! That sounds like verse 22 — “You who abhor idols, do you rob temples?” Is it possible that these Jews in Romans 2 were breaking that commandment from Deuteronomy 7? That they were bringing those false idols into their homes instead of detesting them and abhorring them?

If so, they would hardly have been the first to do so. The Old Testament describes someone who did that same thing — Achan.

Joshua 7:20-21 — And Achan answered Joshua, “Truly I have sinned against the LORD God of Israel, and this is what I did: when I saw among the spoil a beautiful cloak from Shinar, and 200 shekels of silver, and a bar of gold weighing 50 shekels, then I coveted them and took

them. And see, they are hidden in the earth inside my tent, with the silver underneath.”

Achan, no doubt, would have claimed to detest idols. And yet Achan was perfectly happy to bring the gold and the silver from those detested idols into his tent so that he and his family could sleep on top of them! That does sound a bit hypocritical! And that is Paul’s primary charge here — hypocrisy. And so perhaps we are on to something.

Were there, in fact, some first century Achans who were being addressed by Paul here in verse 22? I think the answer is yes. I don’t think the sin of Achan had gone anywhere. I think there were still some Jews who, like Achan, claimed to abhor idols, but who, also like Achan, did not act at all like they abhorred idols. If they really abhorred idols, then why were they sleeping on top of them? If they really detested idols, then why were they embracing those idols?

And that view of verse 22 is not new. That view of verse 22 was also the view of the fourth century commentator, John Chrysostom, who wrote:

“It was strictly forbidden for Jews to touch any of the treasures deposited in heathen temples, because they would be defiled. But Paul claims here that the tyranny of greed had persuaded them to disregard the law at this point.”

These Jews claimed to detest idolatry and claimed to spurn any association with idols, but they were very willing to be defiled by profiting from the very idols that they claimed to detest. That sort of hypocrisy fits perfectly with Paul’s primary point here — you teach one thing, but you do another.

So is this view of verse 22 the best view? I think it is — both because it best fits the point that Paul is making here, but also because it is best supported by the evidence.

What the evidence shows is that, despite the supposedly strict Jewish prohibition against idolatry, the Jews often had a surprisingly loose view with regard to pagan religious objects and idols.

The evidence I found came from Strack and Billerbeck's *Commentary on the New Testament from the Talmud and Midrash*. That monumental multi-volume work is intended to illuminate New Testament texts by gathering relevant passages from the various rabbinic sources of the day.

When Strack and Billerbeck turn their attention to Romans 2:22, here are some of the examples that they provide:

- The rabbinic sources described at least one case where a Jew took an idol outright in order to sell it.
- Another rabbinic case involved a Jew who used stones from a shrine to Mercury to pave their roads.
- Some rabbis taught that Jews could keep gold, garments, and equipment that were found on the head of an idol.
- Some rabbis taught that Jews were free to purchase goods stolen by pagan priests from their own idols and then sold on the market.

- Some rabbis taught that a Jew who found property lost by a Gentile (such as an expensive idol) was under no legal obligation to return that property.

And the broader point from those examples is that they were not just theoretical legal exercises. Instead, those examples reflected real situations that arose often enough to demand the attention of the rabbis.

And it is also important to note that these rabbis, as teachers of the law, were precisely the type of person being addressed by Paul in these verses: “You then who teach others, do you not teach yourself?”

And so I think the best view of the difficult second half of verse 22 is that, as with some Jews who were guilty of stealing and adultery, there were also some Jews who were guilty of profiting from the idols that they claimed to abhor and detest. Certainly not all Jews, but enough Jews that Paul could use these charges to cast broad allegations of hypocrisy on those among them who presumed to be teachers of the law but who were always looking for ways to circumvent the commandments of God.