

Dr. Craig Keener, Romans, Session 5,

Romans 2:11-3:23

6-min. Video Overview

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Welcome to The Explainer. Today, we are going to break down one of the most masterful, airtight arguments ever put to paper, found in the Apostle Paul's letter to the Romans. I mean, think about it.

Have you ever been in that spot, judging someone else, and feeling totally, 100% justified? Well, Paul built this brilliant argument for that exact moment, and honestly, it's structured like a perfect trap. Okay, let's dive in. Alright, first up, setting the rhetorical trap.

Now, to really understand how this trap works, you have to see how Paul sets it all up. He does this in the chapter right before Romans 1, by basically getting his entire audience on his side. So here's his opening move.

He starts by listing all these sins that were pretty common in the Greco-Roman world — things that almost anyone reading, Jewish or not, would agree are just wrong. This gets everyone nodding along, thinking, yeah, absolutely, those people deserve judgment. See what he's doing? He's creating this sense of a shared moral high ground, a united front against some external other.

So, now for part two, the judgment boomerang. This is where things get really interesting. Just when everyone is feeling pretty good about themselves, agreeing with Paul, he completely turns the tables.

The trap has been set. Now, he springs it. He uses this lecture style that was really common back then, called a diatribe.

It's where you basically invent an imaginary opponent to argue with. This lets him anticipate every possible objection his audience might have. He voices their arguments for them and then just demolishes them, one by one.

It's a brilliant way to control the entire conversation. And this all builds to his core logic, which is basically a trap made of pure reason. Think about it.

Premise one — committing sin deserves God's judgment. Well, everybody just agreed with that a second ago. Then comes premise two — guess what? You who are judging, you do the same things.

And boom, the conclusion is totally inescapable. Therefore, you won't escape judgment either. By agreeing with the first easy point, they've literally walked into the trap and condemned themselves.

So, now we're at section three — inward versus outward righteousness. The hypocrisy trap has sprung, but Paul knows his audience. He can already hear their next line of defense.

He knows his imaginary opponent is going to fire back with something like, but wait a minute, Paul. I'm different. I have the law of Moses.

I have my heritage. They're basically pulling out their religious resume, trying to claim a special exemption. But Paul just cuts right through all that, arguing that those external markers are not what actually matter to God.

And this is where he lays out this really sharp contrast. On one side, you have this outward, foreshadow righteousness — you know, bragging about having the law, relying on physical rituals, always looking for approval from other people. But on the other side is the real deal — an inward reality.

The law isn't just in a book; it's written on your heart. The change is spiritual, and the only praise you're seeking is from God. It's a timeless critique of anyone who wears their religion more like a badge of honor than a matter of the heart.

And he just lands the point with this powerful statement. True identity before God isn't about the outward signs; it's about the inward condition of your heart. I mean, that is a radical redefinition of what it means to be one of God's people.

Okay, moving on to section four — the verdict. All are guilty. So, having dismantled every single possible defense, from moral superiority to religious heritage, Paul is now ready to deliver the final, universal verdict.

And what's so powerful here is that Paul doesn't just give his own opinion. He acts like a prosecutor, and his evidence is Scripture itself. He masterfully weaves together a chain of quotes from the Psalms and Isaiah to prove his case that sin has corrupted every single part of the human person.

He starts his diagnosis with the mouth, quoting scriptures that paint a grim picture of human speech as deceptive, even destructive, like an open grave. From the mouth, he then moves to the feet, linking our actions and the paths we walk to violence and misery. And he finishes with the eyes, our very perception of the world showing a fundamental lack of reverence for God.

And really, that's the root of the whole problem. So when he lays it all out, the evidence is just overwhelming. Paul's scriptural argument is so comprehensive that, in the end, nobody — not the religious person, not the irreligious person — no one has anything left to say.

The entire courtroom of humanity falls silent before God. And that brings us to our final section — God's righteous solution. The trap has been sprung, the verdict is in, and the situation looks completely hopeless.

But this is exactly where Paul wants his audience to be. Because it's only when every mouth is silenced that we're finally ready to hear a new word. This is the question his entire argument has been designed to provoke.

If our own efforts fail, if our heritage doesn't save us, if our religious rules can't make us righteous, then what can? He has created a desperate need for a different kind of solution. And here it is. Paul reveals that God has provided a completely different way to be made right with him.

It's a righteousness that's not from us, but is a gift from God. And he's quick to point out this isn't some new idea. The law and the prophets were pointing to it all along.

It's a righteousness that comes through faith in Jesus Christ, and it is for all who believe, with no distinction. And that's the beautiful symmetry of it. The problem of sin is universal.

It applies to everyone. So the solution God provides is also universal. Because everyone is in the same predicament, the solution is available to everyone on the exact same terms.

It puts everyone on equal footing. And that leaves us with a final thought to chew on. Paul's argument isn't just abstract theology.

It's meant to radically reframe how we see judgment, grace, and our common humanity. It forces us to ask: if we all really are in the same boat, all in need of the same rescue, what does that change about how we see ourselves and how we see others?