

Romans 2:1–3:23

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Session 5

Sponsored by Biblealearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

Keywords

Diatribes, Impartiality, Circumcision, Hypocrisy, Justification, Faith, Law of Moses, Oracles of God, Holy Spirit

Abstract

In this lecture, Dr. Craig Keener discusses Romans 2:1–3:23, demonstrating how the Apostle Paul systematically exposes the universal sinfulness of humanity. Utilizing the Greco-Roman diatribe style, Paul addresses an imaginary Jewish interlocutor to dismantle any claim of moral or ethnic superiority, proving that both Jews and Gentiles are inexcusable before God's impartial judgment. Keener explains that outward indicators of covenant identity, such as physical circumcision or mere possession of the Law, are insufficient; instead, true righteousness requires a spiritual circumcision of the heart by the Holy Spirit. Ultimately, the Law's purpose is to reveal sin and silence human self-justification, paving the way for the righteousness of God received through faith in Jesus Christ.

Outline

I. Introduction and Rhetorical Setup (Romans 2:1)

- **A. Romans 1 as a Foundation for Romans 2**

1. Romans 1:18–32 establishes that the Gentiles are lost and morally inexcusable.
2. Romans 2 expands the indictment to prove that all people are lost and in need of grace.

- **B. Rhetorical Devices Employed by Paul**

1. *Apostrophe*: Singling out an individual hearer in the audience (addressed as "O man" in Romans 2:1, 2:3, and 9:20).

2. *Syllogistic traps*: Underlining that sinners who judge others implicitly condemn themselves since they commit the same actions.

II. God's Impartial Judgment (Romans 2:1–16)

- **A. Diatribe Style and the Imaginary Interlocutor**
 1. Common lecture style used by Stoic philosophers (such as Epictetus) to engage audiences through rhetorical questions.
 2. An imaginary opponent allows Paul to anticipate and demolish potential Jewish objections.
 3. The interlocutor is implicitly addressed throughout chapter 2 before being explicitly named in verse 17.
- **B. God's Mercy and Human Obstinacy (Romans 2:4–5)**
 1. God's kindness and patience are intended to lead humanity to repentance.
 2. Instead of storing up heavenly rewards (a common Jewish concept), hypocritical judges are "storing up wrath" for themselves.
- **C. Chiastic Structure of Impartiality (Romans 2:6–11)**
 1. Inverted parallel structure demonstrating God's absolute fairness:
 2. *a. A*: God repays each according to works (v. 6)
 3. *b. B*: Eternal life, glory, and honor to those who do good (v. 7)
 4. *c. C*: Wrath and fury to those who disobey (v. 8)
 5. *d. C'*: Tribulation and distress for those who do evil (v. 9)
 6. *e. B'*: Glory, honor, and peace to everyone who does good (v. 10)
 7. *f. A'*: God shows no partiality / is ethnically impartial (v. 11)
- **D. Ethnic Impartiality and Accountability (Romans 2:12–16)**
 1. Those with greater revelation (possessing the Law of Moses) are held to a more strict standard of accountability.
 2. Jews and Gentiles are judged identically; possession of the Law does not grant automatic favor.
 3. Scholarly views on who performs "good works" for eternal life in chapter 2:

4. *a. View 1*: A real but small class of righteous, God-fearing Gentiles.
5. *b. View 2*: A purely hypothetical class of people used for rhetorical effect.
6. *c. View 3*: Christian believers who fulfill the Law through Christ living in them.
7. Conscience as natural law: Works as an internal monitor (accusing or defending thoughts) for Gentiles who lack the written Law.

III. Indicting Hypocrisy (Romans 2:17–24)

- **A. Diatribal Hyperbole and Spiritual Pride**

1. Paul uses "*reductio ad absurdum*" and exaggeration to challenge the Jewish interlocutor.
2. Torah study, while central to Jewish piety, risked producing intellectual and spiritual pride (a danger applicable to modern seminary students).

- **B. Rhetorical Structure of the Indictment**

1. The interlocutor makes 11 separate pious claims of Jewish privilege and superiority (v. 17–20).
2. Paul counters with 5 rapid-fire, confrontational rhetorical questions using antithesis and anaphora (v. 21–23).

- **C. Desecration and Profaning God's Name**

1. Temple robbery (v. 22): Highlighted as the ultimate impiety to Gentiles; used to illustrate radical hypocrisy.
2. Blasphemy among the Gentiles: Paul quotes Isaiah 52:5 to declare that hypocritical behavior causes outsiders to slander God.
3. Historical parallel: A generation prior, a Jewish charlatan's exploitation of Roman women led Tiberius to expel the entire Jewish community.

IV. Inward Jewishness and Spiritual Circumcision (Romans 2:25–29)

- **A. Circumcision and Covenant Value**

1. Circumcision is valuable only if the covenant is kept; breaking the Law converts circumcision into uncircumcision.
2. Circumcision was a significant social barrier and source of ridicule for Gentile men in the Greco-Roman world.

- **B. Spiritual Circumcision of the Heart**

1. Grounded in Old Testament texts demanding circumcision of the heart (Deuteronomy 10:16, 30:6; Jeremiah 4:4, 9:25–26).
2. True circumcision is an inward work produced by the Holy Spirit, not an outward, physical marker.
3. Wordplay on Judah/Jew: Judah means "praise"—the true Jew seeks praise from God, not from humans (v. 29).

V. God's Faithfulness and Human Unfaithfulness (Romans 3:1–8)

- **A. Theodicy and Jewish Privilege**

1. Paul addresses the value of ethnic Jewishness: they were entrusted with the "oracles of God" (Scripture).
2. Israel's unfaithfulness does not negate God's covenant faithfulness.

- **B. Diatribal Objections Refuted**

1. Objection: If our unrighteousness serves to demonstrate God's righteousness, is God unjust to judge us?
2. Scriptural defense: Paul quotes Psalm 51:4 (David confessing guilt to justify God's judgment).
3. *Reductio ad absurdum*: Dismantling the slanderous charge that Paul's theology of grace encourages sin ("Let us do evil that good may come").

VI. Universal Condemnation: All Under Sin (Romans 3:9–20)

- **A. Gezer HaShavah (The Linking of Scriptures)**

1. Paul employs the rabbinic method of *Gezer HaShavah* to link multiple texts using common keywords.
2. Citations are connected by the theme of body parts (eyes, feet, throat, mouth, tongue), preparing for the discussion of bodily members under sin's power.

- **B. Scriptural Indictment of Humanity (Romans 3:10–18)**

1. Paul chains texts from Psalm 14:1–3, Psalm 5:9, Psalm 140:3, Psalm 10:7, Isaiah 59:7–8, and Psalm 36:1.

2. Establishes the absolute, universal depravity and sinfulness of both Jews and Gentiles.

- **C. The Silencing Work of the Law (Romans 3:19–20)**

1. *Prosopopeia*: Personification where the Law speaks to those under it to silence every mouth and make the world accountable.
2. "Works of the Law" (encompassing the entire Law, though exemplified by distinctives like circumcision, sabbath, and food laws) cannot justify.
3. The Law's true, divine function is to identify and expose sin, not to transform hearts.

VII. God's Righteousness Revealed Through Faith (Romans 3:21–31)

- **A. A Righteousness Apart from the Law**

1. Revealed in the climax of salvation history, witnessed and pointed to by the Law and the Prophets.
2. Righteousness is received solely through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe, without ethnic distinction.

- **B. The Grammatical and Theological Debate on "Faith of Jesus Christ" (*pistis Christou*)**

1. *Subjective Genitive View*: Refers to Christ's own faithfulness or faith (held by Barth, Hays, Hooker, and Wright).
2. *Objective Genitive View*: Refers to faith in Christ as the object of belief (held by Origen, Augustine, Luther, Moo, Schreiner, and Keener).

- **C. Universal Sin and Divine Redemption (Romans 3:23–25)**

1. "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23).
2. *a.* Aorist tense of "sinned" looks at the collective action of humanity.
3. *b.* Alludes to Adam's fall, where humanity lost the divine glory which is now being restored in Christ.
4. Justification is a completely free gift of grace made possible by redemption in Christ Jesus.
5. Potential pre-Pauline tradition: Sublimely written prose in verses 24–25 may reflect an early Christian creed or hymn.