

ACCORDING TO LIGHT

by Ray C. Stedman

In Chapter 1 of Romans we saw the eagerness of Paul to go to Rome and preach the gospel, for, above all else, it is exactly what Rome needs to hear. "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile," {Rom 1:16 NIV}. Paul took pride in the gospel, and rightfully so. The gospel is what men and women everywhere desperately need. In the gospel, God has found a way to condemn our sin and to destroy it without destroying us. No man can do that. When we want to correct evildoers, we have to punish them by imprisoning them. Sometimes, to protect society, we have to take their lives.

But God does not do that. Jesus, the center and heart of the gospel, changes people. He has found a way to change our most fundamental urges from self-centeredness and selfishness, to loving concern for others, so that the very basis of our urges has been altered. In the gospel God has made divine power available to us. God has promised to us and provided for us an ultimate destiny that is mind-blowing, beyond all our wildest dreams. And yet it is amazing that when people hear this good news, they often resist it and stubbornly hold out against accepting it.

Of course, the reason for this struggle is that the gospel can never be accepted until you admit your need. Men will never accept this message until they come to a place of hopelessness and helplessness. But that is the problem; we do not like to admit we need any help. We want everybody to think we are able to handle what is coming our way. We struggle against this humiliation (as we see it) of stooping to receive from God something that we cannot earn or gain for ourselves.

In Romans, Paul describes the four types of men who resist and refuse the gospel. Two of these types we have already looked at. There is the obviously wicked person who, in essence, simply defies God. He is described at the end of Chapter 1: "Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things, but also approve of those who practice them," {Rom 1:32 NIV}. This type includes the whole world of people who flaunt morality, defy the words of God, and who encourage people to get involved more deeply in things that are hurtful and destructive.

In Chapter 2, Paul deals with the second type of man who rejects the gospel, the self-righteous moralist, who is outwardly decent, good-living, and clean-cut. Inwardly, however, he is filled with resentments, jealousies, murder, hatred, and envy; and his attitudes are as wrong as the actions of those who are outwardly evil. The problem is that such men delude themselves by thinking that everything is going to be all right with them. Because they have maintained a certain respectable facade, they think that God is going to overlook the inner sins of their life and that there is going to be no judgment for them because everything appears to be fine.

Now we come to the last two types of people who resist the truth:

One of these is the unenlightened pagan. Here we are dealing with the question of what to do about the people who have not heard the gospel. What about those who live where the Bible is unknown, or those who are in a different religion where there is no reference to the facts of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ? In this passage Paul says that their problem is that they defile their consciences.

The other and last type is that of the religious devotee who seeks deliverance from the judgment of God by religious practices, rituals, performances, and knowledge of the truth.

These two types of people are introduced by a statement of the universal lostness of mankind, found in Chapter 2, Verses 12 and 13:

All who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who sin

under the law will be judged by the law. For it is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God's sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous. {Rom 2:12-13 NIV}

Now this is probably the strongest statement from the hand of Paul and it answers the question non-Christians ask Christians more often than any other, "What about the people who have never heard of Jesus Christ?" Usually they are thinking of savages in jungles. They seldom think of the savages in the concrete jungles of our cities, but both are in the same condition, as we will see. Paul's answer to this question is that they will be judged by their own standards. God judges men, not according to what they do not know, but according to what they *do* know. They will be judged by their own standards.

So far in Romans, Paul has made three great statements about the basis of the judgment:

In Chapter 2, Verse 2, Paul says that God's judgment is according to truth, i.e., it is realistic. He only deals with that which is actually there. God does not falsely accuse anyone, but he judges according to truth.

Then in Chapter 2, Verse 6, he says God judges according to works. Now that is interesting, because that shows God is patient. God, who does see what is going on in our inner lives and who judges wholly on that basis, nevertheless waits patiently until our inner attitude begins to work itself out in some deed, speech, or attitude that we manifest openly. Therefore, God allows men to be their own judge, to see for themselves that what is coming out is a revelation of what is inside.

In Chapter 2, Verses 9-10, Paul also says the judgment of God is according to light. That is, God is not going to summon all mankind and tell them they are going to be judged on the basis of the Ten Commandments.

(By the way, I was taken to task because I speak only about what God says to men. One woman got very disturbed because she wanted to be included in this; so I want to make it clear that when I say *men* I am using it in the long-standing generic sense in which *men* stands for *mankind*. That has always been a grammatical feature of the English language, and, before that, of the Greek and Hebrew languages. All languages have this grammatical device and it is simply ridiculous to say that this is a sexist term, when used in that generic sense.)

But *man*, in this generic sense, is certainly going to be judged according to light. That means that God will say to that individual. "What did you think was right and wrong?" When the individual answers, God's question then is, "Did you do the right, and not the wrong?" By that standard, of course, everyone fails. Paul makes clear that this is true. He says, "All who sin apart from the Law will also perish apart from the Law." The fact that such men never heard the Ten Commandments, or anything else that is in the Bible, does not mean that they are going to be acceptable in God's sight. They will perish, not because they did not hear, but, because what they did know was right, they did not do.

Now Paul goes on to take up the case of the unenlightened pagan in Verses 14-16.

(Indeed, when the Gentiles, who did not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them.) This will take place on the day when God will judge men's secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares. {Rom 2:14-16 NIV}

Now I hope that your text of the Scriptures puts Verses 14 and 15 in parentheses because this all comes within the context of Paul's argument that there is a day coming when God is going to judge the secrets of men everywhere and all that is hidden will be revealed. In Luke 12:3 Jesus himself spoke of that: "What you have said in the dark will be heard in the daylight, and what you have whispered in the ear behind closed doors will be proclaimed from the housetops," {Luke 12:3 NIV}. Now there were some in Paul's day who said that because the Jews possessed the Law and knew God's truth, they would not be condemned in that judgment. But Paul is saying, "Look, if your knowledge of truth is what saves you, then everybody will be saved, even

the savages and the pagans, for they show that they have a law, too. They know a great deal about the Law; it is written on their hearts, and their consciences act as judges within them, just as they do within those of us in the more civilized world." On that basis, you see, everyone would be saved. But God does not judge that way.

Now here we have a revelation of what goes on in the primitive world. Men and women who have never heard anything about the Bible, Jesus Christ, Moses, the Ten Commandments, or any standard that we are familiar with, nevertheless are subject to judgment because they have truth written in their hearts. They do know what is right and wrong. They show it in their own lives.

I have just finished reading an amazing book called *Peace Child*, which has been made into a movie. It is a wonderful and remarkable story, taking place in the last couple of decades in the island of New Guinea. Some missionaries went there and found a tribe of people who were so degraded, so sunken in immorality, that they actually idolized treachery. They admired the man who could win someone's love, friendship, and trust, and then betray and murder him. Such a man was held up as an admirable person to follow. When the missionaries first came among these people, they despaired of ever reaching them, for there seemed to be no ground of appeal to a people that had so reversed the moral standards of life. However, as they lived among them and got better acquainted with their culture, they discovered that this moral reversal was universal, except at one point. There was one situation in which they recognized that men and women were bound to a moral standard, and that was in the case of an exchange of a peace child. If a tribe gave a baby or a child from their tribe to another, then that other tribe would be bound to keep its agreements and to honor its treaty with the first tribe. If they did not, they would lose face and be regarded as a despicable people. It was at this point the missionaries were able to introduce the gospel, for they pointed out that God had given up a peace child in Jesus Christ. Thus these people were bound to honor God. It is a remarkable story, but it shows clearly how God had prepared the way for the gospel by building into this culture a concept that would be ready and waiting when the gospel came. Now these people were living according to the rule of conscience; and the conscience, as Paul points out here, never brings a settled peace. These tribes are a continual testimony to that fact.

People say, "Let your conscience be your guide." That is a recipe for unhappiness. If that is all you have, it is a certain way of plunging into a life that alternates between fear and momentary peace.

In the latest issue of *Christianity Today* there is a very interesting article by Rachel Saint, widow of one of the five men who were cruelly murdered by the Auca Indians on the banks of a river in Ecuador twenty years ago. In this article she describes the way the Aucas lived before the gospel came and the tremendous work going on in that tribe since then. She writes,

The Aucas have been thoroughly acquainted with demons and devil worship for many generations. The result of this is a religion of terror. The witch doctor is the central authority, and he controls the tribe. Any death is supposed to be caused by the witch doctor. Then that death has to be avenged and the feuding starts. They are afraid that they might be speared at night in their own houses. Everyone is a potential enemy. If a father loses a son, he feels he must kill his daughter. If the group loses a marriageable girl, a grandmother is killed. Why should a worthless old woman live if a marriageable girl has died? This kind of thinking permeates their culture.

Now this sort of thinking goes on not only in the jungles of South America and other places, but also in the concrete jungles of San Francisco, Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, and everywhere else. A reign of terror always ensues when people are governed only by the law of conscience. Yet, even under their own law, they perish, just as much as those who are judged by God's Law.

Now Paul goes on to take up the case of the religious devotee of his day, the Jew. Today we need only substitute the title "church member" to bring it up to date -- because we American church members are in the same condition as the Jew was in the culture of Paul's day. We have a great body of truth that we delight in, and we feel proud of our knowledge and our understanding of it. But unfortunately, we oftentimes hope and think that knowledge, in itself, is what is going to deliver us in the sight of God.

In Verses 17-24 we will see how Paul handles such thinking.

Now you, if you call yourself a Jew; if you rely on the law and brag about your relationship to God; if you know his will and approve of what is superior because you are instructed by the law; if you are convinced that you are a guide for the blind, a light for those who are in the dark, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of infants, because you have in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth -- you, then, who teach others, do you not teach yourself? You who preach against stealing, do you steal? You who say that people should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who brag about the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? As it is written: "God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you." {Rom 2:17-24 NIV}

Paul lists here the five great advantages which the Jews of his day had and on which they relied for their position before God:

First, they relied on possessing the Law. There are many people in the churches of America today who rely upon the fact that the Bible is available to them. We have the Bible in twenty-five different versions and many take great pride in owning a specific version. "I am a King James Christian! If it was good enough for the Apostle Paul, it's good enough for me!" Or "We're liberated! We have the American Standard Version!" You hear people bragging about this! Well, that is exactly what the Jew was doing in Paul's day.

Second, they bragged about their relationship to God. The Jew made it clear that he had a special inside track with the Almighty. You hear people talking like that today. "God, Billy Graham, and I were just talking the other day..." We make it clear that we have a special standing with the "Good Lord," as he is usually called, and in some way we brag about our relationship to God.

Third, the Jews were people who knew the will of God. They had the Scriptures, they had the Ten Commandments, and the knowledge of what God wanted. There are many today who boast about their knowledge of the Word of God and who rest upon that fact.

Fourth, these Jews approved of what was superior, i.e., they rejected certain attitudes and actions in life and chose only that which was regarded as morally superior. Many, many church members do this. They take pride in the fact that they do not do certain things. I am amazed at how many people think that God is going to be impressed by the things they do not do. "We don't dance, we don't drink, we don't go to the movies, we don't go to theaters, we don't play cards, we don't drink coffee," and on and on.

Finally, the Jews were instructed in the Law. There were many who could quote great passages of Scripture and they took pride in that. Now, there is nothing wrong with any of these advantages except that the Jews and many of us today depend on them for righteousness. We feel we have a special standing with God because of them; and that is what is wrong.

Paul goes on to list four privileges which the Jews felt were theirs because they had these advantages:

First, they felt they were a guide to the blind. Today we have those who are always ready to correct anybody around them, to impart truth to those unfortunate people who have not learned anything yet.

Second, the Jews felt they were a light to those in the dark. Every now and then we run into people who are quite ready to dazzle us with their knowledge of the Scriptures. They know all about the antichrist, they know when Christ is coming again, they know all the elective decrees of God, they are thoroughly acquainted with the superlapsarian position of the people before the Fall, etc., and they take great pride in this knowledge.

Third, the Jews felt they were instructors of the foolish. A lady came up to me after a service on Sunday and told me a long, painful story of how she had injured her wrist in an auto accident. The emergency doctor who took care of her happened to let slip a couple of curse words while working on her. She lectured him at great length about how she was a Christian, how she wouldn't listen to this kind of language, and how terrible it was that he took the name of God in vain. This attitude is typical of many who feel they are instructors of the foolish, because they have a knowledge of the Scriptures.

The fourth privilege which the Jews possessed was that they were teachers of children. I am amazed at how many want to teach Sunday school classes for the wrong reason. Now there is a right reason, but many want to teach because they feel they are imparting truth to people who need it, and they take great ego satisfaction in doing it.

Paul's judgment of such people is, "You are guilty yourself." This attitude of the Jew is the same one Paul condemned earlier in the moral Gentile. "You are outwardly righteous and correct, but inwardly you are doing the wrong thing." They were envious, proud, covetous, lustful, bitter, dangerous people. Religious zealots are dangerous people. The Jews were notorious in the Roman empire for being over-sharp in business deals. That is why Paul says, "You who preach against stealing, do you steal?" They were not above a little hanky-panky with slave girls they had to deal with. Paul says, "You who say that people should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery?" They were ready to profit from trade with pagan temples. He says, "You who abhor idols, do you rob temples?" They bragged about the Law, but Paul says, "God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you." That was the ultimate judgment upon the Jews. To them, blasphemy was the worst of sins. Yet Paul says, "Though you claim to have so much, and to be so knowledgeable, yet what you have done is to blaspheme God. People have been turned away from God because of you."

I do not think I have to detail how true that is of American Christianity as a whole. And not only in this country, but around the world, Christians have caused people to turn from God because of our attitudes and the way we approach people. I have often thought it is amazing how the people who keep close records on how many they win to Christ never keep any records on how many they drive away. And the name of God is blasphemed because of that.

Now Paul seizes upon and singles out the supreme symbol of Jewish separatism, circumcision, in Verses 25-27.

Circumcision has value if you observe the law, but if you break the law, you have become as though you had not been circumcised. If those who are not circumcised keep the law's requirements, will they not be regarded as though they were circumcised? The one who is not circumcised physically and yet obeys the law will condemn you who, even though you have the written code and circumcision, are a lawbreaker. {Rom 2:25-27 NIV}

The Jews, of course, prided themselves (and still do today) on the rite of circumcision, the symbol that they were God's people. You only need to substitute baptism, confirmation, or church membership to apply that to the twentieth century, to Protestant or Catholic American. So many Americans rest upon the fact that they have been baptized, confirmed, or accepted as members of a church, as the sign that they belong to God. Paul says that is useless and worthless, if something has not happened in the heart.

Paul's final conclusion about the religious man is in Verses 28-29.

A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a man's praise is not from men, but from God. {Rom 2:28-29 NIV}

That last phrase is a play on words. The word "praise" is taken from the word "Judah," from which we get the word "Jew." Paul says the Jew is not praised by men but by God; but he also makes clear what constitutes a true Jew in God's sight.

Now this is one of the most hotly debated questions in the state of Israel today. The Israelis are constantly trying to decide what is the basis of Jewry. What makes a Jew? Is it religion? Is it observing the Old Testament Law, keeping a kosher kitchen? Many Jews are atheists, having no use for the Old Testament, and yet they claim to be Jews because their ancestry is Jewish; their mothers and fathers, as far back as they know, were Jews. Is that the basis on which to claim Jewishness? There are black Jews who are petitioning to belong to Israel. But other Jews say you have to be white to be a Jew. What makes a Jew?

God says that nothing outward makes you a Jew. One becomes a Jew when his heart is changed. As with Abraham and Jacob, you become a Jew when you believe in *Yeshua Hamashiach*, Jesus the Messiah. The Jews for Jesus group is telling people this today. What makes you a Jew is not the culture from which you came, the ritual through which you have gone, the circumstances of your life, or your background, ancestry, or history, but the fact that you have come to know the Lord Jesus Christ. That is what makes you a Jew.

Paul wrote in Galatians 3:29:

If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise. {Gal 3:29 NIV}

Paul's conclusion of this section of Chapter 2 of Romans is that man without Christ is hopelessly lost. Though he defies God, deludes himself, defiles his conscience, or denies what he himself teaches, he is absolutely, hopelessly lost until he comes to know the Lord Jesus and lives on the basis of that relationship. That is what makes a Christian.

It is not a question of whether you are baptized, galvanized, sanforized, or pasteurized. The question is: "Do you have faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, and have you received the gift of righteousness which God gives to those who do not deserve it, cannot earn it, but receive it by his love and grace?"

We will see what additional problems this raises with the Jews in the next section of the book of Romans.

Prayer

Our Father, we pray that if anyone here today is resting upon empty ceremonies, fancy moral standing, or decent or good living for their righteousness that they will see the hopelessness of such justification before you, the God of reality, the God of truth. We pray that they will receive the gift that you so freely offer in Jesus Christ our Lord. He alone can change us. He alone can set us free. He alone can instruct us, guide us, and make us into the men and women you want us to be. He accepts us on that basis, and for that we give grateful thanks. In his name, Amen.

Title: According to Light
By: Ray C. Stedman
Series: From Guilt to Glory -- Explained
Scripture: Romans 2:12-29
Message No: 5
Catalog No: 3505
Date: January 11, 1976

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