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# ROMANS: THE FOUNDATION OF CHRISTIAN TEACHING

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## WEEK 2 – RELIGIOUS PEOPLE NEED THE GOSPEL TOO

**QUESTION 1) A twentieth-century theologian named Francis Schaeffer used to use an illustration of an invisible tape recorder. He said that if you wore one around your neck every day, recorded all the judgments you made of other people, and on the Last Day God judged you only on the basis of the words you've spoken as standards for human behavior, no one would pass.**

**On a scale of 1 to 10, how judgmental of a person do you consider yourself? Do you see this as a problem? What are the things that you struggle with judging others about the most? (Since most of us are fairly blind to our judgmentalism, imagine we called a close friend or co-worker – what would they say you are most judgmental about?)**

(Answers will vary. Rarely do people ever consider themselves *unnecessarily* critical. Remember, however, that judgment is not merely pointing out moral wrong in the world, but feeling comparatively superior. People tend to feel justified in their judgments of others because, they argue, 1) it's accurate, or 2) "*but I do/don't do that particular behavior, so why can't you just defeat that temptation like I do?*" Even if someone else is *deserving* of judgment, and we ALL are, the judgment is still inappropriate because 1) we aren't God's appointed Judge, 2) we are deserving of judgment in general ourselves, and 3) we likely ARE guilty of that same sin, just to a varied degree, as most of the manifestations of sinful impulses are culturally conditioned.

The goal for this question is simply to let people consider how judgmental they are, how worthy of judgment before God they are, and acknowledge some of that struggle before fellow Christians.)

**QUESTION 2) Romans 1 & 2 are placing the same two types of people before us that Jesus does in his parable about the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32). As a group, recall the details of that parable as well as the lessons Jesus is teaching.**

(Encourage participants to recall as many details as they can about the incredible story. In Luke 15, Jesus teaches the story that has traditionally been referred to as "The Prodigal Son." Already we have a problem, as the story is just as much about the Elder Brother as it is about the Younger Brother. The younger brother loves partying, sex with prostitutes, and squanders the father's money; he's licentious, he's materialistic, he's disobedient to his father. But then there's a second, older son; he's obedient, and he's compliant with everything the father says. But when the younger brother finally repents and returns home, and the father attempts to throw a celebration for him, the older brother is outraged. Since the older brother still stands to receive *his* inheritance, the time, energy, and dollars spent welcoming the younger brother home are essentially being taken out of the future inheritance of the elder brother. This proves BOTH brothers really were more interested in the father's wealth than they were in a relationship with the father himself. The point of the parable is that they're both lost, both alienated from the father, both have used the father more than loved him, and they both need salvation, which the father provides.

In this chapter, Paul is saying the same exact thing. Romans 1 is about younger brothers, and Paul says *they're lost, they're condemned, worshiping idols, the kind of sin everyone thinks of as sin*. Now he turns to older brothers in Romans 2 and he says: *You people who are trying so hard to be good, you think God owes you because you're better: you're lost too!* The younger brother's sin in Romans 1 is the attempt to be your own Lord. The elder brother's sin in Romans 2 is the attempt to be your own Savior. This is the one religious people especially tend to struggle with.)

**BACKGROUND:** In Romans 1, Paul showed that the pagan Gentile world had rejected God. This would have been eagerly supported by listeners of Jewish descent. But they also would have assumed they were exempt from such judgment because, after all, THEY were law-keeping Jews. Religious people today would largely have the same opinion – “Of course God’s wrath will eventually come down upon the immoral pagans!” But Paul’s twist in chapter 2 is that anyone who believes they stand in judgment upon the pagans is actually proving themselves worthy of judgment also.

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### GOD’S RIGHTEOUS JUDGMENT (ROM. 2:1-16)

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You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge another, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things. <sup>2</sup> Now we know that God’s judgment against those who do such things is based on truth. <sup>3</sup> So when you, a mere human being, pass judgment on them and yet do the same things, do you think you will escape God’s judgment? <sup>4</sup> Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, forbearance and patience, not realizing that God’s kindness is intended to lead you to repentance?

<sup>5</sup> But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God’s wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed. <sup>6</sup> God “will repay each person according to what they have done.” <sup>7</sup> To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life. <sup>8</sup> But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger. <sup>9</sup> There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile; <sup>10</sup> but glory, honor and peace for everyone who does good: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. <sup>11</sup> For God does not show favoritism.

<sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> 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. <sup>14</sup> (Indeed, when Gentiles, who do 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. <sup>15</sup> They show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts sometimes accusing them and at other times even defending them.) <sup>16</sup> This will take place on the day when God judges people’s secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares.

**QUESTION 3) Verses 6-10 sound like Paul could be promoting works righteousness. What is clear evidence (from last week) that this is NOT the case? (cf. Rom. 1:17) If not works righteousness, then how can Paul seem to be saying that we will be judged for doing “evil” or “good”?**

(Romans 1:17 says that the good news of Jesus, the gospel, offers to us a righteousness that comes apart from the law, apart from works. It’s news, not advice. Salvation is a gift that comes from God’s grace and is received simply through believing.

These verses, however, highlight the important reality that faith which is alive invariably produces good works. To use the old example, apples on an apple tree prove that the tree is alive, but they

don't give the tree life. The roots are the thing that pull in the nutrients to create and sustain life. Similarly, faith in Christ alone provides new life. Still, a changed life which produces righteous fruit is proof that we do indeed have real faith.)

**QUESTION 4) Paul's parenthetical statement in verses 14-15 is perhaps the Bible's most fascinating statement on the Natural Knowledge of God. Put it in your own words. How might this truth impact our Christian witnessing?**

(Verses 14-15 indicate, that even if someone has never read the Bible, they nonetheless understand that murder, sexual immorality, robbery, deceit, etc, are wrong. They know this because the moral code that God intended for humanity is written on every human heart. Because the flesh is weak and the mind is easily tricked, the conscience can certainly become weakened. But this explains why nonbelievers still experience guilt, even to the point of getting defensive and making excuses for their wrongdoing.

This is essential to understand in Christian witnessing. No one will be interested in a Savior if they do not believe they need saving (i.e. are guilty of sin). A non-believer may very well be likely to rationalize sinful behavior, and may passionately defend themselves and the sins of the world, but deep down, like what Paul is describing in these verses, they sense that there is such a thing as sin, and that it's wrong. This means you know something about them and their inner-workings that they don't know about themselves. You have to take advantage of that when seeking to persuade hearts.)

**QUESTION 5) Believers, like nonbelievers, are adept at fighting their consciences and rationalizing their poor words, attitudes, and behaviors. Share with the group something you struggle with that you are quick to defend.**

(Answers will vary. As mentioned earlier, it could simply be constant criticism of others. Try to remind the group that this is a non-judgmental space (part of the point of the lesson!) Christians need to have a safe space in which we're free to share weaknesses and struggles. In my groups, I've had individuals at various points share about very recent alcohol addiction, porn addiction, drug addiction, one-night stands, same sex attraction, out-of-control spending habits, racism, etc. This is NOT a time to create awkwardness when someone opens up by reminding them how wrong a behavior is. By virtue of their sharing it, they know it's wrong. Commend individuals for their courage in sharing. Try to lead transparently yourself. And if you haven't done so in your group before, perhaps remind individuals at the beginning of class that everything personal which is shared in the group is confidential. Verbally purging ourselves of sin is one of the single healthiest things we believers can do [Luke 15:7]).

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THE JEWS AND THE LAW (ROM. 2:17-29)

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17 Now you, if you call yourself a Jew; if you rely on the law and boast in God; 18 if you know his will and approve of what is superior because you are instructed by the law; 19 if you are convinced that you are a guide for the blind, a light for those who are in the dark, 20 an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of little children, because you have in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth— 21 you, then, who teach others, do you not teach yourself? You who preach against stealing, do you steal? 22 You who say that people should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? 23 You who boast in the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? 24 As it is written: "God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you."

25 Circumcision has value if you observe the law, but if you break the law, you have become as though you had not been circumcised. 26 So then, if those who are not circumcised keep the law's requirements, will they not be regarded as though they were circumcised? 27 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.

28 A person is not a Jew who is one only outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. 29 No, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a person's praise is not from other people, but from God.

**QUESTION 6) We don't have any biblical or historical evidence of Jewish believers "robbing temples" (vs. 22) as Paul suggests. This would seem to indicate he's speaking metaphorically. What do think Paul is suggesting? (cf. Jesus' teaching in Matt. 5:21-22 & 5:27-28).**

(What Paul seems to be implying is that while the *circumstances* are different from the lives of the pagans to the Jews, their *hearts & attitudes* are very similar. The Jews have essentially been "stealing the idolatry" of the Gentiles *by living selfish lifestyles*. Another good reason why it's inappropriate for humans to judge is we can only detect superficial behaviors, and sometimes attitudes, but we can't fully read hearts. But Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount [Matt. 5] that hate in the heart is tantamount to murderous behavior and lust in the heart is tantamount to adulterous behavior. Jesus and Paul know that behaviors are often culturally informed. Consequently, behaviors are not as good a test of purity as the heart itself is.

Because the Jews had 1) the Law of God, and 2) a culture that pressured them towards morally respectable behavior, they had fewer obviously godless behaviors than their Gentile counterparts. But they didn't see these things as blessed advantages; they perceived these things as causes for why they were better than Gentiles. Paul is proving here that the Jews' hearts have the same flawed and sinful impulses as everyone else. In reality, the Jews' misplaced pride, in many ways, made them worse than the Gentiles. That's why Paul could justly say, "*God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.*" (vs. 24)

**QUESTION 7) Verses 25-29 take on new meaning if you replace “Jew” with “Christian/believer” or “circumcision” with a host of various Christian activities. What is Paul’s main point in these verses? What are some of the activities/ceremonies/checkboxes which Christians sometimes point to as causes for right relationship with God?**

(Paul’s point in this section is that there is no believer who is ONLY a believer externally. In the same way that a fruitless tree is obviously dead, a tree with wax fruit is dead in a different type of way. It’s possible to artificially manufacture deeds, rituals, and ceremonies that are not actually creating a vibrant internal spiritual life.

When asked about their faith, many Christians are inclined to speak about their church membership, confirmation, Christian schooling, or family members who are Christians. All of these things are important and are blessings, and certainly can either be evidences of Christian faith or supports to Christian faith. But they are not properly the causes of faith, righteousness, or salvation, and should not be pointed to as reasons for confidence in right relationship with God. Only the grace of Jesus Christ saves us. Even means by which God shares Christ’s grace – faithfully using the Bible, being baptized – are not exactly the same thing as the atoning work of Christ itself.

There is a constant temptation for Christians to steal a little bit of credit away from Jesus. Similarly, for the Jews, circumcision was a tremendous gift from God. But circumcision alone did not save the Jew if there ultimately remained no inner life of the Spirit. Confusing God’s gifts with God Himself is religious idolatry.)

**QUESTION 8) Paul makes a big deal with the Jews about circumcision. Circumcision is a cutting off of flesh at the source of life. And in Colossians 2:11 (ESV) Paul says, “In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ.” What do you think Paul is getting at? In what way was Jesus circumcised (i.e. cut off) to bring us into a covenant relationship with God?**

(Paul is very clearly, but skillfully and poetically alluding, to the fact that at the cross, Jesus was cosmically “cut off” by God and from God. Jesus got the ultimate punishment attached to breaking the covenant of circumcision. But he did it so that those of us who have been falsely confident religious idolaters could be reattached to God by grace.)

**SUMMARY:** *Biblical knowledge, solid doctrine, moral behaviors, and spiritual rituals and activities are all privileges to be humbled by and gifts to be thankful for. They are NOT, however, reasons to boast. If Christians boast, it should be that God is so gracious that he chose to love, forgive, and embrace hypocrites like us. When this takes place, God’s name has a chance to be praised, not blasphemed, before the watching world.*

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## CLOSING PRAYER (GATHER PRAYER REQUESTS)

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