

Exegetical Notes - Romans 2:17-3:20

## **“There Is No One Righteous”**

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### **Romans 2:17-3:20**

#### **Verses 2:17-24**

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

- This passage is addressed to good, religious Jews who keep the Law of Moses. These are those who know the word of God and the law. They teach the word of God to others. The expectation is that they should comply with the word of God in what they do. They should live the word and not just recite it. It should influence the way they live.
- But Paul accuses them of not keeping the law. They “dishonor God by breaking his law.” Though their teaching is “right on,” their example is “way off.” As a result, “Gentiles” who do not know the word of the Lord are confused because these people say one thing and do another.

#### **Verses 25-28**

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

***<sup>28</sup> A person is not a Jew who is one only outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. <sup>29</sup> 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.***

- Paul contends that being Jewish is not a matter of outward signs like circumcision. It is a matter of a changed heart.
- Paul contends that Jews who practice their faith as an outward expression, but who do not have a spiritual experience with God that changes their hearts, are not Jews at all, in truth. He contends that Gentiles who know God and live for God are righteous, even if they are not outwardly Jewish.
- The issue of our relationship with God is a spiritual, not a fleshly, matter.

#### **Verse 3:1-4**

***What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew, or what value is there in circumcision? <sup>2</sup> Much in every way! First of all, the Jews have been entrusted with the very words of God.***

***<sup>3</sup> What if some were unfaithful? Will their unfaithfulness nullify God's faithfulness? <sup>4</sup> Not at all! Let God be true, and every human being a liar. As it is written:***

***"So that you may be proved right when you speak and prevail when you judge.***

- Paul asks a rhetorical question. If being Jewish does not automatically put one in right relationship with God, why bother being Jewish? His answer is that good Jews have been entrusted with the word of God. It is their job to tell others about God and what God has said. Even though some Jews may not live so that their example coincides with what God's word says, the word of God is still true and God is still faithful. It is a great honor to be entrusted with the word of the Lord.

#### **Verses 5-8**

***<sup>5</sup> But if our unrighteousness brings out God's righteousness more clearly, what shall we say? That God is unjust in bringing his wrath on us? (I am using a human argument.) <sup>6</sup> Certainly not! If that were so, how could God judge the world? <sup>7</sup> Someone might argue, "If my falsehood enhances God's truthfulness and so increases his glory, why am I still condemned as a sinner?" <sup>8</sup> Why not***

**say—as some slanderously claim that we say—“Let us do evil that good may result”? Their condemnation is just!**

- Paul then asks a second rhetorical question. He acknowledges that it might seem unfair for God to judge men for not keeping his word if, indeed, righteousness is not determined by success in keeping the word but found in the intention of the heart. He clearly acknowledges that this might seem so if you were thinking like a human and did not understand God. You might argue that it would be good to do evil because that would give God more to forgive.
- Apparently, some people, probably good religious Jews who struggled to keep the Law of Moses, had misunderstood Paul’s teaching about the grace of God. They did not understand that no one can be saved by works of the law because no one keeps the law perfectly, and perfection is the measure the law requires. If you break the law in one part, you are guilty of breaking the law in its entirety.

#### **Verses 9-20**

**<sup>9</sup> What shall we conclude then? Do we have any advantage? Not at all! For we have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under the power of sin. <sup>10</sup> As it is written:**

***“There is no one righteous, not even one;***

**<sup>11</sup> *there is no one who understands;***

***there is no one who seeks God.***

**<sup>12</sup> *All have turned away,***

***they have together become worthless;***

***there is no one who does good,***

***not even one.”***

**<sup>13</sup> *“Their throats are open graves;***

***their tongues practice deceit.”***

***“The poison of vipers is on their lips.”***

**<sup>14</sup> *“Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness.”***

**<sup>15</sup> *“Their feet are swift to shed blood;***

**<sup>16</sup> *ruin and misery mark their ways,***

**<sup>17</sup> *and the way of peace they do not know.”***

**<sup>18</sup> *“There is no fear of God before their eyes.”***

**<sup>19</sup> Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable**

**to God.<sup>20</sup> Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin.**

- Paul moves to the conclusion of his argument. There is no one who is righteous. Both Jews and Gentiles have sinned and fall short of perfection.
- He quotes and paraphrases a number of Old Testament passages to establish his agreement. Psalm 5:9, 10:7, 14:1-3, 36:1, 140:3, Isaiah 59:7-8 among them. This is how we preach, not based on the authority of men or any source, but on God's word alone!
- He concludes that the law defines how far we have fallen and establishes that we are the problem. We cannot be good enough to save ourselves.

(These exegetical notes are the foundational study for the sermon entitled *There Is No One Righteous*. They have been prepared by the Reverend Doctor Charles H. Jensen, Interim Senior/Lead Pastor at Cornerstone Fellowship, Coatesville Pennsylvania. All rights are reserved by *Cornerstone Fellowship* & The Reverend Doctor Charles H. Jensen. They are used here by permission.)