

## The Law Cannot Save

This week, we move forward some in the book of Romans. We are in the middle of Paul's initial argument.

Let's start by taking stock of where we are in the argument. We are in the middle of this extended logical argument in which Paul presents various thought scenarios. When first going through this argument while studying, it seemed a straight forward argument going point by point. But there is another layer to Paul's argument. Maybe even multiple layers. He has crafted this argument without the word for "faith." Perhaps that is like the challenge in English of writing a coherent paragraph without using a single word with the letter "e." He is also writing in a logical sequence to pull in the various listeners who have different strengths and weaknesses in their sin natures. How do you get all these different kinds of people to listen to you all the while setting them up for the gut punch: Faith alone in Christ alone. Nothing else will work.

Paul, in his argument, is setting up the listeners to get to the point of "You are all sinners and in need of salvation through faith" in chapter 3. He sets up various scenarios which are demonstrated to be unworkable solutions to meeting God's standards. Paul uses the language and logic that his audience can follow. In some cases, the Jews have clung to self-righteousness or the Law only to have Paul say, you say one thing, but you actually do the same sin you accuse others of doing.

It starts with degeneracy in chapter 1. First there is "immoral" degeneracy. This includes obvious acts that most people, especially religious people, would condemn and in fact do condemn in the next paragraph of this argument. There are some, as we will see later in chapter 3, that say grace abounds when sin abounds.

The Law Cannot Save  
Romans 2:12-21a

**Romans 3:7 But if through my lie the truth of God abounded to His glory, why am I also still being judged as a sinner?**

**Romans 3:8 And why not say (as we are slanderously reported and as some claim that we say), “Let us do evil that good may come”? Their condemnation is just.**

There is a personal story told by D. A. Carson about a man like this. Dr. Carson went to Germany to sharpen his German language skills. Also there was a pastor from Africa also studying German. Dr. Carson found that the other pastor was cheating on his wife while he was in Germany. When Dr. Carson quizzed him on this, the pastor said something like “It is my job to sin. It is God’s job to forgive me.” Huh? Can you say, “Divine Discipline?”

Then there is “moral” degeneracy by the moral self-righteous crowd that would judge the immoral acts previously listed. Paul accuses them of doing the same sins as those they are judging. Any sin is a violation of the Law and is unrighteous, even sins like “mental adultery.” Then Paul goes to “works.” There are good works which lead to eternal life. But hidden in that statement is the fact brought out in Isaiah 64:6 that we cannot produce righteousness that meets God’s standard. At this point you want Paul to use the word “faith.” Yet he is saving that for the next chapter. Chapter 2 demands that Paul have a chapter 3. And he does. We just haven’t gotten there yet. He will in chapter 3:

**Romans 3:21 But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets,**

The Law Cannot Save  
Romans 2:12-21a

**Romans 3:22 even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction;**

**Romans 3:23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,**

Then there are evil works which obviously fall short of God's righteous standard.

Today we have arrived at the Law argument.

**Romans 2:12 For all who have sinned without the Law will also perish without the Law, and all who have sinned under the Law will be judged by the Law;**

Paul divides the human race into two groups: those without the Law, Gentiles, and those under the Law, Mosaic Law, in other words the Jews. Paul is very crafty here. He doesn't want to upset his listeners until he hits them with the punch line...the gut punch from which they cannot escape.

A side note on law. Romans had laws and in some cases held to those laws strictly. For instance, there were some things like flogging and crucifixion that were forbidden to be imposed on a Roman citizen. We see this in the New Testament with Paul.

**Acts 22:25 But when they stretched him out with thongs, Paul said to the centurion who was standing by, "Is it lawful (also translated permissible) for you to scourge a man who is a Roman and uncondemned?"**

The Law Cannot Save  
Romans 2:12-21a

**Acts 22:26** When the centurion heard this, he went to the commander and told him, saying, “What are you about to do? For this man is a Roman.”

**Acts 22:27** The commander came and said to him, “Tell me, are you a Roman?” And he said, “Yes.”

**Acts 22:28** The commander answered, “I acquired this citizenship with a large sum of money.” And Paul said, “But I was actually born a citizen.”

**Acts 22:29** Therefore those who were about to examine him immediately let go of him; and the commander also was afraid when he found out that he was a Roman, and because he had put him in chains.

The point is that the Jews were not the only people with a “law.” Other cultures had written laws that determined right from wrong. Additionally, I have not gone into the nuances of what “Law” can mean.

**Romans 2:13** for it is not the hearers of the Law who are just before God, but the doers of the Law will be justified.

Have you seen a movie in which someone in the background is just barely peeking out from behind a door or window? You know that person is just about to have a dramatic impact on the action. That is the word “faith” here. We have already read ahead and know there is a great deal

**The Law Cannot Save**  
**Romans 2:12-21a**

about faith yet to be said by Paul. It adds drama to the text. You know that man is there. You know he is about to pounce. But not yet...

James uses the same words for hearers and doers. Paul and James are on the same page spiritually. They should be. Both books are inerrant Scripture.

**James 1:22 But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves.**

Here, James is applying the Word of God to the Christian instead of the Mosaic Law to the Jew. Paul is dealing with the Jewish and Jewish-influenced crowd in this part of his argument.

**James 1:23 For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror;**

**James 1:24 for once he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was.**

**James 1:25 But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does.**

Paul continues with those without the Law, Gentiles.

**Romans 2:14 For when Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the**

**The Law Cannot Save**  
**Romans 2:12-21a**

**Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves,**

As shown above. Other cultures have their own laws of right and wrong.

**Gentiles.** This is the word that is often translated as “Gentile.” Literally it means “nations.” It is not the same word used earlier in Romans (1:16, 2:8,9), “Greek.” I don’t have an answer to the obvious question, “Why does Paul use the word “Gentile” now instead of Greek earlier? “Greek” is a subset of Gentile and could be used of the sophisticated Greek, refined, cultured. Perhaps many of the Jews have been “Hellenized” or assimilated into the Graeco-Roman culture. But now Paul uses the word for the “nations” which are Gentiles.

**Law to themselves.** What! You mean Gentiles have “Law?!!!” Heaven forbid from the Jewish perspective. Yet that is exactly what Paul is saying. He is slowly chopping down their assumption that heritage as a Jew, possession of the Mosaic Law and eventually circumcision will get them into heaven. Again, the word for faith does not show up in this chapter. He lowers the boom in the next chapter.

**Romans 2:15 in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them,**

**Romans 2:16 on the day when, according to my gospel, God will judge the secrets of men through Christ Jesus.**

Did the men of Nineveh have the Law in Jonah’s day? No. Yet...

**Jonah 3:5 Then the people of Nineveh believed in God; and they called a fast and put**

The Law Cannot Save  
Romans 2:12-21a

**on sackcloth from the greatest to the least of them.**

Without the Law, the people of Nineveh believed and were saved.

**Jonah 3:6 When the word reached the king of Nineveh, he arose from his throne, laid aside his robe from him, covered himself with sackcloth and sat on the ashes.**

**Jonah 3:7 He issued a proclamation and it said, “In Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let man, beast, herd, or flock taste a thing. Do not let them eat or drink water.**

**Jonah 3:8 But both man and beast must be covered with sackcloth; and let men call on God earnestly that each may turn from his wicked way and from the violence which is in his hands.**

**Jonah 3:9 Who knows, God may turn and relent and withdraw His burning anger so that we will not perish.”**

I sometimes ask myself, “Why don’t Jews make more of the book of Jonah?” Without the Law of Moses, the people of Nineveh believed. They did not become Jews, going through some ritual and training. No. They simply believed in the Word of God from Jonah.

Next is a list of supposed benefits that the Jews of Paul’s day counted on.

The Law Cannot Save  
Romans 2:12-21a

**Romans 2:17 But if you bear the name “Jew” and rely upon the Law and boast in God,**

**Romans 2:18 and know His will and approve the things that are essential, being instructed out of the Law,**

**Romans 2:19 and are confident that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness,**

**Romans 2:20 a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of the immature, having in the Law the embodiment of knowledge and of the truth,**

After providing a long list of benefits the Jews think they have on their side to get into heaven, did they not learn the importance of faith? The word for faith was encountered in chapter 1. It will be encountered in chapter 3. But not in this chapter. The self-righteous moral Jew who depends upon Jewish heritage, Jewish history (as God’s people) and Jewish (Mosaic) Law has not included the word “faith.” But if a Gentile has faith he is saved. As Paul says later on in chapter 3, God is God over all. There is that word again, all. And if a Jew, with all his advantages has no faith, how does he expect to be saved and go to heaven?

**Romans 2:21a you, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself?**

Here we are back to Nicodemus’ dialogue with Jesus. Paul, having studied under Gamaliel in Jerusalem as a young man and likely having seen Jesus during His earthly ministry took in many lessons that he would only understand once he believed in Jesus.



**The Law Cannot Save**  
**Romans 2:12-21a**

There are logical arguments that show Paul had to have been in Jerusalem during at least part if not most of Jesus' ministry. Like Judas, who he replaced, Paul saw Jesus's ministry, His miracles and His teachings from the perspective of an unbeliever. Paul, as a young man in Jerusalem was taught by the famous Gamaliel.

**Acts 22:3 “I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city (Jerusalem), educated under Gamaliel, strictly according to the law of our fathers, being zealous for God just as you all are today.**

While Paul is studying the Law in Jerusalem under an expert on the Torah, he is also studying Jesus and His teachings. He compares them to the Torah. It would be fascinating to ask Paul what went through his mind as he first encountered Jesus. Some theorize that the “rich young ruler” might have been Paul. The Biblical text does not give us any identity of the rich young ruler. Just have to ask Paul when we get to heaven.

When multiple New Testament writers use the same phrase it highlights an important perspective in the Christian life.

There was, and still is, a problem in Jewish thinking. “If I know the Law and abide by it, then I will be saved.” But that is what Paul is contesting here. Of course, that is also what many Christians think. If I am good and follow the Ten Commandments, I will go to heaven. But it goes back to that missing word in this chapter. Faith.

Jesus, talking to Nicodemus in John chapter 3:

The Law Cannot Save  
Romans 2:12-21a

**John 3:10 Jesus answered and said to him, “Are you the teacher of Israel and do not understand (literally “know”) these things?**

There is great irony in these verses. Nicodemus addresses Jesus as “Rabbi” and teacher. Jesus throws this back into his face. Nicodemus is perhaps a Rabbi and teacher to the Jews. Yet he does not have a firm grasp on basic spiritual concepts.

**John 3:11 Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know (understand) and testify of what we have seen, and you do not accept our testimony.**

Jesus is saying that Nicodemus does not even know basic spiritual facts. He will contrast the word for “know” that he associates with Nicodemus with Jesus word for “understanding.” I feel that the translators got these two words backwards in the translations. Verse 10 is “know” (*ginosko*). One might say that this word is a basic knowledge of facts. Let us call this as academic knowledge. Yet, Jesus says Nicodemus does not even have this. Verse 11 is understand (*oida*). Jesus is speaking from a deep understanding of both the physical and the spiritual world.

In reflection, it is possible that in English, the word “to know” can imply an understanding of a concept. Whereas “understand” can mean to grasp the meaning of a concept. The point is, Jesus indicates that Nicodemus does not have a grasp of the basic fact whereas Jesus has a deep understanding of the concepts and how things work both in the physical world and in the spiritual world.

**John 3:12 If I told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things?**

## **The Law Cannot Save Romans 2:12-21a**

Jesus, in the narrative provided by the apostle John, said what Paul later reiterates to the Jews. They do not have understanding of spiritual concepts.

This is emphasized because it shows up spoken by Jesus, James and Paul. It is an important concept. This is not just for salvation but for Christian living as well. You must have more than just academic knowledge of the Bible. You must have a deep understanding which is the result of trusting the Holy Spirit and His teaching ministry to each of us.

Bible teachers emphasize this point. It is good to attend Bible class and learn important concepts that apply to living the Christian life. But in order for them to be useful, the Christian must believe them and act upon them. Fatih. Doesn't the book of Hebrews say something like this?

**Hebrews 4:1 Therefore, let us fear if, while a promise remains of entering His rest, any one of you may seem to have come short of it.**

**Hebrews 4:2 For indeed we have had good news preached to us, just as they also; but the word they heard did not profit them, because it was not united by faith in those who heard.**

### **Promises (Bible Doctrine) Plus Faith**

If we have time, we might read Romans 1:18-Romans 2:29. Let's look for the word "faith" in Paul's argument.