



Group Discussion Guide

Romans 2:1-16

For groups meeting January 19 evening through January 26 morning.

Years ago I learned that when reading and applying Scripture, the phrase “context is king” helps steer the reader to the truth. I have seen Scripture applied outside of its context and the results can be disastrous. In a book as large, varied and detailed as the Bible, it is possible to pull verses away from their context and end up with wrong beliefs and wrong application.

As we come to Romans 2, it is crucial that we consider the context of Paul’s writing ... asking and answering the right questions. One of the first questions we must ask regarding this passage is, “who is Paul addressing in this section of his letter?” We already know that Paul is writing to believers in Rome, because he states this in Romans 1:7. However, as with any message given to a large group of people, the communicator may seek to address those within the group who might need specific instruction or help. In this letter, Paul refers to both Jews and Gentiles. There is a common belief that part of his purpose for writing this letter was to eliminate conflict that had arisen between these two groups of believers.

In Romans 2:1, Paul addresses “every one of you who judges.” This gives us the first point of context for this passage. Some scholars believe Paul is writing to unbelieving Jews and Gentiles who think of themselves as moralists – those who attempt to be “good people” apart from the grace of God. Others believe he is writing to Jewish and Gentile believers who have chosen to judge other people while ignoring their own sin. Based on the knowledge that the letter is written to believers, the second option is the most likely.

The hypocrisy described by Paul could be present in the lives of believers and unbelievers alike. Unbelievers who read these words and take them to heart would be led to realize their sin and the need for repentance and trusting in Christ. Believers who take this to heart would be convicted of their sin and realize the need to ask for forgiveness and the strength to live faithful to God.

We must keep in mind that Paul’s primary message in Romans is found in Romans 1:16-17. The righteousness of God comes to us by faith in Christ, and His righteousness empowers us to live by faith. This is consistent with the teachings of Jesus found in the gospels, and with Paul’s teachings later in this letter and his other letters (consider Ephesians 2:8-10 as an example, along with large sections of Galatians).

Just before this section of Romans, Paul had written about the results of rejecting God. He listed sinful behaviors that manifested in the lives of those who chose not to follow the Lord. After reading this, it is likely that some would pass judgment on those who live this way. Paul makes it clear in Romans 2 that this is not God's way for those who believe.

Paul points out that those who judge others condemn themselves because in some way they "practice the very same things" (Romans 2:1) as those he referenced near the end of Romans 1. He states that God will in fact judge those who pass judgment while continuing to live in sin (v. 3). He writes that God's patience and kindness are "meant to lead you to repentance" (v. 4). Those who judge others and refuse to turn from this will one day receive God's wrath when His "righteous judgment will be revealed" (v. 5). For the unbeliever, judgment takes place at the great white throne judgment (Revelation 20:11-15). For the believer, one's works will be judged at the judgment seat of Christ, (2 Corinthians 5:6-10). On that day the believer will experience reward or loss (1 Corinthians 3:10-15).

The judgment Paul references in verses 6-10 is the great white throne judgment. We know this because he writes that those who are faithful to God will receive "eternal life" while those who disobey God will receive "wrath and fury" (vs. 7-8). Because Paul teaches that salvation comes through faith in Christ, we know that obedience does not earn salvation; rather obedience is outward evidence that a person has trusted in Christ. Likewise, disobedience is outward evidence that a person has rejected Christ. Paul is not advocating for perfection from the believer, because he wrote about his own disobedience later in this same letter (Romans 7). He is merely pointing out that one who has trusted in Christ will seek to follow Christ; this person's life will be generally characterized by obedience to God (this includes confession of sin, as he writes in 1 Corinthians 11:27-32).

In the last section of this week's reading, we get a glimpse into the "Jew and Gentile" aspect of this letter. Paul writes that Jews and Gentiles both will be judged by God, even though Jews were given the law and Gentiles were not (vs. 12-14). Even without the specifics of the law, there were Gentiles who obeyed aspects of the law, thus showing that God's law is "written on their hearts" and that their conscience – while not a perfect guide – allowed them to discern between wrong and right (v. 15). Paul's message ("my gospel") included the certainty that God will in fact judge all of a person's works on the day when Christ fulfills his role as judge (v. 16).

With this section of his letter, Paul was building the case that neither the Jew was not better than the Gentile, nor was the Gentile better than the Jew. All would be judged. His point was this: every person on the face of the planet stood in need of salvation. It would be difficult to read this passage and ignore one's own sin. At times, we all judge other people while ignoring our own sin. Therefore, we all need God's grace. This is a case that Paul continues to build, as we will see in the weeks to come.

Discussion Questions

1. In what ways are you tempted to judge other people?
2. How can we identify good and evil actions without judging a person's heart?
3. Paul writes about those "who judge those who practice such things and yet do them yourself" (v. 3). According to this passage, how does God view people who do this? How have you observed this in your own life? What should we do when we identify this hypocrisy in ourselves?
4. How is God's kindness meant to lead us to repentance (v. 4)? What does this look like, practically speaking?
5. In verses 7-8, who are "those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality," and who are "those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness"? Do those who receive eternal life earn it through the way they live? Or do they live righteously because of who they are in Christ? How do we know?
6. Why do you think Paul wrote that one's nationality or heritage would have no bearing on one's eternal destiny (vs. 9-11)? How can you apply this in your own life today? How do we apply it within the context of our church?
7. Paul indicates that those who do not have the law still follow the law at times because "the work of the law is written on their hearts" (vs. 14-15). What does this teach us about God? About His law? About humanity?
8. How do we live in such a way that we are open and honest with God, instead of trying to keep "secrets" (v. 16) from Him? Is there a role in this for accountability with other people?