

The Book of Romans, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 3: God's Righteous Judgment and the Law

Romans 2:1-29

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Romans 2:1-29 continues Paul's case that the whole world stands guilty before God, but he now turns from the openly pagan to the religious and moral person who assumed they were exempt. A great deal is at stake doctrinally. Paul teaches the impartiality of God's judgment, the right reading of God's kindness as a call to repentance, judgment according to works, the witness of conscience among those without the written law, and the difference between external religion and an inward, heart-level reality (the circumcision of the heart). The teacher should be ready to handle the apparent tension between judgment according to works (2:6) and justification apart from works of law (3:28). These are not contradictory: God's grace is received through an obedient faith, and that faith shows itself in a life God will take honest account of at the judgment. Works are the evidence and fruit of saving faith, never the meritorious cause of salvation.

This chapter is also sharply formative, and it works mainly by exposure. Paul is holding up a mirror to the respectable, churchgoing heart. The teacher's task is to keep the class from doing the very thing Paul condemns, listening to this chapter as a description of someone else. The warnings against hypocritical judging, presuming on kindness, hardness of heart, and resting in outward markers all aim to produce humility, repentance, and integrity. The vision of a circumcised heart, religion that is inward and real rather than merely external, is exactly the kind of transformation we long to see in our members.

So aim at both targets. Send students home understanding God's impartial judgment and the relationship between grace, faith, and works, and send them home humbled, softened, and more concerned with the state of their hearts than the polish of their reputations. The disciple being formed here is a person who has stopped trusting in being basically good or religiously connected, and who wants, above all, a heart that is right with God in secret.

Question 1

Student Question:

Paul says, You have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things (vv. 1-3). What is the difference between the right discernment Scripture calls for and the hypocritical judging Paul condemns here, and why does condemning others actually condemn the one who judges?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Begin by distinguishing two things our culture often confuses. Scripture clearly calls believers to discernment, to judge rightly between good and evil, truth and error, and even to hold one another accountable in love (John 7:24; Galatians 6:1). So Paul is not forbidding all moral evaluation. What he condemns is the hypocritical judging that condemns in others what it excuses in itself.

Show the trap Paul springs. The religious reader has been agreeing enthusiastically with the catalog of sins in chapter one. Paul says that very agreement is the problem, because the one who judges practices the same things. The judge has unknowingly pronounced sentence on himself. The act of condemning others reveals that we know the standard, which leaves us all the more without excuse when we break it.

Help students feel why condemning others condemns us. When we judge, we appeal to a standard of right and wrong. But that same standard then turns and measures us. The more loudly we denounce sin in others, the more clearly we testify that we knew better when we sinned ourselves. Self-righteous judging is therefore self-defeating.

Apply this pastorally. A congregation can either be a place of honest, humble accountability or a place of harsh, self-protective judging. The difference is whether we see ourselves as fellow sinners helping one another toward Christ, or as superior people inspecting the failures of inferiors. Paul wants the former and warns sharply against the latter.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The difference between righteous discernment (John 7:24) and hypocritical judging
- Self-righteous judging as self-condemning
- Accountability in love versus condemnation from superiority (Galatians 6:1)
- The universality of guilt, the judge stands among the accused
- Humility as the proper posture of one sinner toward another

Discussion Prompts

- What is the difference between discernment and the judging Paul condemns?
- Why does condemning others actually condemn the one who judges?
- How can our congregation hold one another accountable without becoming harsh?

Question 2

Student Question:

Paul exposes the hypocrisy of seeing clearly in others what we excuse in ourselves. Be specific: what sin or fault are you quick to criticize in other people while quietly tolerating a version of it in your own life? What would it look like to turn that same honest scrutiny on yourself this week?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question turns Paul's charge into a personal mirror. The aim is honest recognition, not vague guilt. Every person has blind spots, sins they overlook in themselves while spotting instantly in others. Jesus described it as noticing the speck in a brother's eye while ignoring the log in our own (Matthew 7:3-5).

Help students get specific. The pattern often appears where we are most defensive. We criticize others for being controlling, or harsh, or proud, or undisciplined, precisely in the areas where we have not faced the same fault in ourselves. Invite students to name one concrete example rather than a general confession.

Explore why this happens. Judging others gives us a sense of superiority and distracts us from our own need. It is easier to manage our self-image by lowering others than by changing ourselves. Naming this dynamic helps break its power.

Move toward the constructive step. The question asks students to turn the same honest scrutiny on themselves. Encourage one specific act: confessing the fault, asking a trusted friend for honest feedback, or repenting where they have judged others for what they tolerate in themselves. The goal is the integrity Jesus described, first take the log out of your own eye.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The log and the speck, self-examination before correction (Matthew 7:3-5)
- Judging others as a way of avoiding our own need
- The call to integrity between how we measure others and ourselves
- Repentance as turning the standard first upon oneself

Discussion Prompts

- What fault are you quick to criticize in others while tolerating in yourself?
- Why is judging others such an effective distraction from our own need?
- What is one honest step toward removing the log from your own eye?

Question 3

Student Question:

Paul asks whether we presume on the riches of God's kindness, forbearance, and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead us to repentance (v. 4). What does it mean to presume on God's kindness, and how does this verse teach us to read God's patience rightly rather than as evidence that our sin does not matter?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul asks a piercing question: do you presume on the riches of God's kindness and forbearance and patience? The word presume means to take for granted, to treat carelessly. The teacher should help students see that God's patience is not the same as God's approval. The fact that judgment has not yet fallen does not mean sin does not matter.

Unfold the purpose of God's kindness: it is meant to lead us to repentance. Every day God withholds the consequences our sin deserves is a gift designed to give us time and reason to turn. His kindness is not weakness or indifference; it is an open door. The tragedy is misreading that open door as a sign that no one is watching.

Connect this to how people actually live. Many treat a delay in consequences as evidence that they have gotten away with something, and so they harden. Others are genuinely melted by the realization that God has been patient with them far beyond what they deserved. The same kindness produces opposite responses depending on the heart that receives it.

Make the application warm. The right response to God's patience is not anxiety but grateful repentance. Help students see the patience of God in their own story, the relationships He preserved, the disasters He averted, the time He gave, and let that kindness draw them, as Paul says it is meant to, toward turning to Him.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's patience as kindness aimed at repentance (2 Peter 3:9)
- The difference between God's patience and God's approval
- Presumption, treating mercy as permission to keep sinning
- Repentance as the intended response to grace

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean to presume on God's kindness?
- How should we read the fact that God has not yet judged our sin?
- Where has God been patient with you, and how is that meant to draw you to Him?

Question 4

Student Question:

Paul warns that a hard and impenitent heart is storing up wrath for itself on the day of judgment (v. 5). Is there an area where you have grown comfortable with a sin, assuming you will deal with it later? What is the danger of putting off repentance, and what would it look like to soften your heart in that area now rather than later?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-focused question takes Paul's warning about a hard and impenitent heart storing up wrath (v. 5) and presses it gently into the student's life. The image is of someone accumulating a debt they will one day have to pay, all while assuming there is plenty of time.

Address the common strategy of delayed repentance. Many believers carry a sin they fully intend to deal with, later. They assume the heart will stay soft, that they can turn whenever they choose. Paul warns that hearts do not stay soft. Each refusal to repent hardens us a little more, making the next refusal easier and repentance harder.

Help students name the area honestly. The question asks for a specific sin they have grown comfortable with, expecting to address it eventually. Naming it begins to break the illusion of unlimited time. The teacher can remind the class that today is the day of salvation (2 Corinthians 6:2); the only repentance we can be sure of is the one we do now.

Offer a hopeful path. Softening the heart is not mainly about trying harder but about returning to God, confessing the thing, and receiving His help. Encourage one concrete step toward repentance now rather than later: a confession, the removal of an occasion for sin, accountability with a brother or sister.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The danger of a hardening, impenitent heart (2:5)
- Repentance as urgent, today is the day of salvation (2 Corinthians 6:2)
- The deceptive assumption of unlimited time
- The hardening effect of repeated refusal to repent

Discussion Prompts

- What sin have you been planning to deal with later?
- Why is delayed repentance more dangerous than it feels?
- What is one step toward softening your heart in that area now?

Question 5

Student Question:

Paul says God will render to each one according to his works, eternal life to those who by patience in well-doing seek glory and honor, but wrath for the self-seeking who do not obey the truth, and that God shows no partiality (vv. 6–11). How can this be true alongside Paul's later insistence that no one is justified by works of the law, and what does it teach us about the place of a faithful, obedient life in God's final judgment?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is a weighty doctrinal question, and the teacher should handle it with care because it touches the relationship between grace, faith, and works. Paul plainly says God will render to

each one according to his works (v. 6), and yet in chapter three he insists no one is justified by works of the law (3:28). Students may feel these collide. They do not.

Distinguish two different things. Works of the law done to earn a standing before God and to boast can never justify anyone, because no one keeps the law perfectly. That is the works Paul excludes. But the works of 2:6 are the fruit and evidence of a genuine, obedient faith, the actual shape of a life lived toward God or away from Him. Scripture everywhere teaches that the final judgment will take honest account of how we have lived (Matthew 25:31–46; 2 Corinthians 5:10; Revelation 20:12).

Hold the two truths together with the category of obedient faith. We are saved by grace, received through a faith that trusts and obeys. That faith is not idle; it produces a life of patient well-doing. At the judgment, God looks at that life, not because our works earn salvation, but because a living faith always bears fruit, and a faith that bears no fruit is dead (James 2:17). So judgment according to works and salvation by grace through faith are two sides of one coin.

Underline the impartiality of God. Paul stresses that God shows no partiality (v. 11): not to Jew over Gentile, not to the religious over the irreligious, not to the respectable over the scandalous. No heritage, no membership, no reputation exempts anyone. This levels the ground and prepares for the gospel, in which all alike are saved the same way, by grace through faith in Christ.

Guard against two errors. Do not let students conclude that they earn heaven by good deeds (that is the works-righteousness Paul will demolish). And do not let them conclude that how they live is irrelevant because they are saved by grace (that is the presumption Paul has just warned against). The truth runs between: grace saves, and grace transforms, and the transformed life is what God will acknowledge.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Judgment according to works (2:6) as God's honest reckoning of a life
- The harmony of grace, obedient faith, and works as fruit (James 2:17)
- The exclusion of works of merit and law-keeping for boasting (3:28)
- The final judgment taking account of how we have lived (2 Corinthians 5:10; Matthew 25:31–46)
- The impartiality of God, no heritage or status exempts anyone (2:11)
- Avoiding both works-righteousness and the presumption that conduct is irrelevant

Discussion Prompts

- How can judgment according to works fit with salvation by grace through faith?
- What is the difference between works that justify (which Paul excludes) and the works God will judge?
- Why does it matter that God shows no partiality in judgment?

Question 6

Student Question:

Paul speaks of those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality (v. 7). Patience in well-doing means keeping on with the good even when it is hard, slow, and unnoticed. Where are you tempted to give up doing good because the results are not coming, and what would help you persevere faithfully?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-focused question draws on Paul's phrase patience in well-doing (v. 7). The Christian life is not mainly a series of dramatic moments but a long obedience in the same direction, doing good steadily when no one notices and the results are slow to come.

Name the temptation to quit. We grow weary in doing good when the marriage does not improve, the wayward child does not return, the kindness is not reciprocated, the ministry shows no fruit, the prayer seems unanswered. Galatians 6:9 speaks directly to this: let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap if we do not give up.

Help students locate their own point of fatigue. The question asks where they are tempted to give up because the results are not coming. Inviting a specific answer keeps the discussion from staying abstract. Often simply naming the discouragement aloud, in the company of others, lightens it.

Offer means of perseverance. Patience in well-doing is sustained by fixing our eyes on the reward God promises (glory, honor, immortality), by leaning on the fellowship of the church, by remembering that the harvest comes in God's timing and not ours, and by trusting that no good done for Christ is ever wasted (1 Corinthians 15:58).

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Perseverance in good as the normal shape of faithful Christian living
- The promise of harvest in due season (Galatians 6:9)
- Eternal reward as motivation for steady obedience
- No labor in the Lord is in vain (1 Corinthians 15:58)

Discussion Prompts

- Where are you tempted to give up doing good because the results are not coming?
- What helps you keep going when faithfulness feels unrewarded?
- How does the promise of harvest in due season change how you wait?

Question 7

Student Question:

Paul says that even Gentiles who do not have the law sometimes do by nature what the law requires, showing that the work of the law is written on their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness (vv. 14–15). What does this teach about how God has given every person a moral witness through conscience, and what does it tell us about the basis on which God will judge those who never received His written law?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul makes a striking observation: Gentiles who do not have the written law sometimes do by nature what the law requires, showing that the work of the law is written on their hearts, their conscience bearing witness (vv. 14–15). The teacher should explain that God has not left any people group without moral witness. Even those who never received the Scriptures have an inner sense of right and wrong.

Connect this to conscience. Conscience is the internal witness that accuses or excuses us, the moral awareness God has placed in every human being. It is not a perfect or infallible guide (it can be poorly informed or seared), but it testifies that we are moral creatures answerable to a moral God. This is part of the general revelation Paul described in chapter one.

Explain the basis of judgment for those without the written law. Paul's point is that people will be judged according to the light they had. Those with the law are judged by the law; those without it are judged by the moral witness of conscience and creation. In every case, people fall short, which is exactly Paul's larger argument: all are guilty, with or without the law.

Apply this to humility and evangelism. The reality of conscience means no one is a blank slate; the missionary and the witness can appeal to a moral sense already present. It also means that the human problem is universal. The teacher can help students see both the dignity of being made moral creatures and the seriousness of having violated even the law written on our own hearts.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Conscience as God's moral witness written on the heart (2:14–15)
- Judgment according to the light each person has received
- The universality of moral accountability, with or without the written law
- Conscience as real but not infallible, in need of instruction by God's word

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean that the work of the law is written on the heart?
- How does conscience function as a witness, and what are its limits?
- How does this passage support the claim that all people are accountable to God?

Question 8

Student Question:

Paul says that on the day of judgment God will judge the secrets of men by Christ Jesus (v. 16). Imagine the hidden parts of your life, the private thoughts, the secret habits, the things no one else sees, brought into the open before God. Where is there a gap between your public reputation and your private reality, and how does the truth that God sees in secret call you to integrity?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-focused question takes Paul's sobering statement that God will judge the secrets of men by Christ Jesus (v. 16). The teacher should let the class sit with the reality that nothing is hidden from God, not the private thought, the secret habit, the hidden motive, or the sin no one else knows about.

Address the gap between reputation and reality. Many people maintain a respectable public image while harboring private sins or a divided heart. Paul's words confront the comforting illusion that what is hidden does not count. To God, the secret life is the real life, and it is fully known.

Make the application about integrity rather than mere fear. Integrity means being the same person in private that we appear to be in public, one undivided life before God. The goal is not to live in dread of exposure but to live so honestly before the God who already sees that exposure would hold no terror.

Point to grace as the remedy for the hidden self. The answer to a guilty secret is not deeper concealment but confession to the God who already knows and freely forgives. The teacher can encourage students that bringing the hidden things into the light before God (and, where appropriate, a trusted brother or sister) is the path to wholeness (James 5:16; 1 John 1:9).

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's knowledge of the secret life (2:16; Hebrews 4:13)
- Integrity as one undivided life before God
- The difference between reputation and reality
- Confession as the remedy for hidden sin (1 John 1:9; James 5:16)

Discussion Prompts

- Where is there a gap between your public reputation and your private reality?
- How does the truth that God sees in secret call you to integrity?
- What hidden thing might God be inviting you to bring into the light?

Question 9**Student Question:**

Paul confronts the religious person who relies on the law and boasts in God yet dishonors Him by breaking the law, so that God's name is blasphemed because of them (vv. 17–24); then he says real circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit and not the letter, and that the true Jew is one inwardly whose praise is from God and not man (vv. 25–29). What is the danger of resting in outward religious markers (heritage, membership, ritual, reputation) while the heart is far from God, and what does Paul mean that God wants an inward, heart-level reality and not merely external conformity?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest doctrinal question of the lesson, and it strikes at one of the deepest dangers in religious life: trusting in external markers while the heart is far from God. Paul confronts the person who relies on the law, boasts in God, and prides himself on his religious identity, yet dishonors God by breaking the very law he boasts in (vv. 17–24). The teacher should help students feel the force of this, because the same danger threatens every religious tradition, including our own.

Explain the specific markers Paul addresses: the law and circumcision. For the Jewish reader these were the badges of belonging to God's covenant people. Paul does not deny their God-given value, but he insists they are worthless as a substitute for an obedient heart. Circumcision without obedience, he says, has become as good as uncircumcision (v. 25). The outward sign means nothing if the inward reality is missing.

Bring this home to our own setting. We do not trust in circumcision, but we can trust in our own external markers: church membership, a family heritage of faith, regular attendance, baptism viewed as a mere certificate rather than a living union with Christ, a reputation for being a good church person. Paul's warning is that none of these saves a person whose heart is not truly given to God. The teacher should make this pointed without being cruel: it is possible to have all the right markers and a heart far from the Lord.

Unfold the positive vision: the circumcision of the heart. Paul says real circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit and not the letter, and the true Jew is one inwardly whose praise comes from God and not man (vv. 28–29). This was always God's desire, even under the old covenant (Deuteronomy 10:16; Jeremiah 4:4). God has never been content with mere external conformity. He wants the heart, an inward reality of faith, love, and obedience that the Spirit works in us.

Guard the balance carefully for our tradition. This passage is not teaching that outward obedience does not matter or that God is indifferent to how we respond to His commands. Paul is not pitting heart against obedience; he is pitting empty external religion against the obedient heart God desires. The right conclusion is not to neglect baptism, the assembly, or the Lord's Supper, but to make sure that in all of them the heart is truly engaged. God wants both the obedient act and the willing heart behind it, never the shell without the substance.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The danger of resting in external markers (heritage, membership, ritual, reputation) while the heart is far from God
- The circumcision of the heart, an inward reality worked by the Spirit (2:28-29; Deuteronomy 10:16; Jeremiah 4:4)
- God's desire for the heart behind the obedient act, not the act alone
- Outward signs as meaningful only when joined to a living, obedient faith
- Avoiding two errors, empty externalism and the neglect of God's appointed commands
- Praise from God rather than from people as the mark of the true worshiper

Discussion Prompts

- What external religious markers are we tempted to trust in today?
- What does it mean for the heart to be circumcised by the Spirit?
- How do we keep our obedience (baptism, worship, the Lord's Supper) from becoming mere externalism?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across this searching chapter. Paul has confronted hypocritical judging, the danger of presuming on God's kindness, judgment according to works, the witness of conscience, the judgment of secret things, and the call to a circumcised heart. Name one specific way you sense Jesus forming you through these verses. What is the single truth from Romans 2:1-29 that you most need to carry into this coming week?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone question invites students to look back over the whole chapter and name how Jesus is forming them through it. Because Romans 2 is a humbling chapter, the teacher should gather the threads in a way that produces honesty and hope rather than discouragement.

Recall the movement: the trap of hypocritical judging, the call to read God's kindness as an invitation to repent, the warning against a hardening heart, judgment according to works, the witness of conscience, the judgment of secret things, and the call to a circumcised heart. Each one peels away a layer of false security.

Encourage students to choose a single truth to carry. For one it may be repenting of a judging spirit; for another, responding to God's patience with overdue repentance; for another, attending to the secret life; for another, examining whether their religion is heart-deep or only skin-deep.

Close by pointing forward. Paul has now stripped away every false hope so that, in Romans 3, the gospel can be received with empty hands. The disciple being formed here is not crushed but cleared, set free from self-righteous illusions and ready to find their whole hope in the grace of God in Christ.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Self-knowledge and repentance as fruit of the chapter
- The dismantling of false securities to prepare for grace
- Integrity of heart as the goal of spiritual formation
- The unity of Romans, diagnosis leading to the cure

Discussion Prompts

- Which single truth from Romans 2:1-29 most needs to shape your week?
- What false security has this chapter exposed in you?
- How does facing this chapter honestly prepare you to receive grace?