

The Law of Moses in a Lawless World

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Romans 2:6-29 (ESV adapted)

⁶ *'He will render to each one according to his works':* [Psa 62:12, Prov 24:12]

⁷ To those who by endurance in **good work seek for glory and honor and immortality**, he will give **life of the age to come**; ⁸ but for those who are **self-centered and do not obey the truth**, but **obey injustice, wrath and fury**.

⁹ **Tribulation and distress** for every human life who **works evil**, the **Jew** first and also the **Greek**, ¹⁰ but **glory and honor and peace** for everyone who **works good**, the **Jew** first and also the **Greek**. ¹¹ For **God shows no partiality**.

¹² For everyone who **sinned outside law (Torah)** will also perish outside law, and everyone who **sinned within law (Torah)** will be **judged through law**. ¹³ For it is not the **hearers of law** who are in the right with God, but the **doers of law** who will be **declared to be right** (justified).

¹⁴ For when **Gentiles, who do not by birth have law (Torah), do what the law affirms**, though they do not have law, they for themselves are law. ¹⁵ They show **the work of the law** written in their **hearts**, while their **conscience** also bears witness, and their conflicting **thoughts** accuse or even defend them ¹⁶ on that day when, according to my gospel, **God judges the secrets of humans through Messiah Jesus**.

¹⁷ But if **you** call yourself a **Jew** and rely on **law (Torah)** and celebrate **God** ¹⁸ and know **his will** and discern **what really matters**, because you are **instructed from the law (Torah)**; ¹⁹ and if you are sure that you yourself are a **guide to the blind**, a **light** for those **in darkness**, ²⁰ an **instructor** of the foolish, a **teacher** of children, having **in the law** the delineation of **knowledge and truth** – ²¹ you then who **teach others**, do you not **teach yourself**?

While you preach against stealing, do **you steal**? ²² You who say that one must not commit adultery, do **you commit adultery**? You who abhor idols, do you **rob temples**? ²³ You who **boast in the law dishonor God by breaking the law**. ²⁴ For "*The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you;*" so it is written. [Isa 52:5]

²⁵ For **circumcision** indeed is of value if you **obey the law**, but if you **break the law**, your **circumcision becomes uncircumcision**. ²⁶ So, if one who is uncircumcised keeps the just requirements of the law, will not their **uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision**? ²⁷ Then one who is physically uncircumcised but keeps the law will judge you who have the written code and circumcision but transgress the law (Torah).

²⁸ For the outward person is not the Jew, nor is that which is outward, in flesh, real circumcision. ²⁹ But **the secret person is the Jew**, and **circumcision is of the heart, in Spirit**, not in letter. Their **praise** is not from people but **from God**.

Isaiah 42:6-7

⁶ "I am the LORD; I have called you in righteousness; I will take you by the hand and keep you; I will give you as a covenant for the people, a light for the nations, ⁷ to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness."

Deuteronomy 30:6

⁶ And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.

Jeremiah 4:4 (cf. 9:26)

⁴ Circumcise yourselves to the LORD; circumcise your hearts, O men of Judah and of Jerusalem; lest my wrath go forth like fire, and burn with none to quench it, because of the evil of your deeds.

An Impartial God in a Divided World

Paul's focus is the Gospel – God faithfully fulfilling his promises in his Son Jesus Messiah. His power to save everyone who trusts/believes, “the Jew first and also the Greek” (1:16).

It is the astonishing seriousness of the core of God's action – incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection: God becoming human, the death of God, the conquest of death and the creation of a new life – that reveals what is at stake, the depth of human brokenness.

The world is divided – Jew/Greek – and many other ways. But God is creator of all, loves all, will judge all impartially, on the basis of the whole reality (works) of life, including the secret depths of life, through Messiah Jesus (vv 6-16). The Torah/Law is very important but does not limit God. It is given to Israel and marks a great covenant relationship.

But the many nations (Gentiles) who do not have it, still have moral responsibility in their heart, conscience, reasoning. God shows no partiality. He looks at the secret reality.

In the Gospel he brings all people – broken, dying, in need of life – into direct connection with his promised blessings for his whole world that he made through Abraham and Israel.

The Call and Indictment of Israel

But what about Israel? What about a Jew like Paul? (A theme throughout Romans.) Paul lived within the pagan world as a Jew with a strong self-identity, a sense of the calling of Israel that he took seriously as a Pharisee (Phi 3:5-6). But he knew the deep paradox of it.

There was so much that was wonderful. Knowing God, receiving the Torah, Exodus, Messiah, promises, etc. Israel was called by God to be a light to all the nations (Gentiles) (Isa. 42:6-7). Paul knows that calling is real and important. The Torah is a true gift of God to Israel and the truths it unfolds of the one creator God and his interaction with his people are basic.

But just read the story in scripture! Israel's failure was always evident. From the golden calf to divided kingdom to idolatry to exile. More recently look at the Herods, the temple high priests, the drive toward violent confrontation with Rome, the people of the land.

Paul knows many Jews had high moral standards, as he had. But scripture itself says that Israel had not fulfilled its calling to be a light to the nations. Passages like Isa 42 and 52 – deeply studied by Paul – point to God's promises to be faithful to Israel in spite of failures, to raise up the Servant of the Lord, Israel, or one who embodies and serves Israel, to do something new, a Suffering Servant to heal Israel and the nations. God never fails in his promises to Israel, but intervenes himself to become Israel's Messiah, Servant.

God Follows not External Boundaries but Deep Reality

But aren't the boundaries clear and indisputable that mark off the Jews as God's elect people: Circumcision, Torah observance (Sabbath, purity laws, tithing, feast days)?

Paul, like Jesus before him, says these boundary markers have become external, ritual lines that mark no real devotion of life to God, no “circumcision of the heart” in real love for God and his will. This was already anticipated in scripture (Deut 30:6; Jer 4:4), and the prophets repeatedly indicted Israel for elaborate religiosity without transformation, for ritual without justice, for sacrifices and rites in a society that oppressed the poor.

God is now showing that he will not recognize those external boundaries, Paul says. There is one God of all people and he will judge all people by the same standard: Not external marks they have but the transformation of their heart and life, the deep reality secret to all but God. He works from the inside out. When God dies for you, taking on your sin, and you trust his faithful work, and his Spirit works in you, a new reality begins!