

ROMANS

Part 5: “The Deconstruction of Self-Righteousness”

Romans 2:1–29

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Scripture Reading

Our Scripture reading today is a long passage. It is also a very dense and complex passage. But it all ties together, so it's best if we read it all together.

So buckle up: today we will be looking at the all 599 words of Romans chapter 2.

“Therefore 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. We know that the judgment of God rightly falls on those who practice such things. Do you suppose, O man—you who judge those who practice such things and yet do them yourself—that you will escape the judgment of God? Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God’s righteous judgment will be revealed. He will render to each one according to his works: to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury. There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. For God shows no partiality. 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. For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified. For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus. But if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast in God and know his will and approve what is excellent, because you are instructed from the law; and if you are sure that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of children, having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth— you then who teach others, do you not teach yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal? You who say that one must not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who boast in the law dishonor God by breaking the law. For, as it is

written, *“The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.” For circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law, but if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision. So, if a man who is uncircumcised keeps the precepts of the law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? Then he who is physically uncircumcised but keeps the law will condemn you who have the written code and circumcision but break the law. For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God” (Rom 2:1–29).*

Introduction

“Deconstruction” is a word that is very popular today. Originally, “deconstruction” was a technical, philosophical term that described the outlook of the French philosopher Jacques Derrida.

But that’s not how the word “deconstruction” is typically used today. In our cultural moment, it is a term that refers to people critically analyzing and questioning their deeply held beliefs and worldview. Deconstruction means that ideas and truths that were once foundational and unquestioned givens are now subjected to critique and interrogation. Thus, “deconstruction” is now particularly associated with young people, who, although they grew up going to church, are now questioning their faith.

For many people, deconstruction of faith leads to the *destruction* of faith, often in the name of self-discovery. Many who deconstruct walk away from the gospel, away from the church, and away from Christ. And, in a sad irony, the end result of such deconstruction is often the mere exchanging of a *religious* fundamentalism for a *secular* fundamentalism.

But, for others, deconstruction can be somewhat of a refiner’s fire that burns away the dross of cultural baggage and misconceptions from the pure and precious metal of the Christian gospel. This form of deconstruction is different. Such a form of deconstruction is not a questioning of the Bible. It is a questioning of our religious beliefs *in light of the Bible*. It is saying, *“I’ve always believed this idea to be true, but is it something the Bible actually teaches?”*

There have been moments in history when this latter type of deconstruction leads to reformation and revival. In the sixteenth century, a German monk named Martin Luther began to deconstruct the religious beliefs passed down to him through Catholic scholasticism in light of the book of Romans. The result was a renewed vision of faith and grace that launched the Protestant Reformation.

Even more importantly, there was once a Pharisaical Jew named Saul of Tarsus, who had deeply held religious views about who God was and what it meant to be a faithful Jew. However, those views were utterly deconstructed when Saul—later known as *Paul*—encountered the risen Christ and heard his voice. As a result, Paul becomes the Apostle to the nations!

I mention all of this because I want to argue that Romans chapter 2 is the Apostle Paul engaging in a form of *deconstruction*.

In Romans 1, Paul exposes how a rejection of God leads to idolatry and sin. However, in Romans 2, he is turning his attention to exposing how self-made religion and self-righteousness are just as deadly and damning as irreligion and willful sin. Such self-made religion and self-righteousness are not condoned or supported by the word of God. Rather, they are exposed and deconstructed by the word of God.

So today, we are going to talk about *"The Deconstruction of Self-Righteousness."* Paul is going to deconstruct three big ideas that are temptations for all of us.

Exposition

1. Self-Righteous Judgment

Let's look back at our text: *"Therefore 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"* (Rom 2:1).

Notice how the Apostle directly addresses the reader: *"you...O man...you condemn yourself!"* Departing from merely describing a situation in chapter 1, Paul now suddenly switches to a tone of direct confrontation. This shift creates a sense of focused intensity. Paul wants his readers to *feel* the force of what he says at a personal level.

All of us have a spiritual hunger to be known and approved of as morally righteous. We want others to see us as righteous. Even more, we want to feel that we ourselves are righteous. We want to *feel* justified.

But we often go about this in the wrong way. One way we can falsely feel justified is by casting judgment upon others. Fighting our own sin is hard. Exposing our own sin is even harder. But it is easy to self-righteously fight and expose the sin of others, all the while harboring sin within our hearts.

I call this mindset *"comparative justification."* It is a mindset that says, *"I don't have to be righteous. I just need to convince myself that I'm a little more righteous than that guy over there."*

But Paul deconstructs self-righteous judgment. He says essentially, *"Do you think you can escape accountably by condemning the sins of others, all the while you are sinning in the exact same ways?"*

In the original context of the book of Romans, this temptation toward self-righteous judgment seems to be a temptation particularly associated with the Jewish Christians in Rome. But self-righteous judgment is not a uniquely Jewish temptation—it is a *human* temptation.

But Paul exposes this mindset for what it is. It is a self-made religion wherein the self is exalted to divinity beneath the veil of religion. To self-righteously judge another is to put oneself in the position of ultimate judgment. It is to usurp the place of Christ, who alone is qualified to judge the living and the dead!

But why would people who believe in God be so bold as to assume God's throne of judgment? Paul claims it is because we are tempted to mistake God's kindness toward us as indifference to our sin. But nothing could be further from the case. God's kindness is meant to lead us to repentance. And if we spurn his kindness, we are not avoiding accountability—we are storing up divine wrath!

Look at verses 4 through 5: *“Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed”* (Rom 2:4–5).

There is a day coming when all that is hidden will be revealed. God's righteous judgment will be “revealed”—it will literally be *apocalypted* (ἀποκάλυψις)—upon us!

To be presumptuous concerning God's kindness and patience is to in reality despise him, look down upon him, to patronize him. Paul is saying, *“Is that really the posture you want to take toward an almighty God who is zealous for righteousness and justice?”*

The typical stereotype of preachers who constantly preach hell, fire, and brimstone is that they are filled with pride as they deride the sins of the world and arrogantly look down upon others.

However, Romans 2 shows us that the doctrine of eternal judgment should never bolster our pride—in fact, it should destroy it. We will know that we have taken the truth of God's justice seriously when we are filled with fear and trembling before God's righteous glory. We will know that we take God's judgment seriously when we humble ourselves, with awestruck wonder, under the mighty hand of God.

Even more, the humility that comes from believing in God's justice and glory should determine the way the church speaks to sin in the world. We are to think and speak and live as those who have been rescued and redeemed by the kindness of God. Thus, our goal is never to shame the world.

Shame does not lead people to repentance. Shame does not cultivate spiritual transformation. Shame engenders defiance, defensiveness, and withdrawal. Grace, on the other hand, disarms, welcomes, and restores.

The watching world does not see the beauty of God's grace when they see judgmental Christians. The world will see the beauty of grace when the people of God model honest

confession and practice faithful repentance. We show the watching world a new way of life when we possess the humility to acknowledge our errors and the courage to correct them.

It is God's *kindness* that leads us to repentance. We are to embody that same kindness to those around us.

2. Self-Righteous Hypocrisy

Originally, the word "*hypocrite*" was a Greek word that simply referred to a stage actor; specifically, a stage actor who wore a mask that expressed an exaggerated emotion. The idea is that there is a disconnect between the emotion that a mask is portraying and what the actual human person is feeling.

Eventually, the term "hypocrite" began to be particularly associated with a person who makes for an outward pretense of righteousness, all the while concealing a life of compromise. In fact, the first person we have on record as using the word "hypocrite" in this way is Jesus himself (cf. Mark 7:6)!

We may fool each other with our masks. But we do not fool God.

As Paul continues to build his case in Romans 2, he is clearly exposing the sin of hypocrisy. He wants his readers to know there is a crucial distinction between *knowing* what the Bible says and *obeying* what the Bible commands.

Paul takes the Jewish Christians in Rome to task for failing to understand this distinction: "*But if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast in God and know his will and approve what is excellent, because you are instructed from the law; and if you are sure that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of children, having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth— you then who teach others, do you not teach yourself?*" (Rom 2:17–21).

While the original context of Romans 2 is geared toward religious-minded Jewish Christians, this broad tendency toward hypocrisy is a temptation for us all.

There is real temptation to come before the word of God—to hear it, read its words, and know its truth—but to fail to let it show us the reality of God. There is a temptation to deny the word of God the opportunity to correct us; to only think of how it applies to *others*.

When we come before the living word of God, we must come before it humbly, knowing that these are the words of our holy, glorious Creator. *We must not trivialize God or his word.* We must come before him with a willingness to hear, a willingness to receive, a willingness to submit and obey.

We are not justified by believing the doctrine of God's reign when we refuse to submit to his rule within our lives. As Paul writes, *"For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified"* (Rom 2:13).

Now, you might read that verse and say, *"Wait, I thought that we are justified by faith and not by works?"*

That is true. And by the time we are done studying Romans, we will have talked a lot about justification by faith alone. But for now, what I want you to know is this: We are not saved by our works. We are saved by faith alone. *But saving faith never stands alone.* Saving faith—living faith—always bears the fruit of righteousness.

We can say we believe one thing. But our behavior shows what we *truly* believe.

So the questions that are provoked by this text are: have you allowed the truth of grace to change your life? Have you allowed the love of Christ to reorder your loves? How have you allowed the word of God to move you toward obedience?

Jesus himself told his disciples, *"If you love me, you will keep my commandments"* (John 14:15).

Have we encountered Christ in such a way that we desire to submit to his desires? Or have we succumbed to the lie that we are saved by knowing a truth that we do not really believe and do not intend to obey?

Even demons believe and tremble before the reality of God, but they do not love him and they will not obey him (cf. James 2:19). So too, we must not be satisfied with a religion of self-righteous hypocrisy that knows the truth but does not *love* the truth or obey the truth.

The Christian is called to take off the mask of hypocrisy and find freedom and transformation in confession and repentance. Our world has plenty of pretense and pretenders. Christians do not need to add more. Our world is desperate to see honesty, humility, the willingness to love.

We bear witness to the gospel not through our sinless perfection but by humbly confessing our sin to our perfect Savior.

3. Self-Righteous Legalism

The Jewish people of Rome were understandably proud of their ethnic heritage as God's chosen people. They were proud of the covenant God had made with Abraham and the Law that God had given Moses. And there were various external signs that showed someone belonged to the Jewish community. Those external signs included the observance of certain religious festivals, the keeping of the Sabbath on Saturdays, the adherence to kosher dietary restrictions, and, most significantly, the practice of

circumcision, which was a sign of the relationship God made with his people (cf. Gen 17:1–14).

But there were Jews who began to trust in their circumcision as the that which saved them. To this Paul says something that would have radically challenged the Jewish Christians of the ancient world, “*For circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law, but if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision*” (Rom 2:25).

The Jewish Christians were tempted to look at circumcision as the ultimate proof that they were God’s people. So too, for us, there is an ever-present temptation to look to emblems of outward religiosity and mistake those emblems for true, heartfelt devotion to God.

We typically call such a mindset *legalism*. Legalism is when we trust in our righteousness for salvation instead of trusting in Christ’s righteousness for our salvation. Legalism is when we measure our righteousness by a list of rules or laws, and we say, “*As long as I perform up to this list, then I am okay and worthy.*”

Legalism can manifest in a thousand different ways. There is the classic Bible belt saying, “*I don’t drink, smoke, or chew or go with those that do.*” That’s a list of external behaviors.

But for others, that list might look differently. It might be, “*I have the right theological opinions and read the right books*” or “*I do the right acts of social service and care about the right groups of oppressed people*” or “*I have the right political views*” or even “*I have the right culture and the right ethnicity*”—which is exactly what was happening among Jewish Christians in Rome.

And here’s the thing: *the things on your list might be good things*—but they do not justify you, and your external religious performance will not *save* you. The haunting truth is that you can do all the things on your list and have a heart that is cold towards God.

To be Christian—to be a part of God’s people—is not a matter of observing a list of outward religious tokens or ethnic heritage—it is a matter of the *heart*. As Paul declares, “*For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God*” (Rom 2:28–29).

We so often fall under the spell of believing that the worship of God is a type of religious performance art of outward displays. But God is not interested in performative gestures—he desires humility, brokenness, and simplicity of devotion that comes from the heart!

As King David once sang`1 even more clearly in Psalms, “*The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise*” (Ps 51:17).

Conclusion

We are drawn toward self-made religion and self-righteousness because we believe if God knew the real us—the broken us—he would despise and reject us.

Like Adam and Eve, who tried to hide from God when they fell into sin, we make fig leaves of performance to mask our failure (cf. Gen 3:7–8).

But Romans 2 reminds us that we cannot hide from an omnipresent God! We cannot deceive or dupe an omniscient. God sets himself in zealous opposition and confrontation to all human claims to righteousness!

Yet, here again, we witness the greatness of God's mercy. God confronts our pretenses of judgment and hypocrisy and religiosity not to shame us but to *save* us!

The cross of Jesus Christ has already exposed us. We no longer have to hide from God or one another. Our sin was so great that it merited the death of the Son of God. But God's love was so great that he was willing to pay that cost for our sake!

I once rejected and *deconstructed* what I thought was Christianity. But it was the book of Romans that showed me what had fallen down in my mind was only man-made religion of performance, a West Texas religiosity that I had mistaken for the Christian gospel.

I pray that if you have equated the Christian faith with a list of rules to follow or a performative mask to wear that God's word in Romans 2 would mercifully shatter that illusion.

Jesus was a teacher, but he was more than a teacher. Jesus was a moral example, but he was more than an example. Jesus is our Redeemer, our deliverer, the one who saved us when we could not save ourselves!

He does not save you because you pretended to be righteous when in reality you were unworthy. He has loved you despite your unworthiness, and his love is what makes you righteous.

So Redeemer Christian Church, may we be fearless to lay aside all man-made religion, all judgmentalism, and all legalism. May we take off the masks of our pretensions and pride, and may we humbly receive the grace of the one who died in our place. May we encounter the kindness of Christ, and may his kindness lead to our repentance and redemption!

AMEN.

Discussion Starters for Gospel Communities

1. Read Romans 2:1–11. This portion of Romans 2 addresses the sin of judgmentalism. Why is judging others such a besetting temptation for many? How should God's kindness help us overcome this temptation?
2. Read Romans 2:12–24. This passage shows us there is a crucial distinction between knowing what the Bible says and obeying what the Bible commands. How should our love for Christ spur us toward obeying the commands of Christ (cf. John 14:15)?
3. Legalism is when we trust in our righteousness for salvation instead of trusting in Christ's righteousness for our salvation. Read Romans 2:25–29 and discuss how these verses reveal that legalism is different from a sincere devotion that comes from the heart.