

11

Romans 2: Saved Apart from the Gospel?

Douglas Moo

To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life. (Rom. 2:7)

For it is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God's sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous. Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them. (Rom. 2:13–15)

If those who are not circumcised keep the law's requirements, will they not be regarded as though they were circumcised? The one who is not circumcised physically and yet obeys the law will condemn you who, even though you have the written code and circumcision, are a lawbreaker. (Rom. 2:26–27)

These passages from Romans 2 appear to teach that people can be saved by doing good things. “Persistence in doing good” can bring eternal life, “obeying the law” can lead to being declared righteous before God, “doing by nature the things required by the law” can result in thoughts that “defend” a person on the day of judgment (see v. 16), and “keeping the law’s requirement” can mark a person as belonging to God’s people (i.e., be considered as circumcised). Nothing is said in either these texts or the larger context about responding to the gospel or about faith in Christ. Romans 2, in other words, seems to furnish considerable exegetical ammunition to those who think that people can be saved without responding in faith to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Many have drawn just this conclusion from Romans 2. Several church fathers and the reformer Zwingli thought these passages referred to “enlightened” pagans who lived before the time of Christ. Others go further, saying Paul opens the door here to the possibility that people after Christ’s coming, who have never heard the gospel in any form, can be saved by a sincere and obedient response to the “light” they have received.

I will show in this chapter that this interpretation of Romans 2 is incorrect. First, I will give my reasons for rejecting the conclusion that Paul is teaching salvation apart from the gospel and faith. I will then present two more satisfying interpretations of the relevant texts and indicate my own preference between them.

Does Paul Teach Salvation by Works?

The biggest problem for anyone arguing that Romans 2 allows for salvation by works is that such a reading conflicts with other texts in this same letter. “No one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law” (3:20a). “For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law” (3:28). “However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness” (4:5). In these texts Paul seems to say that a right relationship with God comes only through faith, and that nothing a person does can contribute in any way to establishing this relationship.

Some boldly cut the knot of paradox and state that Paul simply contradicts himself. He usually teaches salvation by faith alone, but for some reason, teaches salvation by works in Romans 2.¹ These interpreters can claim Paul’s authority for “salvation apart from the gospel,” but in so doing they destroy the value of appealing to the apostle as an authority. What kind of authority should Paul have for

1. See, e.g., Heikki Räisänen, *Paul and the Law* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1983), 99–108; and E. P. Sanders, *Paul, the Law and the Jewish People* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 123–32.

us if he so blatantly contradicts himself at so fundamental a point for his theology and preaching? We may, then, dismiss this view from consideration because it leads to no certain conclusions about how a person is to be saved.

Those who think that Romans 2 teaches salvation by doing, and that such a teaching does not contradict Paul's teaching elsewhere, argue in different ways, and I do not intend here to rehearse all the possibilities. Rather, I will take one recent and well-argued article as an example. Klyne Snodgrass insists that Paul is teaching "salvation to the doers" in Romans 2 and that nothing in Paul's letters contradicts this conclusion. First, suggests Snodgrass, the "doing" that God rewards with salvation in Romans 2 is a doing that springs from the work of God's grace in the life of a person. Paul's "by grace alone" is, then, preserved. Second, in texts like Romans 3:20 and 3:28, Paul is not denying that works or doing can justify—only that certain *kinds* of works do not justify. Specifically, Snodgrass argues that the phrase used in both these verses, *erga nomou* ("works of the law"), refers to works done in a legalistic spirit, "works done in the flesh." Paul resolutely denies that such works, done apart from God's grace in a desire to gain favor with God, can save. But there is nothing in Paul against the idea that the "right" kind of doing can bring a person into relationship with God. God, Romans 2 teaches, is impartial and will reward every person according to what that person has done; and the one who responds sincerely and obediently to that "light" will be saved.²

Quite apart from questions about whether this interpretation gets at what Paul is doing in Romans 2, I am not convinced that it escapes the charge of Pauline inconsistency. For Snodgrass's view to work, *erga nomou* must have a restricted meaning and Paul must not elsewhere teach that justification is by faith alone. Both are questionable. Despite recent claims to the contrary, there is no good reason to confine Paul's "works of the law" to a certain kind of works, such as "works done in a 'legalistic spirit,'" or "works done to claim covenant status."³ *Erga nomou*, which Paul uses eight times (also in Gal. 2:16 [three times]; 3:2, 5, 10), is clearly equivalent to the simple *erga* ("works") of Romans 4:2 and 4:6. The addition of the phrase *of the law (nomou)* simply denotes the source that demands the works; it does not change the meaning of the word *works* from the way Paul uses it elsewhere—of

2. Indeed, Snodgrass suggests that some passages such as Rom. 3:31; 8:4; 13:8, 10; Gal. 5:14; 6:2 support this idea. See Klyne R. Snodgrass, "Justification by Grace—to the Doers: An Analysis of the Place of Romans 2 in the Theology of Paul," *New Testament Studies* 32 (1986): 72–93, esp. 85.

3. The latter is the way that James D. G. Dunn interprets the phrase; see *Romans 1–8*, Word Biblical Commentary 38a (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1988), 158–60.

anything a person does (see Rom. 9:11–12). This is confirmed by the equivalent Jewish phrase, which also denotes anything done in obedience to the law.⁴ In Romans 3:20 and 3:28, then, Paul rejects any place for human “doing,” however motivated or directed, in the justification of sinful human beings, as the majority of Protestant interpreters have correctly seen. Nothing we can do, not even the works of Abraham (Rom. 4), can bring us to God.

Moreover, justification by faith is, for Paul, the necessary corollary to “by grace alone.” Any work that a human does, however it is motivated (and Abraham’s were surely rightly motivated!), creates an “obligation” on God’s part. Therefore, since God gives his salvation in an act of pure grace, there can be no place for works in the process. (This is the logic of Rom. 4:4–5.)

If this is so, then any interpretation of Romans 2 that allows for people to be saved apart from faith runs head-on into the bedrock of Paul’s theology: justification by faith alone, as the necessary corollary to salvation by grace alone. We have put the matter negatively: salvation apart from faith contradicts salvation by faith alone. But it can also be defended positively when we recognize the place of chapter 2 in the argument of Romans. Romans 1:18–3:20 is a long, but necessary “interruption” in the basic train of Paul’s thought. In 1:16–17, Paul affirms that the gospel mediates saving power to everyone who believes, both Jew and Gentile. Romans 3:21 resumes and develops this theme. The intervening argument (1:18–3:20) is intended to show why human beings need this “revelation of the righteousness of God” and why it can be experienced only through faith. What is the reason? Sin. It holds every person, Jew or Gentile, under its power (3:9). And because of sin, no person can be justified before God by obeying the law or by doing any other good work (3:20). Boiled down to its essentials, then, Paul is claiming that people must respond in faith to the revelation of God’s righteousness because it, and it alone, breaks the stranglehold of sin. And the revelation of God’s righteousness occurs, he says, in the gospel.

Romans 2 cannot mean that people are saved apart from faith or apart from the gospel. But my case will not be convincing unless I can demonstrate a plausible alternative interpretation. In fact, two such interpretations exist.

The Gentile Christian Interpretation

The first holds that Paul is speaking, in each of the verses quoted at the head of this chapter, of Gentile *Christians*. It is they, and they only,

4. For more detailed argument, see my article “‘Law,’ ‘Works of the Law,’ and Legalism in Paul,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 45 (1983): 73–100.

who persist “in doing good” (2:7), who are justified by observing the law (2:13), who “do by nature things required by the law” (2:14), and who are accounted as God’s people by keeping the requirements of the law (2:26). They do not have the law “by nature,” that is, by being born as Jews under the Mosaic law. Yet, their faith incorporates them into Christ, gives them the indwelling Spirit (see 2:28–29), and makes them able to “fulfill” the demands of the law. Thus is brought to pass the circumstances predicted by the prophet Jeremiah for the “new covenant,” when God’s law is written on the hearts of his people (Jer. 31:31–34; compare Rom. 2:15). On this view, of course, Romans 2 says nothing about the possibility of salvation apart from the gospel, for all of Paul’s statements about those who are saved by doing refer to people who have already responded to the gospel.

This view, which has a long and distinguished history,⁵ succeeds in harmonizing Romans 2 with 3:20 and 3:28. Paul would be saying that faith alone justifies and is the necessary presupposition of the works that count before God in the final judgment. Still, while this interpretation may be theologically sound, it has problems satisfying the data in Romans 2. First, the introduction of Gentile Christians at this point in Paul’s discussion would interfere with his purpose. Romans 2 is part of Paul’s indictment of humankind, an indictment that reaches its climax in 3:9: “Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin.” Throughout 1:18–3:8, Paul shows that Jews and Gentiles are on the same footing before God, because they have been exposed to the revelation of God, but have turned from that revelation. To compare Jews and Gentile Christians at this point in his indictment would disrupt this carefully argued equation between the two.

The second problem with the Gentile Christian view is the description of the “Gentiles” (*ethnē*) in verse 14 as those who “do by nature things required by the law.” Gentile Christians certainly fulfill the law (see Rom. 8:4), but they do it through the Spirit, not “by nature” (*physisi*), a word that alludes to natural, inborn capacities.

Third, we are required on this view to assume that when Paul says people will be saved by doing good or by their obedience to the law, he really means “by their faith which is manifested in their doing good.” This is a big assumption to make, for Paul appears to be saying that it is the doing itself which is the criterion for the judgment of God.

While the Gentile Christian view should be taken seriously, I do not think it is the best interpretation of Romans 2. The context and thrust

5. Held by Augustine, revived by Karl Barth and argued recently by, among others, C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975), 1:151–58, 172–74.

of Paul's argument are better explained if these people are identified as Gentiles apart from Christ. Does this mean, then, that Paul opens the door to the salvation of Gentiles apart from the gospel? In a sense, yes, he does—but only to slam it decisively in the next chapter. Let me explain by examining Romans 2, paragraph by paragraph, in light of the hypothetical interpretation.

The Hypothetical Interpretation

The paragraph in verses 6–11 begins and ends with statements that God will impartially render to each person “according to his works.” Paul breaks down this general statement into two possibilities: punishment for doing wrong (vv. 8–9) and eternal life for doing good (vv. 7 and 10). Paul's purpose in this paragraph is to set forth the standard by which God judges each person, whether Jew or Gentile. He is not teaching how a person can be saved, but why God's judgment is truly a “righteous judgment” (v. 5). Here, apart from Christ, is the standard of judgment: works. Doing evil will be punished, but doing good, *if persisted in sufficiently* (v. 7) will be rewarded with eternal life. But Paul does not say that anyone outside of Christ meets this standard. In 3:9 (“all are under sin”) and 3:20 (“no one can be justified by ‘works of the law’”) he plainly denies that it is possible. The standard is set forth, and it embodies a genuine promise—but it is a promise that the power of sin, unleashed in the world through Adam (Rom. 5:12–21), prevents any person from attaining.⁶

The paragraph that follows takes the matter a step further. One might well respond at this point: Paul, you have said that God will judge each person, impartially, according to that person's works. But do not the Jews have a decisive advantage at this point? Has not God given them in the Mosaic law a clear description of the works he expects, while the Gentiles have been left without such guidance? In the face of this potential objection, Paul makes two main points in verses 12–16: (1) having the Mosaic law does not help the Jews, and (2) the Gentiles have not been left without guidance from God. The former point emerges clearly in verses 12b–13. Jews (“those under the law,” i.e., under its authority) will be judged according to the Mosaic law that has been given them (v. 12b), and it is not possessing, learning, or teaching that law which will clear them at the judgment, but *doing* it (v. 13). Here again, Paul is setting forth the standard by which Jews will be judged—he is not showing the Jews how

6. This line of interpretation is taken by, among others, Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950), 49–50, 54–55, 64–65; and Richard N. Longenecker, *Paul, Apostle of Liberty* (repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976), 116–22.

they may be saved. Romans 3:20 makes it clear that no person will be justified (*dikaioō*, the same verb as is used in 2:13) by doing the law. The logic of Paul in chapters 2–3 may be summarized in three key statements:

1. Doing the law can bring justification (2:13).
2. All are under the power of sin (3:9).
3. No one can be justified by doing the law (3:20).

The second of these assertions explains why the promise embodied in the first never becomes a reality and why the third, therefore, states the situation as it really is.

The description in verse 14 does not fit Gentile Christians. Paul is referring to non-Christian Gentiles who, though they do not “have the [Mosaic] law,” show, by their “natural” conformity to many of the law’s demands, that God has put within them a knowledge of “right and wrong.” Verses 14–15, then, do not explain verse 13b—as if Paul were describing those who are justified by obeying the law—but they qualify verse 12a. Those Gentiles who perish “apart from the [Mosaic] law” are not without access to God’s law in a more general sense: they have the basic moral law of God written on their hearts (note the reference to the conscience in v. 15).

Thus, Paul hints again at what he has taught in Romans 1:19–22: that in some way God confronts every person and, when judgment falls, each is “without excuse”—whether that person be a Jew who has the law of Moses or a Gentile who has the law of the heart. But does Paul in verse 15 allow that such Gentiles may follow the law of the heart so well that they are “excused” in the judgment? The verse could be read this way, but makes no sense in the context, since verses 14–15 explain why the Gentiles are condemned in verse 12a. Rather than reading verse 15b as if Paul were saying that some Gentiles may have thoughts that “accuse” them, while others have thoughts that “excuse” them, we should understand the point to be that all Gentiles have some thoughts that “accuse” and some that “excuse” (the NIV translation implies this). Every Gentile who stands before God in the judgment will be able to plead that he or she has occasionally, and maybe even often, done what “the law on the heart” demanded: honored parents, refrained from stealing, murder, adultery, and so on. But no Gentile will be able to stand before God without many “thoughts” that reveal a frequent lack of conformity to God’s demand. Such lack of conformity is sufficient basis for the wrath of God.

The last paragraph of Romans 2 is parallel to verses 12–16. Both show that the covenant privileges of the Jews do not shield them from the judgment of God and that they are in the same situation as the

Gentiles. While verses 12–16 make this point in light of the Jews' possession of the Mosaic law, verses 25–29 make it with reference to circumcision, the "sign of the covenant." Paul argues that mere possession of this blessing has no "value," unless it is accompanied by obedience to the law (v. 25). Again, we find Paul making what is actually *done* the decisive criterion in God's verdict. And assessment by this criterion can have positive as well as negative results, for even uncircumcised Gentiles, if they obey the law, will be considered as belonging to the people of God (v. 26). The case for identifying these Gentiles as Gentile Christians is stronger here than in any of the other debated texts in Romans 2.⁷ Two reasons support this position. First, verse 27, which continues the thought of verse 26, appears to predict an actual situation in which the Gentiles who follow the law judge the Jews who do not. Second, the latter part of the paragraph identifies the Holy Spirit, the agent of new covenant regeneration, as the one who accomplishes the circumcision that stamps people as God's own (see vv. 28–29).

Yet the argument is not conclusive. The realism of verse 27 may simply reflect the hypothetical circumstance of verse 26. If uncircumcised Gentiles were to meet the law's demand, at the judgment they would be able to condemn the Jews who had the law, but did not do it. It is true that Christian experience is "foreshadowed" in verses 28–29, for Paul always uses "Spirit," when contrasted with "letter" (*gramma*), to refer to a specifically Christian situation (see also Rom. 7:6 and 2 Cor. 3:5–6). But it is not clear that verse 29 describes the same individual as verse 26. Paul's description of the "true Jew" in verses 28–29 contrasts with the law-breaking Jew of verses 25 and 27 and does not further describe the uncircumcised Gentile of verse 26. Paul's main point in verses 25–27 is that Jews cannot rely on their circumcision to shield them from the judgment of God. In verses 28–29, he contrasts this "ineffective" circumcision with the only circumcision that counts before God: the circumcision of the heart, accomplished by God's Spirit. Here Paul anticipates his teaching later in Romans that Christians who fulfill the law through the Spirit are the true people of God (see 8:2–4).⁸

7. For instance, John Murray adopts the interpretation of vv. 7, 10, 13, and 14–15 argued above, but still thinks that here Paul is referring to Gentile Christians; see *The Epistle to the Romans*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 1:86–87.

8. Another factor makes it unlikely that Paul is referring to Gentile Christians in v. 26. As in the earlier texts, it is conformity to the law that here qualifies one to be a member of God's people. But Paul makes clear that it is faith, not conformity to the law, that turns a Gentile into a Gentile Christian. Paul insists that any form of doing or obedience to the law is distinct from faith (e.g., Rom. 4:4–5, 13–14; Gal. 3:12). He would never describe faith under the rubric of "keeping the requirements of the law."

Paul never says that Gentiles apart from the gospel can be saved by meeting the demands of the law, or by doing good works. The texts could mean this only if they are ripped out of context. Once the context is recognized, Paul's purposes understood, and his theology of justification taken into account, we quickly see that Gentiles cannot be saved apart from the gospel.