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## Prayers

### To God

Dear Lord, we long for Your glory to be shown among us. We ask that the love of Jesus inspire us to acts of love and mercy, that God's righteousness inspire truth and justice in our world, and that the power of the Holy Spirit blow fresh inspiration into tired lives. May Your Kingdom come, and may the Good news of Your grace and love transform us again: AMEN

### For Self

*Do you get cross? Pray for grace*  
*Do you become frustrated? Pray for peace*  
*Do you speak too quickly? Pray for wisdom*  
*Do you jump to conclusions? Pray for spiritual insight*  
*Do you act on what you believe? Pray for faith*

### For others

*Pray for people on low pay*  
*Pray for any you know who are trapped in their jobs*  
*Pray for people who are being bullied at work*  
*Pray for those who are in the wrong employment, and know it*  
*Pray for all who seek justice in the workplace*

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## Meditation

*Would you like to see the Lord do great things in you?*  
*Then repent and turn from all your sinfulness.*

*Would you like to know what is right and wrong?*  
*Then open your heart to all God's revelation.*

*Would you like to let the Lord take control of you?*  
*Then walk the path of a disciple as Jesus taught.*

*Would you like to know what God says in His Word?*  
*Then let the Holy Spirit reveal its truth to you.*

*Would you like to follow Jesus with all your being?*  
*Then believe in Jesus and testify before others.*

*Would you like know the power of God's Holy Spirit?*  
*Then open up your heart, mind and will, to Him.*

*Would you like to see the Lord do great things in you?*  
*Then follow the path of faith set out before you.*

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## Bible Passage

### **Romans 2:12-16**

<sup>12</sup> All who have sinned knowing nothing of the Law will perish without it, and all who have the Law and yet have sinned will be condemned by it. <sup>13</sup> For those who are put right with God are not those who hear the Law, but those who do the Law.

<sup>14</sup> So when the Gentiles who know nothing of the Law do by nature what it requires, even though they know nothing of it, they are their own law. <sup>15</sup> They demonstrate that doing the Law is written on their hearts, as witnessed by their consciences, which conflictingly might either accuse or even excuse them. <sup>16</sup> All this will become clear on that day when God judges the secret thoughts of all people through Jesus Christ, according to the Gospel I preach.

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## Bible study Review

You would be forgiven for finding this a rather difficult passage of Scripture. What is Paul trying to say? It is certainly not obvious at first reading. Thus far, Paul has built up a general understanding of the state of the world without Christ and under the power of sin (1:18-32), and he argues strongly that all are equally guilty of sin before God, whether Jew or Gentile (2:1-11). But what does he mean here by talking about the Gentiles doing the law '*by nature*' (2:14)? The second half of the passage does not help, and rather opaquely speaks of Gentiles having the law '*written on their hearts*' with some possible effect on or through their consciences (2:15). We must be careful!

At the end of yesterday's passage, Paul declares that at the End, all will be subject to the judgement of God, which is exclusively just in rewarding 'right' and destroying 'wrong'. He should be careful not to imagine that he suggests there is some 'goodness' by which people might be saved through their own efforts, for Paul gives his whole life to preaching the exact opposite (Ephesians 2, Galatians 3, etc). So why does he say this? It is because he is determined to argue against the Jews of his own day who believed just this; they thought they could achieve righteousness by living exactly according to God's Law as evened through Moses.

Notice then how Paul begins our passage today by saying that Gentiles who do not know the Laws of Moses will 'perish' in their ignorance, and we can imagine every good Jew would be in agreement. But he quickly continues, not however saying that the Jews may achieve righteousness through the Law, but giving a stern warning that every Jew who sins will perish because of it! This was not the message a Jew would expect to hear, especially from a trained Pharisee like Paul, whether converted to Christianity or not!

Paul's basic point here is that God's judgement does not depend on whether people know the Law or not, but only on what they have done (2:13). For the time being he just does not say whether it is possible to do 'good' and earn righteousness; but his lack of support for the classic Jewish position would have been pretty obvious to his first readers. We are however left with a rather unfair situation, in which Gentiles appear to have no reasonable way to find themselves 'right' before God. Paul describes them as capable of good, and indeed able to understand the

basic laws of the natural world that must come from God as Creator (2:15); it is something *'written on their hearts'*, even though what one person's conscience says is quite different from another (2:15)! How then can the Gentiles be saved? But this is exactly what we are supposed to think at this point in Paul's letter, prior to his declaration of the answer to this problem in the form of the Gospel declaration of chapter 3. The Gospel of grace alone will remove the apparent unfairness in God's dealing with both Jew and Gentile.

Verses 14 to 16 are often quoted as a scriptural example of God's generosity towards people of different origins and perhaps faiths, who perceive something of God from different ethnic or religious backgrounds. People suggest that this passage places people like Mother Theresa, Gandhi, and Nelson Mandela all on the same plane before God, as if their 'goodness' is something God somehow measures and appreciates. It is unwise to follow such a pathway. As I have attempted to point out, Paul's points here are not to try and make a case for Gentile 'goodness' as if this somehow competes with the righteousness of the Jews in bringing a person close to God.

We must always go back to a core truth, which is that God will judge all people according to absolute standards of good and evil; but such judgements are not ours to make. If we do, we miss the mark of Paul's long term argument here, which if we have not already spotted it by now we will surely do so soon. It is that no one can measure up to the standards of 'goodness' by which God judges someone worthy of His favour. This is not the Gospel, and this is not the message of God to the world through His Son Jesus Christ.

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## Going Deeper

### ***The 'Law' of God (2:12,13)***

Verses 12 summarises Paul's powerful insistence that sin is the cause of the separation between God and all people, using a simple sentence of two halves reflecting the social division of Paul's day. The first half dealing with the Gentiles and the second half with the Jews. The message is the same for both groups, and the only difference between them is the revelation by God of His Law. The Gentiles have evidence of God's natural Law through the evidence of moral goodness within the created world (see also 1:18f.), whilst the Jews know God's Law because it has been revealed to them in their history. Whatever the revelation or lack of it, sin destroys both people and their relationship with the Creator of the world.

We must ask the question, what did Paul mean when he spoke about the Law? Different people, even in his day, meant different things when they used this word. Here, the word 'Law' means the intricate system of written legal requirements penned by generations of Jewish scholars in the centuries prior to the time of Jesus, all interpreting the Scriptures (the Old Testament). Paul argues that because this law is all an interpretation of the will of a loving Creator God, the detailed 'Law' of the Jews must also be reflected in the rest of God's created order.

In Romans and other places, Paul often spoke forthrightly against the Law, and when he does so, he attacks the petty legalism and rules of Jewish tradition outside of the text of the Old Testament, just as Jesus did in his own ministry (Matt 5:17f.). However, following Jesus' example, Paul would never say anything against the revelation of God in the Old Testament, such as the Covenant relationship as given to Abraham, or the gift of the Ten Commandments.

### ***The problem of sin, and being 'put right' with God***

The problem for people which this verse exposes is not the Law, but sin. Paul perceived that the Jews had a problem with this because they insisted that they had a special relationship with God because of His favours to them as His chosen people. It is unfortunately true that people will sometimes claim even today that sin is not a problem in their lives. Christians make a similar mistake by ignoring the problem of sin when they need to be a people of continual confession and repentance.

As we have already noticed in verse 13, Paul shifts the ground of the whole discussion by talking not simply in terms of judgement, but of being 'put right' with God; *'it is not those who hear the Law who are righteous before God, rather, it is those who carry out the Law who are put right with God'*. In some versions of the Bible, you will find that the end of verse 13 is translated; *'it is doers of the law who will be justified'* and the word '*justified*' here means '*put right with God*'. You will have heard it used by preachers when they try to explain the Gospel using the expression '*justification*' by faith.

This shift in the emphasis of Paul's argument runs parallel with the way that Paul refers to the Law, for the Law of God in Genesis and Exodus is given to His people because God wants to break down the barriers between Himself and the people because of sin. There is a deep rooted connection in Scripture between God's Law, sin, and God's desire to overcome the consequences of sin and have a relationship with us. Paul's words in this text do no more than draw out this truth, which has its origins in the Old Testament.

### ***The position of the Gentiles (2:14,15)***

In some translations of the Bible, verses 14 and 15 fit awkwardly into the flow of the Greek, and it is best to think of them as like a 'parenthesis' within what Paul is writing. When Paul wrote, Greek was written in capital letters and without punctuation, so when someone translates the text, they must work out the grammar of the sentences as they go along. In this case, it appears from the Greek text that these verses break the flow of what Paul says between verses 13 and 16.

For this reason, it is wise to make sure we do not place too much emphasis on verses 14 and 15, as above, and make this out to be some important theological point inserted here but not supported by the general thrust of Paul's letter at this point.

### ***The day of judgement (2:16)***

All, of course, will be revealed on the day of judgement when 'God judges the secret thoughts of all people through Jesus Christ'. This phrase neatly sums up what Paul believes to be the truth about God's judgement, which is that whatever we say or think about others, and whatever we say or think about what we do, God alone is judge of our motives (the 'secret thoughts') and our actions. It sounds almost presumptive of Paul to say that this is what will happen 'according to my Gospel', but this is his way of saying that this is what he believes. Paul always speaks with great conviction, but we should see in this phrase not arrogance, but a small note of humility which says that this is what he believes about the Gospel. God, of course, will be the judge!

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## **Application**

### ***Discipleship issues***

#### ***Being persistent with difficult passages***

It is very hard to read this part of Romans, and many people are put off the letter because it seems to become stuck in this lengthy description of Jews and Gentiles, the Law, God's judgement and His wrath. It is a combination that seems too impenetrable for people today, and these are not subjects on which it is easy to preach a worthwhile sermon! If, however, we are prepared to work our way through the central points made by Paul here, then I still believe it is possible to get to the heart of the Gospel, even though we have not yet arrived at its fullest explanation.

### ***The power of the law in determining what sin is***

Even as Christians, as those who know their salvation in Christ, we should never forget the power of sin (2:12) and the fact that God alone is the judge of what is right and wrong. Too often, Christian people do not know what sin is because they do not read the Bible and find out what God's law says. What Paul implies here is this, that although knowing the law is of no benefit in obtaining salvation, it is certainly a benefit in knowing God's will and knowing what is right and what is wrong. Our passage says clearly that the conscience is a faulty indicator of God's Law (2:15), so we need to get to know it. We acknowledge the gift of our salvation through Christ, but we must also accept that the work of the Holy Spirit is to root out sin that still remains within us. We live in an imperfect world, and we are not yet made perfect.

### ***Goodness within the world - there to be seen***

It is worth thinking carefully about what this passage says about those who 'do good' even though they do not know God or His law. It does not say that people can be saved or be judged right by God merely on the basis of having managed to get some things right in life, but it does say that goodness can be discerned within the world, because it is God's world, and He has placed the clues to His morality within it. Perhaps it also warns us not to be too judgemental about the ultimate destiny of those who have never heard of Christ, and who still strive for good. God is a true and just Judge, and if we accept this, then we accept that our understanding of what He does is far from complete. Scriptures such as this warn us to accept God's pure justice and also warn us to refrain from being too presumptuous in our judgements of others.

### ***Ideas for exploring discipleship***

- *Take the opportunity to check out the passage of scripture again, by reading forward from Romans 1:18 to this passage today. Read it several times to make sure that you begin to get a grip of it.*
- *Pray for any who you know to be really confused about their own sin and whether it places a barrier between themselves and God. Talk with them if possible about the way in which Christ works to overcome all barriers of sin.*

### ***Questions for groups***

1. Discuss why it is that sin still afflicts Christians, even though they have been saved through faith.
2. Is our conscience a useful measure of what is right or wrong? Or is our judgement based upon culture more than God's Word?
3. Discuss whether there is any benefit in being Jewish, when it comes to receiving the Gospel of Christ.

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## **Final Prayer**

Lord Your hand guides in strange ways, and we do not always discern what You are doing. Help us to keep our eyes open our ears attuned and our hearts ready to act for you, and also ready to follow one who has been anointed by You to lead. Bless us in our discipleship we pray: AMEN