

Chapter 2

Verses 1–11 Some agree with the analysis but need to reflect more deeply

I realised that lots of my audience would agree with pretty much everything I had written so far. It's common ground among all the Christian groups I'm familiar with. It would also be endorsed by most of the branches of Judaism that I've come across. Now I was going to be a bit more controversial because I needed to distinguish my position from the sort of things taught by the leaders in some of the synagogues I knew. If any of them had read what I'd written so far, they'd probably have been nodding their heads in agreement. The trouble is that few of them would have recognised themselves as part of the story. And let's face it, there were also a few Gentiles around, mainly those who'd come under the influence of Jewish ideas, who also loved to applaud sentiments of this kind.

So, I introduce a person like this into the argument and address them directly. I call them 'person' or 'whoever you are'. He or she represents the people who like to judge others, who feel that their group is morally superior to other groups. My point is really that the story I have told involves everyone. There is no group or category of people that is not caught up in all of this. I might have argued my case in terms of a non-Jew with this kind of blind spot, but I needed to say something about the Instruction. So, I imagined a particular kind of Jewish thinker and addressed this part of the argument to them. Actually, by and large, my own people are far more moral than the non-Jews, but we have to accept that we were far from immune to the problems I have mentioned.

Again, the discussion is quite tightly argued in the letter, so I think I'll try to outline the argument verse by verse.

1. There are people who see the force of the argument I have made and then judge or condemn others. When people do this, they're actually condemning themselves because they belong to a category of people who are caught up in all the things I mentioned. Let's be clear, my thinking at this point is not really about individuals, it's about groups. I am not arguing that every single individual does all of the things that I mention, but that all human groups have members who are involved. Those who sit in judgement are not speaking on behalf of any group that is not impacted by, or implicated in, the consequences of human folly. The judge, then, does the very things he condemns.
2. Basically, I'm acknowledging that we all agree on this point. God's judgement falls on all who do the things I've described in the second half of chapter 1. The difference is that they don't realise it applies to them as well as to others. At this point, I'm working with the picture of God as judge. If you remember my argument from earlier you will understand that living in ways other than the one God intended has consequences, which is to say that the penalty for Sin is Death because, by definition, it avoids the way of living that brings Life.
3. The one who condemns others, just like the people he has judged, stands under judgement. For that person is part of a group, or speaks on behalf of a group, whose members do the very things he or she condemns. Claiming the moral high ground makes no difference. It is what you actually do that matters, not what you claim to do or aspire to be.

4. The other possibility is that this person presumes they will be okay because of God's patience. They feel that God has a particular love or concern for their group and therefore that God will turn a blind eye to their wrongdoing. But again, I want to tell them that they've misunderstood. God takes his time because he wants everyone to have an opportunity to see the error of their ways and change things. However, there will come a point when God acts.

5. This person, who sees so clearly the faults of others, does not see their own heart, and so will face God's judgement.

6. This is the pay-off line for this section. My argument is that it's the same for everyone whatever group of humans they are part of, whether, for instance, they're Jewish or not Jewish; God does not show any partiality. There will be justice. God renders to each in accordance with what they have done. I don't think I could have said this any more clearly. God deals with us according to the things we do. He does not judge us according to what we have, and he does not judge us according to our ethnicity. I try to clarify this argument in the comments below on verses 17-24.

7. As far as God is concerned, there are two ways to live. There is the way that God intended and there is anything else. Here I describe human life as God intended it to be. You will see that I use some of the language, like the word 'glory', associated with the goal that God originally set for humans. I get this from my understanding of texts like Psalm 8, as I will discuss later. The outcome of this way of living is Life. If we were to draw on the picture of God as judge at this point, we would say that at the judgement, God will vindicate this category of people, or that the verdict would be in their favour, and the decision would be that they will live the Life of the age to come.

8. And these words describe the other way to live. There may be lots of versions of this, but they amount to the same thing because they are all at odds with God's original purpose for humans. All of them are categorised by being 'self-seeking' rather than 'God-seeking'. Those in this group do not live as though God is their creator. As a result, they do not live their lives in accordance with God's purposes. Instead, they live as though they were their own creator or as though their god or highest value was some other created thing. The upshot of this is that they pursue their own purposes and not God's. The result would be that this group is condemned at the judgement and that they will not take part in the Life of the age to come.

9. Here I make the same point again using different words and make it clear that this applies to every category of human, both Jewish people and others. I stress the consequences for those who do not give their allegiance to God.

10. And in this verse, I spell out what can be expected by those who are loyal to God. Again, notice the words glory and honour that are associated with Life. The Bible shapes my thinking. Lots of my ideas about the destiny God originally intended for humans come from Psalm 8. Verse 5 of the psalm includes these very words.

11. This is where I really drive home one of my key points. God, when it comes to the crunch, is not biased towards one group or another. He is God of the whole world, not just of one part of it. God is impartial. Everyone gets assessed on the same basis. Some might be wise and some foolish; some might have the Instruction and others might not; but the

basis of judgement remains the same. This is the same basic point I made forcibly in verse 6.

Verses 12–16 Possessing the Instruction and living it are different things

Jews have the Instruction and non-Jews don't. If you don't have it and have gone wrong, God judges you without reference to it. If you do have it and have gone wrong, you will be judged in accordance with its provisions. The point is that everyone is subject to the judgement of God whether or not they know the Instruction, which is to say, effectively, whether or not they are Jewish. The point is that it's not the having, knowing or hearing of the Instruction that matters, it's the living of it that counts. The ones who do that get vindicated. So, if there were a group of people who had never heard of the Instruction but lived it anyway, they'd get vindicated. At this point I had in mind non-Jewish followers of Jesus. I'll spell all this out a little bit later. I wasn't suggesting that they have it all sorted. It's true that sometimes their thoughts get conflicted. But basically, they fulfil the parts of the Instruction that really matter. Again, I intend to spell this out later.

12. We are still working with the picture of God as judge. The non-Jews, those who do not know God's Instruction, and have failed to live in God's intended way, get judged without regard to the Instruction. Meanwhile, the Jews, that is, those who possess the Instruction, and who have failed to live as God intended, get judged in accordance with the Instruction. The outcome is the same whether you have the Instruction or not, whether you are Jewish or not. If you fail to live in God's intended way, you get condemned.

13. Here it should be clear that the meaning of the words 'righteous' and 'justified' should be understood in terms of the overall picture of God as judge. Essentially, I am talking about those who get vindicated at the last judgement. By this I mean that God, the judge, finds in their favour. That is what it means to be justified or to be found righteous. Later, I will argue that the Jesus-followers are justified. This means that the outcome of God's future judgement is being, through King Jesus, announced in the present. To call this group righteous is not to claim that they are perfect but that through their loyalty to King Jesus and the work of his Spirit, God has oriented them towards himself, and so they have begun to live as God intended.

So, my basic point is that it is not *knowledge* of the Instruction that brings a favourable verdict. No, to get such a verdict you have to *live out* the Instruction. There are two ways to look at the righteous. These are really two ways of saying the same thing. They are those who live in the way that God intended; and they are those who will live the Life of the age to come. Similarly, the justified are those whose lives now demonstrate that they are those who will be vindicated at the judgement. To speak of someone as 'righteous' and speak of somebody as being 'justified' are really two ways of saying the same thing.

14. I do not want you to think that the Instruction is irrelevant to any of this. It reveals the way God intended humans to live. However, it is not the Instruction itself that matters but the intended way of living that it teaches. So, if a non-Jew, someone who has not heard or read the Instruction, nevertheless, because of who they are, actually lives the life that God intended for humans, that is to say, the way of life set out in the Instruction, then, in God's eyes, it is as though they both possessed and obeyed that Instruction.

15. In other words, we could say that the things really required by the Instruction have shaped their character and their lives. This means they have an inner guide to the way of life God intended even if they are sometimes conflicted about it. The group of people I had in mind in this verse and the previous one, are the non-Jewish Christians. I was not trying to make some sort of 'what if' point but was preparing the ground for some of the ideas I planned to explore later in the letter.

16. And here I am reminding everyone that I am still working with the picture of God as judge. I am trying to make it clear that the judgement will not simply be on the basis of outward things. It will also take into account inner or secret things because it is what is in our hearts that shapes our words and actions. I learned this from the stories I heard about the things that King Jesus taught.¹

My point is still that God is impartial. I argue that there may be a category of people who do not appear to have heard the Instruction who, nevertheless, live in the way that God always intended humans should live and so will be vindicated at the last judgement. The group I have in mind here are the Gentile Christians. I am trying to persuade Jewish thinkers that such a group should be considered a part of the people of God and that those who know the Instruction but are not living it out, should not really be considered a part of that people. At least, not in the same way as those who do have an allegiance to God.

Verses 17–24 The people of God live the instruction

Now I'm back to my imagined conversation partner. My issue with him is that he thinks that God will find in favour of the Jews because they possess the Instruction. The problem with this is that not all of them actually live out the Instruction and since living it out is what matters, it's not enough to simply say, 'we're Jewish' or 'we have the Instruction'. It's quite clear that not all those who know the Instruction have kept it. You see, there were some Jews who felt this was enough. They'd boast about possessing the Instruction and make much of this part of our heritage because it gave the Jews as a whole something that the non-Jews didn't have. And they argued that this put them in a position to teach others. However, not all of them lived the Instruction. It's no good looking at the Jewish community as a teacher of the rest if not all, or indeed not many, are actually living out God's Instruction. In fact, the Jewish community goes against the Instruction in all kinds of ways, and I list some examples. I'm not saying all Jews do this but that some do. Therefore, it cannot be the case that simply being Jewish or simply possessing the Instruction brings God's vindication. And for good measure, I bring up an Old Testament quotation to make my point.

In retrospect, I can see that I could have expressed myself more clearly. You have to remember that at this point all the main leaders among the Jesus-followers were Jewish. We still held out the hope that the mission to the Jews led by Peter and the others would be successful. We didn't envisage that the church would be a largely Gentile phenomenon. In some ways this was an argument between Jews about the best way to be Jewish. When you read it back now it has a different feel from the one that I intended. The point stands, and it certainly needed making, but part of me wishes I'd said things differently.

¹ You can read some of this teaching in Mark 7:21-23.

17. The points are addressed to my original, imagined conversation partner. This person is now more fully defined. He is a Jew who relies on the Instruction and boasts in God. Notice that I do not say that he lives out or obeys the Instruction. This is a person who believes that it is merely the possession of, or the hearing of, the Instruction that brings a certain moral superiority. Such people will boast of God's favour to them and see that favour encapsulated in their possession of the Instruction.

18. Such a person may know the Instruction very well and be fully aware of the things it promotes and of God's intended way of life for humans.

19. This person would know that the Instruction requires that those who know it should help others; Israel was to be a light for the non-Jewish peoples.

20. Therefore my imaginary conversation partner would be a teacher of the knowledge and truth contained in the Instruction.

21-22. But here's the point; this person might not listen to his or her own teaching! They might not practice what they preach. They might not walk the talk. They might not themselves live the life that God intended for us all. They, or others who are part of the same group, might live lives that do not conform to God's intention, and this might manifest itself in things like theft, sexual infidelity, or robbery from pagan shrines.

23. In other words, it is quite possible for someone to boast about the favour of God represented by their possession of the Instruction, while living in ways that are actually in conflict with that Instruction.

24. I cite a text that makes my point for me. The scriptures envisage people who appear to be a part of the people of God but who do not live as God intended and who, in consequence, bring huge damage to the reputation of God among the non-Jewish nations. Actually, it's a rather loose quotation but I had in mind texts like Isaiah 52:5 and Ezekiel 36:20. The context is God's action to bring salvation or to defend himself, even at a time when his reputation is being slandered. In just such a time, then, God has acted to bring his salvation through King Jesus.

So, my point was that it's no good boasting about possessing or knowing the Instruction. Or about how good you are at teaching others who need to hear it. What matters is whether you are actually living it out. To me it was fairly clear that many Jewish people, including many of the leaders, were failing to do this. This was one of the things that got me hot under the collar as a Pharisee. I was determined to get my fellow Jews to obey the Instruction and it vexed me when they didn't. After I met Jesus, I gained a different perspective.

Verses 25–29 The people of God and their badge

So, this has been an argument about the right way to be Jewish. Inevitably, then, this is an argument about the Instruction because, when push comes to shove, it is having the Instruction that defines us Jews as a people. And the best-known expression of obedience to the Instruction is that our males are all circumcised; it was the thing that marked us out in the whole Roman Empire. It was the mark on the bodies of our men that we were the people of the Instruction. In other words, to talk about being circumcised is to talk about

having the Instruction, which means being part of the Jewish people, which is to say, the nation through which God has been especially at work in history. This is something that clearly has value, but it counts for nothing before God if we don't actually live the Instruction. Circumcision is supposed to be the mark of the Instruction and that should mean wholehearted commitment to it. If it doesn't mean that, then the mark is meaningless.

Now, since the mark of circumcision is supposed to mean commitment to living the Instruction, it follows that somebody who is committed, whether they are Jewish or not, is in a better place with God than a member of the Jewish community who is not committed. Effectively, this means that the Instruction-committed non-Jew is a witness against the Jew who is not Instruction-committed. This makes more sense if you remember that I was still working with an extended law court illustration. So, you can't truly be a Jew, that is truly part of the people of God, if your belonging only has an outward expression, such as knowing the Instruction and – if you're a male – being physically circumcised. Rather, to be truly a Jew, you need to be committed to the Instruction from the heart, that's the bit of a person where the mark of the Instruction really means something and this is a work that is accomplished by the Spirit of God, not simply by knowing words. This inward commitment may not win you friends but it's what matters to God.

25. The best-known outward sign of the Instruction, and hence mark of being Jewish, was male circumcision. If you had this mark as a part of your commitment to the whole way of life that God intended, then it had a purpose. However, if you do not live that way, you might as well not be circumcised. In fact, it's worse than that, you've become a walking contradiction. Let me attempt an illustration from your century. Suppose you are buying a car. The body and the badge are those of a Rolls Royce. However, when you open the bonnet, you see that the engine, and all the other hidden parts, were made by a greatly inferior manufacturer. You'd probably want to tear the badge off the car. The badge is supposed to tell you what sort of car it really is. In fact, it simply misleads you. The badge is useful if the car is authentic but useless, or even dangerous, otherwise. It's the same, in some ways, with circumcision and the rest of the Instruction. If the outward sign doesn't tell you what's really on the inside, it is useless, or worse than useless.

26. Looking at this from another point of view, I argue that a non-Jew who does live in the way that God originally intended ought to be regarded as though they were circumcised. Going back to the car illustration, a car that has all the inner parts of a Rolls Royce, but lacks the badge, would be a terrific car. This is like the person who is not Jewish but who, nevertheless, keeps the really significant requirements of the Instruction.

27. Such a person will be in a better position come the judgement than someone who has the Instruction and is circumcised but does not live as the Instruction teaches. I emphasize my point by referring to the Instruction as 'the written code'. This expression is part of setting up a distinction that I will make later, with things that are spiritual. For now, though, I'm trying to get across the idea that it is not the external, outward things that matter but the internal, inner things. Go back to our two cars for a moment. One looks like a Rolls Royce but isn't and the other is a Rolls Royce but lacks the badge. When examined by a specialist it becomes clear which of them is the better car. One may have the badge, but that's not what really matters.

28. Hence, I argue that being truly Jewish is not simply a matter of outward appearances and that therefore true circumcision, the mark of being a Jew, is not really an outward or physical thing. I could extend the car analogy but it's approaching breaking point. I think you've got the idea.

29. Instead being authentically Jewish is really an inward thing. This means that the kind of circumcision that really counts relates to character, it is something done to us by the Spirit of God not by the written letter of the Instruction. This inward, spiritual mark of commitment does not get us any credit with human social groups, but it does bring God's approval. I draw a distinction here, hinted at earlier, between the Spirit and the letter. The Instruction has spiritual and non-spiritual dimensions. There is a sense in which the Instruction is divided or even conflicted. This will be an important part of an argument that I will develop more fully later in the letter.

So, my argument is really that the outward marks of being Jewish are meaningless unless they are matched by the inward marks of being a part of God's people. Indeed, it is those inner things that are the important ones. I may be protesting too much at this point, but I want to stress that this is not an anti-Jewish argument. I'm saying that God treats everyone exactly the same no matter who they are. Indeed, the idea of a spiritual circumcision is one I learned from the scriptures. It's right there in Deuteronomy.²

² Deuteronomy 30:6.