

# Romans 2:17-21

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/rom/rom-2/romans-217-21/>

*Paul is pointing out the hypocrisy of those who teach the law but do not obey it.*

This passage began in 2:1 with Paul switching audiences. Instead of directly addressing the Roman believers whose faith was being spoken of throughout the entire world (1:8), Paul shifted to directly addressing anyone who judges others while practicing the same or similar things. He has made clear that God knows what is really occurring at all times, and will cause the secret or hidden things (such as the intent of the heart) to be revealed in the Day of Judgment. So, these judges ("whoever you are" from verse 1) will not get away with their hypocrisy.

Now, Paul reveals some specific people he has in mind who are engaging in this hypocritical practice of judging others while they do the same things themselves: a group of Jews who claim to be faithfully carrying out the laws of God. The audience to whom Paul addresses his letter to the Romans are believers whose "faith is being proclaimed throughout the whole world" (Romans 1:8). This group of believers is predominantly Gentile, as we saw in Romans 1:13 where Paul says he wants to come visit these believers and have fruit among them, just as he has had "among the other Gentiles."

This does not preclude there being some Jews in the Roman church (in fact, in Acts 2:10 there were Jewish visitors from Rome present). But the clear indication here and in chapter 3 is that the particular Jews Paul is addressing here are a group claiming that their authority to teach is superior to that of Paul. They are attacking his gospel, his good news. This is terrible for Paul, but wonderful for us—for it led to Paul writing this epistle, that has created immense benefit for us.

Paul now recites claims that these Jews have made about themselves, that they "*rely upon the law, and boast in God*" (v 17). We will soon see the hollowness of these claims.

Paul continues citing these specific Jews' claims of having superior authority to Paul. These men who *bear the name "Jew" and rely upon the Law and boast in God*, claim also to *know His will and approve the things that are essential, being instructed out of the Law* (vv 17–18). The core claim these Jews will make is that they stand for and are justified by the law, and that Paul is trying to overthrow the law and therefore is wrong and unrighteous. But Paul is setting up their argument in a manner that will allow him to dismantle it.

It is clear in this sentence, which spans Romans 2:17–21, that Paul's detractors are Jewish (v 17) and they hold themselves out to be authorities on matters of the Bible, specifically about biblical law (vv 18–20).

It is also clear that Paul's detractors are hypocrites (2:1), and that they are in opposition to Paul and his gospel message of righteousness by grace through faith. These Jewish leaders are competing with Paul for biblical authority, and this letter from Paul to the Romans is a legal

wrestling match over what the Bible actually says about how people become righteous or just, and how they can come to live justly. Paul says both occur by faith, apart from the law.

Paul continues to cite claims being made by the Jews claiming authority superior to himself. Because these Jews are *instructed out of the law*, they claim to see truth, to have the *light*. They *are confident that they themselves are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of the immature* (vv 19–20). The competing Jewish “authorities” consider all those who do not see things the way they do, to be *in darkness*. They claim to guide people into the light through their knowledge and teaching of the law. Paul will soon knock this claim down.

It is important to note that nowhere does Paul contest that the competing Jewish “authorities” have great knowledge of the Bible. He says they *have in the Law the embodiment of knowledge and of the truth* (v 20). What Paul will contend is that these competing Jewish “authorities” with great *knowledge* do not have a biblical understanding.

*Knowledge* can create pride apart from understanding (1 Corinthians 8:1). True biblical understanding brings humility rather than pridefulness. The biblical opposite of pride is faith (Habakkuk 2:4). Pride asserts that we know what is best, and rationalizes the coercion of others to our will. Humility sees reality as it is, and accepts the need for God’s wisdom as a starting place to gain understanding.

We will also see humility like this in Paul. While demolishing the arguments of the competing Jewish “authorities” Paul will make clear he is no better than they—he relies on the grace of God every day (Romans 3:9).

Paul does not contest the notion that the law actually embodies knowledge and truth. As he systematically dismantles the various allegations and slanders of these competing Jewish “authorities,” Paul will dispel their lie that he opposes the law outright. In Romans 3:31, Paul answers the allegation that faith sets the law aside. “May it never be!” Paul answers. Faith establishes the law.

In Romans 7:7, Paul answers the allegation that his teaching leads to the conclusion that the law is sin. Again, Paul answers, “May it never be!” It is not the fault of the law that it brings knowledge of sin; the law is our friend by demonstrating what is sinful, and everything about that is good and helpful.

In Romans 2:1,3 Paul shifted immediate audiences and began addressing “O man” (vs 3) who is “everyone of you who passes judgment” (v 1). Then, in Romans 2:17–20, we saw that the particular group of people passing judgment was a group of Jews who fancied themselves teachers of wisdom and sterling examples of keeping the law.

Paul now begins to publicly challenge these competing Jewish “authorities” by accusing them of breaking the very law they claim to represent, the very law they are using to judge others. *You, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself? You who preach that one shall not steal, do you steal* (v 21)?

Paul will culminate his critique of the competing Jewish “authorities” in Romans 2:24 when he states that their law-breaking is giving God a bad reputation.

It is common today for people to cite hypocrisy by Christians as the reason they do not want to follow God. Since this is precisely what Paul is confronting, it is clear that there is truly nothing new under the sun (Ecclesiastes 1:9). Paul asks these competing Jewish “authorities” whether they teach themselves, a rhetorical question that expects an answer of “no.” They tell others to do things they themselves refuse to do (Matthew 23:4).

Paul then begins his accusations against the competing Jewish “authorities,” claiming that they break the law against stealing. This is serious, as breaking the law against stealing breaks one of the Ten Commandments. Paul does not say in what way these competing Jewish “authorities” are stealing, but clearly expects the Roman Gentile believers (whose faith is world-renowned, Romans 1:8) to recognize it is so (Romans 2:24).

Jesus addressed Jewish religious leaders in a similar way, and in Matthew 23:14 says the Pharisees are devouring widows’ houses. Perhaps this is what Paul has in mind when he asks, *Do you steal?* Religious authorities using their position to bilk a poor person into supporting their own luxurious lifestyles can reasonably be considered a form of stealing. An abuse of authority is a form of coercive taking. Also in Matthew 23:25, Jesus says the Pharisees are full of “extortion and excess.”

### **Biblical Text**

**17But if you bear the name “Jew” and rely upon the Law and boast in God, 18and know His will and approve the things that are essential, being instructed out of the Law, 19and are confident that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, 20a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of the immature, having in the Law the embodiment of knowledge and of the truth, 21you, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself? You who preach that one shall not steal, do you steal?**