

Romans 2:22-24

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The hypocrisy of those who teach the law, but do not follow it themselves, not only dishonors God, but it also harms the witness of God and His word. The competing Jewish “authorities” who assert that the Roman believers should be following the law are, in truth, sinful hypocrites who judge others for actions they themselves also do. Therefore they should not be listened to.

Paul continues chastising the competing Jewish “authorities” who fancied themselves teachers of wisdom and excellent models of keeping the law. He points out that they are breaking the very law they claim to represent. They use this law to judge others but fail to apply it to themselves. Paul culminates his critique in Romans 2:24 when he states that their lawbreaking is giving God a bad reputation: *For “the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you,” just as it is written* (vs 24).

Paul asserts that these competing Jewish “authorities” *commit adultery*. *You who say that one should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery?* (v 22). Although Paul does not give specifics, we can get an idea what he might be referring to, which would have been common enough knowledge such that specifics were not necessary. In Matthew 19:3–9, Jesus addresses the Pharisees with respect to divorce “for any reason.” Some say the Pharisees were able to divorce a wife just by pronouncing they were divorced, and then they were free to marry another. Jesus is clear that this is simply an attempt to justify adultery.

Paul then says these Jewish “authorities” claim to *abhor idols*, but *rob temples* (v 22). Here Paul gives a specific example that to *rob temples* violates his accusers’ claim that they *abhor idols*. The phrase *rob temples* is a translation of a single Greek word “*hierosyleō*,” which means to commit sacrilege. To rob a temple would be to commit sacrilege to that deity.

We might gain insight into what Paul has in mind about robbing *temples* from the time Jesus cleansed the temple in Jerusalem. He said the religious authorities had made it into a den of thieves. Historians say that the temple authorities created temple money that had to be used to purchase “approved” sacrifices, and of course the authorities pocketed a substantial profit on the exchange.

Jesus seemed to consider this and other practices a desecration of the temple of God, and it is specifically mentioned that Jesus overturned the tables of the moneychangers. Perhaps Paul is condemning how the competing Jewish “authorities” abuse their power to pilfer money from their followers, stating that this is sacrilege to God, which is equivalent to idolatry. So while they claim to *abhor idols* they are, in practice, committing idolatry.

Paul next asks a rhetorical question of the competing Jewish “authorities:” *You who boast in the Law, through your breaking the Law, do you dishonor God* (v 23)? The expected answer is “Yes.” God is dishonored when religious authorities say one thing then do another. Throughout

the letter to the Romans, Paul systematically answers their objections to his gospel, but his first counter argument to the Jewish “authorities” is, “You don’t really do what you say.”

Consequently, prior to answering the specific allegations they make against Paul’s teaching, Paul is undermining the credibility of these competing Jewish “authorities” by pointing out their hypocrisy.

Paul began this letter in chapter 1 by claiming righteousness comes by faith, quoting Habakkuk 2:4 as his theme verse, that “the righteous shall live by faith” (1:16–17). Paul also made clear that prideful living brings very adverse consequences (Romans 1:24, 26, 28). Here in chapter 2, Paul introduces the word “law” for the first time (verse 12), and now is vehemently asserting that these competing Jewish “authorities” who claim to bring righteousness to others by teaching them the law are, in fact, lawbreakers. In Romans 2:24, we see they are not only lawbreakers; *the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of their hypocrisy*. They are giving God a bad name through their hypocrisy.

It is important to note that although this is still a part of Paul’s letter to the Gentile believers in Rome (whose faith is being proclaimed throughout the world, v 1:8), in chapter 2 Paul redirected his immediate audience from the Gentile believers in Rome to a different audience. He began addressing “everyone of you who passes judgement” on others (but not yourself).

Then we learned in Romans 2:17 that Paul particularly has in mind some Jews who self-proclaim to be teachers of wisdom from the law, a gift from God to point people to the light of God. The problem is, Paul says, that they are doing just the opposite. They are, due to their hypocrisy, causing Gentiles to blaspheme rather than follow God: *For “the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you,” just as it is written* (vs 24).

Just as it is written in verse 24 means Paul is referencing scripture from the Bible, which at that time was primarily what we call the Old Testament. What Paul says here is a capsulation of the message in Ezekiel 36:19–21. This means there is a precedent that hypocrisy like this has happened by Israel previously, and God was not pleased; one of Israel’s assigned duties is to be a witness to other nations (Exodus 19:6), and their hypocrisy is causing a bad witness.

Paul is undermining the teaching of these competing Jewish “authorities,” who apparently are attempting to sway the believers in Rome to set aside Paul’s gospel and replace it with their teaching. We will see in chapter 16 that Paul’s “team” in Rome include Priscilla and Aquila, a husband-wife team that he labored with in the gospel during his missionary journeys.

We can infer that when Priscilla and Aquila were able to return home to Rome after fleeing persecution (Acts 18:2) that they spread Paul’s teachings to the Gentiles in Rome, resulting in their faith being spoken of throughout the entire world (Romans 1:8). However, Paul’s teaching of grace was constantly opposed by competing Jewish “authorities” and it seems their opposition was particularly fierce in Rome. This is understandable since Rome was the center of the political and cultural world at that time.

It seems likely that Priscilla and Aquila sent to Paul to ask for his aid, resulting in this epistle. Paul now asserts that these competing Jewish “authorities” are actively slandering Paul’s teaching centered on faith rather than law. They are attempting to thwart his ministry in Rome, the center of the world at that time, among believers renowned throughout the nations for their faith (Romans 1:8).

Biblical Text

22 You who say that one should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? 23 You who boast in the Law, through your breaking the Law, do you dishonor God? 24 For “the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you,” just as it is written.