



Knowing the Bible Can Be Dangerous

Grace Reigns: God's Gospel for All Peoples Series #19

Romans 2:6-29

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We left this series at Romans 2:5 a few weeks ago and we are going to continue through the rest of that chapter today. It is a large passage that I am taking in a big chunk. We will do the same next week, because I want us to see the main thread of argument that goes throughout this passage. I do not want us to lose the forest for the trees, but I will admit it is a pretty dense forest.

We are a church that treasures and teaches the Bible. It is not by accident that "Bible" is our middle name here at New Covenant Bible Church. We believe these words of Psalm 19:7-11:

*The law of the Lord is perfect,
reviving the soul;
the testimony of the Lord is sure,
making wise the simple;
the precepts of the Lord are right,
rejoicing the heart;
the commandment of the Lord is pure,
enlightening the eyes;
the fear of the Lord is clean,
enduring forever;
the rules of the Lord are true,
and righteous altogether.
More to be desired are they than gold,
even much fine gold;
sweeter also than honey
and drippings of the honeycomb.
Moreover, by them is your servant warned;
in keeping them there is great reward.*

We believe these things about God's written revelation. We treasure the Bible. We emphasize preaching, teaching, studying and even memorizing the Bible because we believe what the Bible says about itself. We believe in the words of 2 Timothy 3:16 which says, "All Scripture

is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness...” That is how we hold to the Scriptures. That is what we believe about God’s written revelation in His Word.

I want to warn you that knowing the Bible can be hazardous to your spiritual health. Romans 2 is aimed at people who know the Bible. They had God’s written revelation in His law, the Torah. They were people who were moral and religious. They studied the Scriptures and were instructed in God’s law. They had listened to Paul in Romans 1 condemning the sinfulness of humanity and they had enjoyed it a little too much. They were the Amen Brothers and the Hallelujah Sisters, saying, “Go get ‘em, Paul! Go after all that sin out there in the world.” They loved to hear the preacher denouncing sin—someone else’s sin.

Paul hit them between the eyes in this passage. He got uncomfortably in the face of people who knew the Bible and rejoiced in their knowledge of the Scripture. He warns us of this truth: knowing the Bible can be dangerous. We are going to look at the following three dangers in particular that stand out in this passage:

1. The Danger of False Security
2. The Danger of Smug Hypocrisy
3. The Danger of Dead Orthodoxy

The Danger of False Security

Let’s first look at the danger of false security in 2:6-16. This part encompasses the most verses and we are going to spend more time here because this is foundational.

When you are familiar with God’s Word, a subtle thought can start to creep into your mind. Often, we are not even aware that we are thinking, “I’m pretty special. Look at how much I know about God and His Word.” It is like the student who gets straight A’s and begins to think he’s the teacher’s pet. In the same way, the person who knows a lot about the Bible can start to think, “God’s going to show me special treatment because I know so much about Him. He’ll make exceptions for me. He’ll show preference toward me because I know something about His Word.” Whenever you start thinking that way, watch out. You are on dangerous ground—the danger of false security.

God wants us to understand that it is not what we know but what we do with what we know that counts. When Paul says in verse six, “*He will render to each one according to his works,*” he is not teaching salvation by works here. Let’s give Paul credit. He’s not inconsistent or convoluted in his thinking. He’s not confused. Paul has already made it clear in 1:16-17 that righteousness comes by faith from first to last. It is only through trusting in Jesus Christ that we can be counted righteous before God. Then in 3:20, he wraps up this whole section of Romans

with this assertion: *“For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.”*

So when Paul says in verse six, *“He will render to each one according to his works,”* he is not talking about works versus faith. He is talking about truth versus hypocrisy. He is talking to a person who claims to be righteous because of what he knows about God’s revelation. Paul is pushing back and challenging this self-righteous person, saying, “Is your lifestyle consistent with what you say you believe? Is there evidence that the truth you claim to know is transforming your life?”

The phrase, *“He will render to each one according to his works,”* comes from Psalm 62:12, the psalm from which we get the song, “Find Rest My Soul in God Alone.” In that psalm, the ultimate work of the righteous person is to rest in God alone for salvation and glory—to pour out your heart to God, trusting and finding refuge in Him. It is faith. It is trusting in God. Jesus Himself taught this in John 6:29: *“This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.”*

So what happens when we rest in God for our salvation and glory? What happens when we really trust in God? Do our lives stay the same? The Bible’s unequivocal answer is, “No, true faith transforms our lives.” Resting in God alone for salvation makes a radical difference in the daily conduct of our lives. It changes how we live. Faith without works is dead. Apples on a tree prove that the tree is alive, but the apples do not produce life. Likewise, the works of a believer prove that he/she is alive spiritually, but works do not produce the life.

Paul is not saying here that you need to add works to your faith in order to stand justified at God’s judgment. He’s not saying it is faith plus works; he is saying that if you claim to have faith, it should be proven and evident through your works.

Let me give you a “true or false” statement as you look at verse six. True or false: salvation—being declared righteous by God—is by grace through faith alone, but judgment is by works. I believe that verse six teaches this is true. At God’s judgment, He will be looking to see if you have rested, rejoiced and trusted in Christ alone for your salvation. The evidence of that faith will not be what you know about Jesus—what you have read in His Word or how well you can define justification. What you have said you believe will not be the evidence of your faith. The evidence of your faith will be what you did—how faith in Jesus transformed your life. Those works will prove the reality of your faith at the judgment.

In 2:7-10, Paul builds upon this premise. There is an A-B-B-A pattern which is called a “chiasm.” The outer statements (“A”) of 2:6-10 show us one way to live, and the inner statements (“B”) show us another way to live. There are two ways to live outlined here in 26-10:

- A** ⁶ *He will render to each one according to his works: ⁷ to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life;*
- B** ⁸ *but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury.*
- B** ⁹ *There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek,*
- A** ¹⁰ *but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek.*

The first way to live is characterized in verse seven by persistence, or patience, in doing good. Here is a person who is living a new pattern of his/her life in a godly way—doing good. You are on a new pursuit, seeking “*glory and honor and immortality,*” as it says in verse seven. In other words, you don’t just do good for the sake of doing good. You want to experience God’s glory. You want to bring honor to Him and ultimately care about receiving honor from Him. You want to live forever in His presence. That is why you live the way you live. That is the pursuit you are on.

The only way a person can live like this is by God’s grace through faith in Jesus. Paul says the result of that kind of life is the gift of eternal life in God’s presence. Notice that Paul does not say in verse seven that we will earn eternal life. What does he say? “*He will render to each one according to his works to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life.*”

That eternal life is described in verse ten as a life of glory, honor and peace. God will give “*glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek.*” So that is one way to live—persistence in doing good and seeking glory, honor and immortality from God. That is the way of faith. That is the way of the righteous.

However, in verse eight we see another way to live. What characterizes this way? Self-seeking. Here is the hard truth: you can know a lot about the Bible and still be an incredibly selfish person, ruled by self-will. You can even use your religious knowledge as a means of trying to be your own lord and savior. Those who are self-seeking do not obey the truth, Paul says in verse eight. A self-seeking person might know the truth, but he doesn’t obey it. Instead, unrighteousness dominates his life.

So you can know a lot about the Bible and still be controlled by unrighteous thoughts and behavior. They knew the law, but they were self-seeking, dominated by unrighteousness. Paul’s

point here is that God will not show favoritism or partiality toward you simply because you knew His will that is revealed in His Word. He is not going to treat you as special.

In fact, look at verse eight again. *“But for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury. There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek...”* These are sobering words. I want you to focus your eyes there for a minute. These are some of the most sobering words we have read so far in Paul’s letter to the Romans.

Friends, a life of self-seeking is not just a little bit bad in God’s eyes. Self-seeking is evil according to God. Wrath and fury are very real attributes of God that He will not hesitate to pour out on those who are self-seeking and obey unrighteousness rather than the truth. God is not ashamed of His wrath and fury, pouring them out on unrepentant sinners.

Look at these two ways to live and honestly assess your life. Which way characterizes you? This is not talking about a life of sinless perfection. It is saying the believer’s life is set on a new direction with new aims, values and priorities that transform our behavior. We are not perfect; we are moving in a different direction. We are seeking glory and honor and immortality in God’s presence. We are going in a new direction. Can you say that this is true of you?

Verse 11 is the main point of this section. God shows no partiality. He will not give preferential treatment, no matter who we are, whether Jew or Gentile, Christians or church-going people, whether we know the Bible or don’t know the Bible. The proof will be the direction of our lives. The proof will not be in what we say we believe or in how well we can define things theologically. The proof will be the transformation of our lives by what we say we believe.

Entrance into God’s Kingdom is not based on passing a theology exam. It is based on whether or not you have received a new life from God. It is not what we say we believe but what we have done—how we have lived in light of what we have believed. God will show no partiality at the judgment toward those who had the Bible.

Verses 12-16 are packed and complex. I want to give you a sentence that I hope captures the essence of what Paul is saying here. Merely having the law/Bible will not spare you at God’s judgment. In other words, you will not be able to impress God with how much you can talk about His law/Bible. Not having the law/Bible will not exempt you from God’s judgment.

Paul says, “God does not show partiality. He will fairly judge both the Jew and the Greek, both the one who has God’s law and the one who doesn’t have God’s law.” His point in verses 12-16 is to tell us that each of us knows enough to be accountable at God’s judgment and we will be held accountable for what we knew.

So Paul is addressing two groups of people here in 2:12-16. There are the Jews, who had the law, and the Gentiles, who did not have the law. The people who had the law are not going to be able to hide behind the law. Their knowledge of God's will and ways is not going to save them from God's wrath and fury. The question will be what did you do with the revelation that you received?

Look at verse 13 for a minute. *"For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified."* Again, Paul is not teaching justification by works here. Some people put a conflict between the Apostle Paul and the Apostle James. However, this is a great verse to show there is really no conflict between these two apostles. Verse 13 could be interpreted in two ways, both of which have validity. I'm going to mention both of these.

The first way is hypothetical. In this case, here is what Paul would be saying if this is hypothetical: "If you want to be declared righteous through the law, then you would have to obey it perfectly." Raise your hand if you can claim to have done that. No one is righteous under those stands—not even one (Romans 3:11). Only One—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One—can claim to have merited God's justification through His righteous living. So no one can be justified by obedience to the works of the law. That is an absolutely true statement and may be how we should interpret verse 13.

Other evangelical, gospel-loving people would interpret verse 13 as simply reinforcing what Paul has already said in the previous verses. In other words, he is not speaking of perfect, flawless obedience that merits justification. What he is speaking of is the reality of a changed life that only happens by grace through the Spirit. It is a life that will be demonstrated by practical obedience. In the final judgment, God will not be looking at whether you heard the Word; He will be looking at whether you obeyed the Word in such a way that it made a difference in your life.

There is truth in both of these interpretations, but the main point is this: merely having God's written revelation is not going to save anyone. Friends, if anything, having the Bible—God's law and Word—makes you more accountable. What did he say in 2:9 and 2:10? He said, "The Jew first and also the Greek." Those who have the written revelation are more accountable to God for what they have.

But what about those who have never heard the law—those who do not have the Bible? Paul's point in 2:14-15 is that God is just, and His judgment will be fair and impartial. God is not going to hold anyone accountable for disobeying a law they did not know, but all of humanity knows something about God's righteous requirements. We have God's law written on our

consciences. Our consciences testify about what is right and what is wrong. Sometimes, they mislead us and excuse us when we are doing wrong or accuse us when we are not doing something wrong, but God has imprinted His will and righteous requirements on the conscience of every human being. On that basis, He will be able to rightly judge everyone.

Here is the point: no one has an unfair advantage at God's judgment. Having the Bible and knowing the Bible will not make you one of God's favorites. He is not going to let you off easy because you read your Bible every day, go to church every week or learn a lot of theology.

Let's zoom in on verse 16. This verse should arrest us, startle us and make us tremble if we have a sense of false security. Verse 16 says there is coming a "*day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus.*" You can hide behind Bible knowledge and impress other people with how much you know, but you will not be able to impress Jesus Christ with your theology. He knows your secrets. He knows all about you. He knows your lusts, resentments and hatreds. He knows everything about you and He died for your sins. This is the gospel.

I was just praying this morning, saying some of the things Jesus know about that probably none of you know—things that would make me tremble to stand before Him in judgment. But then I said, "You know this about me, worthy Lamb Who was slain: I trust in You alone to be my Savior. I believe Your blood cleanses me of all my sin. You died to save me, the guilty one. You died to cleanse me, the vile one. You died and came down to rescue me, the helpless one. I believe this, Lord Jesus. So when I stand at the judgment, I will be standing before the Judge, Who is my Savior. I will be free at the judgment because I trust in Your blood and in You alone."

That is where every verse in this book is designed to lead us. Every verse in this book is not designed to lead us to a pious sense of false security in our own righteousness, but to the foot of the cross, where we bow in abasement and humility. We tremble in the dust with an awareness of our guilt and vile helplessness. We look up from that vantage point and see a bleeding Savior Who is no longer on that cross but is risen and forever reigns. He triumphs over our sin and over death and hell. We behold His glory and trust in Him. We esteem and love Him. This is where true security lies. True security is found by trusting in Jesus alone.

Charles Simeon understood this. He said, "There are but two objects that I have ever desired to behold. The one is my own vileness. The other is the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. And I have always thought that they should be viewed together." These verses lead us to see both our vileness and the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

Do not find security in anything less than trusting in Jesus alone. If you do trust in Jesus alone, there will be a new direction in your life. It is not what you say you believe that is going to matter; it is how your life reflects your faith in Jesus Christ. Is your faith real?

The Danger of Smug Hypocrisy

The first danger was probably the most dense and complex in Paul's argument. If you have questions, feel free to send them to me. The second danger is the most convicting for us. It is the danger of smug hypocrisy in verses 17-24.

I want you to insert the word "Christian" here because most of us are not Jewish. However, we have a lot in common with the Jews of Paul's day in that we are Bible-believing people. We love God's written revelation. Listen to verse 17 in this light: "But you call yourself a Christian and rely on the Bible and boast in God and know His will and approve what is excellent, because you are instructed from the Scriptures. You go to a church that believes in the expositional preaching of the Word of God. You read theology. You go to Bible studies."

Verse 19 begins, "*And if you are sure that you yourself are a guide to the blind...*" In other words, if you think you know the answers for what is wrong with American culture these days and if everyone followed your guidance, this world would be a lot better off. You are a light to those who are in darkness."

Verse 20 continues, "You are *an instructor of the foolish.*" People are in the bad place they are in because they do not listen to what we know regarding the Bible. If they just listened and could see it, how could people be so blind? How could they be so foolish? You are "*an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of children, having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth.*"

Is there anything wrong with internalizing the Scriptures and using God's commands to make ethical decisions and share the teaching of Scripture with others? No, these are good things. This man with whom Paul is engaged in a diatribe has a lot of good things going for him. He cares about that which God approves, and he disapproves of evil. He is disturbed about so many people's lack of care for God's Word and will. There is a lot to be said for this man, but we get a hint of the problem with this guy in two words in verses 17 and 19.

The word in verse 17 is "boast" and the word in verse 19 is "sure." Paul is saying, "You are sure that you are a guide to the blind." Friends, should we boast in God? Yes. Should we be sure of what we believe, convinced of the Scriptures? Absolutely! When you hold a Bible in your hands, you are holding the embodiment of knowledge and truth. Every word in here is true. However, it is what we do with that assurance, certainty and delight in God that matters.

It is a good thing if the assurance that this is God's truth leads you to bow before God when you read this and say, "O God, how I need You to change me! How I need You to conform my life to this standard." It means you are humble and open before God and others. However, there is a kind of sureness and certitude that is very arrogant. It is the kind of certitude that says, "I am going to study this to enlighten others. They need to change." That kind of arrogance and smugness—where you see all the problems with other people who disobey the Word—makes you blind to what God's Word says you need to change in your own life, and it makes us repulsive to the world. It makes us self-exalting, irritating and hypocritical.

There are times when someone will come up to me in the church—usually a man who has not been in our church very long—and he will say, "I have the gift to teach and I want to know how I will fit in here. How are you going to let me use my gift in your church?" I kid you not, that will happen from time to time. Here is what I want to know when someone approaches me like that: Do you teach yourself? Is God's Word convicting you? Comforting you? Thrilling you? Disturbing you? Melting you? Humbling you? Transforming you? Making you more loving, tender, kind, self-sacrificing and obedient? Less self-seeking? That takes some time to observe.

James 3:1 says, "*Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.*" Martyn Lloyd-Jones has searching questions for all of us. He said:

As you read your Bible day-by-day, do you apply the truth to yourself? What is your motive when you read the Bible? Is it just to have a knowledge of it, so that you can show others how much you know and argue with them? Or are you applying the truth to yourself? As you read, say to yourself, "This is me. What is it saying about me?" Allow the Scriptures to search you; otherwise, it can be very dangerous.

Underline that sentence, friends. There is a sense in which the more you know of the Bible, the more dangerous it is to you if you do not apply it to yourself. It is possible to be cultivating a merely theoretical knowledge of the Bible. We can read it for concepts but not for conviction or change. In a sense, we can even read the Bible to gain control over other people, telling them how they ought to live while we are failing to experience its transforming effects on us.

Take abortion, for example. If you have been following the news this week, you have undoubtedly heard about a lion named Cecil that was killed in Zimbabwe by an American dentist. You have also heard about Cecile Richards, the head of Planned Parenthood, and about her organization selling fetal tissue.

Kevin DeYoung wrong something I think is very wise. He said this: “If the Lord calls us to avoid anger and outrage over most things, He is equally concerned that we be angry and outraged about some things.” This is very important. In most things, we should avoid anger and outrage. In some things, we are sinning if we are not angry and outraged over them.

Where was the outrage in the major news media this week? I think it was tilted toward the killing of the lion in Africa and pretty muted when it came to the dismembering of unborn children in the womb. How should we respond to this? On the one hand, I think we should be very careful right now not to be cavalier and calloused about animal rights, making stupid statements. As we saw in Genesis, we do have a stewardship over God’s creation. We should care about the humane treatment of animals. We should care about the preservation of endangered species. We should not talk as if that is not an important issue. However, at the same time, we should be outraged over the evil that is taking place in our nation, and in other nations, every day in places like Planned Parenthood. We should not be calloused or flippant or act ignorantly about this. Even more than outraged, we should be broken-hearted. We should be stricken over this atrocity.

Psalms 119:136 says, “*My eyes shed streams of tears, because people do not keep your law.*” This is a righteous response toward evil like this. However, here is where the danger lies: does our outrage over the evil that is taking place in abortion clinics every day in our nation make us smug and disdainful toward others, or do we turn the light in on ourselves? Have we discovered what is underneath the sin of abortion? It is the sin of verse eight: self-seeking. It is a “me first” attitude.

What does Jesus say in the gospel? He says, “I will give My life for yours on the cross.” Abortion says, “I will take your life for mine—me first.” That root sin of putting my own interests above everyone else’s interest is in all of us. Self-seeking is underneath abortion; it is in us as well. We can see the blindness of a man who tweeted his horror at the killing of Cecil the Lion and then just a few moments later tweeted his unqualified support for abortion. We can see these two tweets side by side, look at them and say, “How can a person be so blind?”

The Apostle Paul says we can know the Bible well enough to teach it to others, yet be totally blind when it comes to applying it to our own lives. That is what he is saying here in verses 21-22: “*You then who teach others, do you not teach yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal? You who say that one must not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples?*”

It looks like some of the Jews in Paul’s day abhorred idolatry, but they also sneaked into pagan temples at night and robbed some of the goods. It would be like a person who takes a

public stance against pornography but also writes articles for pornographic magazines. Paul says this is how blind we can be, even when we have the Bible. We can be blind to its application in our own lives.

Whenever Bible-believing people, who boast in God's law and instruct others in how they should live, break God's law and fail to live up to the very principles we are enforcing upon others, the tragic result is that God is dishonored. Verses 23-24 say, "*You who boast in the law dishonor God by breaking the law. For, as it is written, 'The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.'*" What a horrible statement! How searching and convicting it is. It is possible for people who know the Bible to live in a way that hardens other people toward God.

God, deliver us from smug hypocrisy. Deliver us from thinking about what the Bible has to say to the world and not thinking about what it is saying to me and how I need to change.

Someone once said to Charles Spurgeon, "The Bible is the light of the world." Spurgeon said, "Oh, no, how can that be? The world never reads the Bible." He went on to say this: "The Bible is the light of the Church, and the Church is the light of the world. The world reads the Christian, not the Bible."

When the world reads us, may they read truth about God. He is full of grace and truth. When the world reads us, may they see Jesus, full of grace and truth. We need to ask ourselves, "Has our knowledge of the Bible made us smug in any way toward those who do not know the truth?" Do we look down on other people who are failing? Are we cold and condemning toward those who are struggling? Do our eyes shed streams of tears over people who do not keep God's law, or do we just separate ourselves from them and hope they get their just reward? Are people comfortable coming to us and sharing their problems with us?

Here is a good question: are we defensive when other people point out our problems to us? Is our church community and are we as individuals attractive? Are we humble? Here is a question from Tim Keller: "Are we living as an advertisement from God or as a 'Keep Clear' sign?" This is the danger of smug hypocrisy.

The Danger of Dead Orthodoxy

In verses 25-29, Paul speaks to a Jew who is relying on circumcision—the external rite—forgetting that the whole point of that ritual was to show the wretchedness of man in the most dramatic way. We need cleansing at the very point of reproduction. I heard John MacArthur say something that finally explained to me why circumcision is such a big deal in the New Testament. He said, "The most profound illustration of human sinfulness is in what it reproduces. What do

we reproduce? Sinners. No one who gives birth to a baby gives birth to a holy child, other than the Virgin Mary, who had a baby who was conceived by the Holy Spirit.”

We give birth to sinners, and circumcision was showing Israel how they needed a cleansing at the very basic root of human nature. It was a symbol of what they needed God to do in their hearts. They needed profound cleansing. It was pointing to Christ so that He could circumcise our hearts and cleanse us within.

Paul says this is what we need. We don't need an outward ritual. We need an inward cleansing. We need a circumcision that *“is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter.”* We need the Holy Spirit to give us new life. That is what we need. The bottom line for people who know their Bibles is to not put your trust in the Bible. Don't put your trust in Christianity; put your trust in Christ alone. Don't trust in your baptism, the Lord's Supper, church membership, tithing, praying and reading your Bible every day, or inherited religion. Don't put your trust in any of these things.

Knowing the Bible can be dangerous if it leads you to put your trust in anything external, anything other than Christ alone. Put your trust in Jesus and in Jesus only. When you do, the Spirit will give you new life. He will cleanse you from deep within. He will reward you with honor and glory and immortality in God's presence, by grace through faith alone. Men won't praise you, but God will. I love those last words in verse 29: *“His praise is not from man but from God.”*

Let's pray together than God would have mercy and deliver us from false security, smug hypocrisy and dead orthodoxy. Let us put our trust and hope in Jesus alone.

Let's pray.

O Lord, our only hope is You. The more we know of Your will, Your Word and Your law, the more it continually drives us back to the cross—to You alone, Jesus. I pray that these words would penetrate deep within our hearts and would be the true movement of each of our hearts—to put our hope and trust in You alone to save us. We do that now, Lord, by grace through faith in Jesus, Your Son. Amen.

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