

Romans 2B (2017)

- Paul is at work knocking down the major religious lies that deceive mankind
 - So far, Paul has dispensed with two of these lies
 - First, Paul shot down paganism
 - In fact, Paul demonstrated how paganism, the first false religion, is the cause for humanity's depraved condition
 - They are focused on the creature rather than the Creator
 - Out of paganism came the second great religious lie: moralism
 - Moralism is a belief that people are good enough to get into heaven
 - It assumes God grades on a curve or gives credit for trying, and therefore all but the very worst of humanity get into heaven
 - Today, you can find so-called Christian pastors teaching that hell doesn't exist, which is an example of the lie of moralism
 - Those two lies cover a lot of ground, and many of the world's religions and even the non-religious fit into these two categories
 - But there are still two more broad religious lies that must be discounted before Paul is ready to explain the one true way we may become righteous
 - Tonight we study the third of these four lies: Nomianism
 - You see in your chart of the structure of Romans that this topic begins in Chapter 2:12
 - Following Nomianism comes Judaism in Chapter 3
 - In this context, Judaism describes the attitude that a Jew is saved automatically because they are descended from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob
 - But of course, living as a Jew also included following the Law of Moses

- And this aspect of Judaism may lead you to think that these two sections – Nomianism and Judaism – are actually one and the same topic
- But as we move through them tonight, we'll see the differences between them
- Let's begin with Paul's argument against Nomianism

Rom. 2:12 For all who have sinned without the Law will also perish without the Law, and all who have sinned under the Law will be judged by the Law;

Rom. 2:13 for it is not the hearers of the Law who are just before God, but the doers of the Law will be justified.

- Paul's treatment of the the third religious lie begins as a transition out of v.11 where he stated that there is no partiality with God
 - He means that God does not change His standards from one person to another
 - No human being is graded differently than any other, so no one should expect special treatment
 - God will judge each person against a set of expectations or laws
 - And He will assign an eternal outcome to each that is just
 - And God is so impartial that He will hold us accountable regardless of whether we know His expectations or not
 - In v12, Paul begins this section by talking about the Law
 - He says all who have sinned without the Law will also perish without the Law
 - He's raising the third religious system of Nomianism
 - Nomianism is the pursuit of righteousness by means of observing laws (or rules)
 - The largest world religions follow this system including Catholicism and Islam
 - These systems prescribe an intricate system of rules and rituals and teaches that these methods bring a person into heaven
 - They usually include a belief in the exclusivity of their rules

- Catholics believe that only Catholics go to heaven, muslims believe only muslims go to heaven, etc.
- So if one does not have the right set of laws or rules, they perish
- Paul addresses this idea in v.12
 - In the first half of the verse, he agrees that those without God's Law will perish in their ignorance
 - They perish, of course, because in their ignorance they did not keep the Law and therefore they sinned
 - No man or woman facing God in their judgment moment may claim they deserve Heaven despite their sin, merely because they didn't know God's law
 - Their ignorance of the law will not be a defense
 - They will experience the second death of spending eternity in the Lake of Fire
 - If that sounds unfair, remember that we have the same principle in our system of law
 - If you drive too fast through a school zone not realizing that school was in session, you're still going to get a ticket
 - If you don't pay enough taxes because you didn't realize an additional tax was required, you're still going to pay a penalty
 - Your ignorance of the law or the situation is no defense
- Nomianism agrees with this philosophy, at least in theory
 - Nomianism maintains that "good" people are those who keep the rules and "bad" people are those who break the rules
 - When good people keep the rules, they will be rewarded
 - When bad people break the rules, they will be punished
 - Many people find this thinking appealing, especially those of us raised in a Greek-thinking, western culture
 - We're taught to respect law and order, and that playing by the rules is the right way to achieve what we want

- We're raised to appreciate hard work and to expect that our efforts deserve reward
- So it makes sense to us when someone tells us that God will reward us by this same criteria
- If we keep God's rules and observe His rituals, we get to go to heaven
- But of course, the opposite must also be true
 - Those who break God's rules must expect to pay the price for their lawbreaking
 - The punishment is just desserts
 - If you do the crime, you should expect to do the time
- While Nomianism largely holds true in human society, it conceals a fatal flaw when attempting to explain God's standard for heaven
 - Nomianism claims that keeping rules is required but then makes exceptions for those who don't keep the rules
 - Religious groups teach that living according to rules and traditions is the way to righteousness and heaven
 - And that failure to keep the rules leads to damnation
 - But everyone breaks rules sooner or later
 - So Nomianism holds that *pursuing* laws (i.e., rules, rituals) is sufficient to gain God's approval
 - Nomianism does not require that followers actually *keep* those laws to receive heaven
 - For example, have you ever heard someone describe themselves as a "good Catholic" or a "good Muslim?"
 - They aren't saying they are perfect rule keepers
 - They're saying they are one who is sincerely trying
 - In fact, Nomianistic religions assume their followers *will* fail
 - But these violations do not automatically disqualify someone from heaven

- Conveniently, these religious systems have rules to cover the inevitable violations and restore the sinner to good standing
- For example, Catholics teach that those who violate Catholic dogma may receive absolution through confession and doing penance
 - Mormons prescribe a process called repentance and restitution
 - Muslims are taught they may be forgiven by praying day and night, calling upon Allah using specific names they memorize
 - Rule-breaking Jehovah's Witnesses must submit to a re-education process while demonstrating a proper repentant attitude
- So, every Nomianistic system includes more rules for how the guilty may amend for breaking the initial rules
 - And this is the flaw in Nomianism
 - These system profess that keeping rules is the way to heaven
 - But just as quickly they acknowledge no one keeps the rules
 - Yet somehow they still expect to receive a good judgment from God in the end
 - A cynical follower might conclude that they can ignore the rules altogether while pursuing a life of sin
 - But when death approaches, they can perform the steps for absolution and still get into heaven
 - That kind of hypocrisy is the logical outworking of nomianism
 - It's just another lie we tell ourselves, similar to the one moralists profess
 - Both nomianism and moralism pervert the standard God will use to judge
 - Moralism overestimates man's goodness by assuming he will measure up to God's standards for heaven
 - While nomianism underestimates God's standards for heaven, by assuming man's mistakes aren't disqualifying
 - These are two sides of the same counterfeit coin

- In the second half of v.12, Paul exposes the hypocrisy of nomianism
 - He reminds them that those who sin under the Law will be judged by the Law
 - To be under the Law means to have been notified of God's rules and to be obligated to keep them
 - Should such a person continue to violate those rules despite their knowledge, they too will receive a just penalty
 - Because the Law will condemn them
 - There is no advantage to having the knowledge if it isn't put to use
 - And since God shows no partiality, we can expect Him to take note of every rule we break
 - Nomianism's assumption that effort and sincerity will be enough will be proven wrong in the end
 - Paul targets this flaw in v.13 when he declares that God does not give credit for effort
 - Those who wish to be judged by a law must be prepared to keep it
 - Only those who keep God's law perfectly should expect to be justified (i.e., declared innocent)
 - Paul's statement defeats both moralism and nomianism
 - God's standard for entering heaven isn't as low as you had hoped, and you're not as good as you assumed
 - Obviously, Paul's referring to the Jewish people
 - Gentiles did not receive the Law of God, so they were "without the Law"
 - But Jews were given the Law at the mountain as part of the Old Covenant, and they agreed to keep it
- Perhaps there is no one who practices nomianism more fervently and more scrupulously than a Jew following the Mosaic Law
 - To be clear, Judaism is NOT nomianism

- For example, King David and the prophet Daniel, like all Jewish saints, practiced Judaism
- But scripture testifies that neither of them sought to be righteous before God merely by obeying the Mosaic Law
- Nevertheless, many Jews throughout history have made that mistake, seeking to be righteous by zealously keeping the Law
- They twist what the Lord gave Moses into the lie of nomianism
- But rule-keeping Jews distance themselves from other religions by telling themselves they have the inside track with God
 - While Muslims and Catholics and Mormons and other Gentile religions also follow rules hoping to please God
 - Jews know these Gentiles are following the *wrong* rules, so they won't be rewarded in the end
- Jews on the other hand, have God's Law given directly to them by the finger of God
 - So while everyone says they have the "right" rules, only Jews actually do
 - And they suppose that this will make the difference for them
- This is Jewish nomianism, and it has always been prevalent within the Jewish nation
 - The Pharisees of Jesus' day practiced Nomianism in this way
 - They claimed to keep the Mosaic Law perfectly, and they found confidence in having the right law and in their own piety
 - But Jesus succeeded in exposing their hypocrisy over and over again
 - He called them white-washed tombs, clean only on the outside
- The sad truth is that even the most accomplished practitioner of nomianism will be disappointed upon their death to learn their efforts were insufficient
 - The Law of God was simply too demanding and their ability to keep that law was woefully inadequate

- Everyday, many “good” Catholics and Muslims and Mormons enter into an eternity of punishment because they lacked the right rules and the ability to keep them
- But likewise, many “good” Jews enter punishment as well though they heard the correct Law
- Because it matters only if they actually keep the Law, Paul says
 - To prove his point, Paul raises the example of a Gentile who knows nothing of the Law of Moses, yet instinctively conforms his life to the Law’s requirements

Rom. 2:14 For when Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves,

Rom. 2:15 in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them,

Rom. 2:16 on the day when, according to my gospel, God will judge the secrets of men through Christ Jesus.

- The word instinctively could also be translated “by nature;”
- It refers to a desire within us that is not taught
- So a Gentile who shows mercy or charity or respects another man’s property or tells the truth or honors his marriage vows, is doing the Law
 - Paul says he is showing the work of the law written on his heart, which we call following our conscience
 - The work of the Law is to produce righteous behavior, so we see the Law of God at work in his heart though he’s never heard it
 - God is at work in mankind in this way all the time
 - It’s how otherwise sinful people may accomplish good things from time to time
- Paul says a person’s conscience will be his witness when he stands before God
 - His conscience will defend him in times when he followed it
 - But it will accuse him in the times when he ignored it

- Paul's point is that Jews should take no satisfaction merely in the fact that they possessed the "right" law
 - The only question that will matter in the end, for both Gentile and Jew, is whether we kept that law
 - In v.16 Paul says a day is coming when we will be judged and even the secret things we've said or done will be exposed
 - But that judgment will come "through" Christ Jesus
 - Meaning Christ will judge us against Himself
 - We aren't judged against ourselves or others, but against the sinless Savior
 - So if you want heaven, you must keep the Law as Jesus did
 - But many Jews in Paul's day believed they were keeping the Law perfectly
 - Just like the orthodox or ultra-orthodox Jews today feel they've met the mark
 - They hold the same point of view of that young ruler
 - After Jesus named off various commandments, the ruler replied, "I've kept them from my youth."
- So Paul next exposes the self-deception that drives nomianism among Jewish people...thinking they are actually keeping the Law when in fact they are not

[Rom. 2:17](#) But if you bear the name "Jew" and rely upon the Law and boast in God, [Rom. 2:18](#) and know His will and approve the things that are essential, being instructed out of the Law,

[Rom. 2:19](#) and are confident that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness,

[Rom. 2:20](#) a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of the immature, having in the Law the embodiment of knowledge and of the truth,

[Rom. 2:21](#) you, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself? You who preach that one shall not steal, do you steal?

[Rom. 2:22](#) You who say that one should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples?

[Rom. 2:23](#) You who boast in the Law, through your breaking the Law, do you dishonor God?

[Rom. 2:24](#) For “The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you,” just as it is written.

- Notice first that Paul is talking to the one who is a Jew and relies on the law and boasts in God
 - That’s Paul’s description of Jewish nomianism
 - First, they call themselves “Jew” meaning they see themselves as part of the privileged group who have the right rules
 - They rely on those rules (i.e., the Law) as their means to righteousness or heaven
 - And they boast in God, meaning they believe God is pleased
 - Remember, Paul is focusing on Jewish nomianism as his example, but this description would apply equally to every law-keeping religion
 - Other systems of nomianism simply change the nouns in that sentence
 - For example, we could say, “You who bear the name ‘Catholic’ and rely upon the magisterium and boast in Mary, etc.”
 - Or we could say, “You who bear the name ‘Muslim’ and rely upon the Qur’an and boast in Allah.”
 - Or “You call yourself ‘Mormon’ and rely on the Book of Mormon and boast in Moroni”
 - In all cases, it’s conceit and self-righteousness
 - Nevertheless, the Jewish people were privileged to have the right law
 - Paul says in v.18 that they knew the will of God as revealed in His word
 - And they approved the things that were essential
 - Paul means they accepted and practiced the rituals that the Lord used to make Israel distinct in the world
 - Things like the feasts and sacrificial system and dietary laws
- So Israel had the right law, but the question remains were they successful in keeping it as some claimed?

- Paul answers that question by asking a series of rhetorical questions intended to expose their hypocrisy
 - He begins by drawing into question their success
 - He asks are you confident that you are guide to the blind and a light in the darkness?
 - A corrector of the foolish and a teacher of the immature?
- Paul's sweeping descriptions alert us to his skepticism as to their claims
 - Notice how he ends v.20
 - Paul asks if they believe that merely possessing the Law has somehow produced these outcomes in them?
 - That the Law has become the embodiment of knowledge and truth for them?
- The word embodiment means outward form
 - So Paul is asking has the presence of the Law among the Jewish people produced righteousness in their lives?
 - It's like asking if I gave your son a rulebook for the game of baseball, would that rulebook (by itself) cause your son to become a Hall of Fame pitcher?
- Knowing that someone in his audience might have been tempted to answer yes, Paul narrows his point through a series of examples
 - In v.21 Paul asks, you Jew who claims to teach the Law to others, are you sure you're keeping it yourself?
 - You who preach that the Law forbids stealing, have you stolen?
 - He asks the same for adultery and idolatry
 - Jewish people were renown for finding ways around their own laws when it suited their purposes
 - They would find creative ways to charge interest when the Law prohibited the practice, thus stealing from someone
 - They found creative ways to dissolve marriages and permit remarriage (which is adultery) even though the Law said no

- They would rob pagan temples to obtain gold for themselves, thus revealing their true god, which was money
- Paul's point is obvious...the Jewish people (and all people) fall short of the rules somewhere, as I discussed earlier
 - Though they claim perfection in keeping their law, they obey it selectively and inconsistently
 - So they are breaking the Law even as they claim to follow it, which is not righteousness at all
- In short, no one who pursues righteousness by keeping rules will be found innocent in the end
 - Even if we were to reduce our system of laws down to just one law, sooner or later we would break it
 - If you doubt me, remember that Adam had only one rule to keep in the Garden and we know how that turned out
- So the conclusion is inescapable
 - In v.23 Paul says those who "boast" in the Law are dishonoring the Lord as they break that law
 - Notice he changed their boast from boasting in God to boasting in the Law
 - Because that's what nomianism does: it makes rules into a god
 - Nomianism doesn't seek to serve God
 - It seeks to serve the rules we set for ourselves
- Remember what the Pharisees said to the blind man Jesus healed:

[John 9:28](#) They reviled him and said, "You are His disciple, but we are disciples of Moses.

[John 9:29](#) "We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where He is from."

- They admit to being disciples of Moses (not of God)
 - They say they follow Moses because they know God spoke to Moses

- What they're truly saying is they are disciples of the Law because they know those rules came from God
- To prove his assessment is accurate, Paul quotes scripture where God foretold Israel's hypocrisy
 - Paul quotes in v.24 from Isaiah 52:5 where the prophet described this very behavior in his day
 - Israel was blaspheming God before the Gentile nations (who lacked the Law) by their failure to keep the Law
 - So if God declares that those who fail to keep His law are blasphemers, then what prospect did those Jews have of reaching Heaven?
 - Wasn't their eternal future in jeopardy though they attempted to keep the Law?
 - What does that say about our prospects for the same?

Rom. 2:25 For indeed circumcision is of value if you practice the Law; but if you are a transgressor of the Law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision.

Rom. 2:26 So if the uncircumcised man keeps the requirements of the Law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision?

Rom. 2:27 And he who is physically uncircumcised, if he keeps the Law, will he not judge you who though having the letter of the Law and circumcision are a transgressor of the Law?

Rom. 2:28 For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh.

Rom. 2:29 But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God.

- Simply put, having the Law won't be an advantage to the one who can't keep it
 - Paul says their circumcision is only of value if they are living according to the Law they uphold
 - Circumcision is a euphemistic way of describing those who are part of the family of Israel by birth
 - If a circumcised Jew is a transgressor of the Law, then he might as well be uncircumcised like a Gentile

- Paul's saying that being a Jew is no better than being Catholic or Muslim if you don't live up to the standards revealed in God's law
- So our identity offers no advantage unless it's an accurate description of our heart
 - It all comes down to performance
 - A Gentile will get credit for keeping the Law though he never became part of Israel
 - And such a one will stand as a witness against those Jews who ignored the Law despite having the privilege to be among God's people
- Paul's conclusion is that our outward condition is not the measure of our righteousness
 - We cannot be judged by how we perform, or even which system we join
 - Who we are before God is not what we show to others
 - Or even what we tell ourselves
 - It's what's true about us on the inside
 - Paul says a Jew is not determined outwardly
 - The mark of a true follower of God is not something made in the flesh
 - It's a mark on the heart made by God by His spirit
 - Imagine a bottle with a label on the outside
 - The label's description doesn't determine the contents of the bottle
 - If we scratch out the description and write a different description, the contents of the bottle don't change to match our new description
 - Instead, the contents of the bottle will determine the description on the label
- That's Paul's point to the Jew seeking to follow the Law
 - His or her approval won't be determined by the "letter" Paul says in v.29

- Notice earlier in v.27 Paul referred to the letter of the Law
- So Paul's referring to law in general
- Our approval before God will not be determined by our accomplishments under a law, not even the Mosaic Law
 - And it certainly won't depend on the praise of men
 - Only God sets the standards for Heaven, and only He can approve our entrance into His eternal kingdom
- So to summarize the lie of nomianism, it is a religious lie that claims we obtain righteousness by observing laws and rules and rituals
 - It's the philosophy of major religions including many Jews
 - It's chief mistake is in overlooking the impact of breaking the rules
 - Everyone breaks the rules in these systems, but they assume God doesn't mind
 - Even within Judaism, which does have the right set of rules, they still ignore the consequences of breaking the Law
 - But the word of God says that those who break God's law will be judged for it
 - So how do we reach out to those trapped in these systems of religious rule-keeping?
 - Frankly, it can be very difficult to pull people out of these systems
 - Jews, Catholics, Mormons and Muslims are some of the hardest people to evangelize – for at least two reasons
 - First, nomianism systems tend to be rooted deeply in culture
 - Generation after generation of families participate in these systems
 - So a person's very identity is connected to these systems
 - Furthermore, if you indict their system, you're implying that their deceased family and friends are not in heaven

- Often these implications are so threatening that the person shuts down the conversation
- There's no easy way to address these concerns except to redirect their attention back to themselves and the question of their future
 - If they find the truth of the Gospel compelling, there will be time to reconcile with the implication for others
 - No one has a perfect family history, so everyone has relatives who have gone to the grave without knowing the truth
 - So perhaps reassure the person they are not alone
- But secondly, people who are caught in nomianistic systems have difficulty accepting that entry into Heaven won't be based on personal performance
 - When you tell them that God is even prepared to grant a murderer entry into heaven, they reject that idea as illogical and unfair
 - They see that all achievements in life are based on performance, reward and punishment
 - So how can they believe the Creator does not work in the same way?
 - Jesus addressed this objection specifically when talking to committed law-keepers, the Pharisees

Matt. 5:17 "Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill.

Matt. 5:18 "For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished.

Matt. 5:19 "Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

Matt. 5:20 "For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.

Matt. 5:21 "You have heard that the ancients were told, 'You shall not commit murder' and 'Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.'

Matt. 5:22 "But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever says to his brother, 'You good-for-nothing,' shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever says, 'You fool,' shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell.

- Jesus' strategy begins by acknowledging that performance is required to enter Heaven
 - In fact, those who suggested that Jesus was attempting to abolish the Law got it wrong
 - That's the essential objection of those coming out of a rules-based religion
 - They reject the notion that God doesn't care about rule keeping
 - And Jesus agrees with them!
 - He says that setting aside even the least Law will have negative consequences
 - While those who keep and teach them will be honored
 - In fact, Jesus says He came into the world to fulfill the Law
 - To fulfill is a Greek word that means to accomplish in full, to fully carry out
 - So Jesus is saying He came to keep the rules of the Law *for us* so we wouldn't be judged by them when we fail
 - That's your first answer to someone caught in these systems
 - Our Gospel message doesn't claim that God doesn't care about keeping rules or Law
 - On the contrary, the Gospel tells us how we can keep the rules
 - All God's rules have already been kept for us by Jesus
 - He lived a sinless life, without breaking any rule, so He has already done all that's required to satisfy entry into Heaven
- On the other hand, should a person remain determined to keep those rules themselves, they had better be prepared to meet the standard God will use at the judgment
 - Remember, nomianism underestimates the consequences of breaking the rules
 - People caught in these systems are taught that breaking the rules is no big deal

- They need only say a few words, perform a certain ritual, and God forgives and forgets
- But Jesus says that our righteousness must surpass that of the Pharisees, which is an unimaginable standard
 - Pharisees lived a lifestyle we can hardly imagine, and few of us would tolerate very long
 - Their every minute was directed by scrupulous rule keeping
 - They fasted several times weekly, said prayers at all hours, and tithed on even the herbs that grew in their garden
 - Rule keeping drove their every thought and action
 - You can see examples of this type of extreme nomianism still alive in Israel among the ultra-orthodox Jews
- Even these scrupulous law keepers are falling short of God's standard, Jesus declares
 - And if you want to know exactly what God's standard is for entry into Heaven, consider Jesus' example
 - He says you've no doubt heard of the rule that murder is sin and if you murder you will be judged by God
 - Certainly, any one caught up in nomianism would agree that murderers shouldn't be in Heaven
- But then Jesus says God's standard is much stricter than that
 - Have you ever been angry with a brother?
 - Have you ever said an unkind word against someone?
 - Have you ever judged someone to be a fool?
 - Each of these offenses is sufficient to place you in Hell
- So if you have taken comfort in the fact that you haven't committed murder, you should take a second look at your life
 - Are you sure you have the right rules?
 - Are you sure you're even keeping the ones you do have?
 - Are you sure God overlooks your mistakes?

- If God is willing to overlook your failures at the rules, why is keeping the rules even necessary?
- How does anyone know when they've done enough to satisfy God?
- Or maybe you're the person who has committed murder? Or you've done something you feel is equally disqualifying?
 - And so you struggle to find hope in any system that teaches heaven is reserved for good people
 - Jesus says everyone is in the same boat with you
- So on Hell's death row we find murderers seated next to those who hate and those who use profanity and those who call another a fool
 - If calling someone a fool is a disqualifying offense for heaven, then who can qualify?
 - Clearly, systems based on personal performance aren't going to make us righteous enough
 - If anything, they simply expose our sin and leave us more vulnerable to judgment
 - And so we must look for another solution
- Now as we end Chapter 2 and prepare to move into Chapter 3 next time, notice Paul's transition
 - He was discussing the nature of a true Jew verses that of one who misuses Jewish Law
 - That is but one major way Judaism is distorted
 - There is another way, which then forms the fourth major religious life
 - I'll call it Judaism, but here again I'm not talking about authentic Judaism
 - It's a system of assuming righteousness by identity
 - It's unique to Judaism
 - And it was a major force in the church in Paul's day