

But when we compare these two classes of people and these two conditions with the first major strand of thought in this section -- that of mankind's unrighteousness -- we discover that, except for Jesus Christ Himself, the first class of people is an empty class! There are no people who fulfill the condition in the first class, and thus there are no people in that class!

There simply are no people who persist in doing good, who seek heavenly glory, honor, and immortality, who perfectly obey the Law of God, and who will therefore be declared righteous in the judgment. If there were any such people, they would be declared righteous. But there are none except for Jesus Christ!

To confirm this, Paul concludes this first major section of the epistle with a strong conclusion, found in 3:19-20:

Now we know that whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are under the Law, that every mouth may be closed, and all the world may become accountable to God; because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin.

Here it is clearly stated. Romans 2:13 says that "the doers of the Law will be justified;" i.e., those who obey the Law will be declared righteous. Yet on the other hand Romans 3:20 says that "by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight;" i.e., no one will be declared righteous by obeying the Law.

Is this a contradiction?

Paul says that on the day of God's righteous judgment God will declare righteous all who have perfectly obeyed His perfect standard of righteousness. But none will be found who have done this! None have obeyed the Law! All have transgressed God's Law, and continue to fall short of its high and holy standard of righteousness!

It is not through obeying the Law of God that human beings are declared righteous in God's sight, for human beings do not obey it. Rather, the righteous Law reveals human beings to be what they are -- sinners! And the righteous Law silences every mouth, and holds the whole world accountable to God and liable to punishment for their sin.

If, then, the Law condemns every human being, then no human being can be declared righteous by the Law. The Law can pronounce only one judgment on its transgressors -- GUILTY.

It is of course possible to take another way out of this impasse. We could understand Paul to be speaking of two classes, but divided between believers and nonbelievers. Believers would be those who persevere in doing good and seek for glory, honor, and immortality; and they would receive eternal life and glory, honor, and peace on the day of God's righteous judgment. Nonbelievers on the other hand would be those who persevere in doing evil, are selfishly ambitious, and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness; and they would receive wrath and indignation, tribulation and distress.