Do you think it is worse to commit a vice (e.g., take drugs) or to encourage others to commit this vice?

9. Romans 2:1-16

Therefore, you, fellow, have no excuse—I mean anyone who judges—because when you judge someone else, you condemn yourself, because you who judge commit the same things. Now we know that God’s judgment rightly falls on those who commit such things. But, fellow, do you imagine that when you judge those who commit such things yet do them yourself that you will escape God’s judgment? Or do you have contempt for his rich kindness and restraint and patience? Are you ignorant of the fact that God’s kindness is to lead you to repentance? By your stubbornness and impenitent heart you are accumulating for yourself indignation on the Day of Indignation and of the revelation of God’s fair judgment. He “will repay each person in accordance with their deeds” [Ps. 62:13]. For those who seek glory and honor and immortality by persevering in doing good, there will be eternal life, but for those who from selfishness disregard the truth and follow wickedness, there will be indignation and fury. There will be affliction and anguish for every human being who does evil, both for the Jew first and for the Greek, but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, both for the Jew first and for the Greek, for there is no favoritism with God. All who have sinned without being under the Law also will perish without the Law, and all who sinned under the Law will be judged through the Law. For it is not those who know the Law who are innocent from God’s perspective, but those who follow the Law will be found innocent. When the Gentiles who do not have the Law do naturally what the Law requires, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the Law. They demonstrate that the requirement of the Law is written in their minds. Their consciences will also testify and their reasonings condemn or even acquit one another on the day when God through Christ Jesus is
going to judge people’s hidden lives in accordance with what I preach. (2:1–16)

This section of the letter does not fit smoothly with what went before. In the previous section (1:18–32) Paul himself harshly condemned the Pagans and invited the reader to second that condemnation. Now suddenly Paul insists that everyone who judges the Pagans is also guilty. The reader feels tricked and is tempted to respond that obviously Paul himself must be especially guilty since he has been especially judgmental!

The reason that Paul makes this awkward about-face is that after he shows that without the gospel the Gentile world is fundamentally corrupt, he then must claim that without the gospel the Jewish world is equally corrupt. He must make this claim for both theological and practical reasons. As a Christian, Paul is committed to the theology that salvation can only come through Jesus. Moreover, as a missionary to the Gentiles, Paul preached that, thanks to the coming of Jesus, Gentiles have equal access to salvation. Hence, he must insist that without Jesus, even the Jews are fundamentally lost. In addition, to avoid antagonizing either side in the Roman congregation, which was divided between Jewish and Gentile Christians, or either side in the early Church as a whole, which was similarly divided, Paul had to be evenhanded and show that the Jews have no fundamental superiority over the Gentiles.

Paul diplomatically presents his argument in two parts. In 2:1–16 he points out in general terms that both the Jews and the Greeks will be judged not on what they claim but on what they actually do. Hence, those who condemn others will not necessarily fare any better at the last judgment. Then in 2:17–29 Paul explicitly states that the Jews who do not follow Christ are as wicked as the Pagans they attack. By giving a general discussion of God’s impartial judgment before zeroing in on the sinfulness of the Jews in particular, Paul lets his Jewish readers down gradually and keeps them from dismissing his argument as unfair.
Both in theory and in practice, the primary difference between Jews and Gentiles was the Mosaic Law. Jews believed that God himself had given the Law in order that the Jews would be a separate and holy people. Hence, Jews held that they had a religious obligation to pattern their lives and beliefs according to it. In practice the Law also helped preserve Jewish identity in the melting pot of the Greco-Roman world of the first century. Following the Mosaic Law made it more difficult for Jews to associate with outsiders and hence guaranteed that the Jewish minority in the Roman Empire would not be absorbed. For example, the Law made it difficult for Jews and Gentiles to dine together, because the Law carefully specified what could and could not be eaten. We should also note that most Gentiles regarded the Jewish Law as strange and even offensive. Thus, for example, the Law required Jews to be circumcised, but Gentiles regarded circumcision to be mutilation.

The term “Law” designated several different things in the first century, and, in his discussion of “Law,” Paul uses the term to refer now to one thing, now to another. The Law was, first and foremost, the regulations contained in the first five books of the Bible, commonly called the books of Moses. Yet, the “Law” also referred to these books themselves, including the sections that consisted of stories, prophecies, and so forth rather than regulations. Moreover, “Law” could even be used as a label for the entire Jewish scriptures (the Christian Old Testament). Paul uses the word “Law” in all these senses, and, consequently, the reader must determine from the context what Paul means in a given passage.

An additional complication is that the Mosaic regulations (the “Law” narrowly speaking) combined what we would call ethical and ethnic regulations. Thus, on the one hand, the Mosaic Law enshrined ethical precepts that occur in any culture, such as the prohibition of murder, stealing, and adultery. Yet, on the other hand, the Law also dictated such culturally specific matters as what to eat, how to dress, and what holidays to observe.

In this section Paul emphasizes that both Jews and Gentiles will be judged by works. His words are clear. God will repay
people in accordance with their deeds. Hence, all who have acted sinfully—regardless of whether it was under the Law or outside the Law—will receive the appropriate penalty.

Consequently, we must conclude that when Paul elsewhere insists on justification by faith he does not primarily mean that believers will be pardoned at the last judgment. Of course, God may be merciful at the last judgment. Nevertheless, God remains just, and regardless of whether or not people are Christian believers, they will have to suffer for their misdeeds.

Instead, as we shall see later, when Paul talks about justification by faith, he means that in this present world God mercifully invites sinners into the sphere of his saving power. The material we have surveyed so far makes it evident that individual sins are themselves a punishment from God for the primordial sin of not gratefully acknowledging his lordship. Because people refused to worship God, he as a punishment turned them over to the power of perverted desires that in turn produced sinful acts. Consequently, it takes an act of divine mercy to deliver people from the power of sin and give them the freedom to choose to do what is right.

In the passage we are presently considering, Paul claims that in practice the Pagans sometimes do in fact keep the Law even though they are not consciously trying to follow the Jewish regulations. Of course, here Paul is using the term “Law” to designate the ethical requirements of the Mosaic code. Paul returns to his earlier insight that the Pagans do have some knowledge of God through nature; only now, he treats it more positively. Whereas earlier he suggested that the Pagans inevitably turn away from this knowledge and, hence, it makes them even more culpable, he now allows the possibility that the Pagans may by nature sometimes actually do what is right. Indeed, Paul freely concedes that Pagans may be found innocent at the last judgment.

Today Paul’s concession that people who do not belong to the Jewish tradition know and may even keep the moral law is very helpful. It would be easy in reading the Bible to conclude that people outside the Judeo-Christian tradition are necessar-
ily depraved, and some otherwise perceptive theologians have made this claim. It would also be easy to assume that Paul’s comments about the “Law” are only relevant to Jews since, for the most part, when Paul refers to the “Law,” he is referring to the Mosaic Law. The fact that Paul can state that Pagans know and can even keep the law gives us a wider perspective. Paul does not assume that Pagans must be depraved, and his comments about the strengths and weaknesses of the “Law,” though primarily directed at Jews, have a relevance to every human community.

We may note in passing that this section of the letter makes it particularly obvious that the theme of Romans is that the Gospel is for the Jew first and also for the Greek. Thus, in 2:9–10 Paul insists that there will be destruction for everyone who does evil “for the Jew first and for the Greek,” and salvation for everyone who does good “for the Jew first and for the Greek.” The repetition of the phrase “Jew first . . . and Greek” is very striking and serves as a reminder to the reader that Paul’s theme is that through faith in Jesus everyone has access to salvation but, nevertheless, the Jews retain some sort of priority.

Questions for reflection:

In your experience do some people who are not Christian or not even religious at all sometimes maintain higher ethical standards than most Christians do? If so, will they fare better at the last judgment than most of us will? What advantage will believing in Jesus give us as we face final judgment? If we have grievously failed to live up to the teachings of Jesus, will we conceivably be worse off than people who have acted just as wickedly but did not do so as Christians? In warning people about their sins, do we sometimes first have to get them to agree that in principle there are certain standards that everyone must uphold?
10. Romans 2:17–29

Now if you call yourself a “Jew” and rely on the Law and brag about God and you know his will and discern what is superior, since you are instructed by the Law, and you are sure that you are a guide for the blind, a light for those in darkness, a mentor for the ignorant, a teacher for the immature, since in the Law you have the formulation of knowledge and truth, so, as you teach someone else, are you not going to teach yourself? You preach against stealing: yet you steal. You say not to commit adultery: yet you commit adultery. You detest idols; yet you commit sacrilege. You who brag about the Law dishonor God by breaking the Law. For, just as it is written, “God’s name is reviled among the Gentiles because of you” [cf. Isa. 52:5]. Circumcision is helpful if you follow the Law. But if you are a law-breaker, your circumcision has become uncircumcision. So if the uncircumcised keep the requirements of the Law, will their uncircumcision not be considered as circumcision? And those who are physically uncircumcised yet keep the Law will judge you who are a law-breaker despite your written code and circumcision. Because externals do not make someone Jewish. Neither is external circumcision in the flesh real circumcision. But internals make someone Jewish, and real circumcision is mental, in the Spirit not in a code. The commendation of a true Jew comes not from human beings but from God. (2:17–29)

Paul now explicitly attacks the sins of the Jews to balance his attack on the sins of the Gentiles in chapter 1. In the first chapter Paul insisted that the Gentiles were grievously sinful. Of course, Jewish readers found that section of the letter especially congenial. Here, by contrast, Paul explicitly focuses on the sins of Jews.

Now that Paul has made it obvious that his target is the Jews, the reader is forced to reinterpret the previous paragraph. There Paul condemned people who look down on the Pagans and yet do not live any better. He warned that such persons would suffer at the last judgment because God is impartial.
Nevertheless, Paul seemed to be talking about everyone. Here, by contrast, he makes it devastatingly clear that he was primarily talking about the Jews. Consequently, the reader now views the previous paragraph as the introduction to the present denunciation of hypocritical Jews.

Hence, in analyzing this section, I will also freely draw on material from 2:1–16.

Paul notes that the Jews boast in the law and lecture others about the need to keep it and are judgmental toward the sins of others. Such national and religious pride was typical of Judaism in Paul’s day. Prior to becoming a Christian, Paul himself as a Pharisee must have fully believed in the superiority of Judaism and looked down on Gentiles as habitual sinners.

Nevertheless, Paul now goes on to claim that in practice Jews do the very things which the Law condemns. Indeed, he suggests that the very need to judge others is itself a sign of sinfulness. Here Paul seems to follow the lead of Jesus. Jesus pointedly accused the religious leaders of his own day of merely being hypocritical, of putting on an act (e.g., Mat. 23). They acted as if they were more righteous than others but in practice were at least as wicked as the people they criticized. They condemned others in order to hide their own viciousness. Paul makes a similar accusation here. The Jews who condemn the Pagans do not in practice actually live better.

Paul hints that one reason that the Jews do not in practice live any better is that they seek public approval from human beings rather than the hidden approval of God. Here again Paul follows the lead of Jesus. Jesus accused religious leaders of parading their piety to impress other people (Mat. 6:1–21). So too, Paul points out that the Jews boast in the moral superiority that the Mosaic Law requires, and they do so in order to impress others with how much better they themselves are. By contrast, what a sincere Jew would seek is not praise from human beings but praise from God.

Jewish hypocrisy causes Pagans to revile the God of Israel. When people who do not know much about the Jewish God see his worshippers engaged in hypocrisy, they naturally condemn
the religion itself. God gets blamed for the faults of his followers. Hence, the very “Jew” who boasts about being a guide to the blind is in fact driving people away from God.

According to Paul, the Jews assume that they are not liable to God’s judgment, and this assumption itself is presumptuous and sinful. The smug awareness that the Jewish Law teaches higher moral standards than Pagans observe blinds Jews to the fact that in practice they do not live any better themselves. The reader can scarcely avoid drawing the additional conclusion that this moral blindness is itself another spiritual defect.

Consequently, the Jews also face the danger of condemnation at the final judgment and, hence, are no better off than Gentiles. Paul’s warning is strong. The Jews are accumulating divine punishment for themselves and will inevitably experience God’s wrath. They must not delude themselves by supposing that their circumcision by itself will placate God. Circumcision is only an outward sign of a commitment to keep the Mosaic Law and is worthless if the Law is not kept. Paul implicitly admits that there is truth to the traditional Jewish claim that God is more merciful to Jews than to Gentiles (e.g., Wisdom of Solomon 12:22), but he insists that this mercy is temporary. Whereas the wrath of God has already fallen on the Gentiles, as the shameful consequences of their sins attest, God is being patient with the Jews. Nevertheless, the purpose of such patience is to give the Jews an opportunity to repent. If Jews refuse to do so, they will feel the full force of God’s condemnation.

In evaluating Paul’s argument, we must conclude that he exaggerated Jewish sinfulness to make a point. Of course, two thousand years later we have no way of knowing in detail how Paul’s Jewish contemporaries behaved in their daily lives. Moreover, we must remember that Paul is thinking corporately. He is not discussing how each individual Jew acts, but whether the Jewish community as a whole is faithful to its own legal standards. Nevertheless, we can be tolerably certain that as a community the Jews who boasted in the Law actually kept most of it fairly well. Paul deliberately overemphasizes the failure of Jews in order to warn of the dangers of pride and in
order to prepare for his contention that true righteousness comes through Jesus. We may note in passing that in Paul’s day preachers and philosophers normally grotesquely exaggerated the moral failures of people who did not follow the religion or teaching in question.

Nevertheless, if I may judge by contemporary experience, Paul’s condemnation of people who boast in moral teaching is substantially justified. The sad fact is that individuals and communities often do preach one thing while doing the opposite. An important reason for this duplicity is that many people who laud high standards are in reality seeking public approval rather than genuine goodness. Consequently, in practice those who emphasize moral standards often grievously fail to uphold them.

Later we will also see that Paul increases the demands of the Law and holds that this greater goodness is only possible through following Jesus. Paul will argue that the Law not only forbids evil actions but even the obsessive thoughts and desires which produce them. Only the Spirit of Jesus allows us to change our way of thinking.

In keeping with the overall structure of the letter, Paul here addresses the Jews and warns them not to despise Gentiles. It is striking that in his discussion of Gentile sinfulness in chapter 1 Paul uses the third person. He talks about what “they” do. By contrast, in chapter 2 when he attacks the failings of the Jews he switches to “you.” To be sure, in Greek, the “you” is singular, and, hence, Paul does not specifically address the Jews (plural!) in his intended audience. Nevertheless, he does address a generic Jew. In this address, of course, he warns that the Jew cannot rightly despise the Gentile since both are subject to sin. Subsequently in the first half of Romans Paul will continue to insist that the Jews and the Gentiles have equal access to salvation. One clear implication is that the Jews are not to despise their Gentiles brothers and sisters in the church. Then beginning in chapter 9 Paul will stress that nevertheless the Jews still have some special standing in God’s plan and the Gentiles should behave accordingly. Significantly, in this second half Paul will call the Gentiles “you” and refer to the Jews as “they.”
For sensitive modern readers, a major problem with this section of the letter is that Paul has a punitive understanding of final judgment which today seems incompatible with God’s unconditional love and mercy. Of course, Paul does not dwell on the sufferings that the sinner will experience on the day of judgment, but clearly they will be severe. There will be “affliction and anguish.” In ancient times when cruel corporal penalties (e.g., floggings) were standard and when it was believed that God directly caused natural disasters to punish societies, few readers would have had problems with Paul’s portrait of the final reckoning. Today, however, when at least in the United States we have a more humanitarian justice system and when we know that natural disasters have natural causes, we find it difficult to reconcile this vision of the last judgment with God’s compassion.

It must be stressed, however, that for Paul the final judgment is primarily public exposure. Paul does not talk about the other sufferings which God will visit on the wicked but does make it plain that at the judgment everyone’s shabby secrets will be public knowledge. “God through Christ Jesus is going to judge people’s hidden lives.” As a result, the Gentile who kept the ethical demands of the law will condemn the Jew who ostentatiously praised the Law but never actually abided by it. In the first century Mediterranean world, the importance of honor was much greater than it is in the contemporary United States, and to be put to public shame was painful in the extreme.

What remains valuable in Paul’s presentation of judgment is that we cannot be saved without facing the truth about ourselves in the context of the community. The greatest joys of salvation come from right relationships with God and others, and there can be no right relationships if we do not know the truth about one another and face the truth about our own selves. Consequently, Paul was right to emphasize that the final judgment will consist, at least in part, of public exposure.

Later in Romans Paul will suggest that God’s punishment is temporary and ultimately everyone—and especially the Jews—will be saved.
Questions for reflection:

In your experience, do Christians who boast of their moral standards actually behave better than other people do? When Christians boast of their moral standards and live wickedly, does the rest of the world tend to have contempt for the whole Church and its message? Does a need to judge others often come from a refusal to face one's own sinfulness? Do we sometimes praise virtue primarily to gain approval for ourselves? What would it mean to seek God's approval? Do you believe that God will condemn people at a final judgment? If so, what standard will God use, and what punishment will he impose?

11. Romans 3:1–8

So what is the benefit of being Jewish, or what is the advantage of circumcision? Great in every respect. To begin with, the Jews were entrusted with God's revelations. What if some Jews were unfaithful? Their faithlessness does not undermine the faithfulness of God, does it? Certainly not. Let God be true although every human being is a liar. It is just as it is written, "That you may be proven right when you speak, and you may be victorious when you go to court" [cf. Ps. 51:4]. Now if our wickedness shows that God is righteous, what shall we say? God is not wicked when he inflicts his punishment, is he? (I am being presumptuous even to talk like this.) Certainly not. Otherwise, how will God judge the world? But if the truth about God rebounds to his glory through my lie, why am I still condemned for being a sinner? Why not say, "Let us do evil that good may result"? Some slander us by claiming that we say this. They deserve their condemnation. (3:1–8)

In the previous section Paul overemphasized the equality of Jews and Gentiles and now needs to qualify his earlier remarks. Earlier he claimed that ethnic Jews are not real Jews