

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. And 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.

Although this interpretation is certainly possible, yet it does not seem to fit the flow of Paul's argument, or the conclusion to which he brings his readers in 3:19-20. And it certainly does not fit with 2:13 ("the doers of the Law will be justified"), unless the requirements of the Law of God are lowered or the "doing" is partial or token or representative, in which case "justified" takes on a different coloration from that of the context.

Paul has now deliberately brought us to the depths of despair, so far as any attempts on our part to earn a righteous standing before God by trying to fulfill the demands of the Law.