

415 Who is *'they'*?

Two unconnected people emailed after my last article (that's an above-average response rate!), both quoting Romans 1:18ff (especially 1:20), in response to my rhetorical question: 'But what about people who don't even own a Bible? How can God communicate to *them*'?

There are, of course, things about God which you can't see, namely, his eternal power and deity. But, ever since the world was created, they have been known and seen in the things he has made. As a result, they have no excuse.^{1:20} (my bold)

I really struggle with this verse (do you?), especially if '*they*' includes my friend who doesn't own a Bible, or worse if '*they*' includes the people I know who wouldn't touch the Bible or church with a bargepole because of past experiences with people professing to be Christians!

And checking the context doesn't help; it makes it worse. Try applying all of 1:18ff to your friends and family who don't believe! (Please at least scan-read it.)

I picked up my copy of Tom Wright's commentary on Romans, and that helped a little. He applied this difficult passage to humankind *as a whole*, which helps, but I still struggle on behalf of Ann, Bertie, Clare and David.

In order to find out who '*they*' might be, I read through (*context* again!) to the end of chapter 2, and stumbled upon:

...the God who will "repay everyone according to their *works*."^{2:6}

...and there will be glory, honor and peace for everyone who *does what is good*, the Jew first and also, equally, the Greek. God, you see, shows no partiality.^{2:10-11} (my bold)

Then I remembered being so shocked in 2019 by Jesus' sheep and goats,^[80] where the sheep are welcomed into the kingdom and the goats are told, 'Get away from me! You're accursed! Go to the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels!' based on their (lack of) *works*.^{Mt 25:31-46}

I have no simple answers for you, sorry, but perhaps Tom Wright's commentary on 2:12-16 might help:

But people often forget (though Paul makes it crystal clear) that 'justification by faith' is a truth about the present time, about how you can tell in the present, in advance of the future judgement, who God's people really are – and therefore how you can know that you, too, belong to that people, that your own sins really have been forgiven. But whenever Paul looks at the future day of judgement, which is what our present passage is about, he remains equally clear. The future judgement will take place on the basis of the entire life a person has led. He has already said this in the previous passage (2.7-10). He repeats it in 14.10. (his bold)

It certainly seems clear, from the whole of chapters 1 & 2, that judgement will fall most heavily on those of us who say we believe. But this needs more thought, doesn't it?!