

God's Impartial Judgment

Romans 2:12-16

This year marked the 70th anniversary of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's death by execution shortly before the end of World War 2 in Germany. In one of his letters to his friend and biographer, Eberhard Bethge, he referred to his absorption in reading the Old Testament as he endured the Nazi prison at Tegel. He wrote, "...it is only when one submits to God's law that one may speak of grace." Then he commented, "In my opinion it is not Christian to want to take our thoughts and feelings too quickly and too directly from the New Testament" [Letters & Papers from Prison (New York: MacMillan, 1972), 157]. John Stott explained Bonhoeffer's statement, "What he meant is that, until the law has done its work of exposing and condemning our sin, we are not ready to hear the gospel of justification" [Roman's: God's Good News for the World, 88-89].

This is exactly what Paul has been writing about in his letter to the Romans. Through the Spirit of God Paul has been exposing and condemning our sin so that we would be ready to hear and receive the gospel.

You remember in Romans 1:18-32, Paul had wrote about God's wrath being revealed from heaven against the unrighteousness and ungodliness of men who suppress the truth. He wrote about those who had never heard the Old Testament law of Moses, detailing the evils of the pagan Gentile world. He brought to bear the searching judgment of God against their sin and declared them to be without excuse and rightly condemned to death.

Then, in Romans chapter 2 Paul turns his guns towards his fellow Jews, the religious people of his day; the people who had received the one true revelation of God in the history of this world through the writings of the Old Testament. And he says to them, you are condemned as well. You need the gospel, too.

As we saw last time, there is a judgment day coming in which God will judge everyone with perfect justice. Today in Romans 2:12-16, Paul showing the truth of verse 11, **"For there is no partiality with God."** This was not good news for the Jews because they deeply believed in the favoritism of God. They wanted—and expected—special treatment from the Almighty. Many of them truly believed that because God had chosen them, he would give them a special deal when Judgment Day finally rolled around. In effect Paul is going to tell them, "You'll get a special deal, all right, but you won't be happy about it."

Listen to Romans 2:12-16:

11 For there is no partiality with God.

12 For as many as have sinned without law will also perish without law, and as many as have sinned in the law will be judged by the law

13 (for not the hearers of the law are just in the sight of God, but the doers of the law will be justified;

14 for when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do the things in the law, these, although not having the law, are a law to themselves,

15 who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves their thoughts accusing or else excusing them)

16 in the day when God will judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ, according to my gospel.

Paul demonstrates here that God will impartially judge everyone for sinning against the light that they were given. Paul describes two different groups of people, both of whom are busted because of their behavior. Whether someone has the law or someone has never heard the truth, both groups are guilty because of sin.

His line of reasoning goes like this: The Gentile sinned without the Law, so he will perish without the Law. The Jew sinned under the Law and so he will be judged by the Law (2:12). As verse 6 stated, God “**will render to each one according to his deeds.**” Hearing the Law isn’t good enough; you must be a doer of the Law (2:13). Although the Gentiles did not have God’s Law, they all have an inner sense of right and wrong (2:14). And, although occasionally they may do what is right, they all have sinned against what they know to be right. Their consciences and thoughts convict them of their guilt (2:15). But whatever they may think of themselves, the day is coming when God will judge not only outward deeds, but also the secrets of men through Jesus Christ, in accordance with the gospel (2:16). To sum up, Paul is saying:

Since God will impartially judge everyone for sinning against what they know to be right, everyone is guilty and so everyone needs the gospel.

Let’s look at what God says to us verse by verse:

1. God will judge everyone based on the light that they were given (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.

“For” shows that Paul is explaining verse 11, “For there is no partiality with God.” Verse 12 means that God will judge each person according to the light that he was given. In some translations you will notice that the “L” in the word Law is capitalized. This is the translators attempt to convey the idea that it’s not just human laws to which Paul is referring here. He is referring specifically to the Old Testament Law of Moses, the special revelation God gave to the Jews. The Gentiles, who did not have the Law, will perish apart from the Law. The Jews, who received God’s Law, will be judged by that Law. But, note carefully: Both groups have sinned and both groups will be judged for their sin.

The ultimate issue here is that everyone sins, whether they have been exposed to the Bible or not. Paul is laying the groundwork in this section that will hit a crescendo in Romans 3:23, **For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.**

Those who have heard the Law are judged by that Law because they are sinners and those who have never heard will perish because they are guilty as well. People perish because of their sin, not because they hear or don’t hear the Law.

I’m sure that some of you are jumping ahead to ask the question “How could the Gentiles be guilty of sin if they didn’t know the standard of God’s Law to live by?” We will see the answer in a moment in verses 14 & 15. But the point of verse 12 is that God will judge every person, Gentile or Jew, according to their response to the light that they were given. So God can’t be accused of partiality.

Jesus taught a similar truth in Matthew 11:20-24. We read:

20 Then He began to denounce the cities in which most of His miracles were done, because they did not repent.

21 "Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles had occurred in Tyre and Sidon which occurred in you, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes.

22 "Nevertheless I say to you, it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the day of judgment than for you.

23 "And you, Capernaum, will not be exalted to heaven, will you? You will descend to Hades; for if the miracles had occurred in Sodom which occurred in you, it would have remained to this day.

24 "Nevertheless I say to you that it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment, than for you."

Jesus says that those who witnessed His miracles and yet rejected Him will be judged more harshly than those in Tyre, Sidon, and Sodom, who never heard about Jesus. Think about what Jesus is saying. Jesus knew how the pagans in those cities would have responded if they had witnessed His miracles. Just take the case of Sodom, God easily could have had the angels who went there to destroy the city perform enough miracles to bring them to faith. But He did not do that! Sodom did not repent and was judged on the basis of the light they rejected. They will spend eternity in hell for their sins.

But their judgment will be less than that of the people in the Jewish cities of Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum. These people not only had the Law, but they were even privileged to have the Lord in their midst but they never repented. They were amazed by Jesus' miracles but they weren't moved enough to obey Him. Jesus told them that judgment day would be more bearable for the pagan cities of Tyre, Sidon, and even Sodom than it will be for them.

Let me ask you. How much light have you received? Have you responded to the light you have received by repenting of your sins and trusting in Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord? If not, what kind of judgment will you face when you stand before God?

2. Only doing the Law makes you right with God, not just hearing it (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 again uses "for" (see also, 2:11, 12, and 14) to show that he is explaining or proving what he has just said. The Jews boasted in having God's Law. They heard it read every week in their synagogues. But Paul says, "Hearing it is not enough. Hearing the Law doesn't put you in God's favor ahead of the Gentiles, who have not heard the Law. The issue is, doing it. Only those who do God's Law will be acquitted or justified on judgment day."

This is a common tendency among religious people even today. We can hear the Bible so much that we never allow it to permeate down into our hearts so that it changes our lives. Too many people approach the Bible like auditing a class. When I was in seminary I audited a class, which meant all I had to do was show up and listen. There was nothing more expected of me. I didn't have to write any papers or take any exams. I could listen without being accountable for what I heard.

When we just listen to the Bible, or just stare straight ahead during a sermon, in essence we're just auditing a course, in danger of becoming like those who "hear the law" but don't obey it. These religious people heard the law, they talked about it, and we know from Romans 2:1-2, they even judged others according to it. But they didn't love the law, for if they did they would have done what it says.

Paul then says if you want to be declared righteous you must obey the law. Does this mean that you can be made right with God, justified before Him by obeying the Law? No. Why? Because it is impossible to completely obey the law. In fact, in Romans 3:20

says: **Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin.**

When we measure our motives and behavior against God's holy standards, we realize pretty quickly how far short we fall. And James 2:10 adds that to break God's law just once means that we've broken everything: **For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all.**

So, Paul's argument is that God is not partial to the Jews by giving them the Law, because He will judge everyone based on the light that they were given (2:12); and, hearing the Law only does not justify anyone; we must be doers of the Law (2:13).

3. All people have an inner sense of right and wrong that condemns them when they violate it (2:14-15).

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,

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,

Paul brings up the Gentiles to show his Jewish readers that having the Law and occasionally obeying it are not enough. So verse 14 explains the first half of verse 12, that **"all who sin without the Law will also perish without the Law."** Even unsaved Gentiles have an inner sense of right and wrong. Sometimes they do what they know to be right. But they often disobey what they know to be right, so that their conscience condemns them. They will be guilty before God on the day when He judges their secret sins (2:16).

Even pagans, who have had no exposure to God's revealed Law, have a built-in sense of right and wrong that coincides with God's Law. They have **"the Law written in their hearts."** Almost all cultures believe that murder, stealing, rape, assault, etc. are wrong. Treating others as you want to be treated, obeying just laws, and loving your mate and your children are right.

No one talked about this natural moral law more effectively in recent years than the late Cambridge professor C. S. Lewis. It is the initial argument in his classic defense of the faith, Mere Christianity. Lewis begins with the observation that when people argue with one another, an angry person almost always appeals to some basic standard of behavior that the other person is assumed to recognize:

They say things like this:

- "How'd you like it if anyone did the same to you?"
- "That's my seat, I was there first."
- "Leave him alone, he isn't doing you any harm."
- "Give me a bit of your orange; I gave you a bit of mine."
- "That's not fair."

People say things like that every day, educated people as well as uneducated, and children as well as grown-ups.

What interested Lewis about these remarks is that the people making them are not merely saying that the other person's behavior just does not happen to suit them, but rather that the behavior of the other person is wrong. And this is precisely what Paul is saying in Romans 2:14-15 in reference to the Gentiles, though in more theological

terms. It is true that the Gentiles did not have the Jews' law. But they had a law within, a law that did not merely say that some kinds of behavior seem to work better than others or produce better responses from other people, but, rather, went far beyond that either to accuse or excuse them of wrongdoing.

But, there is a problem: Even though we all have this built-in sense of right and wrong, we all have violated our own standards. Paul's point is that every culture has standards of right and wrong that often coincide with God's Law. And every person has a conscience that condemns him when he violates what he knows to be wrong.

John MacArthur writes, "When we violate our conscience, it condemns us, triggering feelings of shame, anguish, regret...anxiety, and even fear. When we follow our conscience, it commends us, bringing joy, serenity, self-respect...and gladness."

To recap, in answer to the objection that God's judgment is unfair because He gave the Jews the Law, Paul says, "No, God will judge everyone by the light they have been given and sinned against. Hearing the Law is not enough; it is the doers of the Law who will be justified. With the Gentiles, not having the Law is no excuse. They instinctively know what is right and wrong and they all have violated what they know to be right, as their consciences affirm. Finally,

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

There are several things that we should not miss in verse 16.

First, there will be a certain day of judgment. God has fixed the day (Acts 17:31). If we believe that, we'd better be ready! And if you don't believe it, that does not mean that it will not happen! Unless Jesus was a liar or mistaken, that day is coming (Matt. 16:27; John 5:22, 24-29).

Second, on that day, God will judge the secrets of everyone. That is a scary thought! What would people think of us if they knew everything we were thinking? In Luke 12:2-3 Jesus said, **"For there is nothing covered that will not be revealed, nor hidden that will not be known. Therefore whatever you have spoken in the dark will be heard in the light, and what you have spoken in the ear in inner rooms will be proclaimed on the housetops."**

Hebrews 4:13 says, **"And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account."**

Third, when God judges the secrets of men, it will be through Christ Jesus. Jesus made the astounding claim (John 5:22-23), **"For the Father judges no one, but has committed all judgment to the Son, that all should honor the Son just as they honor the Father."** Jesus could not have made a clearer claim to deity than that! For Christ to sit in judgment on the secrets of all men, He must have infinite knowledge, which only God can have.

The good news is that the one who judges us is also the one who loved us so much that He gave His life on the cross for us. If there is no judgment for all sin, then there is no need for a Savior and so there is no gospel. The gospel does not offer you the option of going on in your sin or shrugging it off as if it will not come under judgment if you do not repent. We need to understand the bad news of judgment in order to appreciate the good news of salvation through faith in Christ.

For those who've heard, which includes us, we will be judged by what we do with what we know to be true. For others, since everyone has a conscience and an innate sense of right and wrong, God will judge according that. The bottom line is that we're all busted. No one will be able to make any excuses.

Don't make the mistake that so many religious people make by thinking that because they're in church they're OK. This passage teaches that religious people have the most to fear. We can wonder about the heathen who have never heard, but what about those who have heard, like you? What will you do with what you know to be true?