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Romans #12
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The Day when the Secrets of our Souls will be Judged
Romans 2:12-16

I can't begin to tell you how often people challenge me, either in the form of a question or a protest, that goes something like this:

“How can God be just when so few people have access to the Bible? How can God possibly be good and fair if he condemns people for failing to believe something they never heard?”

“I can understand why God would hold the Jewish people during the time of the OT accountable for their sins. They had the Law of Moses. They knew what God's will was. They knew what he demanded and commanded, so their disobedience is certainly deserving of judgment. But what about the rest of the world that didn't have the privilege of reading God's law or the opportunity to obey it?”

“How can God fairly judge all people when everyone has differing levels of access to God's will and ways? Wouldn't it be unfair for him to judge someone who grew up in remote regions of the Sudan by the same standard that he judges someone who grew up in OKC?”

Let's dig a little deeper into this problem. Consider the difference between Jews and Gentiles during the time of the Old Testament. The Jewish people were greatly blessed when God gave them the Law of Moses. His revealed moral will was made explicitly clear to them in the books of Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy, and in other places of the OT Scriptures. We can understand how and on what basis God will hold them accountable for their sins.

But what about the people who lived before the Law of Moses was given? What about the masses who were not related to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob? What about the multitudes of pagan people, the Gentiles, who lived simultaneously with the Jewish people but had no access to the Law of Moses? What about the people in more recent times who live in remote regions of the earth who have never so much as held a Bible in their hands? How can God hold them accountable for their conduct if they have no knowledge of his moral will?

The bottom-line question is this: How can God be just and fair if he judges people for their failure to obey a law about which they have no knowledge? How can God be holy and merciful if he holds people accountable for not obeying a moral law about which they know nothing? The short answer is: He doesn't.

Let's suppose, for the sake of illustration, that your teenaged son or daughter has just returned home from three weeks away at summer camp. During their absence, you and your spouse decided that a new rule would be imposed on the entire household. Your children must make their beds before 8:00 a.m. Failure to abide by this law will result in the withholding of their weekly allowance.

The younger children in the home are aware of this new law and do their best to obey it. But your teenager wasn't present when the law was enacted, and no one told them about it on their return home after three weeks away. On the first day back, they quickly leave the house to join friends somewhere in the city. On their return home, you inform them that they won't receive their weekly allowance because they disobeyed the family rule about making one's bed by 8:00 a.m. “But mom, dad, I never knew about this rule. You never told me. No one did. It isn't fair that I suffer the penalty for not obeying a law about which I knew nothing.”

And they would be right. And you as their parent should apologize and withdraw the penalty. But isn't this what most pagan Gentiles can do when it comes to the many biblical laws to which they have never had access? Would not the pagan in some remote village in India or the outback of Australia appeal to the same thing to justify their behavior? How can God be just and holy and righteous and fair in holding people accountable to rules and moral laws of which they have no knowledge?

Good question! Let's listen to Paul's even better answer!

All will be Judged (v. 12)

Notice that in v. 12 Paul identifies and differentiates between two groups of people. All such people have sinned, says Paul. But some do so "**without the law**" while others do so "**under the law.**" What does he mean by this?

I think he is referring to Gentiles and Jews. Gentiles will be judged for their sins, but not on the basis of having violated the Law of Moses. They will "perish," but "without the law," which I take to mean that their disobedience to the Law of Moses will not be the ground for their punishment. God does not hold people accountable for their failure to obey a moral law about which they know nothing. **Judgment is always based on a person's response to the knowledge that they possess.**

Jewish people, on the other hand, those who have lived "under the law" and with full knowledge of what the law contained, will be judged "by the law."

It may feel as if I'm belaboring the point, but it is so important that repetition is needed. Contrary to what many have thought, not all people will be judged by the same standard. Gentiles, or non-Jewish people, will not be held accountable for failing to obey a "law" they never saw or heard. God would never do that. He is eminently just. If they "perish," that is to say, if they suffer judgment on the final day, it won't be because they disobeyed the written Law of Moses that we have in our Bibles.

Likewise, the people of Israel, Jewish men and women, will be held accountable for how they responded to God's law given through Moses. They will be "judged by the law." In both cases, for Jew and Gentile alike, judgment will be just. People will be held accountable for how they responded to the revelation given to them. God will never punish anyone for failing to obey a law that he/she never knew.

Justification by Works? (v. 13)

Before I try to explain v. 13, let's be sure we know what Paul means when he speaks of **justification**. This is one of the most important words in Scripture and it is essential that all Christians know what it means.

Our fundamental problem as fallen, broken, sinful men and women is that we lack that righteousness which an infinitely holy and righteous God requires. No matter how good you may be, no matter how faithfully you obey what Scripture requires, you will never measure up to the standards of the God of Scripture. He requires absolute perfection. He is infinitely and immeasurably holy and righteous and any who wish to stand in his presence or be granted entrance into his eternal kingdom must also be holy and righteous.

This is what makes the gospel so precious and wonderful. You will recall back in Romans 1:16-17 that Paul made known the fact that he is not in any way ashamed of the gospel. The reason is because the gospel is "the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes," whether you are a Jew or a Gentile. The reason it has the power to save is because it provides us, in and through Jesus Christ, the very righteousness of God himself. The righteousness that God's righteousness requires him to require is provided to us and for us in and through the gospel of what he has done in the sinless life, substitutionary death, and bodily resurrection of Jesus.

When a person believes the gospel and puts their trust in Jesus, God imputes the righteousness of Jesus to him/her. The word “impute” may be unfamiliar to you. It simply means that God reckons or legally transfers the righteousness of Jesus himself to your account. It is a legal or forensic declaration by God that, as far as he is concerned, he sees and knows you as one who is clothed in and characterized by the righteousness of Jesus Christ. Experientially speaking, you and I are not perfectly righteous. We still sin. But in legal terms, as far as our standing in the sight of God is concerned, the declaration of the Judge of the universe is that believers in Jesus are reckoned and regarded as righteous. That declaration is what the Bible refers to when it mentions justification.

That being said, is Paul saying in v. 13 that people who “do” or who “obey” the law are justified? How can he say that when he says in Romans 3:28,

“For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law” (Rom. 3:28).

If you were with us last week you heard what I believe are the two most cogent answers. To those I want to add a third today.

One might choose to argue that the difference between Romans 2:13 and 3:28 is the difference between how salvation was available in the OT and how it is available in the NT. In other words, in the old era, under the Mosaic covenant, doing the law could justify, but in the new era, under the New covenant, it no longer can. Now, faith alone justifies. There are two obvious problems with this view. First, this makes Paul's point in Romans 2:13 totally irrelevant to his readers, since they live in the present, New Covenant, era. But worse still, Paul clearly and on several occasions insists that obedience to the Mosaic Law could *never* justify (see esp. Gal. 3:21). Salvation in the OT was *never* based on works of obedience to the law.

Some contend that v. 13 is a merely hypothetical statement. In principle, says Paul, if someone were to obey or do the law perfectly, they could be justified. But no one ever does, as Romans 3:10-12 and other texts so clearly state.

Others argue that Paul is once again stating what he said earlier in Romans 1:5 when he referred to the “obedience of faith.” His point is that true saving faith, the faith that justifies a person, will always display or produce obedience. Not perfect obedience, but progressive, gradual, obedience. In the absence of any transformation or change in a person's life, one may legitimately question whether they have truly believed. Those who are justified will be gradually and incrementally sanctified and progressively changed into the image of Jesus Christ.

According to this third view, being a “doer” of the law does not mean you are perfect and sinless in every way. It may simply mean that you love God's law and desire to keep it and when you don't you are quick to confess your sin and repent and cast yourself on the mercy of God in Christ.

I believe that both of these latter two explanations are possible. It isn't necessary that we make a final or definitive decision on which is true. What we know to be true are these two facts:

- (1) Justification is always and only by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.
- (2) The faith that alone justifies, is never alone. It is the sort of faith that obeys and does the law of God. It does not obey perfectly or render a person sinless, but it does mean that the person who truly believes will, over the course of their life, sin less.

As long as we hold these two truths together, whichever view of v. 13 we end up embracing isn't critically important.

The Judgement of the Gentiles (vv. 14-15)

OK, then, if Gentiles or all non-Jewish people were never given the Law of Moses and thus were never held accountable to it, on what basis will they be judged? We have already heard Paul give one answer to this question. You will recall what he said in Romans 1:18-21 –

“For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened” (Rom. 1:18-21).

No one has an excuse. All have been given the clear and undeniable knowledge of God in creation, in nature. God’s existence, his nature, and what he requires of humanity “is plain” (v. 19) to all people. God “has shown it to them” (v. 19b). What can be known about God is “clearly perceived,” so much so that all “are without excuse” (v. 20). Indeed, people know God but refuse to honor him or give thanks or obey him. In Romans 1:32 Paul said that “they know God’s righteous decree” and are even aware that those who violate it “deserve to die.” That is one of the grounds or reasons for why people who never saw a Bible or heard the gospel preached can be held accountable and will be judged.

But here in Romans 2:14-15 Paul gives yet another reason. Not only can God be known because of what he has revealed of himself in the natural creation, he has also made known his moral will by stamping it on the hearts of every human being.

Even though non-Jewish people don’t have the law of Moses, they “by nature” are aware of that law and on occasion even obey it. “They are a law to themselves,” says Paul (v. 14b) in the sense that the law is written on their hearts and either condemns them or acquits them.

In other words, to say that Gentiles are without the law, that is, the Law of Moses, is one thing. But that does not mean they are entirely without law in any sense of the term. They most assuredly do have much of the moral law of God written on their hearts. They know God’s moral demands. This is part of what it means to be created in the image of God. He has indelibly stamped on every human soul, both Jew and Gentile, his moral demands. God has created all people, regardless of race or education, as self-conscious moral beings whose *conscience* either accuses or excuses them. They know God’s law “by nature,” that is, by virtue of how they were created in his image.

This law may be unwritten in the sense that they don’t have access to the tablets of stone on which were inscribed the 10 commandments or the parchments on which the many laws God gave Israel were written. But they possess an unwritten moral law code in the sense that they have an innate moral awareness of right and wrong.

Paul reaffirms this truth in v. 15. Here he tells us that the works which the law requires are “written on their hearts.” *God has inscribed on the heart and soul of every human being an awareness of the basic and most fundamental principles of good and evil.* “The things of the law” or “what the law requires” (v. 14) are the basic principles of right and wrong, such as do not lie, do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, etc. Paul isn’t saying that everything in the Law of Moses is inscribed on the hearts of all people, but that enough of God’s will and his moral requirements is known by them that they are fully accountable and morally responsible in the sight of God.

Indeed, the “conscience” of every human being “bears witness” to this. The conscience of each individual functions as a moral compass of sorts, alerting a person to either the goodness or evil of their actions.

The “conscience” is that facet of the image of God in human beings by which they have an intuitive sense of right and wrong. The “conscience” either says to them, “You are innocent because you have done what God requires of you or you are guilty because you have disobeyed.” The conscience thus brings a mixed verdict. Sometimes you know instinctively you have done what is right and other times you know you have done what is wrong.

Although there are times when even the most pagan and unbelieving of people do what is right, this isn’t enough to save or justify them in God’s sight. Their conscience will far more often “accuse” them than “excuse” them. The fact remains that when God created all of humanity he indelibly impressed on their hearts and consciences the undeniable and inescapable principles of right and wrong. They can know that God exists and what he requires both by looking at creation and in their conscience. There is both an external witness to God’s existence and an internal witness. And both of these are sufficient to render all people without excuse, regardless of whether or not they have heard the gospel or read the Bible.

Paul’s point in all this is to defend and vindicate the justice of God in holding all people accountable, not only the Jews who have his revealed moral will in the written Law of Moses but also all non-Jewish, Gentile people, everywhere in the world, who because of what God has revealed of himself by means of the natural creation and in the conscience of each person can in perfect righteousness execute justice on all.

A Brief Summary

Before we look at v. 16, let me take a moment and trace Paul’s thinking from v. 11 on. We saw last week in v. 11 that God’s judgment is without “partiality” (v. 11b). His judgment is entirely fair and without regard to race or education or athletic ability or anything other than the deeds of the individual. He then reinforces this truth in v. 12 by telling us that the judgment of God is always based on how we respond to the measure of truth that has been given to us. Those who have the written law of God, the Bible, and have heard the gospel will be judged based on their response to it. Those who do not, will be judged according to how they responded to the revelation God has made of himself in the created order, in nature, as well as the revelation of his moral will as inscribed on their heart and conscience. Contrary to what many think, the law of God is available to those who have never even seen the Law of Moses or have never possessed or read the Bible. It is written on their hearts by virtue of their having been created in the image of God.

One more thing. This passage tells us something about human nature that all of us need to understand. Even the most pagan and hard-hearted of persons knows and cannot escape the revelation God has made of what is good and evil. Even the most hardened of criminals is without excuse. Even the most ignorant and uneducated person who has never seen a book or attended a class in school knows by virtue of creation and conscience that God exists and is deserving of their worship, gratitude, and obedience.

It’s important for us to remember this as we engage with unbelievers, whether they are friends, family, or entirely unfamiliar to us. You aren’t speaking to a blank slate. They are not ignorant or unaware of God. They are not oblivious to his moral requirements. They may hate God. They may argue with you about what is right and wrong. They may endorse abortion and same-sex marriage and any number of other sins. But in the depths of their hearts, their conscience tells them what is right and wrong, and it is their conscience that will bear witness against them on the day of final judgment.

I trust that what Paul says here will give you hope as you share the gospel with others. I trust it will prove encouraging as you engage with unbelievers. Paul assures us here that, without minimizing the horrific effects of sin on the human soul, there is always a point of contact or connection between you and a non-believer. They know “by nature,” that is, by virtue of how God created them in his image, that certain things are right and others are wrong. And this can be the basis on which you make known to them the truth of their condition apart from Christ and the hope of forgiveness through faith in Christ.

The Day of Judgment (v. 16)

The gospel is, by definition, good news. But included in the good news of what happens when one believes is the bad news of what happens when one rejects Christ. That is why Paul here says that it is “according to” the gospel that God will judge people by Christ Jesus (v. 16).

That God’s judgment will take into account not only outward actions but also the hidden or secret things of the heart is because God is omniscient. God knows your secret, unspoken thoughts and desires and motives. There are a number of texts that testify to this truth:

“But the Lord said to Samuel, ‘Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him [i.e., Eliab, one of the sons of Jesse]. For the Lord sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart’” (1 Sam. 16:7).

The point here is not that God sees or looks upon the physical organ of the heart. Even humans can do that, especially physicians! His point is that God sees and knows and understands the inmost, internal thoughts and desires and motives and intentions of a person. David confirmed this in Psalm 139:

“O Lord, you have searched me and known me! You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar. You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O Lord, you know it altogether” (Ps. 139:1-4).

Every emotion, feeling, idea, thought, conception, resolve, aim, doubt, motive, perplexity, and anxious moment lies before God like an open book. And he knows all this “from afar”! The distance between heaven and earth by which men vainly imagine God’s knowledge to be circumscribed (limited, bounded) offers no obstacle.

Jeremiah quotes God himself who declares,

“I the Lord search the heart and test the mind, to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his deeds” (Jer. 17:10).

If, as Hebrews 4 tells us, the word of God is living and active, “discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Heb. 4:12), then surely God himself also is. In fact, the author of Hebrews goes on to declare that “no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account” (Heb. 4:13). Other similar texts:

““And you, my son Solomon, know the God of your father and serve him with a whole heart and with a willing mind, for the Lord searches all hearts and understands every plan and thought’” (1 Chron. 28:9a).

“Sheol and Abaddon lie open before the Lord; how much more the hearts of the children of man!” (Prov. 15:11; cf. Mark 4:22).

“Yet you, O Lord, know all their plotting to kill me. Forgive not their iniquity, nor blot out their sin from your sight” (Jer. 18:23).

“O Lord of hosts, who tests the righteous, who sees the heart and the mind . . .” (Jer. 20:12).

“And the Spirit of the Lord fell upon me, and he said to me, ‘Say, Thus says the Lord: So you think, O house of Israel. For I know the things that come into your mind’” (Ezek. 11:5; cf. Isa. 40:27-28).

“And they prayed, and said, ‘You, Lord, who know the hearts of all, show which one of these two you have chosen’” (Acts 1:24).

It is staggering and profoundly sobering to think that the “secrets” of our souls, those obscure and hidden thoughts, those veiled fantasies and silent sins, will all be laid bare before God on the day of judgment. How does this affect your life *now*?

But remember this: For the believer in Jesus Christ who has turned to him in faith for the forgiveness of sins, no thought, word, or deed will ever serve as grounds for judgment. Although our secrets will be revealed on that day, it will not be for the purpose of accusation or condemnation, for Christ has suffered in our place the full extent of the judgment we deserved for our wayward and sinful deeds, thoughts, and words.

When your sexual fantasies are made known on that day, God will say of them: “Forgiven!”

When your malicious thoughts regarding another person are exposed, God will say: “Covered by the blood of Jesus!”

When your unkind words are revealed and your selfish motives are seen and all your sinfully perverted plans are brought to light, God will say of them: “Cleansed! Wiped clean! Put behind my back! Cast into the depths of the sea! Blotted out! Trampled under my feet! Removed from you as far as the east is from the west!”

Praise be to God for his amazing, forgiving, cleansing, redemptive grace through Jesus Christ!