

What About Those Without the Law?

Romans 2:12-16

May 14, 2017

Introduction:

We're going to begin this morning by using our imagination for a bit. If you would, imagine for a moment that you're a traffic cop, and while parked alongside of the road in a quiet residential neighborhood, suddenly a car wizzes by you. You look at your radar gun and see that the car that rushed past you was going a little over 50 miles per hour. In response, you flip on the sirens, and moments later you have the guy pulled over and you're walking up to his vehicle ready for a little conversation.

You come up to the driver's side window and the man asks, "What's the problem officer?" to which you reply, "You were going over 50 in a residential neighborhood." He looks at you puzzled and replies, "Well officer, I didn't see any signs indicating what the speed limit was. You can go back down the whole street we're on and look for yourself: there's not one sign posted anywhere. So since there wasn't any speed limit posted, I don't see how you can pull me over for speeding."

What would your response be? Does he have a point: since there were no speed limit signs posted, was he free to go whatever speed he wanted through the neighborhood? Would it be unjust to give him a speeding ticket? Or is there something wrong in how he's thinking? Would you perhaps respond to him saying, "Regardless of whether there were speed limit signs or not, you should know that it's against the law to drive over 50 in a residential neighborhood." What's the right answer?

This little fictional example illustrates the objection Paul wants to address in our passage today. Last week Paul made a point of saying that when it comes to judgment, God is impartial. In other words, God's not going to show favoritism and will judge each man equally. But how can that be so if the Jews had the Law clearly laid out for them by Moses while the Gentiles did not. The Jews knew what God expected because he spelled it out for them in the OT, but the Gentiles didn't have the Law of Moses. Like a police officer who pulls someone over for speeding in a neighborhood that didn't have any speed limit signs posted, how can God truly be fair in his judgment of the Gentiles if they weren't given the Law like the Jews?

That's the issue we're going to be considering this morning, so let's take a look at how Paul addresses this by opening your Bibles to Romans 2. If you don't have your own Bible with you, I'd encourage you to please follow along in one of the pew Bibles, where you should be able to find today's text on page 940. We will be focusing on v. 12-16 today. Please follow along as I read, starting at v. 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 it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified. For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts,**

while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus.”

Paul is carefully reasoning through the impartiality of God’s judgment to demonstrate that God is indeed fair to judge both Jews and Gentiles for their sin, even though the Jews possessed the Mosaic Law and the Gentile didn’t. He does this by first stating the basic principle of God’s judgment in v. 12. So our first point this morning concerns...

1. God’s judgement in principle (v. 12)

Let’s consider more carefully what Paul says in v. 12. He begins, **“For all who have sinned without the law...”** Who is this to whom Paul is referring to? Well, it’s the Gentiles, those who were not Jews. They were **“without the law”** in that they did not have the Mosaic law like the Jews did. If you were born in Assyria or Greece or in far-away lands like India or China, you would have had no idea about the Torah. Unless you were lucky enough to have some Jewish neighbors, you would never have heard of the Ten Commandments or the Exodus or any of the prophets. Gentiles such as these would have been as familiar with the Jewish Scriptures as you are with the Koran, in fact, much less so. Many Gentiles would not even be aware of its existence.

Nevertheless, what does Paul say about these people? He says, **“All who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law.”** Even though they don’t have the Mosaic Law, even though they never heard of the Ten Commandments, still they’re guilty of sinning and in turn will perish for their sin. God in his wrath will judge them for their sin and they will go to hell as a result.

Now look at the second half of v. 12. **“...and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law.”** This, of course, refers to the Jews. They were under the Law in that God specifically gave the Law to them through Moses and as God’s covenant people they were to live their lives in accordance with it, following God’s commands to offer sacrifices, observe various holy days and feasts, and live in accordance with the Ten Commandments as the foundation of their moral behavior.

Yet what happens to them? Same thing as it was for the Gentiles. They also sinned and consequently will be judged. Having the Law of Moses didn’t convey upon them any special privilege. It wasn’t a “Get out of Jail Free” they could flash before God at the pearly gates. All Jews who had the Law and all the Gentiles who didn’t have the Law both sinned and as a result both fall under the just judgment of God.

So the principle of God’s equal judgment for both those with the Law and those without it is not hard to understand; it’s pretty clear that nobody in either camp escapes the reality of God’s judgment for their sin. Anyone can read v. 12 and recognize that Paul is categorically stating that both Jews and Gentiles are guilty of sin, regardless of whether they possess the Law or not, and will perish under God’s righteous judgment as a result. So far, so good.

But this principle raised some eyebrows for those who heard it, for the Jews and the Gentiles. Both groups could raise objections, objections that Paul goes on to address in v. 13-16. So now that Paul has presented the basic principle of God's judgment, we need to consider how God's judgment works out in practice with each of these two groups. So moving on now, our second point this morning concerns...

2. God's judgment in practice (v. 13-16)

In v. 13-16, Paul deals with two potential objections to what he just said in v. 12 starting first with the Jews. So we're going to break this second point down into two sub-points and the first of which is addressed...

a. To the Jews who possess the Law (v. 13)

Please look back in your Bible with me now at v. 13. Paul says there, **"For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified."** You see, the problem with the Jews is they slipped into the error of thinking that because of who they were as Jews - God's chosen people who were related to Abraham and had been given the Law of God by Moses - that therefore they were assured salvation. Most Jews knew they didn't keep the Law perfectly: all those animal sacrifices alone were enough to remind them of that. Of course there was the occasional self-righteous Pharisees who made a herculean effort to keep the law perfectly (such as was Paul back in his pre-Christian days as a Pharisee), but most Jews knew full well they were guilty of breaking the Law. But because they were Jews, they believed that salvation was guaranteed regardless of what they did, since God had chosen them.

But the problem was that simply possessing the Law wasn't enough to guarantee your salvation. Paul says, **"It is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God..."** Merely listening to it doesn't make you righteous. Simply having it as part of your cultural heritage doesn't make you automatically justified in God's sight. What does? Well, Paul completes v. 13 saying, **"...but [it is] the doers of the law who will be justified."** In other words, hearing it isn't enough; the Law must be obeyed in order to be justified.

So let me bring this close to home for a moment. Maybe some of you have a big old Bible that you've had for many years. Perhaps it a nice old King James Bible you've owned for decades. And you and King Jimmy, well, you've been through a lot together, haven't you? You got your name engraved in gold on it, stamped all pretty-like on the black leather cover. But old King Jimmy has gotten fat over the years: stuffed full of sermon notes and old bulletins and gum wrappers. And let's face it, King Jimmy is also showing his age: the binding is worn, the pages are marked up with favorite verses you've highlighted and underlined, with years of notes scribbled in the margins, like wrinkles on an elderly man's face. But no matter: King Jimmy comes with you every Sunday morning, worn and ragged, but still your Bible and faithful companion as you go to church.

But King Jimmy isn't going to get you into heaven. No matter how nice the leather, how many yellow highlights, how stuffed it is with old bulletins, it'll do you no good unless you put what King Jimmy has to say into practice. Reading your Bible and listening to sermons is all fine and well, but it doesn't amount to a hill of beans unless your hearing turns into doing. Like the Jews, we can deceive ourselves into thinking that because we own a Bible that's all marked up or because we attend church every Sunday or because our dad or grandfather was a pastor that we're in like Flynn with God. But merely owning God's Word or hearing God Word or being related to someone who obeyed God's Word doesn't save you. As Paul says here, and the rest of the Bible reiterates over and over again, it is not hearer but rather **“doers of the law who will be justified.”**

Now we need to talk about what Paul means here by saying it is **“doers of the law who will be justified.”** Is Paul envisioning a situation where someone could obey the Law perfectly and thus be justified by it? Well, theoretically yes, but practically no. If one desires to be justified in God's sight by obedience to the Law, then all of it would need to be obeyed, all the time, in every way. God's standard is, “Be holy as I am holy.” So if you can be a doer of the Law perfectly, without fail, then yes, you can be justified in God's sight.

But the problem is we've all sinned and thus have fallen short of God's requirement. The whole point of the first three chapters of Romans is to conclusively demonstrate that we haven't been doers of the Law in the manner God commands. Thus Paul says in Romans 3:20, “Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law...” So while it is possible to be justified by perfectly obeying the Law in theory, it's impossible in reality because we've all sinned.

So then, the Jews are out of luck as far as the Law is concerned. Yes, they possess it. It was given to them. But they can't keep it, and it's only by keeping it perfectly that they can be justified before God by their works. Hence v. 12: **“all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law.”** The Jews knew full well what God demanded of them because they had the Law of Moses and it is by that Law that they will be judged, as God reveals how they failed to do what they knew his Word commanded of them.

But now we need to turn to the Gentiles. What about them? How can God judge them if they didn't have the Law? Aren't they like the man who was driving through a neighborhood without any speed limit signs? So moving on to our second sub-point, we need to consider what Paul has to say...

b. To the Gentiles who don't possess the Law (v. 14-16)

This is where the biggest objection to God's judgment lies. If the Jews had the Law clearly spelled out for them and yet broke the Law, then fair enough: God has every right to punish him. But if the Gentiles don't have the Mosaic Law, then how can they be held accountable to obedience to a law they were unaware of? How can Paul claim God is impartial in his judgement if the Gentiles didn't know any better?

This is still a question asked by many today. What about those who haven't heard? Consider the Ecuadorian Indians that Jim Elliot and his missionary friends attempted to reach back in 1956. Long before Jim Elliot came, generation upon generation of Indians lived in the deep jungles of Ecuador without any Bible or church or Christian witness of any kind and yet, according to Paul, they will be judged for sins. So the question is: how can God judge them for breaking his commandments if they were never given the commandments to begin with?

But this doesn't just go for primitive tribes: this question is relevant for people living here in the United States. I attended the University of Wisconsin in Milwaukee for a year and during one of my classes I got to know a young woman who I was shocked to discover had no idea what Easter was about. She knew about Easter eggs and bunnies and stuff, of course, but she just thought it was some generic spring festival. She grew up in an irreligious home and as a result lived isolated from any real knowledge of Christianity. The whole notion of Jesus' death and resurrection was completely new to her. So then, we don't need to travel to the jungles of the Amazon or the African savannah to wrestle with this question: we have people right here in America who don't have the slightest clue of what's in the Bible. And so we must ask: what about those who haven't heard? Is God truly just to judge them for violating laws and commandments they're unaware of?

Paul address this in objection in v. 14-15. Look there in your Bibles with me. **“For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts...”**

So then, the reason God can justly and impartially judge the Gentiles as well as the Jews is because they do have the law, but it is a law written on their hearts. True, they may not possess the Ten Commandment or have a Bible they can read, but written on the hearts of every human being is a basic knowledge of right and wrong. Paul says they **“by nature do what the law requires.”** It is part and parcel of our human nature to recognize that some things are morally wrong.

We can readily recognize this by considering the value systems of other cultures. While our Western civilization has clear Judeo-Christian roots, many other cultures do not. Yet, we don't find in those cultures radically differing morals when it comes basic morality. You don't need to fear going to China because they believe it is morally acceptable to kill people. Rape is not protected by law as a civil right in India. Sleep with another man's wife in any culture, no matter how primitive or advanced, and you're going to find yourself in hot water with her husband. While cultures may ground their morality in something other than the Bible, nevertheless, you can find a common consistency of basic moral obligations across all human cultures.

But besides the fact that all civilizations have shared common moral assumptions, we also see this working itself out in individuals. Look at v. 15 again. **“They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them...”**

People have a conscience that gives evidence of God's law being written on their heart. It's an inescapable reality that when we do something wrong, even if we don't have a law against it or if nobody knows we did it, nevertheless our conscience will accuse us. I can remember as a kid cheating in class or being mean to a classmate and having my conscience nag me about it even though I didn't get caught. While admittedly we can sear our conscience such that it no longer bothers us when we commit some moral evil, that's not how we start out. All of us have a conscience that instinctively weighs upon us when we do wrong.

But our conscience can also excuse as well. When we do something right, when perhaps we've helped that little old lady across the street or gone beyond the call of duty to help a stranger in need, our conscience tells us, "Good job!" We instinctively know it is right to be kind to others and wrong to be hurtful and when we do either, our conscience is there to either affirm our behavior or accuse us of wrongdoing.

So then, God is indeed impartial in his judgement because both Jews and Gentiles have the law: the Jew have the Mosaic Law and will be judged according to it. The Gentiles don't have the Mosaic Law, but they do have the law of God written on their hearts and so they will be judged in according to what they knew in light of it. To be sure, the Jews have a higher standard to which they'll be judged because they were given clearer, more direct revelation: to whom more is given, more will be expected. But the Gentiles have been given an understanding of what God expects of them: we know how we ought to treat our fellow man because our conscience bears witness and from witnessing creation we know enough that God exists and we ought to give him honor and thanks. No Bible is necessary to know that.

And so Paul finishes in v. 16 by reminding them that a day of judgment is coming. He points then to **"that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus."** God's wrath is being revealed right now and will one day be revealed in all of its fury as God impartially judges both Jew and Gentile. The Jews don't get off the hook because they possess the Law of Moses and the Gentiles don't escape it because all they had was general revelation and their conscience. God will judge both, in accordance to what light was given them, but have no doubt that both Jew and Gentiles had enough to know what they ought to have done and therefore God is right to judge them both for their sins.

Conclusion

So then, let's draw this to a close by making a couple of applications, and the first is this: ignorance is not an excuse. Like the driver who was speeding through a residential neighborhood that didn't have speed limit signs posted, you know better. You've driven long enough to know that going over 50 in a neighbor where kids could suddenly run out into the road is not acceptable anywhere. So it is for us in our moral knowledge. You don't need a law to tell you it's wrong to steal, to rape, to murder, to lie, to cheat, to slander. It's written on your heart. Your conscience tells you what is right and wrong long before you ever read it in a law book or holy scriptures. We don't make up right and wrong

according to our own whims: it exists outside of us objectively and every human being knows in his heart what that is. There is not one person who lived in a remote village or jungle tribe or pagan civilization who will be able to say, "God, you have no right to judge me because you failed to give me a Bible in my language to instruct me on what you expected." We all know what is expected of us - whether with a Bible or without - and so God is right to judge each of us in according with what we've done. Ignorance is not an excuse any of us can use.

Second, since we are all without excuse because the law of God is written on our hearts and is also written in our Bible, we need to face the reality that we've fallen short of what we know we should have done. If nothing else, our consciences accuse us that we are sinners. We haven't done what we ought to have done and failed to do those things we know we should have done. And even if we've kept those things secret, Paul tells us in v. 16 that "**on that day... God [will judge] the secrets of men...**" And day a reckoning, of judgement, is coming to all men.

So then, in light of the coming judgment, under which we all stand guilty, how should we then live? We ought to call out to God for mercy. We should seek him for pardon. We should look to him for grace and forgiveness. And if we do, that is what we will find. To all who know they have sinned, to all who sit under the inescapable judgment of their own guilty consciences, God offers peace with him through Jesus Christ. The good news of the gospel is that though judgment is due us for our sin, Christ suffered in our place on the cross. He experienced God's judicial wrath in our place, so that whoever would turn from their sin and believe in him, their sins would be forgiven and they would have eternal life.

So fear God's wrath for your sin? Yes, you should. But far better is to find peace with God through faith in Christ, who suffered God's justice so you won't have to. Let's go to him right now in prayer as I close. Let's pray.