

Is GOD FAIR?
ROMANS 2:12-16

We love children and we love the things children say and do. Let's face it — they're cute and the things they do are cute. Like the little girl, who when she was told by her parents, "I love you," regularly responded, "I love me, too."

But children also say annoying things. A few years ago, a British market research firm conducted a poll to determine the most annoying things children said. "Spokeswoman Emma Elsworthy said: 'Despite being adorable 99 per cent of the time, our children do have the ability to be really annoying sometimes, especially when they question absolutely everything.'" Here then is the list of the top 20 annoying things children say (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/mother-tongue/7776126/Most-annoying-phrases-used-by-children-revealed-in-poll.html>):

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|-----------------------------|----------------------------------|---------------------|
| 1. I'm bored | 8. In a minute | 15. What? |
| 2. Why? | 9. I hate you | 16. I don't like it |
| 3. Are we nearly there yet? | 10. He / she hit me | 17. I want this |
| 4. It's not fair! | 11. I don't want to go to bed | 18. Can you do it? |
| 5. Do I have to? | 12. He / she started it | 19. I can't do it |
| 6. It wasn't me | 13. I'm hungry | 20. But you said... |
| 7. Can I have...? | 14. You never let me do anything | |

Of that list, the one that I relate to the most is "it's not fair..." How many times did I hear that complaint coming from the back seat of the car? I suppose it's because I trained my children so well. I don't remember saying it particularly often myself, but I must have, since I remember so often my father saying to me — "that's right. It's not a fair. It's a picnic..."

He was being just a little facetious, but our complaint against perceived unfairness runs deep. No parent ever trains a child to say that (at least not intentionally), and yet all children do say "it's not fair." We want what is our due, or at least what we think we are due.

I remember the (probably proverbial) account of the woman who went to get some portraits done and when she went back to look at the proofs was indignant that the portraits didn't appropriately reflect her true beauty, so she exclaimed to the photographer, "I demand justice..." To which he quickly responded, "Lady, you don't need justice; you need mercy!"

Yes, we all want what we think is justice and we want what is fair. And perhaps the place where that is most evident is in the discussion about God's judgment. People don't have a problem with God being God as long as that means He gives us what we want.

But a God who is just and is wrathful? No way. “That’s not fair.” “That’s not the kind of God I want.”

This is the very issue addressed by Paul in Romans 2:12-16.

In verse 11, Paul makes the statement, “For there is no partiality with God.” And anticipating possible objections to that statement, Paul offers two primary defenses of that statement in vv. 12-16. We can summarize his teaching this way:

GOD IS FAIR IN ALL HIS JUDGMENTS OF ALL PEOPLE.

In verses 6-11, Paul talked about two kinds of judgment — the judgment of the righteous for rewards and the judgment of the unrighteous to Hell. Of those two judgments, man’s only objection is going to be against the wrath of God against sinners. So that’s the issue Paul addresses in vv. 12-16, and he does so by considering the two kinds of people God judges — those who have knowledge of Him and those who do not have knowledge of Him.

1. God is Fair in Judging All Men (vv. 12-13)

- ✓ The “UNTAUGHT” have sin
- ✓ The SELF-RIGHTEOUS have sin (v. 12b)
- ✓ The self-righteous have “HEARD” (v. 13)

2. God is Fair in Judging the “IGNORANT” (vv. 14-16)

- ✓ They have KNOWLEDGE (v. 14-15a)
- ✓ They have a CONSCIENCE (v. 15b)
- ✓ They have MINDS (v. 15c)
- ✓ They have “SECRETS” (v. 16)

1. God is Fair in Judging **ALL MEN** (vv. 12-13)

- In verse 12, Paul addresses two groups that are judged by God — 1) those who were **without the Law** and 2) those who have been **under the Law**. By this he is referring generally to two groups of people: the untaught Gentiles, and the taught Jews. Paul's point about both is that they both sin and because they sin, God is fair in judging them.

- The "**UNTAUGHT**" have sin (v. 12a)

- ✓ Paul acknowledges that there are some who are **without the Law**. The word "law" is going to become important in the book of Romans. It can mean many different things —
 - It can refer to a general principle (e.g., 7:21 — **principle** = "law")
 - It can refer to the entire OT (1 Cor. 14:21 — he calls Isaiah "the Law")
 - It can refer to all the Mosaic Law (5:13-14)
 - It can refer to the Pentateuch (3:21 — "Law" being distinguished from the rest of the OT)
 - It can refer to the Ten Commandments (13:8-9)
 - How is he using it here? In v. 15 he refers to the Law written on the heart of the Gentiles; he can't mean the entire OT. It is something narrower, which he refers to in vv. 18-20 — the law is what teaches to others to guide and instruct them. Specifically, they teach (vv. 21-22) about **stealing, adultery, and idols**. What's that? The 10 commandments. So here Paul is talking about the moral code of the Mosaic Law, which is summarized in the 10 commandments. Paul is talking about the universal, unchanging principles of morality and immorality that are rooted in the nature and character of God.
- ✓ So these **without the Law** refers to the Gentiles who are outside of the covenant of God and therefore do not have the revelation of God given in the Scriptures, and even more specifically, God's revelation of morality as revealed in the Mosaic Law. That was true then and that is still true now. In spite of many efforts to translate the Scriptures into the languages all people, many still don't have God's explicit moral code revealed in the Scriptures.
 - There are about 7000 languages in active use and at least one book of Scripture exists in over 2,900 of these languages (or, over 4000 do not even have one book of Scripture).
 - At least 1.5 billion people do not have the full Bible available in their first language. Over 663 million of these have the New Testament; others have portions or at least some level of work begun. That means about 1 billion people do not have an adequate Bible translation.
 - There is known active translation and/or linguistic development happening in 2,267 languages across more than 130 countries.
 - As of October 1, 2015, estimates suggest between 165 and 180 million people speaking up to 1,800 languages are understood to 'likely need Bible translation to begin' [www.wycliffe.net/statistics]

- ✓ But to say that the ancient people did not have the OT or that people in our world do not have the Scriptures does not mean that they are innocent and sinless.
 - Not everyone is a thief, adulterer, murderer, gambler, drunkard, abuser, or God-hater. Some people actually honor their parents, recognize the sanctity of all human life, are faithful husbands and wives, are honest in their dealings with others, speak the truth, and are content with what they have (fulfilling the last six of the 10 commandments). But that is still different from saying they are completely innocent and sinless in all things. They may do “good” things, but they *are* still sinners.
 - And that is Paul’s point in the beginning of v. 12 — they may not have the OT Law, but they have still sinned — and they *know* they are sinners, as vv. 14-16 demonstrate.
 - In fact, I suppose there are some who will say that he is not sinners, but for all the times I have shared the gospel, I have never had anyone claim he is not a sinner. They usually claim to be good, but with just a couple of questions, it is easy to demonstrate that they have violated common principles of morality — and generally they violate those principles pretty regularly.
- ✓ So all those who do not have the Law are still sinners. Not having the Law doesn’t change their status as sinners. In fact the verb **have sinned** is not saying they sinned only once (which would be enough to condemn them), but that when the totality of their lives is considered they have sinned and they continue to sin even today [Moo, 146, f.n. 12.]. They are sinners. That’s their identity.
- ✓ And Paul’s point in this verse is that God is not unfair about the way He will judge those individuals. They have not received the Law of God — they don’t have God’s special revelation about Himself — but they *do* have revelation about God, and they will be judged (**will perish**) according to that standard.
- ✓ What do they know about God?
 - They know the revelation of God in creation (1:20) — the creation shouts and declares the news of the Creator and has provided a standard that holds them culpable.
 - They knew God (1:21), but they chose not to glorify or thank God.
 - They have understood the standard of God and willfully exchanged that standard for their own sinful desires (1:23, 25, 27, 28). They gave up God’s glory, God’s truth, and God’s acknowledgment for sinful passions and desires.
 - They knew the ordinances of God (1:32) and rejected them anyway.
 - They willfully suppressed the truth (1:18).
 - They had this truth of God not only in creation, but even in their own minds and hearts and their own consciences convicted and will convict them of their guilt (2:14-16).
- ✓ Is it *really* true that all men have a standard of morality that conforms in some way to God’s standard? Yes. Take for example a pirate. He’s lawless and living only for himself. If he is born on the seas and his father is a pirate, he knows nothing other than piracy and all its attendant sins. Surely he must be an exception — he has no morality. Sure he does. Just try and steal from that pirate and see if he doesn’t have a moral standard about stealing!

- ✓ Not all men have the Scriptures, but all men have had enough revealed to them about God and righteousness that they know about sin and to know that they are sinners and guilty. People who have not received the Word of God will not be held to the standard of righteousness revealed in Scripture, but they will be guilty, nonetheless.
- ✓ And Paul says that those who are guilty in that way **will perish** (parallel to **judged** in 12b). This word for “death” means destruction, but not annihilation. They will die eternally — always dying but never dead and ceasing to exist (cf. Jn. 3:16; 1 Cor. 1:18).
 - Notice also that there is a certainty to this judgment — they **will perish**. No sinner can avoid or evade the judgment of God. All *will* perish eternally.
 - Paul does not paint a picture here of what that judgment will be like, but Jesus does (Matt. 8:12; 13:42, 50; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30; **Lk. 16:23-24ff**).
- ✓ This verse is primarily a vindication of God’s fairness (a more biblical word is righteousness) in judging sinners. But this verse is also a warning to those who have rejected God. They cannot avoid what is coming, except by repentance. And it is also an implied encouragement for us who are believers to be compassionate on those who are sinners and tell them of Jesus’ righteousness.
- ✓ This verse also tells us of another group of sinners...

• The **SELF-RIGHTEOUS** have sin (v. 12b)

- ✓ Those who are **under the Law** are those who have the Scriptures, and even more specifically, have the Mosaic Law and the moral code of Moses’ Law. These are people who embrace that position; they “love” the Law in that they affirm that they are part of God’s covenant people.
 - God made a covenant with Abraham in **Genesis 12:1-3** that promised: 1) a land that would forever be inhabited by his descendants; 2) a seed or lineage that would proceed from Abraham that would be numberless (as many as the stars of Heaven); 3) spiritual blessing through which salvation would be given to Israel and the nations on earth.
 - Many Jews held onto that covenant as a privileged position — Abraham was their “father” (e.g., Jn. 8:39, 53), so (they said and believed) God could not condemn them (cf. Mt. 3:9 // Lk. 3:8).
 - They are claiming that God is right to judge those outside the Abrahamic covenant for sin. And they also claim to be safe from God’s judgment only by virtue of their position as Abraham’s descendants. They are *not* claiming to be Christians and they are *not* claiming to be “righteous” except in the sense that by position and heritage they are superior to all other people and not worthy to be judged.
 - Throughout chapter 2 Paul has been addressing the theme of the condemnation of these “self-righteous” people, and he resumes it again here. Is God fair in judging these “self-righteous” people? Yes, because...
- ✓ To be **under the Law** does not mean eternal security, as the Jews have suggested. To have **sinned under the Law** means to be under judgment.

- To have been ***under the Law*** means that they have received God's truth and standard. But they have ***sinned*** under that Law. That sin was not accidental. They knew what was required, and just like the unbelieving pagans, they suppressed the truth (1:18) — except their suppression of truth was a greater sin because the revelation they received was greater.
 - Stephen gives an example of this very sin in his sermon (**Acts 7:51-53**).
 - This clause is an understated way of saying that all men are sinners, for there is not anyone anywhere who received the Mosaic Law of God that did not violate that Law. All men are sinners, even those who were under the covenant of Abraham.
 - The Jew was prone to ignore that — in the apocryphal book, the Wisdom of Solomon, it says, “even if we sin we are yours, knowing your power...” (15:2). In other words, “sin doesn't matter because of our family relationship with Abraham and you.” Paul smashes that idea in this verse.
- ✓ Paul's point in this part of the verse is that these Jews do not have a special privilege; rather, they are like all men and they have sinned.
- This is why Paul says in v. 9 that judgment will come first to the Jew. It is first for them because they have a greater knowledge and awareness of the standard of God. They were given the Law and they knew God's demands. And they sinned nonetheless.
 - And the penalty for their sin is the same penalty as the Gentile who doesn't have the Law. Paul says they ***will be judged by the Law***. He is using that as a parallel term to ***will also perish without the Law***. The Law demands perfection (Mt. 5:48). And they will be judged to that standard and found deficient and condemned for that deficiency. Their position as Jews (“under” the Abrahamic covenant) will be of no use to them on that day. God will damn them.
 - Please understand how shocking this would have been to the Jewish reader. He had no concept of the Jew being condemned by God and now he is being condemned alongside the hated Gentile, and in fact he is receiving a greater condemnation than the Gentile (v. 9). He has had more instruction, so there is a greater accountability, and therefore a greater condemnation (cf. Lk. 12:47 — those having more knowledge receive more lashes for their rebellion).
 - Punishment in Hell is not based on the “yuck” factor of sin, but on the degree of knowledge the sinner had about that sin. That means that if you are in this congregation and you persist in not submitting to God for salvation, Hell will be worse for you than an illiterate pagan idolater in the jungles of Southeast Asia. Hell will be more severe for those who have more knowledge.
- ✓ The self-righteous may claim lineage and heritage and position, but if they are sinners (and they are) and they do not repent, then they *will be* condemned.
- ✓ That is not unfair, my friends. It is completely fair and righteous for God to condemn sinners.
- ✓ There is one more reason that God is fair in condemning sinners (cf. v. 13) —

- The “self-righteous” have “**HEARD**” (v. 13)

- ✓ Now the Jew might say, “but I’m a Jew — I’ve heard the Scriptures, I know the Scriptures, I attend synagogue and offer sacrifices. I must be acceptable to God.”
- ✓ Remember that at that time, no worshipper would have had his own copy of the Scriptures. To know the Scriptures, he would have to go to the Temple and have the scribe read it to him (in corporate worship). The only way to take in the Scriptures in that context is to have it read to him. So what this person is saying is similar to the common statement today, “but I go (or went) to church and I walked the aisle and prayed the prayer...” It’s a focus on the external actions without paying attention to the weightiness of the Law.
- ✓ So Paul says, “Yes, you’ve *listened*; you just haven’t obeyed.” What is ironic here is that the word **hear** is often used in the NT as a synonym for obedience:
 - “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.” (Matt 11:15; 13:9)
 - “Therefore I speak to them in parables; because while seeing they do not see, and while hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand.” (Matt 13:13)
 - “But blessed are your eyes, because they see; and your ears, because they hear.” (Matt 13:16)
 - “But I say to you who hear, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you,” (Luke 6:27)
 - “He who does not love Me does not keep My words; and the word which you hear is not Mine, but the Father’s who sent Me.” (John 14:24)
 - “Therefore Pilate said to Him, ‘So You are a king?’ Jesus answered, ‘You say *correctly* that I am a king. For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice.’” (John 18:37)
- ✓ So to truly **hear** is to obey — to be a **doer of the Law**. And if they are not doers, then they are not saved and they do not have a place with God.
 - By that statement do I mean that people are saved by doing good works only?
 - No, Paul is clear that good works will never save any man (3:20); we are saved only by grace through faith in Christ (3:23-24).
 - But that salvation will result in good works and good deeds. And the only way you can do things to please God is if you have been saved. Paul teaches that in Eph. 2:10. And Jesus’ half-brother James says the same thing in **Js. 1:22-26**. To hear the Word of God is to do (obey) the Word of God. That was one of the very first things Jesus taught: **Mt. 7:24-27**. To hear is to act.
 - We can go one step further — to *not* do the Word of God means to reject God’s authority and lordship over one’s life. It is to set yourself up as a higher authority than God. To be disobedient to God means that you do not love God and do not care about pleasing Him. Which means that if you see someone (even yourself), whose *pattern* of life is rebellion, he’s probably not saved.
- ✓ Yes, the self-righteous have “heard” the Law. They’ve been faithful to go to the Temple and to attend synagogue every Saturday. They just have been unconcerned to obey what God has commanded in the Law. And that rebellion is their condemnation. And God is just and fair in condemning those who rebel against Him.

- Don't presume by your church attendance or your family heritage or your charitable giving that you are acceptable to God. There is only One person who has ever been acceptable to God, and that is Jesus Christ.
- If you want to be acceptable to Christ, then do what Paul did and repudiate your good works and appeal to God on the basis of Christ's work on the cross for your salvation (Rom. 7:24 – 8:1).
- Let's summarize: The general principle given in v. 12 is that God is fair in judging all men because all men are sinners. Those who do not have the Law revealed to them still sin and those who have had the Law given to them are sinners. There is no one anywhere who can accurately claim, "I did not know what sin was and I am not a sinner."
- ✓ Combine vv. 12-13 and you have a clear explanation that God is right and fair in judging all men —

"The Jew cannot claim that he will automatically be saved because God has given him the law: he has not kept it! Nor can the Gentile automatically be saved because he never had the law and so did not break it: he sinned against the light he had. People are judged according to the light they have, not according to the light they do not have. So all are caught up in final condemnation."

[Morris]

- ✓ These verses really serve as a preview to the conclusion that Paul will dramatically make in 3:10-20, 23. *Everyone is guilty*. And everyone needs the righteousness of Christ imputed to Him (3:24).
- Every human being is tied to Adam and his sin (5:12).
- All men sin because they are sinners (born with original sin); and all men are sinners because they sin (their own sin condemns them).
- ... On his own he cannot do good (Rom. 3:10-18).
- ... Everything he does is sin, because nothing he does is for God's glory (1 Cor. 10:31).
- ... His heart is deceitfully wicked (Jer. 17:9-10).
- ... His goal in life is selfishness and only evil continually (Gen. 6:5).
- ... Every aspect of his life is tainted by sin. He is not as sinful as he might be, but nothing in his life is untouched by sin.
- ... All men are accountable to God for their sins. And God is just and fair to judge all men for their sins.
- And all that means that God is fair in judging sinners — Jew and Gentile alike. Taught and untaught.
- Implications:
 - ✓ You and I have a high accountability to God. Like the Jews, we have the revealed moral will of God. In fact, our accountability is higher because we hold it in our hands and have easy access to it.
 - If you reject Christ as Savior, your eternity will be miserable.

- If you follow Christ as Savior, your eternity will be glorious — but so will your time on earth, because there is nothing more satisfying than living for Christ.
- ✓ Everyone you know knows this God who will judge (and will judge with fairness).
 - “Whether they suppress this knowledge or not, they have it. They know their Creator at a profound level, and they know their duty at a profound level. God has dealt with them deeply before you ever came on the scene.” [Piper, “There is No Partiality with God” Pt. 1.]
 - And that has this implication: through the revelation of His moral will to everyone, God is preparing everyone, at some level, for hearing the gospel, which makes our evangelistic job easier. There is a connection between what they know about God and morality and the gospel. They may not be receptive, but we can be confident that through both general and special revelation God has prepared them for the gospel. [Piper]

2. God is Fair in Judging the “Ignorant” (vv. 14-16)

- They have KNOWLEDGE (v. 14-15a)
- They have a CONSCIENCE (v. 15b)
- They have MINDS (v. 15c)
- They have “SECRETS” (v. 16)

CONCLUSION: Former Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black (1937-71) liked to tell the story about a sharecropper who was charged with stealing his landlord’s mule. The evidence against the sharecropper was overwhelming; but he landlord was domineering and mean and had few friends among the common people. So when the jury went to consider the verdict, they were only gone five minutes.

When they returned, the judge asked, “Have you reached a verdict, Mr. Foreman?” “We have, Your Honor,” the foreman replied as he handed a paper to the clerk. The clerk unfolded the paper and read, “We the jury find the defendant not guilty, provided that he returns the mule.”

The judge immediately slammed down that gavel — “There is no such verdict in the law. The defendant is either guilty or not guilty. You go back and deliberate and don’t return until you reach a lawful verdict. The jury walked out of the box, but returned again only five minutes later. This time the paper read, “We the jury find the defendant not guilty. He can keep the mule.” [RD, May, 1975, p. 98.]

We may chuckle at that kind of verdict, but *no one* wants that kind of judgment. We can be sure that God will always be fair. He will judge and He will judge with authority and fairness. Is God fair? Yes, He is. Even (especially) when He condemns men to Hell.

BENEDICTION: Romans 11:33-36