

IS GOD FAIR? PART 2
ROMANS 2:12-16

When I was in seminary, the professor for an introductory missions class had the same assignment for his students every year. They were to write a short paper answering the question: “will the heathen who have never heard and responded in faith to the gospel be condemned to Hell?” It seemed to me to be a pretty straight-forward question, but there was always lots of discussion on campus over that assignment — it just seemed to be wrong that those who don’t hear the gospel are consigned to Hell. That assignment always begged the question, “Is God Fair?”

This is the very issue addressed by Paul in Romans 2:12-16, a study we began last week. In fact, someone told me this week that as he left the worship service last week, the predominant question in his mind was, “Is that fair?” Even hearing the evidence that it is fair makes us ask the question again, “Is God Fair?”

He is. In all His dealings with all men, God is exactly and infinitely fair and just. He cannot not be fair.

Remember that in verse 11 of this section, 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 will see his second answer today. 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. And He is fair in judging both.

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 “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 — those who *have not* received the moral law of God in the 10 commandments (pagan Gentiles) and those who *have* received the moral law of God (Jews) are both culpable (guilty) of sin. No one anywhere can say that he is not a sinner.
- And because both sin, God is fair in judging them.
 - ✓ In vv. 12-13, Paul's main attention is on the Jews who are ***under the Law*** — they have received the Law (capital L — Mosaic Law and the moral code behind it) and have violated it. They think that because they are Jews and merely have the Law that they are righteous before God and won't receive judgment. Paul demonstrates that they violate the Law, making them guilty and susceptible to God's wrath. He won't play favorites (v. 11); He will judge them. Their 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.
 - ✓ 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.
- So 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 truly 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).
- So Paul's first response about the "unfairness" of God is that all men (particularly those with the Law) have known God's standard and are guilty of sin, so God is right to judge them. But what about the "ignorant" — those who have never heard of the Law or Christ? Is God fair to judge them? Yes...

2. God is Fair in Judging the “Ignorant” (vv. 14-16) Why is God fair in judging these people?

- They have KNOWLEDGE (v. 14-15a). Paul has already said in v. 12 that there are people who do not have the moral law of God — they are **without the Law**. However, that does not mean that they don't have knowledge. In vv. 14-15a, Paul demonstrates in several ways that they *do* have knowledge of the moral law of God.
 - ✓ They have knowledge, Paul says, **for [even though they] do not have the Law [they] do instinctively the things of the Law** (v. 14a).
 - Now the natural question is, “If these Gentiles don't have the Law, how can they be considered as sinners? After all, they didn't know the standard... Yet Paul says, they did know the standard.
 - Paul notes that they **instinctively** do the things the Law demands. So they do not have the actual Mosaic Law or moral code of God, but *by nature* (**instinctively**) they do what much of the Law demands. There are unbelievers who have moral sensitivity that you would generally expect to find in Christians. That's why there are unbelieving policemen and lawyers and judges and referees and principals and teachers and bankers and plumbers and wives and husbands who all conduct themselves honorably and fairly. This has always been the case:
 - ... Abimilech (Gen. 20:4-5)
 - ... Darius (Dan. 6:25-28)
 - ... Cyrus (Ezra 1:1-4; 5:13-17)
 - ... Artaxerxes (Ezra 7:11-26)
 - ... Joash (2 Chron. 24:2; cp. with 2 Chron. 24:20-22)
 - ... The city clerk of Ephesus (Acts 19:35-41)
 - ... The Roman military officers who protected Paul (Acts 23:10, 17-35)
 - ... The residents of Malta who care for Paul and others after their shipwreck (Acts 28:10).
 - ... “The fact that such people did good things, *knowing they were ethically good*, proves they had knowledge of God's Law written in their hearts.” [MacArthur, *Romans 1-8*, 140.]
 - This phrase simply means that God created all men with a sense of moral truth and obligation. They may not have known God's written moral code, but they have known morality.
 - (And that helps us to understand that the depravity of man does not mean that man is as wicked as he could be, only that every area of his life is stained by his sin nature and he is incapable of saving himself).
 - There is another reason why God is fair in judging those who are “ignorant” of His Law...
 - ✓ They have knowledge, because **they are a law to themselves** (v. 14b).
 - We might translate this more literally, “they themselves are a law.” Paul is being emphatic. They might claim lawlessness and freedom from the law and morality, but their own actions indicate that they have a governing law within themselves.
 - Notice also that Paul says they *are* a law — they don't have to acquire a law; they possess it and they always have had it and always will have it (though it will also often become perverted).

- Again, this is simply a way of demonstrating that all men have a sense of right and wrong.
- Is this true? Does mankind have an innate sense of morality? Yes. A couple of examples:
 - ... Do you remember Ethan Couch? He's the "affluenza" teen who killed four people while driving drunk as a minor and was sentenced only to 10 years probation 3 years ago. After violating his probation by fleeing to Mexico, this week a judge sentenced him to the longest possible jail term for violation of his probation. Why? Because there was so much outrage over an unjust original sentence. In fact, while the judge couldn't sentence him to a greater time in jail than the nearly two years he gave Ethan Couch, there was still anger over the sentence: "[it's] still just a slap on the wrist..." wrote one disgruntled person. Those are unbelievers who "are a law to themselves" — they have and understand morality.
 - ... This week I read a review of a biography of Christopher Hitchens, who hated Christ and Christianity. Yet he, too, demonstrated a sense of morality when he changed his political affiliation after the events of 9/11 because of his desire for justice to be done to terrorists. Even atheists have an innate sense of God's common morality.
 - ... Or for a more basic sense of morality, bring home a half-gallon of ice cream tonight and fix a bowl for everyone. Give them all one scoop and give yourself three; give yourself hot fudge and don't allow anyone else to have hot fudge. See if your children have a sense of morality about what is fair or not.
 - ... The fact that all men have a sense of God's moral law is why we have laws against murder and rape and stealing and bribery and speeding and copyright infringement and laws about property borders and what can be fairly deducted on taxes and thousands more. All men know the kind of morality that is given by God.
 - ... And by saying this, Paul is affirming that the Jew who has the written Law of God is not at a distinct advantage over the pagan Gentile; they all know God's standard — they are on "equal footing." [Moo, 151]
 - ... Paul continues on that theme in v. 15 —
- ✓ They have knowledge, because ***they show the work of the Law written in their hearts*** (v. 15a).
 - Paul does not say, "they have the Law of Moses written in their hearts." That is, they don't know the actual revealed Law and commands of God, but they do have its ***work***. By ***the work of the Law***, Paul means the function of the Law and the effect of the Law is within them. That is, they know what God has intended for them; they know how to live morally.
 - Again, we see that in the way unbelievers conduct themselves.
 - ... If someone is committing adultery, he (almost always) attempts to hide it. Why? Because he knows it is immoral and wrong — even if he denies Christianity.
 - ... If someone takes deductions on his taxes to which he isn't entitled, he doesn't tell the IRS. Why? Because he knows it is wrong and he will suffer consequences.
 - ... If a your six-year-old hits your four-year-old, the six-year-old perpetrator won't come and tell you. Why? Because he knows it's wrong; you may not have told him, but he *knows*.

- ✓ Combine all these thoughts and it is clear that even though there are some who have nothing of the Scriptures (about 1 billion people today, according to Wycliffe Bible Translators), they still know the moral will of God. They have knowledge of what God has demanded (though they may not and likely will not admit it). And because they have knowledge of sin, God is fair to judge them.
- ✓ There is another reason why God is fair in judging the “ignorant” —

- They have a CONSCIENCE (v. 15b)

- ✓ The conscience is different from the law that is in the heart of all men. The conscience is not what informs us of what is right and wrong. That's the heart. That's knowledge. That's the mind. The conscience is not information about what is moral.
- ✓ Instead, conscience is the evaluation or judgment whether or not we have met the standard of morality that our hearts and minds know.
- ✓ The word **conscience** refers primarily to our inner awareness of the moral quality of our actions. The conscience is what evaluates whether or not we have lived up to the moral norm. It is what internally says, “you are *guilty*” or “you are *innocent*.”
- ✓ In fact, in v. 15 Paul likens the conscience to an internal court of law:
 - ***their thoughts accusing*** = This is the internal thoughts saying of someone's actions, “That was wrong; you are guilty.” Like a prosecuting attorney, the conscience lays out the evidence in the mind of the person's guilt. Now in our courtrooms, you can only be tried for one crime one time. But that's not the way the conscience works. The conscience *relentlessly* accuses the sinner of his sin. His conscience always testifies against him and because the prosecutor is inside him, he can't escape it. He argues against it to (almost) no avail; at least for a time, no matter what he says, the conscience keeps saying, “You are guilty.” David is such a good example of this after his sin with Bathsheba (**Ps. 32:3-4**). He didn't say anything about his sin, so no one knew. But his conscience did. And his conscience convicted him about his guilt relentlessly so that he was in tremendous misery — his body wasting away, an internal groaning, and no vitality of life — all the joy and happiness of life was stripped away. That's what it is to live with an accusing conscience.
 - Because of this, Richard Sibbes wondered whether it was an advantage for someone to have a conscience but no one else to accuse him of his sin. No way he said, because:

He is a thousand witnesses to himself. Conscience is not a private witness. It is a thousand witnesses. Therefore, never sin in order to have it concealed. It were better that all men should know [your sin] than that [you alone] know it. All will be one day written in thy forehead. Conscience will be a blab. If it cannot speak the truth now, [because it is] bribed in this life, it will have power and efficacy in the life to come....We have the witness in us; and, as Isaiah says, “Our sins witness against us.” It is in vain to look for secrecy. Conscience will discover all. [quoted by MacArthur, *Vanishing Conscience*, 40-1.]

- Now occasionally an unbeliever's conscience will acquit him: **[their thoughts] defending them.**
 - ... So the defense attorney in the mind will say, "No, you are not guilty this time; you have done right." But this doesn't happen all the time. And the sense of the verse is that there are far more accusations than defenses. The conscience generally will accuse and convict more than it will defend and acquit.
 - ... There is much more to say about the conscience (and I will do that next time). What we should recognize today is that this conscience, while everyman has it, can be perverted and cut off (1 Tim. 4:1-2). Their conscience keeps saying, "You are wrong...you are wrong..." And their minds fight against that convincing themselves they are right (when they are in fact guilty) — and at some point their conscience no longer functions the way God intended.
 - ... While we can say more about the conscience, what is important for today is simply to realize that even the unregenerate, untaught pagan has a raging internal battle in which he is constantly conflicted about the moral uprightness of his actions.
 - ... The unbeliever who has not been exposed to the gospel lacks the Law, but he still has an internal mechanism that allows him to know what is right and evaluate whether or not he is living according to that standard. He cannot say, "I did not know the standard and I did not know whether or not I was acting rightly." All men have been given that standard; all men everywhere know.

- They have "**SECRETS**" (v. 16)

- ✓ So unbelievers have minds to know the truth; they have consciences to evaluate whether or not they are doing the truth. And they also have "secrets" (v. 16).
- ✓ There will be a day, Paul says, when **God will judge the secrets of men.** That is, men are hiding things: they are doing things that others do not know and they are thinking things and motivated by things that no one can see because those are internal thoughts.
- We know about secret actions — they're the things that are done because someone believes that no one will discover the inconsistencies of his life and then they are exposed and they create a scandal. These are executives who take bribes and skim millions in profits from the company and men who cultivate inappropriate relationships with women who aren't their wives and valedictorians who purchase papers and exams from others.
- But God also evaluates the internal secrets that no one might discover. He evaluates the thoughts and intentions of the heart: **1 Cor. 4:5.**
- There is *nothing* that will remain hidden. *Everything* will be exposed. And God *will* do this. (That's the force of the verse.) There is a coming wrath that is unavoidable for unbelievers. There are no secrets with God. He is omniscient and He will expose what He knows.
- ✓ And Paul says that the judgment will be done **according to my gospel.** Paul is not saying that he has a gospel that is different from the gospel of Christ or anyone else. No, there is only one gospel message. But he is simply saying that he has appropriated the gospel — it belongs to him. He believes it.

- ✓ And part of the gospel message is the wrath of God. There *is* bad news in the gospel. And the bad news is that if anyone rejects Christ, he will be judged on the basis of his own actions, and he *will* be found guilty and condemned to eternity in Hell.
- ✓ And this judgment will be done ***through Jesus Christ***. Here is an irony: the Christ who came to save sinners is the One who will be the judge of those who reject Him.
- ✓ In John 3:17 (and 12:47) Jesus says that God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world. In other words, Jesus' first advent was not for judgment; He came to save. But that doesn't mean He won't ever judge. He didn't judge at His first coming; He *will* judge at His second coming (Jn. 5:22, 30; **Jn. 12:48; 2 Tim. 4:1, 8**). The judgment of God will take place. There will be no secrets from God; He *will* judge through Christ.
- ✓ But I want you to notice one thing that I intentionally skipped over in v. 16 — the little phrase ***on the day...*** How does that connect to v. 15?
 - Paul is saying that the consciences of men convict us (imperfectly) of sin now. But for those who are not believers in Christ, their consciences ***on the day of judgment*** will accuse them. When God convicts them of sin, their own consciences will affirm God's judgment. God will send them to Hell for their unbelief and rebellion against what they knew to be true and their own consciences will say, "God's judgment was right."
 - In other words, no matter what a man will do to uninform his mind of the truth and no matter how he will twist and pervert his innate knowledge of morality so that his conscience judges him "right" on earth, in eternity when he stands before the judgment of God, his own conscience will finally and completely turn against him and for all eternity he will live under the doubly miserable external condemnation of God and internal condemnation of his conscience. His conscience will be unrelenting in convicting him of his guilt.
 - John Flavel said it this way: "Conscience, which should have been the soul's curb here on earth becomes the whip that lashes the soul in hell....That which was the seat and center of all guilt now becomes the seat and center of all torment. Sinners will have a fully-informed and relentless conscience forever."
- Is God fair? The sinner will fight against his conscience today and say, "No. God and His judgment are not fair." But for all eternity, His own conscience will speak against him saying, "God *is* fair. You are a sinner who sinned and you deserve what you have received." And he cannot ever escape that accusation and condemnation. It will forever torment him. Friends, this may well be the greatest torment and horror of Hell. No one will escape the condemnation of his own conscience. All the other punishments will be external to the sinner, but this punishment will be internal within him.

CONCLUSION: This all seems to be something of an academic sermon and discussion — something that seminary students will discuss and write about in papers. Does this really matter in our real world?

One morning this week I took a quick peek at my Facebook feed and the first post I saw was from a longtime friend who announced that he is gay and that he is engaged to be married to a man. He wrote:

I am gay. But I do not believe this makes me unworthy of love or loving others.

No, I believe in a God of love. I believe God *is* love. I have seen and felt the presence of Christ in others.

When I was sixteen, I felt a call from God to serve the world. My calling is to care fiercely for every student entrusted into my care, so that they may know God, and the immeasurable love that flows out of God. My calling is for every student to know, deep within themselves, that nothing in this world has the power to alter God's love for them. My calling is to be the hands and feet of God.

My calling is to love without abandon, because I know what it is like to be loved and unloved.

My passion for youth ministry, for students to know that God loves them immeasurably, stems from my past...and my present....

I am a [seminary] student... [and] I am happily engaged to a man whom I have been with for two wonderful years. I believe in God the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ his only son, our Lord....

So He has convinced himself that he can live in willful rebellion against God and still experience the grace and love of God. Is he right? No. Romans 1 makes clear he is experiencing the wrath of God, not the love of God. Now how will I respond to this friend? It might be tempting to say (as many of his "friends" have), "I'm so proud of your courage; I love you and know that God loves you..." Another simple response is to say, "You will go to Hell if you don't change..." (in an angry tone). But I want to be salty — so that he will respond to me and hear what the Scriptures have to say. I haven't finished writing my letter to him, but here is something of how it will begin:

Tom (not his real name): you know how Raye Jeanne and I love you. We have loved our fellowship over the years and all the times we have had you in our home and shared meals and laughter and tears. We have prayed faithfully for you virtually every day for many years. We have given of ourselves in such a way that I trust has been evident that we love you.

And because we love you, I want to tell you something that is hard for me to say and for you to hear. How will I say what follows in a way that you will know that we still love you and desire God's best for you? I say it with tears in my eyes....

My friends, this truth in Romans 2 is sobering. It is a sobering for believers because it reveals to us the depth from which Christ has freed us; and it is sobering for unbelievers because we realize that God will not relent from His wrath no matter who someone is; He *is* fair. He will not play favorites. And He will pour out His wrath on all men who have not repented of their sin and come to Christ.

And that (Jesus Christ) is our singular hope. As we conclude, look at Rom. 3:23-24. *All have sinned*. That will lead to judgment. That's fair that God does that. And that's hopeless for mankind. And *being justified as a gift of His grace...* Oh friends! That's so hopeful. There is joy. God is still fair because He has judged our sin when He judged Christ and He is also gracious in freeing us from our penalty of sin — He is both just and justifier (v. 26). He is righteous and gracious at the same time. He is fair. Even when He condemns sinners to Hell, He is fair. Believe that. And trust His grace to save you and those whom you love, from His fair and righteous wrath.

BENEDICTION: Romans 11:33-36