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GOD'S IMPARTIAL JUDGMENT

Romans 2:12-16

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Romans, Lesson 11

God's Impartial Judgment Romans 2:12-16

If you've talked with people about the gospel, you've heard the question, "Is God fair to judge those who have never heard about Jesus Christ?" Will they go to hell because they did not believe in Jesus when they never heard of Him? Another variation of the question is, "Won't those who have done the best that they could do get into heaven?"

In Romans 2:12-16, Paul is establishing the point of verse 11, "For there is no partiality with God." God will judge everyone with perfect justice. Paul is anticipating a Jewish objection, "But surely God will treat us more favorably than the pagan Gentiles. We know God's ways as revealed in His Law, but they don't!" Or, perhaps a Gentile would object, "It's not fair for God to judge me for disobeying a standard that I knew nothing about! I've done the best that I could with what I knew. God won't judge me, will He?"

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

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

These verses are not easy to interpret and so godly scholars differ on many issues. There are two main views, going back into the verses that we covered in 2:6-11. One camp argues that verses 7, 10, and 13 are hypothetical. That is to say, if anyone actually could persevere in doing good and obeying the Law, he would be saved by his obedience. But no one is able to do it, so no one can be justified by keeping God's Law (Rom. 3:20). Justification is only through faith in Christ, apart from works (Rom. 4:4-5).

True, says the other camp, but genuine saving faith *always* results in a life of obedience to God's Word (Eph. 2:8-10). We are *not* saved on the *basis* of our good deeds, but our good deeds necessarily show the validity of our faith (James 2:18-26). Thus while we are saved by faith alone, we will be judged by our works. Because (as we saw last week) this is the consistent teaching of all of Scripture, Paul is not talking here about something hypothetical.

Rather, he is showing that God's impartial judgment of all people will be on the basis of their works. Those who are doers of God's Word will be acquitted and go to heaven. Those who disobey God's Word will be condemned and go to hell. At this point Paul is not looking at how a person *enters* into a life of obedience, but rather at the *results* of it. As we saw last time (and will see again today), we can only live in obedience to God if we have experienced the new birth through faith in Christ. Thus verse 13 (as also 2:7 & 10) is *not* talking about sinless *perfection*, but rather about *direction*. Those who live on the path of obedience to God's Word are those who will be justified at the final judgment.

Let's trace Paul's argument verse by verse:

1. God will judge everyone based on the light that they were given (2:12).

"For all who have sinned without the Law will also perish without the Law, and all who have sinned under the Law will be judged by the Law."

"For" shows that Paul is explaining verse 11, "For there is no partiality with God." Verse 12 means that God will judge each person according to the light that he was given. The Gentiles, who did not have the Law, will be judged apart from the Law. The Jews, who received God's Law, will be judged by that Law. But, note

carefully: Both groups have sinned and both groups will be judged for their sin. The Gentiles who sinned without the Law will perish, which refers to eternal condemnation. We have to wait until verses 14 & 15 to answer the question, "How could the Gentiles be guilty of sin if they didn't have the standard of God's Law to live by?" But the point of verse 12 is that God will judge every person, Gentile or Jew, according to their response to the light that they were given. So God can't be accused of partiality.

Jesus taught the same thing in a passage that boggles your brain as you try to grasp it. In Matthew 11:20-24 we read:

Then He began to denounce the cities in which most of His miracles were done, because they did not repent. "Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles had occurred in Tyre and Sidon which occurred in you, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. Nevertheless I say to you, it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the day of judgment than for you. And you, Capernaum, will not be exalted to heaven, will you? You will descend to Hades; for if the miracles had occurred in Sodom which occurred in you, it would have remained to this day. Nevertheless I say to you that it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment, than for you."

Jesus is saying that there will be degrees of punishment in hell, based on the amount of light that a person has rejected. Those who witnessed Jesus' miracles and yet rejected Him will be judged more harshly than those in Tyre, Sidon, and Sodom, who never heard about Jesus. What is brain-boggling is that Jesus knew how the pagans in those cities would have responded if they had witnessed His miracles. And, in the case of Sodom, He easily could have had the angels who went there to destroy the city perform enough miracles to bring them to faith. But He did not do that! Sodom did not repent and was judged on the basis of the light they rejected. They will spend eternity in hell for their sins. But their judgment will be lighter than that of the people of Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum, who witnessed Jesus' miracles, but still rejected Him.

But don't let this be a fascinating brain-teaser without applying it: How much light have *you* received? Have you responded to the light you have received by repenting of your sins and trusting in

Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord? If not, what kind of judgment will you face when you stand before God?

2. Hearing the Law does not justify before God; only doers of the Law will be justified (2:13).

“... for it is not the hearers of the Law who are just before God, but the doers of the Law will be justified.”

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

Again, many commentators understand Paul here to be speaking hypothetically, in that no one is able to keep God’s Law perfectly or to earn salvation by good works. As Romans 3:20 says, “by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight.” Paul’s argument in Romans 1:18-3:20 is that all have sinned and thus all need God’s saving grace through the gift of His Son, who died to redeem sinners who trust in Him. No one can earn right standing before God by good works.

But, while that is clear, there are reasons to argue that Paul is not talking here about hypothetical perfect obedience, which no one can do, but rather about a *direction* of obedience, which those who have been born of God’s Spirit do practice consistently.

For one thing, this agrees with the uniform teaching of the Bible, that God will judge everyone impartially by his works (see last week’s sermon). A person’s works reveal the reality of his faith. Works are the inevitable and essential proof of saving faith (Eph. 2:8-10). Paul is not saying that a person *earns* justification by obedience. Rather, he is *describing* those who will be justified by God on judgment day. They are doers of the Law. They obey God’s Word as a way of life.

Also, there are biblical examples of those who are doers of the Law (or, God’s Word). In Romans 2:26-27, Paul mentions the physically uncircumcised man who keeps the requirements of God’s Law. He goes on (2:28-29) to specify that he is not talking

about outward observance of the Law only, but rather, obedience from the heart. He is describing Gentiles who have been saved by faith and now demonstrate their faith by obedience to God's Word. In Romans 8:4, Paul says that through the cross (8:3), "the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit." In other words, those who have trusted in Christ's death now walk by the Holy Spirit and thus fulfill God's Law.

In Luke 1:6, it says of John the Baptist's parents, Zacharias and Elizabeth, "They were both righteous in the sight of God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and requirements of the Lord." This does not mean that they were sinlessly perfect, because Zacharias goes on to sin by not believing the word of the angel that they would have a child in their old age. Nor does it mean that they somehow would earn eternal life by their blameless obedience. Rather, because they had trusted in God and received His mercy, they became consistent doers of the Law. Their deeds proved that they would be justified on judgment day. (In defending this interpretation, I have relied on Frederic Godet, *Commentary on Romans* [Kregel], pp. 118-122; Thomas Schreiner, *Romans* [Baker], loc. cit.; Schreiner, *The Law and Its Fulfillment* [Baker], pp. 179-204; and, John Piper, "There is no Partiality with God" [part 2], on desiringgod.org.)

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

3. Those who do not have God's Law still have an inner sense of right and wrong that condemns them when they violate it (2:14-15).

"For when Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves, in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them, ..."

Some argue that Paul is referring here to saved Gentiles who obey the Law and thus are justified. Rather, he brings up the Gen-

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

Paul is not saying that the Gentiles instinctively know all of the stipulations of the Mosaic Law. Rather, he is pointing out the obvious fact that even pagans, who have had no exposure to God’s revealed Law, have a built-in sense of right and wrong that coincides with God’s Law. He is not referring to the promise of the New Covenant, when God’s Law will be written on the heart of believers (Jer. 31:33; Heb. 8:10). Rather, when he says that “the *work* of the Law [is] written on their hearts,” he probably means, what the Law does, namely, teaching the difference between right and wrong (H. C. G. Moule, *The Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges* [Cambridge University Press, 1903], p. 71).

Paul is referring to the fact that almost all cultures believe that murder, stealing, rape, assault, etc. are wrong. Treating others as you want to be treated, obeying just laws, and loving your mate and your children are right. C. S. Lewis opens his argument in *Mere Christianity* [Macmillan, pp. 17ff.] by showing how even pagans have this sense of right and wrong. They all hold to a standard of behavior that they expect others to hold to also.

But, there is a problem: Even though we all have this built-in sense of right and wrong, we all have violated our own standards. When we do, we justify it by various arguments. “I know that I treated him wrongly, but he had it coming!” “I know that I shouldn’t cheat on my taxes, but everyone else does it. Besides, the government wastes so much money. And I’m not a millionaire!” So our conscience and our thoughts go back and forth, either condemning us or trying to defend us. That’s what Paul is describing.

The conscience is not an infallible guide, but we should never go against our conscience. It is not infallible in that it needs to be informed by Scripture, not just by what our culture may think is right or wrong, or by what we may instinctively feel is right or

wrong. I have heard of new Christians, for example, who were so influenced by our godless culture, that they had no inner sense that it is wrong for a couple who love one another to have sexual relations outside of marriage. Their conscience was not reliable. It needed to be informed by the unchanging standard of God's Word.

But Paul's point is that every culture has standards of right and wrong that often coincide with God's Law. And every person has a conscience that condemns him when he violates what he knows to be wrong.

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

4. On judgment day, God will judge the secrets of everyone through Christ Jesus according to the gospel (2:16).

"... on the day when, according to my gospel, God will judge the secrets of men through Jesus Christ."

The connection between verses 15 & 16 is not obvious, which has led some to put either verses 13-15 (KJV) or 14-15 (NIV) in parenthesis. Thus they tie verse 16 back either to verse 12 or verse 13. But that is not necessary. The connection is that the present work of the conscience in either accusing or defending the sinner will reach its climax on the final day of judgment, when God will judge even the secrets of men by His righteous standards. Whether a person had God's Law or not, he will stand guilty before God on that day.

There are several things that we should not miss in verse 16 (C. H. Spurgeon, *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit* [Pilgrim Publications], 31:373-384, has an excellent sermon, "Coming Judgment of the Secrets of Men," from which I modified these points).

First, there will be a certain day of judgment. God has fixed the day (Acts 17:31). If we believe that, we'd better be ready! And if you don't believe it, that does not mean that it will not happen! Unless

Jesus was a liar or mistaken, that day is coming (Matt. 16:27; John 5:22, 24-29).

Second, on that day, God will judge the secrets of everyone. That is a scary thought! God doesn't just look at our outward deeds. We can put on a pretty good show towards others. We can impress them with our knowledge of the Bible or our prayers or religiosity. But God knows every secret thought we have and private sin that we do. He knows the hidden prideful motives, even when we outwardly serve Him. He knows the lustful glance that no one else sees. He knows every click of the mouse on your computer, even late at night when no one else is around. He sees the seething anger in your heart, even when you camouflage it. Nothing will escape His penetrating gaze on judgment day.

Third, when God judges the secrets of men, it will be through Christ Jesus. Jesus made the astounding claim (John 5:22-23), "For not even the Father judges anyone, but He has given all judgment to the Son, so that all will honor the Son even as they honor the Father." There couldn't be a clearer claim to deity than that! For Christ to sit in judgment on the secrets of all men, He must have infinite knowledge, which only God can have (Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* [Eerdmans], p. 58).

Also, this means that if you have a picture in your mind of Jesus as being all-loving and never judgmental, then you do not have the biblical picture of Jesus. He described Himself as the judge of all! In Revelation 19:11-15, He returns on a white horse to judge and wage war. His eyes are a flame of fire. He is clothed with a robe dipped in blood. From His mouth comes a sharp sword to strike down the nations. "He treads the wine press of the fierce wrath of God, the Almighty" (19:15). So if that isn't your image of Jesus, you need to change your thinking!

Fourth, this final judgment is according to Paul's gospel. At first glance, this doesn't sound like good news! But, if there is no judgment for all sin, then there is no need for a Savior and thus no good news (Morris, p. 129; Spurgeon, p. 383). The gospel does not offer you the option of going on in your sin or shrugging it off as if it will not come under judgment if you do not repent. As Spurgeon put it (*ibid.*), "With deep love to the souls of men, I bear witness to the truth that he who turns not with repentance and faith to Christ,

shall go away into punishment as everlasting as the life of the righteous." We need to understand the bad news of judgment in order to appreciate the good news of salvation through faith in Christ.

Paul calls it "my gospel" both because he had personally owned it and to defend it against critics who accused him of preaching grace to the neglect of good works (Rom. 3:8). Paul is saying that the gospel he preached was in complete harmony with the solemn truth that God will judge the secrets of men. He "will render to each person according to his deeds" (Rom. 2:6).

Conclusion

Spurgeon rightly argues (p. 384) that if we do not preach the coming judgment and wrath of God, we do not preach the gospel at all. We would be like a surgeon who didn't want to tell his patient that he is ill. He hopes to heal him without his knowing that he was sick. So he flatters him that he is well and the man refuses the cure. Such a doctor would be a murderer. And so are we, if we do not warn people about God's impartial, certain judgment of our every secret, and then point them to the good news that Christ offers forgiveness to repentant sinners as their only hope.

Application Questions

1. How would you answer the objection, "What about the heathen who have never heard about Jesus?"
2. What arguments support that 2:13 is not hypothetical, but rather describes the direction of life of those who are saved?
3. Why is the conscience not a totally reliable guide? How can we make it more reliable? Should we ever go against our conscience? Why/why not?
4. Why is it important to emphasize that God will judge our secrets (2:16)? What practical implications does this have?

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