

Romans: The Good News of God

Principles of Judgment

Romans 2:12-15

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May 27, 2007

Principles of Judgment

Scripture

Let's read Romans 2:12-15:

¹² All who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who sin under the law will be judged by the law. ¹³ For it is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God's sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous. ¹⁴ (Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, ¹⁵ since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them.) (Romans 2:12-15)

Introduction

Every preacher has to answer the question: "What about the poor heathen in a far-off jungle who has never heard about Jesus Christ? Will God condemn him for failing to believe in a person about whom he has not even heard?"

I have touched on these questions earlier in my series on Romans. Today's text once again addresses these questions. The text does not suggest that the heathen may somehow get to heaven in spite of their ignorance of the gospel, but rather that they will be condemned like others. Not for failing to believe in Jesus, of whom they have not heard, of course! But for failing to do what they knew they should do, even apart from God's *special* revelation.

Romans 2:12 supports this view, using the powerful word "perish": "All who sin apart from the law will also *perish* apart from the law, and all who sin under the law will be judged by the law."

Lesson

Today I want to examine the principles of God's judgment.

I. Principles of Judgment

Let's begin by reviewing the principles of God's judgment.

A. *God's Judgment Is According to Truth (2:2)*

First, God's judgment is according to truth.

Paul says in Romans 2:2: "Now we know that God's judgment against those who do such things is based on truth." Human judgment tries to live up to this standard, that is, to judge according to truth. Witnesses in our courts are required to "tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth." But obviously human judgment is at best according to partial truth, and it is often misled entirely when witnesses inadvertently misrepresent the facts or lie about them.

God's judgment, however, is infinitely superior to human judgment at this point. It is according to full knowledge and perfect truth, because all secrets are known and all hearts are open to God. No one will be able to get away with lying or misrepresenting the truth in God's court.

B. *God's Judgment Is Proportionate to Sin (2:5)*

Second, God's judgment is proportionate to sin.

Paul says in Romans 2:5: "But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed." Paul speaks of unbelievers as "storing up wrath" for the day of God's wrath. What Paul means is that those who sin much will be punished much and that those who sin less will be

punished less—but all unbelievers will be punished.

C. God's Judgment Is According to Righteousness (2:5)

Third, God's judgment is according to righteousness.

In Romans 2:5 Paul says that God's wrath will be poured out "when his righteous judgment will be revealed." That is, there will be nothing wrong about God's judgment. It will be according to a perfect standard and a faultless moral code. No sinner will be able to say on the Day of Judgment, "God, you were not fair in your judgment."

D. God's Judgment Is According to Impartiality (2:11)

Fourth, God's judgment is according to impartiality.

Paul says in Romans 2:11: "For God does not show favoritism." In human courts we often find the accused hoping to receive preferential treatment for one reason or another, and Judges sometimes comply. It will not be so with God. At the final judgment all will be judged according to the same impartial standards because "God does not show favoritism."

E. God's Judgment Is According to Deeds (2:6-10, 12-15)

And fifth, God's judgment is according to deeds.

Considering the number of verses dealing with this principle, this must have been the most important point of all according to Paul's way of thinking. In fact, this point is found throughout Romans 2, even in verses that seem to be making another point.

Take Romans 2:1, for example: "You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge the other, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things." Paul is writing of people who try to excuse their wrongdoing by saying that they have a firmer sense of what is right and wrong than other people.

Paul's reply is that these people are nevertheless guilty, because they "do the same things." That is, they are judged on the basis of their actual deeds. That phrase, "do the same things," is also implied in verse 2 and repeated in verse 3. Finally, in verse 6, Paul says, "God 'will give to each person according to what he has done.'" It is not what we know or even what we say that matters. It is what we do that matters.

II. Sinners *Under* the Law

It is so hard for *our* perverted sense of being righteous in God's sight to die! As we read these verses we can discern at once what Paul was dealing with and how he is replying. Paul can undoubtedly visualize the Jew's response. He has spoken of those who are **under**, or exposed, to the law as perishing. But the Jew would not accept this. According to Jewish teaching, salvation was by the law. The pious Jew spent long hours meditating on the law and could always be found in the synagogue attending to its reading and exposition. I suppose Paul could almost hear the Jew gearing up to rattle off his accomplishments.

"I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get" (Luke 18:11-12).

"All these I have kept since I was a boy" (Luke 18:21).

As a matter of fact, Paul had thought like this himself before he met Christ: ". . . circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless" (Philippians 3:5-6).

Later, Paul will deal with the religious person's false hopes more directly, but here he focuses on a person's actual performance. "I know you know the law," Paul is acknowledging. "But do you keep it?" He reminds them in Romans 2:13 that "**it is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God's sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous.**"

Not hearers only, but doers! That is the point of this passage, and it is the point at which each of us falls down. The law calls us to perfect obedience. We have failed to live up to the standards of the law, and so we are therefore condemned by the law. Consequently, we must seek salvation in another way entirely.

III. Sinners Apart from the Law

There is another problem here: the problem of the Gentiles. They would excuse themselves on the grounds that, unlike the Jews, they had not been given the law. They would agree with the justice of God in the Jews' condemnation. God had told the Jews how to live, and they had not done it. In fact, they were even hypocritical about it, which is what Paul seems to bring out in the latter half the chapter (2:17-24). The Jews had sinned **under** the law. But the Gentiles did not have the law of God. How, then, could they even be accused of sinning? Yet Paul wrote, "**All who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law**" (2:12a). How can there be sin **apart from** a divine law or revelation?

Paul's answer is in Romans 2:14-15. It has two parts. First, the Gentiles, even though they **do not have the law** of God that was given to Jewish people, nevertheless have **the law written on their hearts**. Second, they also possess **consciences** that tell them they ought to obey this law and condemn them when they do not.

This is a very important point, for it introduces for the first time in Paul's letter what the older theologians called "the moral law" or "the law of nature." Earlier, in Romans 1:18-32 Paul talked about what we call "natural revelation." That is, God has revealed himself in creation to all people. Because God has revealed himself in creation all men and women should seek and worship the true God. But they do not. Therefore, because all people reject this natural revelation, it is a sufficient basis upon which God can condemn all men and women.

But Romans 2:14-15 goes beyond natural revelation. These verses tell us that all people also have a built-in moral code. They

may not have the revealed law of God. But they have something like it. They have **the requirements of the law written on their hearts**, which condemns them.

No one talked about this moral code more effectively in recent years than the late Cambridge professor C. S. Lewis. It is the initial argument in his classic defense of the faith, *Mere Christianity*. Lewis begins with the observation that when people argue with one another, an angry person almost always appeals to some basic standard of behavior that the other person is assumed to recognize:

They say things like this:

- “How’d you like it if anyone did the same to you?”
- “That’s my seat, I was there first.”
- “Leave him alone, he isn’t doing you any harm.”
- “Why should you shove in first?”
- “Give me a bit of your orange; I gave you a bit of mine.”
- “Come on, you promised.”

People say things like that every day, educated people as well as uneducated, and children as well as grown-ups.¹

What interested Lewis about these remarks is that the people making them are not merely saying that the other person’s behavior just does not happen to suit them, but rather that the behavior of the other person is wrong. And this is precisely what Paul is saying in Romans 2:14-15 in reference to the Gentiles, though in more theological terms. It is true that the Gentiles did not have the Jews’ law. But they had a law within, a law that did not merely say that some kinds of behavior seem to work better than others or produce better responses from other people, but, rather, went far beyond that either to accuse or excuse them of wrongdoing.

IV. Witnesses for the Prosecution

There are three important witnesses against sinful men and

¹ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1958), 3.

women in these verses. We must see what they are:

A. *The Law of Nature (2:14-15)*

The first accuser is the law of human nature.

Paul says in Romans 2:14-15: **“Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts.”**

Paul is saying that those who do not have the written law of God nevertheless **do by nature things required by the law**. And by doing the things required by the law, **they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts**. This is what the ancient theologians called “the law of human nature.”

I know that many people object to belief in a universal moral law, pointing to the fact that some (the insane, for example) do not seem to be aware of it or to the fact that moral standards vary among different races or cultures. But those objections are not valid. It is true that there are people who do not seem to be aware of moral standards, and the insane are among them. But the very fact that we call such people “insane” shows that *we* nevertheless recognize and want to adhere to the standards, regardless of what the problem may be in that individual’s case. If an insane man commits a crime, we usually excuse him; but we do not excuse others. The problem is the person, not the standard. Again, although there are obvious differences in the way various peoples and cultures look at morals, there is nevertheless far more agreement than we might at first think. Regardless of the culture, there is (with few exceptions) a general regard for life, honor, bravery, selflessness, and such things. And the law codes and moral treatises of the ancients are remarkably like our own.

Regardless of what people say or even how they act, the real proof of the moral law is in people’s objection when they perceive themselves to be mistreated. If they speak of “unfair treatment,” as

all people do at one time or another, “have they not let the cat out of the bag and shown that, whatever they say, they really know the Law of Nature just like anyone else?” as Lewis argues.²

B. The Conscience (2:15)

The second accuser in these verses is the conscience.

Paul introduces the conscience as **also bearing witness** (2:15). Some have confused the law of nature and the conscience, but the two are very different concepts.

The first is an objective standard of which all are aware; it involves knowledge, knowledge of the right.

The conscience is the part of our being that tells us we ought to do the right thing personally. Commentator Robert Haldane says, “Knowledge shows what is right; the conscience approves of it and condemns the contrary.”³

C. The Memory (2:15)

The third accuser is the memory.

The third of the prosecuting witnesses in man is something we have not touched on yet, but which is introduced in the very last phrase we are studying: “**their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them**” (2:15). Paul is talking about the memory. Why is the memory so important? Obviously because it is something within ourselves that can (and will) condemn us, even without an external, judging word from God.

What a picture we have here! Three accusers, combining their witness to prove that even the person without the (written) law will perish!

Donald Grey Barnhouse, pastor of the Tenth Presbyterian Church in the middle of the last century, was known for his vivid

² *Ibid.* 5.

³ Robert Haldane, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Romans* (MacDill AFB: MacDonald Publishing, 1958), 91.

and often very original illustrations, and at this point in his treatment of Romans he refers to the famous Revolutionary War painting titled “The Spirit of ’76.” It shows a drummer, a standard-bearer, and fife marching briskly down the road. Barnhouse says that our conduct (measured by the moral law), our conscience, and our memory are like those figures:

Your conduct beats the drum that declares by your resounding good works that you know there is a divine law. Your conscience waves the flag that reminds you that often you have trampled your principles in the dust as you rushed past on your way to complete the desires of your own will. And the fife of your memory shrieks its refrain to remind you that you have sinned. The excuses and accusations of your thought run like shrill arpeggios in the counterpoint of your guilt. And the trio, conduct, conscience and mind, are all in step, in a perfect unison of condemnation because you have followed the road of your own will, refusing the road that forks at the cross of Jesus Christ that will lead you, if you follow it, even into eternal life.⁴

Conclusion

That is the point to which we should be led, of course. We should be led away from attempts to justify ourselves by our works, as the Jews did, or excuse ourselves as people who do not know what we should do, as the Gentiles did. Instead we should turn to Christ, where alone salvation may be found.

Paul says in Romans 2:12, “**All who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law.**” We must never think that any person will ever be saved in any way other than by faith in Jesus Christ. Apart from him they will **perish**. But whenever we see that word **perish**, with all its proper force and terror, we must also think of probably the best-known verse in all the Bible, John 3:16, in which Jesus uses that word but says that it need not be our end: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son,

⁴ Donald Grey Barnhouse, *Epistle to the Romans*, part 8 (Philadelphia: The Bible Study Hour, 1950), 390.

that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

John 3:16 speaks of two destinies: eternal life and perishing, the very end Paul speaks about in Romans 2:12. From birth we are all headed toward the second end, destined to perish miserably, without God and without hope (cf. Ephesians 2:12).

But Jesus died to make another and entirely different destiny possible. It is the way of atonement, with Jesus dying in our place, taking our punishment for sin upon himself. This is a wonderful end. It is, as Lewis says, “a thing of unspeakable comfort.”⁵ Still, it does not begin with comfort. It begins with the knowledge of sin, so that we might turn from sin to faith in Jesus.

If you have never done so, turn from your sin. Trust in Jesus Christ alone. And if you do so, you “shall not perish but have eternal life.” Amen.

⁵ Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 25.

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and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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PRAYER:

[The following prayer is adapted from “Deliverance” in *The Valley of Vision: A Collection of Puritan Prayers and Devotions*, p. 44]:

O God of unsearchable greatness, before you we are nothing but vanity, iniquity, perishing. Sin has forfeited your favor, stripped us of your image, banished us from your presence, exposed us to the curse of your law.

We cannot deliver ourselves, and we are in despair.

But a resource is found in you, for apart from our desire you devised an everlasting plan, honorable to your perfections, and which angels desired to look into. And the Word which announces all the glory of this goodness is near us, invites us, beseeches us.

May we, convinced and self-despairing sinners, find Jesus as the power unto salvation, his death the center of all relief, the source of all gospel-blessings.

Help us to turn to that cross, be crucified to the world by it, and in it find deepest humiliation, motives to patience and self-denial, grace for active benevolence, faith to grasp eternal life, hope to lift up our heads, love to bind us for ever to him who died and rose for us.

May his shed blood make us more thankful for your mercies, more humble under your correction, more zealous in your service, more watchful against temptation, more contented in our circumstances, and more useful to others.

And all of this we pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

CHARGE:

Go and glorify God in all that you think, do, and say! And as you do, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.