
“Written on Their Hearts”

ROMANS 2:12-16

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BOTTOM LINE UP FRONT

As long as any church is filled with people who refuse to get real, the enemy will maintain a foothold and the church will remain impotent. Church, we've been given consciences to discern right from wrong. But our consciences are weak and they can be silenced. They need to be practiced and tuned to God's will if we are going to experience real revival in our church and our community.

INTRODUCTION

To err is...? Human. Right! The very notion that there is error is confirmation that there is knowledge of what is right. After all, what is error if not deviation from what is right? In today's passage Paul highlights the reality that with or without the Law, humans know right from wrong because God has written the moral code on their hearts. He has given us consciences that bear witness.

ROMANS 2:12-16

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. ¹³ For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified. ¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ 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 ¹⁶ on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus.

Verse 12 For all who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law...Paul begins here with the word, **For**. What follows helps us understand what Paul meant in verse 11, “God shows no partiality.”

JUDGEMENT IS FOR SINNERS

God's judgment is for **all who have sinned**, whether they **sin without the law** (gentiles) or **sin under the law** (Jews). That's good news. Judgment is only for sinners. Unfortunately, that's not of any relief for any of us!

Paul says, those who sinned without the law will **perish without the law**. By **perish**, Paul means eternal punishment. He continues, **and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law**. The Jews, who have been told what the Law requires, will be judged by the law. They have the light of the law to illuminate the moral requirements of the Lord. Still, they blatantly sinned despite having and knowing, and even “boasting” in the law.

Having or hearing or knowing the Law is not enough to justify, to save from God's judgment. Why not? **Verse 13** answers that, **For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified.**

Paul says it's not enough to know the Law, you have to do it if you want to be justified by it. This echoes the words of James, *"But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves."* James 1:22

Let's not get tripped up here. When Paul says **doers of the law...will be justified** we have to keep in mind that he would soon say in Romans 3, *"by works of the law no human being will be justified."* Romans 3:20

DID PAUL CONTRADICT HIMSELF?

What was Paul's point? Why did he say, **doers of the law will be justified** and then "by works of the law no human being will be justified?" Isn't that contradictory? No, because technically if you obey the Law perfectly, you would be justified. But in reality, no one ever has obeyed the Law perfectly except Jesus Christ.

To think that because you have a bible and you know some of it, and you generally agree with it, and you even try to live by some of it, that you're good with God is to deceive yourself. Paul, like James, is sounding the alarm to religious hypocrites – wake up! Having and knowing the law does not save a person, never has and never will.

BY NATURE

These next two verses are some of the hardest to interpret in the whole letter. Who is Paul referring to when he says in **verse 14, 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...?** Does he mean gentile believers? Does he mean gentile sinners? There's debate.

What is clear is that as gentiles, they **do not have the law. By nature, though they do what the law requires.** They who **do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires.** There's also lots of debate about what Paul means here and whether **by nature** modifies they do not have the law or they do what the law requires. I'll spare you the technicalities and give you the interpretation I lean toward. (Thomas Schreiner in *Baker Exegetical Commentary* articulates the debate pretty thoroughly if you're interested in learning more.)

God equips all human beings with a moral compass by nature of being made in the image of God. It is in our nature to know good and evil. He has hardwired us this way.

Undeniably, people do not usually follow this moral compass, but occasionally they do. We all know unbelievers who love their parents and their children, who walk the old lady across the street, turn in the briefcase of money they found on the bus, who give to charity, help the poor, & stand up for the helpless. Occasionally, unbelievers **do what the law requires.**

WRITTEN ON THEIR HEARTS

We don't have to possess the Mosaic Law to know that we are moral creatures. The fact that in every culture there is wrong and there is right gives evidence that we are moral beings, and moral beings don't come from nothing. We were created by a moral God and are thereby accountable to Him. Everyone has the **work of the law written on their hearts** and are therefore without excuse.

Verses 15 and 16 read, **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. God's moral standards are self-evident and the **work of the law**, namely the conviction of the **conscience** is written on the hearts of all people.

WORK OF THE LAW

Note that Paul did not say that the *Law* is written on the heart, but **the work of the law**. The Mosaic Law is not written on the hearts of all people, but the Lord gives everyone a **conscience** that **bears witness**. It convicts us when we do wrong and affirms us when we do right, which is the **work of the law**. No one can deny they knew the right thing to do, even if they silence their conscience and do the wrong thing instead.

Nor is Paul suggesting that they fulfilled the Law. The fact that their **thoughts** are **conflicting**, both **accusing** and **defending them**, makes it clear that they have not fulfilled the Law. *“For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it.” James 2:10* Paul is simply saying that through the conscience, through the accusation and defense of our thoughts, it is evident that God's moral code at a minimum whispers in the hearts of all people.

No one, whether Jew or Greek, has any excuse before God. God impressed it upon our very hearts, such that even without the written Law, we know we're not living right.

The fact is, everyone knows right and wrong. We may not like it. We may ignore it. We may surround ourselves with people who feel the same way we do, which makes it much easier to silence our conscience. But our conscience bears witness there is right and wrong.

Everyone knows it is wrong to murder. Everyone knows it is wrong to sleep with another person's spouse. We know it is wrong to steal and right to give. We know it is wrong to cheat and right to work diligently. We know it is wrong to talk bad about people and right to encourage. Why? Because God has given every person a conscience that bears witness.

FLAWED CONSCIENCES

Unfortunately, like all of our human capacities - physical, mental, emotional - our conscience is broken by our sin nature. Our consciences are easily muted, ignored, and silenced. When we first begin to sin, we feel guilt and shame because our conscience bears witness that this is wrong. But the thrill of the sin trumps our conscience, and we silence it. With each subsequent sin, we further silence our conscience until we no longer feel the conviction at all.

This is what Paul calls a “seared conscience” in 1 Timothy 4:2. We can so suppress the conscience that there is nothing to restrain us from running head-long into sin.

However, it is possible to have a working conscience and in fact that was Paul's aim as he stated in 1 Timothy 1:5, *“The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.”* The conscience is a gift from God and the person with a sincere faith and a pure heart can also have a good conscience; a conscience that is tuned to the heart of God, a conscience that is clear. *“So I always take pains to have a clear conscience toward both God and man.” Acts 24:16*

In Hebrews 5:14 we see the concept that our conscience needs to be practiced. It says, *“Solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.”* Just as you exercise to give your physical capacity practice, so you can give your conscience practice to distinguish good from evil.

How do we practice our conscience? How do we learn to distinguish good from evil? We begin by not hardening our hearts to the Holy Spirit. Right now, you need to deliberately decide to soften your hearts before the Lord. *“As it is said, “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion.” Hebrews 3:15*

Once you have softened your heart, you can then ask the Holy Spirit to gently expose the areas of darkness and bring the secrets of your heart to the light. “Search me, O God, and know my thoughts.”

TRANSFORMED CONSCIENCES

This isn't automatic, though. The Holy Spirit uses your regular and sincere time reading His Word - by yourself, with friends in your Connect Group and discipleship triad, and with the church in sermons and bible studies - to expose you to God's will & His ways.

He transforms us by the renewal of our minds, as Paul says in *Romans 12:2*, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

Thus, by the transformation of our minds through the Word of God, the Holy Spirit helps us to discern what the will of God is, what is good and acceptable and perfect. We'll increasingly be capable of knowing right from wrong and increasingly committed doing it.

This should be the motive of every one of us because we'll all stand before the Lord on the Day of Judgment. “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.” *2 Corinthians 5:10*

I don't know what judgment will look like for Christians. I know *Romans 8:1* gives the assurance that in Christ, we are not condemned. We don't have to fear eternal punishment. However, the New Testament is clear that we will give account of our lives.

Imagine standing in front of Jesus who says to you, “I died for you. I shed my blood to cover your unrighteousness. I gave you the Word of God, the Spirit of God, I sent pastors and teachers to shepherd you. Why did you harden your heart and persist in sin?” And you say, “Because I could, Jesus. Because I could.” That will be a sad day.

SECRETS OF MEN

In **verse 16**, Paul describes the judgment day as a day when **God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus**. We can count on one thing for sure, Jesus' judgment is going to be perfectly fair. No one is going to skate by because, as we covered last week, God shows no partiality. Nor will Jesus. No one is going to stand before Jesus and accuse Him of showing favoritism nor will it be said that He lacks any of the facts. Jesus sees all and knows all and will expose all. Truth will finally and fully be known, the truth of your life and the truth of my life.

Not only do our actions come under scrutiny, and our words ill-spoken, but even the purposes of our hearts will be brought into the light. God is going to reveal **the secrets of men** on that day. “Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart...” *1 Corinthians 4:5*

The secret sinful motives that no other human being will ever know or even question, what we work so hard to hide in the darkness, will be disclosed in Jesus' marvelous light.

This is hardly comforting news to most people since most people are actively trying to suppress the truth, hide their sin, lie about their motives, and deceive themselves about their character. The last thing most people want is to have the truth of their lives exposed in broad daylight.

But here's the **gospel**, here's the good news. The righteous and just judge, **Jesus Christ**, is also the merciful and gracious Savior. The One who will sit enthroned on judgement day, now stands in defense of everyone who calls on His name in faith. He is eager to extend His grace to you and cleanse you of your guilt and forgive you of your sin.

Judge and jury or Savior and Lord? How you relate to Jesus on judgment day depends on how you relate to Him today.

HUNGER AND THIRST FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS

Remember that Paul's main point in Romans 1 and 2 is to expose the sinfulness of all humanity and God's impartiality in judgment. He is trying to bring the entire sinful world to its knees in recognition of its impending judgment. All this is so we will hunger and thirst for the righteousness of Christ. Jesus said, *"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied."* *Matthew 5:6* Paul wants us to run to Jesus thirsting for His righteousness, knowing He will give it freely.

Paul is calling Jew and gentile alike to stop searing their consciences, to confess their sin and stop trying to justify themselves.

KILL ADAM, KILL EVE

As long as any church is filled with people who refuse to get real, the enemy will maintain a foothold and the church will remain impotent. Two weeks ago, I invited the men of Wildwood to go to war with pornography. I received several emails and texts from men who heeded the call and confessed their sin. That was not surprising. Nor is it surprising that many have not. They've seared their conscience. They quieted the capacity that God gave them to discern between good and evil. I invite you once again to own your sin, to confess it to the Lord and to people who will help you fight it.

Women, I know that men are not the only sinners in our church. I know that we live in a culture that impacts women just as much as it impacts men. The truth is if we treat men like they're the only ones who need to confess culturally acceptable sins, our church will remain impotent and our families untransformed. I've been a fan of telling men to kill Adam, to deal with the sin of passivity and spiritual laziness for years. Now it is time I call you to kill Eve; to deal with the rebellious hearts and put to death the inheritance you've received from Eve. I'm calling women to soften their hearts and ask the Lord to peel back the layers of cultural influence that maybe you don't even recognize.

Church, we've been given consciences to discern right from wrong. But our consciences are weak and they can be silenced. They need to be practiced and tuned to God's will if we are going to experience real revival in our church and our community.

If you are not in Christ, my plea to you is to repent of your sins, call out to Christ for forgiveness, and submit your life fully to Him today.

If you are in Christ, my plea to you is that you stop being satisfied with abstaining from the "big sins" that even world doesn't tolerate and instead approach the Lord with a spirit of humility, eager to confess every sin and put the flesh to death today and every day.

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