

# The Impartial God and Our Coming Evaluation

## Romans 2:11-16

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Steve DeWitt

Romans 2 begins with Paul pointing out the hypocrisy of anyone who passes moral judgment on others failing to realize their own sin against God. It's not just the Gentiles who are under God's wrath, but Jews as well. In case you missed our intro to the series, Paul is writing to the church at Rome which had been exclusively Gentile after Claudius ordered all Jews out of the city around AD 49. The order was rescinded in AD 54 and Jews came back to the city and Jewish Christians came back to the church at Rome. This created tension between the Gentile and Jewish Christians within the same church. The Book of Romans addresses this and chapter 2 clarifies it by showing that in terms of the gospel, Jews and Gentiles both stand in desperate need of grace.

This brings us to verse 11 which simply says, *"For God shows no partiality."* (Romans 2:11 ESV) Here is our starting point and it's about God. He shows *"no partiality."* This is one of these interesting Greek words. It is a big one; Greek words are like trains, you add words to the front and the back to add meaning. It literally means, *does not accept a face*. God does not accept a face. Translated, that means *"shows no partiality."* This means God is completely unbiased. Unprejudiced. These words show our language struggles to describe this quality. All we can do is pick a common human trait and say he is not that way. Biased? No God is unbiased. Prejudiced? No God is unprejudiced.

We've never known anyone truly impartial. Everyone is somehow biased, prejudiced, partial to certain people. Their family. Their tribe. Their village. Their ethnic group. We tend to show deference to people like us. Our highest bias is self-bias. We love ourselves. The world largely works on this currency. Lobbyists and special interest groups seek to sway politicians. Politicians favor their constituency or whatever keeps them in office. Everyone's favoring someone. We are all "accepting a face" and our favorite face is our own face.

We can hardly conceive of a person who is absolutely and completely without bias. A divine judge who is neither impressed nor swayed by the wealth, status, titles, achievement, beauty, power, importance, or standing of another human being. Yet this is God. He is without need for a payback. He cannot be lobbied. He cannot be won by persuasive speech. He is not beholden to any human category of importance. All these biases and preferences are completely immaterial to him. Why does this matter? Listen very carefully to what follows.

*"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 it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified. 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. 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."* (Romans 2:12-16)

This last phrase is why we should care about all the previous ones. God is going to judge the secrets of men. Not our highlight reels. Not us on our very best behavior. But the God

who accepts no person's face will judge each person's heart. That reality in verse 16 should give us great interest in this question, *by what standard will I and my secrets be judged?*

### **We Will be Judged by the Light We Have Received**

*"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."* (Romans 2:12)

"Without the law" and "under the law" are broad descriptions of Gentiles and Jews. The people of Israel received God's law in the Ten Commandments and others at Mt. Sinai. The Jews had the Torah, the Old Testament teachings of the law and the prophets. They were "under the law." The Gentiles had none of this. What did they have? Back in chapter 1 we saw that all humans have God's revelation through creation which tells us what God is like and is a sufficient testimony of truth about God that all men are without excuse.

The Gentiles are *without the Old Testament law*, but that doesn't mean they didn't sin. They still sinned but they sinned without as much knowledge of God's will as the Jews. The Jews sinned "under the law" and therefore will be judged by the law. Both *"perish."*

In Chapter 2, Paul is addressing Jews who hear about the judgment of God and think, *we are ok. We have the Torah. We are God's chosen people. I fear no judgment for I am a son of Abraham.* Yet a quick look at the story of Israel described in the Old Testament is that they were moral scoundrels just like the pagan people around them. There's plenty of sin to go around.

Paul wants all of us to realize that God is impartial toward Gentiles and Jews. He is no acceptor of the face, even a Jewish face. For the Jews, who trusted in their status as having the law and being God's people, will be judged by that very law. How? *"For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified."* (Romans 2:13)

Who are the hearers? Not Gentiles. They never heard the law. But Jews heard it from childhood. Jews heard it every day. Paul says that having the Torah and hearing the Torah doesn't justify you before God. Doing it does. Is Paul creating an alternative way to God without Jesus and by obeying the law? Let me make it clear, that is exactly what he is saying. Did you know you can be saved by obeying the law? You can go to heaven by obeying the law. Obey the law and you will be justified forever. What is the problem? We cannot obey the law sufficiently to be justified before a holy God.

### **We Cannot Obey the Law's External Requirements**

These are the ones we typically focus on. You ask someone, *how do you know I'm going to heaven?* They will often say, *I've never murdered anyone. I've never robbed a bank. I've never done \_\_\_\_\_.* These are external moral actions which have NOT been done. We like to focus on the capital offenses because these are easier to avoid. But even the Ten Commandments include honoring your father and mother. How did that go when you were two years old, much less 20? Or, you shall not covet your neighbor's anything. Even the big 10 create problems for us as they include external and internal requirements.

### **We Cannot Obey the Law's Internal Requirements**

Never having an idol. Never coveting. Never being irreverent with God's name. The Jews missed what Jesus pointed out in the Sermon on the Mount. That obedience to the law is

not merely external but also internal. If you are angry with your brother, you murdered him in your heart. If you lust after a woman, you are having mental adultery with her. Jesus' Sermon on the Mount was so revolutionary because he internalized the requirements of the law. If anyone was listening they would have thought, *Uh-oh. I'm in trouble.*

### **We Cannot Obey the Law's Positive Requirements**

Obedying the law is more than *not doing* what we *shouldn't* but *always and perfectly doing what we should*. This includes loving God with all our hearts every second of every day, and actively doing what love requires. Think of the Good Samaritan as an example of perfectly loving your neighbor. Every neighbor. All your life. The positive fulfillment of the law flowing from sincere self-giving love. Who has done that perfectly?

### **We Cannot Obey the Law's Requirement of Comprehensive Perfection**

*"For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it."*  
(James 2:10)

Can you be justified by keeping the law of God? *If you do it perfectly in action and attitude all your life without failure in any motive and always done in love to God and neighbor perfectly every second of every day for your entire life, then congratulations, you are justified before God.* Good luck with that. Obviously, no human being could possibly do this.

So when Paul says, *"doers of the law...will be justified"* in verse 13, he hasn't given the Jews an alternative righteousness; he has shown their failure and just condemnation.

*"Let us be perfectly clear about this: the sinful Gentile and the sinful Jew will go together to perdition, but here seems to be clear teaching that the punishment and the suffering of the Jew for his sins will be greater than that of the Gentile. And it is perfectly just and equitable. The Jew has had the advantage, the greater opportunity, the greater light, and therefore he is judged according to the light which he had."*<sup>1</sup> (D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones)

Before we see this as an ivory tower theological debate, if we are judged according to the light we have received, where are you? How much light have you received even by being here today? Is it an awesome and terrifying thought that you and I are accountable forever for the light of Scripture heard today which is far greater than billions of people down through history ever heard? All they had were sunsets and butterflies. You have the gospel of Jesus!

This is where we must be incredibly serious because if Jews are judged by the light they have received in the Old Testament law, what about a post-cross and post-resurrection person like yourself? You have the ultimate light of hearing the truth about Jesus as the Son of God who died on the cross for your sins and that salvation is by faith alone in him. If an Old Testament Jew is judged by Old Testament light, what happens to us who reject Jesus by New Testament light?

Who has the advantage of light? We are in the most privileged position! Better to be us than Abraham or Moses or David or Jeremiah or even the John the Baptist. Why? We know way more than any of them did or could.

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<sup>1</sup> D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, Romans, p. 108.

By that light they will be judged, but by our light we will be judged. Better to have never heard and be judged by the little light as seen in creation than to be judged by the thousand floodlights of glorious truth seen and known in Jesus.

### **All Men Have God's Moral Law Written on Their Hearts**

*"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. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness." (Romans 2:14-15)*

Ever hear a Christian describe another person like, *he would be such a good Christian*. What they mean by that is that they see Christian-like behaviors in him or her even without Christ.

Is that possible? Paul points out that Gentiles also express moral behavior even without ever hearing the Ten Commandments. Why? Because God placed in us spiritual source coding that remains even after the Fall. Non-Christians will do incredibly noble things. Non-Christians can have very loving marriages. Non-Christians will express significant sacrifices for others. Gentiles will strive to end human suffering and be very philanthropic. By nature, Gentiles will sometimes do what the law requires.

### **All Men Have an Internal Testimony to the Truth: the Conscience**

*"They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness." (Romans 2:15)*

Our conscience acts as a moral compass. It tweaks us morally when it perceives that we are not living up to the highest moral standard we are aware of.<sup>2</sup> I assume we all know the feeling of our conscience. What does it feel like? It feels like shame.

God placed both a morality and a reminder of morality within us. The fall distorted it and we can suppress or numb our consciences. Yet it remains.

Paul's point is that Gentiles are judged apart from the Old Testament law, but they have an unwritten law on their hearts. The end result is that all men are judged sinners as we all violate the written and unwritten law God has given us. Why should we care?

### **All People Will be Judged by God for Their Response to Light/Truth**

*"...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." (Romans 2:15-16)*

There is a day of reckoning coming for every one of us. We all will stand before God and be judged for our lives. Notice what is judged, *"the secrets of men by Christ Jesus."*

We like to think this will be like a pie or chili judging where the best pie makers of the county submit their finest pie. We are not judged by our finest moments. These are not things we have as secrets. Our secrets are our worst things. Our secrets are the things we hope nobody finds out about. Our secrets are the things we are most ashamed of. We all have them. The secret failures. The secret sins. Even as I say this, many of our minds go to that struggle in the past which we naturally hope never gets out.

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<sup>2</sup> See John MacArthur, *Vanishing Conscience*, p. 36ff

Someday, it will get out. On Judgment Day it is brought out into the ultimate light of moral purity and is judged by God's holy standard.

Where is this heading? *"None is righteous, no, not one."* (Romans 3:10). Here Paul deconstructs the argument of the religious person who rests assuredly in their possession of truth or ethnic relationship to the truth. Ethnicity doesn't save even for Jews. Having revelation doesn't save. What matters? Living perfectly according to the light of truth is what will save you. Here's the problem. Nobody does. Nobody can. Nobody will.

When we began Romans, I noted that Paul doesn't start with God's love or God's grace. He starts with God's wrath. Why? Only by realizing how bad the bad news is can we revel in how good the good news is. What makes it wonderful is a full realization of what awaits us as all our sins, even the secret sins, are brought into the light of God's holy gaze and judgment. What is the result?

*"For all who have sinned without the law will also **perish** without the law."* (Romans 2:12, emphasis added)

The word *"perish"* is very descriptive. It is not physical death, but eternal destruction. The result of final judgment is not merely the horror of having my secrets revealed and being judged by them; the ultimate horror is the eternal verdict and punishment forever apart from God in a place created by God as the just and right destiny for sins and sinners. It is called hell.

All this prepares the heart for chapter 3 where Paul will say, *"But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law...through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe."* (Romans 3:21-22) Why is that wonderful? Because whether you are Gentile with a heart law or a Jew with the written law, all of us are condemned as sinners before God. By the time I get to 3:21 I think, *there's no hope. I'm bound for hell. What can I do?*

The gospel of Jesus dying for me and providing a righteous standing for me on Judgment Day is the most wonderful thing I could even imagine. *How do I sign up? Where do I go? What do I do? Just tell me because my sins are great. My secrets are the worst.* There is a Savior for your secret sins. Jesus who died for your secret sins and all the rest of them. Believe in him. Believe now.

I have a special burden today and it has to do with our context here. We happen to be in a community where many, many people grew up hearing the gospel. You may not be anti-gospel, you're just not a personal believer. You're not anti-Jesus, but you're not following Jesus. But whatever your personal faith structure, you are not presently sitting under the grace of God. It may have been in an unhealthy church setting or in an unhealthy family setting. Doesn't matter. Those will not be excuses on Judgment Day.

There are many who know the gospel but have not yet trusted in Christ. My dear, long-acquainted-with-the-gospel friend, do you realize what is at stake in your trifling with the gospel? As you think to yourself, *someday I will settle the matter. Someday I will think of my eternity.* Yet you drive down the road mere feet from oncoming traffic, half of them texting. You assume your heart will just keep working. You assume the veins in your brain will remain unclogged allowing you to delay a decision about Christ. All the while you stand on the precipice of a forever judgment by God having known the gospel but delaying a saving trust in it. Why? For what possible good reason?

The worst judgment and punishment in hell will *not* be for the former citizens of Sodom and Gomorrah or wicked people in Noah's day or for whatever terrible criminal you can think of. The worst level of hell will be reserved for those who had all the light and rejected it. Not for a Gentile who never knew. Not for a Jew with Old Testament light. But for a New Testament, gospel-knowing sinner.

We know one person who will be there. We don't know about Hitler or Pontius Pilate or Stalin. We know Judas Iscariot will be there in the worst place in hell. He knew the law. He knew Jesus personally. He was in Jesus' inner circle. Yet he rejected him. Just like so many today who know the Bible. Know the gospel. Know the story. Even know verses. Go to church. Yet so far they are not followers of Jesus. You are not following Jesus, you are following Judas.

Won't you respond in faith to the privileged light you have over billions of others? They never heard, but you have. You are more accountable than they are.

That's Paul's goal and mine as well. Gentile. Jew. Religiously privileged and religiously not. Gospel knower or not. We all are sinners and we all can be saved by faith in Jesus Christ.

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