

“GOD’S JUDGMENT AND THE LAW.”

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Scripture Texts: Romans 2:11-16

There is no partiality with God, vs. 11.

How many of us have favorites or play favorites? How many of us have experienced favoritism either positively or negatively?

The Bellingham Herald has been running a long series of everyone’s favorites in Whatcom County, from tacos and hamburgers to coffee and donuts.

We all have favorites. You have your favorites, like where you sit on Sunday morning. Would you dare say you have a favorite child or grandchild? I give favorite son status to different sons at different times. Todd gets it when he puts up our Christmas lights. Zach has it now since he is visiting and has brought home a wonderful young lady for us to meet.

There are favorites in the Bible. Jacob had a favorite wife and a favorite son. Even Jesus had three favorite disciples, Peter, James and John and John was most favorite, the beloved.

The Jews were sure they were God’s favorite, they were the chosen nation. But what did God say about that? Why did He choose them?

Did God choose them because they were great, many in number, stronger, superior? No, they were the least, they were pathetic as nations go (Deuteronomy 7:6-8). When God chooses who does He choose? The least, the lowly, the weak and foolish. We see again and again God’s preference for the poor, the widow and orphan.

This is the danger of the doctrine of election, it creates the temptation to arrogance, to feeling superior, that we are special, that there is something better about us since we are chosen.

Why did God choose us? Was it because we are better, because we are American, because we are Dutch, or not like those people in Bellingham or Seattle or Olympia, not like those Democrats or Republicans, not like those kids at the public schools, or like those hypocrites at the Christian school, or not like those other churches? Maybe because we were less sinners? What does Scripture say?

I Corinthians 1:27-29 God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; 28 God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, 29 so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.

Romans 5:8 God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Ephesians 2:4-5, 8-9 God, being rich in mercy, ...even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved.

8 For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, 9 not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

While we were yet sinners, while we were dead in our sin, while there was nothing good in us, nothing to make us stand out or be desirable, while we were foolish and weak, poor and needy.

God chose us because we are pathetic, then we start acting like we are special, better. We start thinking God is lucky to have us and God owes us. Then we start boasting.

God chose the Jews, and from then on they started boasting, bragging, and presuming on God's favor and taking it for granted. The Jews believed they don't deserve judgment because of their status, they had the law and the prophets, they had the covenants and the temple.

It would be easy, natural, to assume they would receive different treatment, but Paul sets out to make clear they don't. There are lots of difference between Jews and Gentiles, but they make no difference at the judgment. They have the same guilt and the same judgment. God is impartial, no respecter of persons.

Either without the law or under the law, all have sinned, vss. 12-13.

This is Paul's first reference to the Law, that is the Law of Moses or the Torah. The Jews are those who are under the law. The Gentiles are those who are without the law.

Those who know the law and those who don't know the law, will both be judged for their sin. Ignorance is no excuse since as we heard in chapter one, what can be known about God is clearly known so all are without excuse.

There will be *no excuses* on the day of the judgment. "We didn't know" will not be an acceptable excuse. Our failure will not excuse our behavior. Everyone has some kind of knowledge of right and wrong. The most pagan nation on earth has laws, has morality, has a way of judging good from evil.

Whenever you are talking to a non-Christian, you are talking to someone who is not completely ignorant or unaware of God. They are not totally oblivious to God's moral requirements. They have a conscience and they know in the depths of their heart right and wrong and they know they are suppressing the truth about God and His laws.

Not the hearers, but the doers of the law who are righteous and justified, vs. 13.

This sounds like another contradiction to what Paul says elsewhere, that no one can be justified by the works of the law. Remember what Peter said about Paul. Some of what he writes is hard to understand and it takes careful study.

In the context here Paul is addressing Jews who are presuming on God's grace because they are Jewish and they have the Law, yet they are disobeying the law God gave them. That grace was meant to lead them to repentance, the fruit of which is obedience. But instead because of the hardness of their hearts they were adding to their judgment.

To understand the difference between hearers and doers we should keep James 1 in mind.

James 1:22-25 Be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. 23 For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. 24 For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. 25 But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.

This is not talking about a doing that leads to perfect fulfilling of the law that leads to earning God's justification.

Being a doer of the law here does not mean sinless perfection. It means the ones who are doers of the law will be justified, not they are justified by doing the law. Those who have been transformed by faith "persevere in doing good."

Paul is talking about that doing that is a grateful response to God's grace, a grateful obedience flowing out of believing in Jesus and loving Jesus and having the Holy Spirit.

Christians are doers of the law. Those who trust in Jesus for their salvation, are those who have the Spirit and do good works and bear good fruit enabled by the Spirit.

Christ alone, grace alone, faith alone, with good works, doing the truth

James 2:26 For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.

Paul is saying to the Jews they cannot appeal to the law for their justification. Where there is no obedience there is no genuine experience of grace.

How will the Gentiles be judged, vss. 14-15.

These two verses are also hard to understand. Scholars are greatly divided. There are two ways to understand this passage, two ways to understand "written on their hearts."

Is Paul referring to unbelieving Gentiles who are following the natural law written on their hearts, meaning on their consciences by virtue of being created in the image of God?

Or is Paul referring to Gentiles who are saved and are obeying the law written on their hearts by the enabling grace of the Holy Spirit?

If these are unbelieving Gentiles then the question Paul is answering is how can they be justly judged by God and by what standard since they don't have the external law of God. The answer is all pagans, all Gentiles have some rule of law, some natural inclination toward things in the Law of Moses, do not murder, do not steal, do not commit adultery.

The most pagan nations on earth all have laws, that grow out of their conscience, out of their being made in the image and likeness of God, even though they profess no knowledge of God. They all have some sense of justice and right and wrong, good and evil.

They naturally do things the law requires. And by that same law of conscience they accuse and excuse one another, based on their sense of right and wrong.

They have a natural law, a general law. They have enough to discern good and evil, right and wrong, virtue and vice, honesty and dishonesty. Their conscience bear witness against them. Our consciences are our worst judge and jury, convicting us and convincing us of our sin.

But could these Gentiles Paul refers to here be believers?

The law written on their hearts echoes the words of Jeremiah 31 and what Paul says in 2:29 circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit.

Is Paul talking about the transformation of the heart of a Christian by the Holy Spirit like we read in Jeremiah and Hebrews?

Jeremiah 31:33 Declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

It would seem Paul has Jeremiah 31 in mind. To be a Christian is to have the Holy Spirit who gives us a heart able to and desiring to obey God's commandments.

Paul is not above trying to make the Jews jealous if it will move them toward repentance and obedience. In the rest of chapter two Paul is going to press the Jews hard that salvation and justification are not matters of externals but a matter of the heart, a heart changed by the Holy Spirit. At the end of chapter two Paul will hold up the Gentiles as an example of what matters most, a circumcised or changed heart. They are the true Jews.

Paul will have none of trusting in ourselves, in externals, in rituals, in our own self-righteousness. Paul wants us to see we are hopeless, no hope in us, just in the blood of Jesus.

Paul is pushing us toward the Gospel, toward Jesus Christ and His righteousness. He is pressing us to give God our hearts, not just our ears. You don't do the law until you love Jesus from your heart.

Are these Gentiles people in whom God is fulfilling His promise to write His Law on their hearts giving them a sincere desire to obey Him and by His Spirit is enabling them to do so?

On the day, vs. 16.

“On the day” refers to a great and final public day of judgment when the judge of all the earth will according to the Gospel open up all the secrets of men by Christ Jesus.

I Corinthians 4:5 The Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God.

What are these secrets? They are those secret sins, those besetting sins, those sins that have a grip on us, those dark, hidden corners of our heart? Hidden grudges, unkind or malicious thoughts, selfish motives, evil plots, sexual fantasies, ungodly desires, sins we think we got away with.

What should we do about these secret sins before that great and final day? Do what David did in Psalm 139. He started by saying:

Psalm 139:1-4 O Lord, you have searched me and known me! You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar. You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O Lord, you know it altogether.

He ended by saying:

Psalm 139:23-24 Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts!
24 And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!

Ask God to bring it into the light of your conscience, and when He does, it is to lead us to confession and repentance. Plead the blood of Jesus. Believe the Gospel.

We are living in the days of mercy and grace, but these days are numbered and they will have their end. There is a time when it will be too late to repent, too late to believe, too late to ask for mercy, too late to pray.

The outcome of that final day depends entirely on our heart response to Jesus and His teachings and His way of life.

The Gospel and judgment are inextricably linked. The Gospel convicts us of sin, the Gospel leads us to despair of our sin, to see there is none without sin and therefore none who is righteous. The Gospel announces salvation through Jesus Christ. To those who believe there will be eternal life, to those who reject it, there will be eternal judgment and death.

Implications and application.

The implications of this text are staggering. There are some fixed realities in our world. God exists. God is the God of justice and therefore there is a judgment. There is such a thing as

truth and God is truth. God has created you in His image and part of that is reflected in your conscience where God has imprinted a knowledge of Himself, of right and wrong, good and evil, of justice. God is knowable and you know it, and you will be judged by what you know.

Nothing in this life is trivial. It all matters for all eternity. We will either perish or live according to what we know, what we hear and what we do. Make sure you know God, have faith in Jesus Christ and repent of all your sins. This is the Gospel.

And one more implication. Everything I just said applies to your children and grandchildren. They are created in the image of God, endowed with a knowledge of God and truth and right and wrong. They also will perish or live according to what they know. We have a profound duty to raise them up in the fear of the Lord and train them in the way of righteousness. This should wake us up to the serious privilege and challenge of teaching and training them to know God and love Him and His Gospel, and to be doers of His Word, not just hearers. This calls for great prayer and much grace in humble, daily dependence on the Holy Spirit.