

“But What About...?”

Romans 2:11-16

Three words we learn early in life: “That’s not fair!” “He gets to go, I don’t. That’s not fair!” “Why do I have to clean up my room and she doesn’t? That’s not fair!” “He gets to stay up later than I do. That’s not fair!” “She gets more allowance than I do. That’s not fair!” The three-word answer from our parents? “Life’s not fair!” Every believer who’s ever spent time trying to answer people’s questions about Christianity has heard the “that’s not fair” objection. It has to do with the so-called “unsaved heathen:” “What about that poor man in a far-off jungle who has never heard about Jesus Christ? Will God judge and condemn him for failing to believe in someone he’s never heard of? That’s not fair! What kind of God would do that?” The assumption in this line of questioning is that if you have heard of Jesus and rejected him, you can be held accountable, you deserve judgment and condemnation. But if you’ve never heard the name Jesus, you can’t be held accountable, you can’t be judged for what you don’t know. This is an important question because there are not only people “far away” who don’t know Jesus; in our increasingly unchurched culture (that certainly includes south King County), there are more and more people who know nothing about our Savior and Lord. That’s a key characteristic of our community that truly makes it a mission field. Our passage today speaks to this very issue. But instead of answering “Life’s not fair,” God’s Word lays down some key truths about God and about ourselves and also gives us some important insights into sharing Jesus Christ with those who do not yet know Him as Savior and Lord.

Verses 11-16 talk about God’s interaction with two groups of people. First, there are people with the Law (The Law refers to the Law of Moses, which includes the Ten Commandments and all the regulations of the first five books of the Bible – 613 commandments in total!). The people with the Law are the Jews. The people without the Law are the Gentiles. To bring this into our contemporary setting, you could substitute here “people with the Gospel” (Christians) in the place of the Jews, and “people without the Gospel” (non-Christians) in the place of Gentiles. The first point, a point about God, is that when it comes to the judgment, determining who will receive eternal life and who will be eternally punished, He doesn’t “play favorites.” No one enjoys preferential treatment. Verse 11 says, “God does not show favoritism.” At this point you may say, “Time out! Isn’t it true that God gave the Law of Moses to the Jews (and only the Jews) and so they have access to what is required of them, and the rest of the world doesn’t?” In verse 12 Paul replies that God does not show favoritism “because all who have sinned without the Law [that is, people who aren’t Jews] will also perish without the Law, and all who have sinned under the Law [the Jews] will be judged by the Law.” Paul’s answer is this: it is indeed the case that different groups of people have different advantages when it comes to the amount of truth God has revealed to them. But then he says, God’s judgment will be according to the truth they do have. And so the Law of Moses is not brought in to judge and condemn those who had no knowledge or access to that Law. The Law of Moses will be used only to judge those who had access to it. To bring this to our 21st century question: the Gospel will be used only to judge those who hear it, those who have the opportunity to respond to it. The first point is that God shows no favorites.

The second point is a truth about us and about our accountability to God. Again, our two groups: the person in the group which does have the Law. For that person, when he or she appears before God and gives an account of their life at the final judgment, the question will not be, “How much of the Law did you have and know?” The question will be, “In view of what you did have and hear and know, how did you live? How did you respond in your heart, in your actions to the law you did know?” The person who “obeys the law” is the person who comes to Jesus Christ in faith, because the purpose of the law, Galatians 3:24 tells us, is to lead men, women, boys, and girls to Him. We saw last week that after they come to faith in Him, their obedient lives will give convincing proof of their saving relationship with Him. The second group is those who don’t have the Law of Moses. How can they be held accountable? Paul’s answer (from verse 12) is that they are not held accountable for what they don’t know. But then in verses 14 and 15 he builds on this answer, declaring that those without the Law of Moses still have God’s law. They have it. They know it.

That’s our third point: even if we don’t have the Law of Moses, we all have the law of God. Verses 14 and 15 say, “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, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them.” Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Paul’s saying that every man, woman, boy, and girl have possession of

God's law in here. Please don't miss this! Something incredibly important is being said here about human nature, what it means to be human, what it means to be created in the image of God: God has written, stamped, etched on our inner being (our heart, mind, and soul) His law.

From our text we see this is done and demonstrated three ways. First, there is the law of nature. Verse 14 says, "When Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves." When we think of the law (or laws) of nature, we usually think of physical laws such as the law of gravity, combustion, or nuclear energy. But in the first century, when the letter to the Roman Christians was written, the law of nature didn't refer to those laws, but to the law of human nature. The law of human nature is like the physical laws of nature in that it describes what should happen in culture, it governs how people should relate and function in society. Throughout the world, regardless of the country or culture, the law of human nature displays itself in a general and high regard for life, honor, honesty, bravery, selflessness, marriage and family, and appropriate sexual behavior. The legal codes of cultures throughout history have been remarkably consistent in affirming this law. These are all conclusive proofs of the law of human nature, which is a part of God's law.

The second demonstration of God's law being written into our inner life is referred to in verse 15: "Their consciences also bearing witness." Conscience is not the same as the law of human nature, as that law is an objective standard all of us are aware of. Whereas the law of nature is the knowledge of right and wrong, the conscience is that part of our being that tells us we ought to do the right thing. If we don't, guilt is activated. Very few of us like to feel guilty. I will be the first one to admit that it's very possible to neglect and resist that inner voice that tells you, "This is right, this is wrong." But just because it can be suppressed and ignored (and it's pretty clear that we're living in an age when the sense of right and wrong is increasingly rejected), that doesn't mean conscience doesn't exist. Conscience is a part of what it means to be human.

Memory is the third demonstration of God's law written into our lives. Verse 15 says, "Their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them." The memory is that God-given capacity within us that brings to the present events and situations in our past that can accuse or affirm us for what we have done. The law of human nature, conscience, and memory: God has created each of us with the imprint of His law on and in our lives. We are all accountable to Him for how we respond to that law.

I have three applications today. First, the fact that God has stamped upon your being His law can give you tremendous security, stability, and confidence. God's law tells us what is right, what is wrong, what is true, what is false. These are not things we make up. They aren't mere human opinion, changed on a whim. These values, principles, truths come from God Himself, the eternal, unchanging God. Life is not a cafeteria of options, all of equal value, from which you can choose. Life comes with profound givens. There is a God, and He is truth. That truth is knowable because He is knowable. He sent His Son Jesus, "full of grace and truth." Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, the life," and He said, "Everyone on the side of truth listens to me." Do you see what happens when Jesus is Savior and Lord of your life? In saving you He connects with that truth God hard-wired into you when He created you. And in that connection is guidance, safety, strength, and assurance as you live your life as His follower.

Second, realize that everyone you know at work or school or in the neighborhood has God's law written on his or her heart. Everyone you know knows God and His law. Whether they suppress that knowledge or not, they have it. The application is this: be confident and hopeful when it comes to sharing Christ with people who do not yet know Him. Without minimizing the blinding effects of sin, don't think there is no point of connection in the person you care enough about to share Jesus with. There are points of connection, deeper than you ever imagined. Speak the truth in love and God may be pleased to make the connection between what they know because of how God created them, and what you tell them about your Savior and Lord.

Third, verse 12 says, "All who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law." Whenever we see that word "perish," with all it means in terms of eternal punishment, torment, and suffering, we should also think of John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life." That verse speaks of two destinies: eternal life and perishing. From birth we are all headed toward the second destiny, destined to perish miserably, forever, without God and without hope. But Jesus came to make another and entirely different destiny possible. He took sin, your sin, my sin, the reason we're perishing on Himself. He died in our place. As you claim Jesus' work for you on the cross, you can be saved from perishing, saved to the abundant life, the eternal life that is found only in Him!