

Judged According to Knowledge

Romans 2:12-16

I'll never forget the first big commercial construction job I worked on as an electrician.

It was a residence at Fanshawe College in London and I was a first term apprentice.

I had just started with the company and for the first few months I was assigned a significant number of lower skill tasks as you would expect for someone new to the trade.

I did those things well without complaining and in timely manner.

That eventually paid off and I started getting assigned some higher end tasks.

One of the first higher end task I got assigned was hooking up the wires to the electrical panels in each room.

Before I started my boss told me to check to make sure the power was off before I brought the wires into the panels.

So that is what I did all day right up until the very last panel.

It was getting close to the end of the day and I knew I had to hurry to get in one more panel so I decided to skip the step of checking to make sure the power was off.

I thought to myself, "I've checked every single one today and they were all off, surely this one is off too."

So I proceeded to cut the wires to length with my hacksaw and cut through the first wire with no problems.

I did the same with the second wire and when I was about three quarters of the way through I decided to finish the cut with my wire cutters.

As I was cutting, a part of exposed metal on the wire cutters made contact with the bare conductor of the wire I had just finished cutting.

There was a loud pop and a huge flash of light as wire cutters got welded between the two lines.

It only lasted a second but I found myself unable to see for a few seconds from the flash and a bit shaken.

Thankfully, I was unharmed and nothing was damaged except my slightly melted pair of wire cutters.

I proceeded to make sure the power was off, finished for the day, and from then on checked every time to make sure the power was off.

I still have those wire cutters in my tool case as a reminder to respect the danger of electricity.

[You know the thing about that story is that I knew better. I had been taught very early on to check for power and my boss had told me to do that before I started. I had done the right thing

all day and decided to skip it because I was in a hurry. The only person I had to blame for my mistake was myself. That happens to us more often than we would like to admit doesn't it. We do something that we know we shouldn't and bad things happen. Our text for this mourning **Romans 2:12-16** teaches us about human beings facing the judgement of God and what we see in these verses is that the LORD holds people accountable according to what we know. God shows us four lessons here in regards to His dealings with people. First we see that...]

Point #1 – People can perish with or without knowing God's word. (Verse 12)

Human beings knowingly violate the LORD's moral law even if they have never heard, seen, or read the Bible for themselves.

Just before we look at verse 12 together I want to make sure that two words are clear for us.

The first word is the word 'sin'.

That is a word that comes up all the time in the bible.

It most literally means to 'miss the mark' or 'to be in error' and when it is used in the bible it means a failure to keep God's law.

It means doing things that God forbids and failing to do things God commands.

These failures occur in our actions, our words, our thoughts, and our feelings.

That is sin.

The second word that we need to be clear on is 'the law'.

That refers to the word of God revealed through the Holy Spirit to people, written down, and faithfully preserved for His people in the book we call the Bible.

We find the summary of God's Law in the Ten Commandments as Ian Paisley points out, and the rest of the Old Testament explains and applies God's law to various aspects of life.

So God's law here is God's written word.

With that ground prepared let's look together at **verse 12**.

The word 'all' here is important.

There are no exceptions when it comes to failing to keep God's commands.

Two things are said about 'all who have sinned', they perish and they will be judged.

That is two different ways of saying the same thing.

It means the LORD will hold everyone accountable for violating His moral standards and that means being condemned and cast out of His presence forever and suffering a just and eternal punishment.

Notice this happens to people who are 'without the law'.

That means people who have never heard from, or heard of the bible.

It also happens to people ‘under the law’ that is people who have heard from the Scriptures and therefore know something of God’s Word.

Sin can happen with or without knowing the bible and when people sin they have set their feet on the path of destruction.

[A number of years ago when my kids were small I was pumping up some bike tires on a new to us bike. I didn’t have a tire pressure gauge so was working from feel. Near the end I gave the tire a squeeze and thought to myself, “Just a couple more pumps.” After a couple of more there was a loud bang and the tire went instantly flat. Without a gauge I didn’t know where the pressure was at and the tire exploded. Now what would have happened if I had a gauge and still went past the max pressure? The tire would have still exploded.]

The same thing is true when it comes to the subject of sin.

When people sin who can’t name a book of the Bible, people who have never heard of Moses, Elijah, Peter, or Paul, or even Jesus there are still consequences from the LORD that they must face.

When people sin who know God’s word and have heard it many times throughout their life they will be called to account by the LORD.

Paul’s point here is that sin is a problem for everyone.

It is a problem for me and it is a problem for you.

It is a problem for your family, friends, and neighbors.

It is a problem for everyone even people living in the most remote places with zero contact with the outside world.

[Now when some people hear that, their immediate response will be, “That’s not fair! How can God judge people who have no idea what He expects of them?” That is a very good question and the apostle Paul anticipates that question in the next few verses. He shows us here why people ‘without the law’ and people ‘under the law’ face judgment on account of their sin. First he deals with those ‘under the law’ in verse 13 and shows us that...]

Point #2 – Being right with God requires more than knowing God’s word. (Verse 13)

Storing information from the Bible in our minds alone is of no benefit to us if we fail to do what it says.

Verse 13 begins with the word ‘for’ which tells us that he is going to explain/defend what has just been written.

Let’s listen carefully to what is said here. **Verse 13.**

Charles Hodge in his commentary highlights the phrase ‘hearers of the law’ pointing out that it does not say, ‘readers of the law’.

Back in the day, the Israelites did not have copies of the scriptures in their homes.

Paper was expensive in those days and every copy had to be hand written making it impossible to produce enough copies for everyone.

The primary way common people learned the Word of God was by gathering together and listening to the Bible being read to them.

We see that in Exodus, Deuteronomy, Joshua, 2Chronicles, 2Kings, Ezra, and Nehemiah to name a few.

In Nehemiah 8 we are told the people stood and listened to Ezra read from the law ‘from early in the morning until midday’ which is probably about six straight hours.

That is remarkable.

As time went on the people met in places called synagogues where they would listen to the Scriptures read.

What an amazing privilege Israel had and still has to this day to hear the word of God.

That great blessing came to be viewed by many as a guarantee of being on good terms with the LORD.

People thought, ‘We have God’s word, we listen to the Bible, we know the Scriptures so we must be OK.’

That kind of thinking is way off.

Hearing by itself falls short. In order to be ‘right with God’, that is what the word ‘justified’ means, people have to be ‘doers of the law’.

As I said a few moments ago, failing to obey God’s commands is sin, so when we hear the law and disobey the law we are ‘judged by the law’ rather than justified.

Now here is a really important question, “How much of the law does someone have to do in order to be right with God?”

The answer is, “All of it!”

James 2:10 says, “...whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it.”

That means you are either a law keeper or a law breaker and there is no middle ground.

It is great to be able to say all the books of the bible, to memorize the Ten Commandments, the fruit of the Spirit, the beatitudes, and alike.

Knowing the Bible inside and out is wonderful but all that knowledge doesn’t give us a free pass if we fail to actually do what it says.

[How many of you get things delivered to your door from time to time? Anybody ever have anything fragile delivered to your door? Most of the time boxes like that have ‘FRAGILE’ printed on the outside of the box in a multiple places. What if the delivery guy sees the word ‘FRAGILE’ and just chucks the box in his truck? When he gets is out of the truck he drops it in the street picks it up and football kicks it onto your porch? What do you think you will find when you open the box? Most likely some broken stuff. He sees the sign, he knows what it means, but if he doesn’t respond properly to the word things end up broken.]

It is the exact same thing with hearing God’s word.

We can do our devotions, we can memorize verses, we can listen to sermons, but if we don’t actually do what God’s word says then we put ourselves at odds with the LORD.

We end up broken.

That’s all of us! It is a fool’s errand to think we can earn our way to being right with God.

As Charles Hodge puts it, “If men rely on works, they must have works; they must be doers of the law; they must satisfy its demands if they are to be justified by it.”

[Even if we don’t like that, most of us can probably understand the logic of it. We know the rule, we break the rule, and we get a consequence as a result. But what about people who don’t have the rules? What about people who don’t have Bibles? How can the LORD punish people for things they don’t know about? That is the next lesson taught in this passage, the lesson is that...]

Point #3 – People without the Bible know enough to be judged by God. (Verses 14-15a)

No one will escape condemnation before the LORD’s throne by saying, “I did not know.”

Again we see the word ‘for’ here in verse 14 which is connecting this thought back to the sin and judgement connection made in verse 12. Verse 14.

When the Bible refers to people as Gentiles it is including everyone who is non-Jewish.

Before the time of Jesus, the written word of God belonged almost exclusively to the Jews.

There were a small number of gentiles who came to live with the Israelites, learn the scriptures, and worship the LORD but for the most part the non-Jewish world had no copies of God’s law.

Even though that is the case, we are told here that they, ‘by nature do what the law requires.’

That is people both as individuals and societies can and do have a natural ability to do what is right in the sight of God even though they don’t have any written word from the LORD.

History proves this out. Every society and civilization in the history of the world established laws to live by.

Where there differences? Yes, but it is striking how much similarity there is across time and culture.

Matthew Henry comments on this saying, “*They apprehended a clear and vast difference between good and evil. They had a sense of justice, equity, honour, purity, love, charity, the light of nature taught obedience to parents, pity, peace, order, forbade murder, stealing, lying, thus they were a law unto themselves.*”

Of course the laws of godless men fall far short of the law of God written in His Word, but there is more than enough light here for the LORD to hold them accountable for the evil they have done.

How did people without the bible come by such laws? **Verse 15a**
(stop at ‘witness’)

When the bible speaks about natural law, as it is in these verses, it is not talking about some process of random chance.

Evolutionists would suggest that morality developed merely as a means to help people survive and adapt to their environment.

C.S. Lewis in his book *Mere Christianity* shows the insufficiency of that idea by pointing out that morality does not always benefit people, in fact, it is often costly.

Natural law in the biblical sense is the moral law that the LORD has woven into our DNA, here it is described as being written on our hearts.

The LORD has given people ‘a conscience’ that is an inner testimony regarding what is right and wrong.

The feeling of guilt for having done something bad is the work of God in the lives of people and if only that standard is applied then it is enough to make us guilty in the courtroom of heaven.

[Here again someone might raise a question, “If people who don’t have God’s word are less guilty wouldn’t it be better to just leave them be rather than tell them about the Bible? I mean if hearing God’s word makes people more accountable if they reject it shouldn’t we just leave them alone? Let’s consider that way of thinking in the light of what we are told next in this part of this passage. Rather than leaving people be out of fear of making their situation worse, we see instead that...]

Point #4 – Declaring God’s judgement is necessary to gospel preaching. (Verses 15b-16)

One of things that must be made clear in talking to people about the Person and Work of Jesus is that all people are accountable to the LORD.

Besides the ‘conscience bearing witness’ we also see this in verses 15b-16.

In the court rooms of men people offer a defense to try and escape a guilty verdict.

‘On that day’ that is the day of judgement before the throne of heaven those that are pronounced guilty will offer no defense for there is none that could be made. Nothing is hidden from the knowledge of God, there is no hidden evidence, and there are no loop holes to escape justice. Everything is laid bare in that moment and the apostle says here that this is, ‘according to my gospel’.

That is ‘the gospel of God, concerning His Son’ as it says in chapter one verses 2-3.

Anybody remember what the word ‘gospel’ means?

It means ‘good news’.

What he is saying here is that an essential part of preaching the ‘good news’ of God’s word to people is to be clear on the consequences of sin.

It means telling people that failing to keep God’s Law, whether you know the Bible or not, leads to perishing and judgement.

Listen, there is no good news without the bad news.

But, what about the risk of making someone’s situation worse by telling them about the Bible?

It is true that if we tell people more than they already know they will be more accountable to God if they choose to reject the truth.

At least two things need to be said about that.

First, even if people receive the least amount of hell it is extremely bad and we should never be satisfied with a little less eternal suffering.

Secondly, we must see God’s law and His Gospel as good gifts that He has graciously given humanity.

If we hold back out of fear of making someone’s situation worse than we are treating the Word of God as something bad rather than the glorious treasure that it is.

The response of sinful people can in no way diminish the goodness of the gospel.

[How many of you remember Jesus’ parable of a master who gave talents (that is some money) to three servants? The first two servants put the money to work and had the fruit of their investment to present to the master when he returned. What did the master say to those two servants? “Well done good and faithful servant!” Anyone remember what the third guy did with his money? He buried it and did nothing with it. What was he doing? He was treating the gift of the talent as a bad gift and that turned out badly for him when the master returned.]

If we hold back some or all of God’s word out of fear then we are doing the exact same thing.

We are treating God’s word as a bad gift?

I know it is rather unpopular these days to tell people they are sinners and in danger of perishing under the judgment of the LORD.

But that brothers and sisters is the very reason Jesus died on the cross and rose from the dead.

He did that to rescue us from our law breaking.

We are all law breakers whether we know the bible inside and out or whether we haven't got a clue about anything it says.

Our only hope in the face of that is to have a Saviour, a redeemer Who can pay our debt and make us right with God.

Do we know that we are sinners this morning?

We need to if we are going to trust in Christ as our Saviour because knowing the depth of our problem is the only way to see the truth that only Jesus can help us.

God will judge the world without partiality according to the knowledge that each one has been given, what defense will you offer on that day?

There will be nothing you can say on your own behalf, the only thing that can deliver us from that dreadful moment is to look to Jesus before that day comes and say, "Rescue me LORD!"

May God strengthen every believer in this truth and may He graciously pour out His Spirit and bring many who are lost to believe the good news of the gospel to the praise of His glorious grace.

Let's pray together towards that end.