

SOUND DOCTRINE FOR SPIRITUAL SUCCESS – Studies in Romans
The Excuse of an Extenuating Circumstance (Romans 2:12-16)

“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 just before God, but the doers of the Law will be justified. For when Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law unto themselves, in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them, on the day when, according to my gospel, God will judge the secrets of men through Christ Jesus.”

Paul begins this section of Romans 2 with a comprehensive declaration regarding the judgement of God, in that no one who has sinned qualifies for an exemption (v12). The extenuating circumstance of not having the Law of God doesn't absolve an individual, nor does the privilege of being a member of the chosen nation of Israel. Why? Sin is sin, irrespective of the context. Paul saves his most convicting indictment of all for his fellow Jewish brethren in vv17-29, even though he is clearly referencing Jewish hypocrisy in v13. But for the remainder of this section, his focus is upon the Gentile world which did not have the privilege of possessing God's Law.

The lack of such an advantage can't serve as an excuse, due to the instinctual capacity within every person in comprehending right from wrong (v14). Paul here is most likely referring to the image of God in man, consisting of intellect, emotion and will. Even though that image has been marred and scarred by sin, everyone possesses a certain measure of moral and ethical awareness. In v15, Paul adds the element of an individual's conscience, as that inner barometer which guides our behavior. Is conscience inherent in the image of God or a by-product of how intellect, emotion and will interact within each of us? In either case, it serves the overall purpose of being the Law of God, internally written upon the human heart. Can this innate moral/ethical capacity produce a lifestyle of sinless perfection? Of course not! But it does leave all of us without the excuse of an extenuating circumstance. Paul ends the section with this in v16 –

“. . . on the day when, according to my gospel, God will judge the secrets of men through Christ Jesus.”

The gospel of Jesus Christ is truly a GOOD NEWS/BAD NEWS GOSPEL, in that it includes BOTH the offer of salvation, as well as the inevitability of God's judgment. We can best make sense of this dichotomy by comparing it to John 3:16-21. There, Jesus not only speaks of God's salvation in one of the most familiar passages in all of Scripture (vv16-17), but also the significance of refusing that offer in vv18-20 –

“He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed.”