

Romans 2:14-15: The Law of the Heart

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For when the Gentiles, which have not the law, do by nature the things contained in the law, these, having not the law, are a law unto themselves: Which shew the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the mean while accusing or else excusing one another (Rom. 2:14-15).

Paul's statement in Romans 2:14-15 has been the subject of much controversy and confusion through the years. What does he mean by "the work of the law written in their hearts?" Is he saying that God has created us with a sort of innate morality—a "pre-programmed" knowledge of God's moral law? Or, is he saying something else? The answer to this question is very important because there have been any number of false doctrines that have developed through the years based upon a false understanding of this passage.

First, notice the context in which the passage is found. In the first three chapters of Romans, Paul is building his case that all people need the gospel (c.f. Rom. 1:16-17). In chapter one he describes the sins of the Gentiles, in chapter two the sins of the Jews, and in chapter three he summarizes by telling us "all have sinned and come short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). In chapter two Paul contrasts the Jews unrighteous judgment (2:1-4) with God's righteous judgment (2:5-16). The Jews prided themselves in the fact that the Law of Moses had been given to them, and not to the Gentiles. They considered themselves to be right with God simply on the basis of having the law but not actually doing what it said. Thus, they passed condemnation on the Gentiles for the wrongs that they committed, all the while being guilty themselves of what they condemned the Gentiles for doing. But the fact of the matter is that it is not simply the possession of the Law that mattered but obeying it (Rom. 2:13). Therefore, Romans 2:13-15 is simply Paul reminding the Jews that all people are accountable to God for the law under which they lived, and that they should be completely ashamed of themselves because they had the law and yet in some cases the Gentiles were morally superior to them.

Having considered the context, we should note a few things that Romans 2:14-15 does *not* mean. First, it does not mean that the Gentiles had no law at all. Romans 4:15 says, "...for where no law is there is no transgression." Romans 5:13 says, "... sin is not imputed when there is no law." Sin is a "transgression of the law" (1 John 3:4). Therefore, if there is no law then there can be no sin, yet Paul has just described the Gentiles' sin in chapter one. Therefore, it follows that, although they were not given the Law of Moses, the Gentiles were still under law to God, and that law was the Patriarchal Law. Second, Paul did not say that the Gentiles had *a law* written in their hearts. Look closely at the passage. He said they "show the *work of the* law written in their hearts." It simply means that, though the Law of Moses had not been given to the Gentiles, still they fulfilled some of its moral work or requirements. Third, this passage is not saying that man is born with an innate sense of morality. Man is born with the *capacity* to make moral choices but not the *content*. It is impossible for man to know how to please God without God revealing that information to him. Consider Hebrews 11:4 which says, "By faith Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice...." How did Abel know what and

how to sacrifice? How did he know that sacrifice was necessary in the first place without God revealing it to him (c.f. Acts 17:26ff; 1 Cor. 2:6-16)?

The meaning of Romans 2:14-15 is straightforward. Though the Law of Moses had not been revealed to the Gentiles, they were still accountable to God by the law under which they lived—the Patriarchal law. “By nature,” that is, “by learned habit,” the Gentiles fulfilled some of the moral requirements of the Law of Moses. This is because God had revealed His will to mankind, and it was subsequently passed down from generation to generation. Their conscience bore witness to their actions based upon the law that they had been given. However we must remember that conscience in and of itself is not a guide; it must be educated. Moses Lard wrote, “Conscience originates no truth. It merely approves conformity to truth, or to what is held as truth, and condemns violations of it.”¹ Therefore, it follows that the Gentiles were

“...actually engaged in some reasoning process by which they examined the ‘rightness’ or the ‘wrongness’ of certain actions. And the very fact that they had a conscience that was ‘bearing witness’ with regard to the ‘rightness’ or ‘wrongness’ of their actions implies that there was some standard by which they measured that ‘rightness’ and/or ‘wrongness.’²

This passage is not teaching that the Gentiles had an innate morality “pre-programmed” within them that enabled them to be pleasing to God. Rather, the moral requirements of the law had, at some point, been provided to the Gentiles, and thus their conscience was able to be educated in regard to God’s moral requirements. God would hold them accountable under the law that they had been given just as He would hold the Jews accountable for the law that they had been given.

¹ Moses E. Lard, *Commentary on Romans* (Delight, AR: Gospel Light Publishing Company), p. 48-49.

² Tom Wacaster, *Studies in Romans* (Pulaski, TN: Sain Publications, 2005), p. 112-113.