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Romans 2:12-16 “No Exemptions on Judgment Day”

Intro. My former pastor, Jerry Vines, tells of the time when he was a little boy. The fire station in his town had a goldfish pond. His daddy would take him over there on occasions and he would play around the little pond. One time he got down at the pond and one of the goldfish swam close to his side of the pond, and when it got close to him, he stuck his finger in the water and tried to touch it. Of course, it saw his finger and scurried off! He would just laugh because the little goldfish thought it had gotten away from him, but he had his eyes on it all the time!¹

People seem to think that they can escape God, but the fact is we are never out of His sight. The prophet Jonah thought he could run from God. He found out that you can't escape God. And don't think for a minute that you will be able to escape the Judgment of God after death. The Bible clearly teaches that God has appointed a day in which He will judge men by the standard of His own righteousness. This is the same day described in v.5, where he mentions “the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed.” The Judge will be Jesus Christ. Jesus Himself affirmed this in John 5:22-23, “For the Father judges no one, but has committed all judgment to the Son, that all should honor the Son just as they honor the Father.” When it is time to be called to stand before Him at the Judgment, God will know exactly where you are. Revelation 20:11 says of that Day, “And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them....” You cannot escape or hide from the summons of God's judgment.

Yet some may suppose that certain people will be exempt from facing God's judgment. So the main question I want to answer today is this, “Will anyone be exempt from God's judgment? Will anyone get a pass?” I have already talked about how the Jews tended to think that they will bypass God's judgment (v.3) because they were children of Abraham. They were God's chosen people by birth. Then we typically think of the millions who have never even seen a Bible or heard the name of Jesus. Will they get a pass? Finally, if you have gone to church all your life, heard hundreds of sermons, and lived a pretty good life, will *you* get a pass? Many people have idea that the people I have just described will somehow bypass the judgment of God and go to heaven. But is that what the Bible teaches?

Whatever happens at the Judgment, you can be sure that God will do the right thing. Abraham rightly asked in Genesis 18:25, “Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?” Indeed He shall, for *He* is righteous and just. I am going to tell you in this message who will *not* escape God's judgment and condemnation if they have sinned. Yet I will also offer the gospel hope of salvation. So note with me first of all:

I. THE HEATHEN WILL NOT BE EXEMPT FROM GOD'S JUDGMENT

I am referring here to people groups who do not have the Mosaic law, or even the Ten Commandments. Nevertheless, Paul says they *have* sinned, and God holds them accountable for their sin. Paul affirms in v.12, “For all who have sinned without the law will also perish without

¹ Jerry Vines, *Family Fellowship: An Expository Experience in 1 John* (Dallas: Crescendo Publications, 1976), 239.

the law....” Even though they are “without law”, that is the law of Moses, they still have “sinned” according to Paul. Receiving and hearing the revealed law of God is not the precondition of sin. Solomon said in 1 Kings 8:46, “There is no one who does not sin.” Sin is universal and a holy God must punish sin.

Yet many will object saying, “How can God hold them responsible for breaking His moral law when they haven’t even heard of the 10 Commandments?”² Paul answers that question in vv.14-15. Essentially, he is saying that they are not entirely without law. Much of the same moral law of God is made known to them in another way. First, Paul says in v.14, “For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires,³ they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law.” That sounds a little complicated, but I believe I can explain what he means. The key words here are the words, “by nature.” Paul refers to a state of being that results from creation. You see, mankind was created with an innate knowledge of God and His moral law. There are many things found in the law of God that all men seem to know they ought to do, or not do. For example, every culture manifests an understanding that we should worship God. Never did any man bow before a god without thereby acknowledging in some way the law on his heart which tells him to worship God. That is been the general practice of humanity for thousands of years. Several of the 10 Commandments are typically found in human law. For example, the heathen make laws to punish murder, theft, adultery, and bearing false witness. Thus they confess that God’s moral law is written on their hearts to some degree. Mankind has a definite sense of right and wrong. Furthermore, man knows he should do what is good and right. Obeying and honoring your parents has been required from the earliest days after man was put on this earth. Most societies practice hospitality, even to strangers. This proves that a law is within him to direct him to what is good. So whether written in stone, on parchment, or in the heart, it is God’s law nevertheless. So Paul says in v.15, “They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts....” “The work of the law” is the work which the law prescribes. So when their conduct corresponds on any point with the Mosaic law, they manifest the unwritten law in their hearts.

You see, God has built into all people a basic sense of right and wrong, a universal code of ethics. In fact, man feels guilt when he violates that very code of ethics within him. Even the Greeks referred to the “unwritten law” (*agraphos nomos*) that was regarded as more sacred than human statutes (Wuest, p.45). They viewed such law as the basis for universal moral norms that are encoded in human law.⁴ Likewise, the Declaration of Independence refers to “the Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God.” You do realize, don’t you, that you can be convicted of breaking human law even though you have not read the text of that law? That is possible because the law expects you to have an innate sense of right and wrong, and when in doubt, you should find out what the law says.

Second, the conscience of man bears witness to the universal principle of God’s moral law. Paul says in v.15, “their conscience also bears witness.” Conscience literally refers to co-knowledge and refers to a person’s inner voice to hold him accountable regarding right and wrong. The voice of conscience is based on natural law, and can also be trained by God’s written Law, or some other law that we have been taught. Furthermore, in v.15 Paul says that “their

² After all, there are verses right here in Romans that indicate that there is no sin where there is no law (4:15; 5:13; 7:7).

³ This is literally “does the things of the law.”

⁴ Historically, this concept has provided the authority of human law in Western society. However, we are moving toward a less authoritative basis for law such as “the common good.”

conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them.” The conscience accuses us of wrongdoing or else tries to excuse us from thinking we have done wrong. But all of that presupposes the fact that they know of a law that can be broken. This activity gives experiential proof of moral consciousness. If there were no moral law, they would be no need to accuse or excuse anything.

Man was created in the image of God. So we have a conscience that reminds us of what is right and wrong. Do you think that when a lion kills an antelope he feels guilty? I had a cat that killed many birds. I don't think that bothered him in the least. But when a man murders or commits some other sin, they experience guilt, though they try to make excuses for what they have done.

Recently I read Edgar Allan Poe's, "The Cask of Amontillado." It is the story of how Montrésor felt that Fortunato had hurt him many times and he wanted to get his revenge. Appealing to Fortunato's pride and love of wine, he got him a little drunk and lured him into the underground catacombs of his family's estate, where the fine wine was supposed to be stored. He then led him into a small vault and was able to chain his victim to the wall. Stepping out, Montrésor set stones to seal him into the vault, where he would die a slow death and he expected that no one would discover his murderous deed. As Fortunato realized what Montrésor was doing, he made his appeals to spare his life by saying, "Montrésor, for the love of God!" In response, Fortunato said, "My heart grew sick." Surely, that was the voice of conscience. Yet he went on to say, "It must have been the cold." The voice of depravity found an excuse for how he was feeling and tried to assure him he was doing the right thing.

So the fact that many have never seen or heard the Word of God is no excuse for their sin. They do not get a pass when it is time to call them up for judgment. They will be judged by whatever aspects of God's moral law they *do* have. They will be judged according to the light they do have. They will be judged for the many times they have sinned against the voice of conscience. Thus, they will be found guilty.

This truth concerning the heathen has been the great compulsion for the missionary cause and the driving force that has taken many a man and woman from a life of pleasant ease at home to a life of solitude in the African bush, in a Chinese village, or in some other remote spot of the earth. This is why we support over 3,500 missionaries through the Cooperative Program and the Lottie Moon offering. This is why our church sends out mission teams. Do you care enough about the lost and dying unreached people groups to go, give, and pray for them? They are not going to be exempt from the judgment of God just because they have never heard the Gospel. Even in the USA we have kids and youth that have hardly heard of Jesus or even seen a Bible. Some have not even heard of the 10 Commandments, which have been removed from our schools and courthouses.

Now let's consider who else will not escape the judgment of God:

II. THE SPIRITUALLY PRIVILEGED WILL NOT ESCAPE GOD'S JUDGMENT

Do you remember a time in school when those who made good grades were exempt from the final exam? Some made good grades simply because they were smart or they were the teacher's pet. Most made good grades because they worked hard. Yet here we see that the Jews who were chosen by God and tended to be morally superior to the Gentiles will not escape the judgment of God and go right into the kingdom of God.

Yet we have already discussed the fact that the Jews tended to believe they *were* exempt from judgment. Paul said in v.3, "Do you suppose, O man... that you will escape the judgment

of God?” The Jews would tend to think, “We have been the guardians of the law and the agents God has used to reveal the law. We who have possessed the law should be protected from God’s judgment and wrath.” This same kind of thinking was addressed by John the Baptist. In Matt. 3:7 & 9 John said these words even to the Pharisees, who strictly followed the Law, “Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?... And do not think to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones.” Likewise, Paul warns that the Jews will not be exempt from God’s judgment just because they are Jews. He said in the last of v.12, “all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law.” The Law will not save the Jew. Instead, the Law will *condemn* the Jew! Every Jew has knowingly and willfully broken God’s law at least to some degree.

Besides, Paul points out that just having the law, or even hearing the law of God is not enough. Paul says in v.13, “For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before⁵ God, but the doers of the law who will be justified.”⁶ The good Jew would go to the synagogue service each Sabbath day and hear the reading of the Law, and have it explained to them. In fact, the word translated “hearers” (*akroates*) is rarely used⁷ and specifically refers to those who hear as students. Such a student of God’s law might suppose that surely, he will not be made subject to the judgment of God. But just hearing the law on a regular basis is no way to be justified before God. God also demands obedience. James 1:22 says, “But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.” Yet no one obeys the law well enough to be justified that way because Paul goes on to say in 3:20, “For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight....”⁸ James 2:10 says, “For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all.”⁹ I would not try to get into heaven by keeping the law. The law was given to convict, not to convert. It proclaims guilt, not saving grace.

This text of Scripture also addresses people like you and I who have heard of Jesus. We have heard the Word of God. We have heard the gospel. We have heard the 10 Commandments and many other laws of God. People today might say, “We’ve been going to church all our lives. We’ve tried to be religious. We’ve heard hundreds of sermons and Bible lessons. Surely we will bypass God’s judgment!” Paul affirms that it doesn’t matter. You may own 20 Bibles and you may hear God’s Word every Sunday, but that alone will not make you right with God. Every sermon you hear and every verse of the Bible you read will be used against you if you do not respond to the Word of God with repentance and faith. Furthermore, the test of a *true* Christian is not how much of the Bible you have *heard*, but how much of the Bible you *obey*. If you have been born again, your life will change. There will be a lot of sins that you will give up, and you will begin to do a lot of good works. Would you characterize yourself as a hearer or a doer of God’s Word?

Now if you think that you can be saved by keeping God’s law, let’s consider another truth about the Judgment of God:

⁵ This is actually *para*, along side. When you do a side-by-side comparison between sinful man and God, he is condemned, not justified.

⁶ Likewise, v.25 says, “For circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law....” See also Lev. 18:5; Deut. 5:32-33; 6:25; Matt. 19:16-17; Rom. 2:6-7, 10.

⁷ The only other times this word is used is James 1:22-25.

⁸ Paul says in Galatians 2:21 that if we could be justified by keeping the law then Christ died in vain.

⁹ Gal. 3:10 says, “Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them.”

III. NO SIN WILL BE OVERLOOKED AT GOD'S JUDGMENT

Not only will no individual bypass the judgment of God, but also no sin will escape His notice. Paul says in v.16 of our text that "God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus." The word translated "secrets" (*kruptos*) also refers to what is hidden or concealed. God is omniscient, and even knows the secrets of men. Nothing is concealed before His all-seeing and all-searching eye. The book of Revelation (1:14; 2:18; 19:12) describes Jesus as having eyes as flames of fire which can penetrate the darkness of secrecy.

So in this verse Paul is attacking the folly of Jewish externalism. Men know your reputation; God knows your character. Man looks upon the outward appearance; God looks upon the heart. You can keep people from knowing many of the things you have done. But God knows the secret things; He knows the hidden things. Psa. 44:21 says, "...God ... knows the secrets of the heart." Jesus said in Mt. 10:26, "... nothing is covered that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known" (cf. Luke 8:17; 12:2).

This also means that God will judge not only a man's deeds but also his motives for doing them. He knows when you do good due to selfish ambition or because you seek human praise. God also knows our inmost thoughts. He knows the adulterous thoughts that no one else knows (Mt. 5:27-28). He knows the inner hatred that has yet to be manifest in word or deed. He knows the thoughts of envy or greed that you have. *Nothing* can be hidden from God. Heb. 4:13 says, "And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account." By the way, what you do in secret is a better indication of your character than what people see you do in public.

Do you remember the story of Nebuchadnezzar's dream in the book of Daniel? He woke up very troubled by his dream and demanded that the magicians, the astrologers, the sorcerers, and the Chaldeans not only interpret the dream, but even reveal to him what his dream was! They said, "There is not a man on earth who can tell the king's matter..." (Dan. 2:10). Yet some time later Daniel stood before the king and said, "There is a God in heaven who reveals secrets..." (v.28; NKJV). Then, through the prophet Daniel, God not only interpreted Nebuchadnezzar's dream, but he even revealed the dream that Nebuchadnezzar could not remember!

The Day of Judgment is a day in which the mouths of men will be stopped, as stated in 3:19. No man can deny that they have sinned. They stand before a Judge who knows everything, even the secrets of the heart. Furthermore, as we have seen, no man will have any excuse to offer. Even the heathen who has never seen a Bible has nevertheless sinned against God's moral law revealed in nature, in his nation's laws, and in his conscience. I believe this is the real meaning behind Hab. 2:20, "The Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before Him." That verse is not a call to get quiet in church as the prelude begins. It is a call to silence those who would make excuses or denials of sin before a holy God. Just keep quiet and admit your guilt before God.¹⁰

By the way, you might as well confess your sins to God because He already knows all about your sins. I heard about a man who came to a county courthouse for the first time when he was on trial for stealing chickens. The judge said to him, "Sir, are you the plaintiff?" He must not have known what a "plaintiff" is. He said, "I'm the guy that stole the chickens."¹¹ Well, when you stand before the Son of God you might as well admit your guilt! Don't even try to deny your guilt or make excuses.

¹⁰ The context is a rebuke against drunkenness and idolatry.

¹¹ From Dr. Frank Pollard's sermon, "God Does Judge Us"

Now because we are all guilty of sin, and without excuse, we see another truth in this text of Scripture that is even more ominous:

IV. ALL SINNERS WILL PERISH UPON GOD'S JUDGMENT

What will happen to the person who has sinned, even without having received the revealed law of God? Paul says in v.12 they shall “perish” (*apollumi*). That word “perish” refers to a state of ruin and destruction. This is the same word that is used in John 3:16, “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (NKJV). Such sinners will spend eternity separated from God. Jesus warned us to “fear Him who is able to destroy [*apollumi*] both soul and body in hell” (Matthew 10:28; cf. Luke 4:34). Jesus made it clear that to perish does not mean to be annihilated. It is an ongoing state of ruin.

Sir Thomas Scott, former President of the British Opera was heard saying upon his death bed, “Until this very moment I thought there was no God, neither Hell. Now I know and feel that both are real, and I am on my way to ... the righteous judgment of the Almighty.”¹²

While it is true that every condemned sinner will perish, not all will perish to the same degree. The less exposure a person has had to the Word of God, the less they will suffer for their sin. Their ruin will be commensurate with their lack of knowledge.

On the other hand, the unsaved person who has known of the law of God, and especially the gospel, will face a more severe judgment. This is also brought out in v.9, “tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first” There are a number of Scriptures that teach varying degrees of punishment that will follow God's Judgment Day.

Jesus pronounced woe on the cities of Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum because He performed miracles there and yet they didn't repent. He concluded that the Day of Judgment will be more tolerable for Tyre, Sidon, and even Sodom than for them (Matt. 11:21-24; cf. Luke 10:14). Why? Because those Jewish cities knew much more, so they would bear more responsibility. God is fair and just. The most severe judgment is reserved for those who know the most yet reject it.¹³

In light of this truth, those who live in the Bible belt of America should be all the more diligent to make sure you are saved. Surely you do not want to stand before Jesus, the Judge of all mankind, and hear Him say, “Depart from me into everlasting destruction.” It is not God's will or desire that you perish. Yet Heb. 2:3 warns, “How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation....”

You may be thinking that God is too strict and judgmental. So I want to conclude my message on a more positive note and share with you one more truth:

V. THERE IS ONE WAY TO ESCAPE GOD'S JUDGMENT

Paul's point in this whole section of Romans is not primarily to make us feel guilty. It is to show that *all* people need a Savior. The Jew needs a Savior. The heathen in some remote region needs a Savior. The whole scheme of redemption presupposes that man is a fallen being,

¹² From the *Midnight Call* magazine.

¹³ Luke 12:47-48 says, “And that servant who knew his master's will but did not get ready or act according to his will, will receive a severe beating. But the one who did not know, and did what deserved a beating, will receive a light beating. Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required....” (cf. also Mark 12:40).

and our sin condemns us. Is there any hope? Is there any way out of this predicament? Don't put your hope on how well you have kept God's law. Don't put your hope in being able to plead ignorance. Instead, put your hope in the gospel of Jesus Christ! In v.16 Paul refers to the gospel that *he* embraced and preached. He mentions Jesus Christ as the Judge. Yet He is also the Savior! Jesus Christ said in John 14:6, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me." The only way to bypass the Judgment Day that I have been speaking about is to confess and repent of your sins. God knows of every sin you have committed. Go ahead and confess them! Then place your faith in Jesus Christ, who died on the cross to pay for every sin you have committed. John 3:18 says, "He who believes in Him is not condemned...." Romans 8:1 says, "There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus...." Romans 8:33-34 says, "Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us." If you trust in Christ as Savior, you *will* get a pass from the Judgment of God that I have been speaking of, for your sins have already been judged at the cross!

Conclusion: There is no excuse that anyone can offer on the Day of Judgment. Ignorance of God's written law is no excuse. Besides, no one in my audience can even try to use that defense. You cannot escape the Day of Judgment unless you settle out of court right now, and trust in Christ as your Savior. I don't want you to perish. See yourself as you really are, caught up in the waves of sin on life's sea. You will surely perish if you do not grab hold of the life preserver that I am throwing out to you. Turn from your sin. Believe in Jesus, and you will be saved.

Sources: Donald Grey Barnhouse, *Expositions of Bible Doctrines Taking the Epistle to the Romans as a Point of Departure*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952); Hershel Hobbs, *Romans: A Verse by Verse Study* (Waco: Word Books, 1977); H.A. Ironside, *Lectures on Romans* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers 1928); John MacArthur, Jr., *Without Excuse: Principles of God's Judgment: Study Notes on Romans 2:1-16* (Panorama City, CA: Word of Grace Communications, 1990); Leon McBeth, *Exegetical & Practical Commentary on Romans* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1937); J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 4 (Pasadena, CA: Thru The Bible Radio, 1983); Douglas J. Moo, *The NIV Application Commentary: Romans* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000); John Murray, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1965); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [Ver. 5:30] (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2017); a few notes from Dr. Frank Pollard's sermon on The Baptist Hour, "God Does Judge Us" (12/16/94); A.T. Robertson, *New Testament Word Pictures*, Vol. IV (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1931, accessed through *Online Bible*); Charles H. Spurgeon, *12 Sermons on the Second Coming of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1973 reprint), 75-86; Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Right: Romans* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1977); Kenneth S. Wuest's *Word Studies From the Greek New Testament*, Vol. 1, Romans (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1955). Other sources listed in the footnotes. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Crossway, Good News Publishers, 2001).

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