

Romans 2:14-16

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When people without knowledge of the scripture follow the teaching of scripture, it validates that God has written His law within the heart of man.

Again Paul emphasizes that every human has the knowledge of right and wrong within their hearts, even Gentiles who have no knowledge of the scriptures: *For when Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves* (v 14).

Paul camped on this notion of human moral instinct in chapter 1 and will continue to emphasize it while proving that the “righteous shall live by faith” (Romans 1:16-17; 9:30–10:13). Righteousness (or a just life) comes by believing God’s ways are for our best. and doing what we know in our hearts is right. When people without knowledge of the scripture instinctively follow the teaching of scripture, it validates that God has written His law on the human heart.

In the classic book *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis makes the point that all cultures have the same values. For instance, all cultures value loyalty, courage, and truthfulness. They may define the values differently; loyalty to one tribe will be considered disloyalty to another. Even the Mafia has a strict moral code within its own ranks.

The fact that humans twist and pervert these values only further demonstrates the point that the values are implanted in the human soul in the first place. Not only has God written His law upon the heart of each human, God has placed within each human life a *conscience* that judges us. *They* (Gentiles) *show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them* (v 15).

Since Paul’s primary objective is to counter slanderous allegations made by competing Jewish “authorities” (Romans 3:8), this assertion would have shock value. Not only does Paul claim the Jewish authorities hypocritically fail to follow their own rules (2:1) but here he claims that Gentiles *show the work of the Law written on their hearts*. In other words, “You Jewish fellows judging everyone else don’t follow the law, but the Gentiles do.”

The Greek word translated *conscience* here is used the same way we use the word in English. Our *conscience* is our internal judge. Here are some things the Bible says about our conscience:

- It can convict us properly (John 8:9).
- It can give us confidence to resist improper human authority (Acts 23:1, 24:16).
- It can demonstrate God as Creator (this verse, 2:15).
- It can commune with the Holy Spirit and give confirmation (Romans 9:1).
- It can bring upon us a form of wrath via guilt if not clean (Romans 13:5).
- It can be defiled (1 Corinthians 8:7; Titus 1:15) through our perspective of our behavior.

- It can be weak by having a misguided perspective shaped by culture or other factors, and accordingly be defiled by actions that are not wrong in and of themselves (1 Corinthians 8:10–12).
- It can be protected by avoiding certain kinds of knowledge, and is something we should be aware of protecting in fellow believers with weaker consciences (1 Corinthians 10:25–29).
- It can be seared, so as to cease being pricked by wrong behavior (1 Timothy 4:2). This is likely part and parcel of the progression of wrath set forth in Romans 1:24–
- It can be cleansed from the effects of sin by the cleansing blood of Jesus for believers when we approach God's throne of grace in prayer by faith, asking forgiveness (Hebrews 9:14; 10:22).

Paul speaks of the conscience bearing witness on the *day when, according to my gospel, God will judge the secrets of men through Christ Jesus* (v 16). Apparently, part of each person's accountability at Jesus's judgment seat will be based on the extent to which they adhered to the voice of their conscience.

The Greek word translated *secrets* referring to *secrets of men* that will be judged by God is "*kryptos*," which is a root of the English word "cryptic." "Kryptos" is also translated "hidden," as in Matthew 6:6 which says God is hidden. The evidence of God is all around us as we have seen many times already in Romans (Romans 1:20). But God is not physically visible.

The judgment of God will not be based simply on what other humans see, but what is done by us in *secret* ("*kryptos*") or "out of view." This concept is seen frequently in the gospels (see Matthew 6:18; Matthew 10:24; Mark 4:22; Luke 8:17; Luke 12:12; and John 7:4, for example).

The message addressed to Jewish believers in Hebrews 4 expands this concept to make clear that our thoughts and intents will also be judged and laid completely bare before God:

"For the Word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account."
(Hebrews 4:12-13)

Once again Paul asserts that the "good news" or "*gospel*" he preaches goes far beyond simply how to be born into the family of God by receiving His grace through faith. It extends to living His grace through faith in our daily lives.

This explains why Paul desired to visit Rome and preach the "good news" to a group of believers whose faith was already being declared throughout the entire world (Romans 1:8); the gospel is "good news" for our entire lives.

Every believer must give an account of his or her deeds in the Day of Judgment. Then our actions, and the intent behind our actions will be judged. Every good thing we did for others in service and obedience to God will be rewarded, not a single thing will go unnoticed. This is indeed good news.

Biblical Text

14 For when Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves, 15 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, 16 on the day when, according to my gospel, God will judge the secrets of men through Christ Jesus.