

THE GENTILES OF ROMANS CHAPTER TWO

Rom.2:12-15

Ed Dye

I. Introduction

1. The text concerning the Gentiles of Rom.2:14,15 actually begins at V.12, with Vv.13-15 being parenthetical as an explanation of V.12.
2. These verses are a part of Paul's argument from Ch.1 through Ch.3 establishing that both Jews and Gentiles have sinned in violation of law and are in need of believing and obeying the gospel of Christ in order to be saved from past sins and have the hope of eternal life.
3. Our interest in this study, however, is limited to the Gentiles, especially what is said of them in Vv.14,15.
4. V.12a is referring to these Gentiles when it says: "For as many as have sinned without law shall also perish without law."
5. V.12b is referring to the Jews when it says: "and as many as have sinned in the law shall be judged (condemned) by the law."
6. V.16 refers to the time when God shall judge both of those referred to in V.12 and by whom he will judge them.
7. V.13, the beginning of the parenthetical section of Vv.13-15, offers the reason and explanation for the statements of V.12, and applies the principle to both Jews and Gentiles.
8. Then Vv.14,15 deal specifically with the Gentiles whose case we are considering, and which have given no little trouble to Bible students, including brethren in Christ.
9. What is the true explanation of Vv.14,15? What do the several different expressions found in these two verses mean? How do we explain them in harmony with the context, both immediate and remote?
10. This is the burden of our present study of the Gentiles of Rom.2:14,15.
11. We shall pursue the study under a series of pertinent questions to help focus our attention on the subject.

II. DISCUSSION

- A. **Does the expression of V.12: "For as many as have sinned without law," which refers to the Gentiles, mean they had no law? That they had no revealed law from God, as some claim? That they were not under law to God?**

1. We answer with a simple but emphatic “No!” We know they had law, revealed law. How do we know this?
2. We know they were guilty of sin. For a long list of their sins is enumerated in Rom.1:18-32, for which they were worthy of death. Cf. 2:12; 1Cor.5:1; 6:9-11; Eph.4:17-19; 2:1-5,11-13.
3. Furthermore, there was sin and death in the world because of sin before the law of Moses, Rom.5:14.
4. We also know that sin is a transgression of law, God’s law; that it is lawlessness, 1Jno.3:4.
5. We know, too, that without law there is no transgression, and that sin is not imputed when there is no law, Rom.4:15; 5:13.
6. Balaam, a gentile, sinned, Num.22:34 (Chs.22-24).
7. The Ninevites, who were gentiles, sinned, Jonah 3; Mt.12:41.
8. Adam and Eve had law and sinned, Gen.2,3.
9. The Ante-diluvians sinned under law, Gen.6.
10. Noah and family had law, Gen.6-9.
11. Sodom and Gomorrha sinned under law, Gen.19; Jude 7.
12. Even angels sinned under law, 2Pet.2:4; Jude 3.
13. Rom.1:20,21,28 say God’s will was revealed unto the Gentiles; that they (Gentiles as a whole) knew God; but that as a whole they did not choose to follow God, refused to retain God in their knowledge; therefore, for their sins, they were held accountable; that they were without excuse for their sins.
14. Since the Gentiles were never under the law of Moses, and prior to the coming of Christ and the N.T. did not have a written law, or a written covenant, some have raised the question: “Where did this knowledge of God and his will originate?” Answer:
 - a. God’s law for man, it must be remembered, was revealed and impressed into the minds of men and women several thousand years before the written law of Moses was given to the Jews, even from the time of Adam and Eve, Gen.1-3.
 - b. Paul notes in Rom.5:13 that before the law of Moses “sin was in the world,” and adds that “sin is not imputed when there is no law.”
 - c. God spoke continually to the human race beginning with Adam and Eve, Gen.2,3.
 - d. He spoke to Cain and Abel, Gen.4. Cf. Heb.11:4; Rom.10:17..
 - e. He spoke to Enoch, Gen.5:21-24. Cf. Jude 14,15.
 - f. To Noah, who himself was a preacher of righteousness to the world, Gen.6-9; 2Pet.2:5.

- g. He spoke to Abraham, Abimelech, Pharoah, Nebuchadnezzar.
- h. God spoke to Balaam, a gentile, during the time of the law of Moses, Num.22-24.
- i. All of this shows how and why God's law, God's revealed will, was not totally absent among the Gentiles before the law of Moses, during the law of Moses, and/or before the time of Jesus Christ and the N.T.

B. Does the expression of V.14: “For when the Gentiles...do by nature the things contained in the law” mean that God created man, including the Gentiles, with an innate, inborn, inherent, instinctive sense of “rights” and “wrongs”? That all men are created with a “natural” sense of moral absolutes, and thus, by that natural, inborn, instinctive sense, know specific “rights” and “wrongs” from birth, and that this is what “do by nature” means in reference to the Gentiles in V.14?

1. We are forced to answer with a simple but emphatic negative based on the following scriptures from both Testaments.
 - a. O.T.: Jer.10:23; Prov.14:12; Psa.119:6,7.
 - b. N.T.: Heb.5:11-14; Phil.4:8,9; 1Tim.1:19,20; 2Tim.3:14; Heb.8:11.
2. Therefore, “do by nature” cannot mean, as some claim:
 - a. That these Gentiles did what they “would recognize as proper and right, even if they never had a revelation from God.”
 - b. That these Gentiles did what they did “wholly unenlightened by divine truth.”
 - c. By natural “forces born in us,” (Beet, 77).
 - d. By “innate moral instinct,” (Godet,123).
3. This can't be. For it is one thing to be born with a capacity for obedience to God, a moral capacity, and responsible to God; but it is another to be born with an “innate, inherent, moral instinct,” or born with an inherent knowledge of how to express that moral capacity.
 - a. Adam, for instance, had the capacity for obedience with regard to the tree of knowledge of good and evil before God told him not to eat of it, or before God revealed to him his will regarding eating of the tree.
 - b. Having the capacity or even “instinct” to obey God is one thing, but knowing what is right and wrong and what to do and not to do without revelation of the facts is another.

- c. No person was ever born knowing God's laws of "do's" and "don't's". even Jesus by emptying himself, taking upon himself the form of a servant, and being made in the likeness of man, had to "increase in wisdom," Lk.2:52.
4. "By nature" can mean, depending on the context, as in Eph.2:3, "a mode of feeling and acting which by long habit has become nature" (Thayer, 660).
- a. Habitual practice; sinful habits and practices, Col.1:21; 3:7.
 - b. Eph.2:3 speaks of what they were on the basis of what they constantly thought and did. Their "nature" was what they were. Cf. Eph.4:17-19.
 - c. This, of course, can't be its meaning in Rom.2:14.
5. Jim McGuiggan in his commentary on Rom.2:14 makes the following excellent comments on the meaning of "by nature":
- a. "Bear in mind we must not confuse moral capacity with knowledge or God's commands. Before the laws are made known there is a moral capacity.
 - b. "Being made in the image of God (obviously) enables us, capacitates us for fellowship with God in harmony with his will, but there is no biblical reason to equate that with specific knowledge of specific commandments of God as to right and wrong, as to what to do and what not to do in the absence of God revealing it to us.
 - c. "It seems to me that Paul's use of the term 'by nature' in Rom.2:27 is the answer to the question.
 - (1) "There he speaks of Gentiles as the 'uncircumcision which is by nature'.
 - (2) "Obviously, Paul here does not have the mere piece of flesh in mind when he speaks of 'uncircumcision'. He means a Gentile as opposed to a Jew. Cf. Eph.2:11, ejd.
 - (3) "Jews are born uncircumcised but due to descent, environment, and divine law, he becomes circumcised. While the Gentile is born uncircumcised and remains to because no law requires otherwise.
 - (4) "Thus one who is 'uncircumcised by nature' is one who has not chosen the Jewish way; one who by birth, upbringing, way of life and law, is not part of Israel. Cf. Eph.2:11-14, ejd.

- (5) “This it seems to me has to be the meaning of the expression in Rom.2:14, ‘...Gentiles...do by nature the things contained in the law...’”
- (a) “Gentiles, distinct from the Jew, outside the Mosaic covenant, work to keep the things of the law.
- (b) “Gentile as a community of people distinct from the Jewish people. When Gentiles, as a community of people distinct from the Jew; when Gentiles who haven’t been instructed by the Jews; when Gentiles who are not proselytes of the Jews; when such people, without outside interference, just the way they are, do the things of the law, what do we know about them? **THEY HAVE AND ARE UNDER LAW!** There can be no excuse for them. They do have law and of course they have broken it and are under its condemnation and in need of the Gospel of Christ in order to be saved.”

6. “By nature” means nature without written law, and not necessarily wholly unenlightened by divine truth; for we know God had revealed his will to them from Adam onward, of which they had knowledge, Rom.1:21,25,27,28,31,32.

C. Is this text speaking of all Gentiles (of Gentiles in general), such as those of Rom.1:18-32, who, among other things, had refused to retain God in their knowledge (V.28), who worshipped the creature rather than the Creator (V.25), or, is he speaking of those, such as Cornelius, who were worshippers of God, and yet were guilty of sin and in need of the gospel to saved them?

1. Obviously, the Gentiles of Rom.2:14,15 are contrasted to those of Rom.1:18-32 who rejected God, refused to retained God in their knowledge, who glorified him not as God, who worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, and who knowing the things they committed were worthy of death, not only did them, but took pleasure in others who did the same!

D. What is the time frame to be considered in the discussion of Rom.2:12-15? Is it both before and when the law of Moses was still binding and when the Gentiles were not under it? Or, is it, that even this long after Pentecost Paul is yet teaching that Gentiles were still under a “law in the heart”, as some claim; i.e., that they are still without law, or not subjects

of the N.T. law of Christ until they come to believe in him and obey the gospel? Is he referring to the time before or after the cross of Christ when he speaks here of the case of the Gentiles, their sin, and their need of the gospel of Christ to save them?

1. V.12 indicates the time frame under consideration to be that of the time before the cross of Christ, the whole time from Adam onward prior to the cross of Christ.
2. There Paul uses the **aorist** tense (the simply past tense) and speaks of those who “sinned in (under) the law”. Since the law was annulled at the cross, Paul is discussing the condition of the Jews under the law of Moses prior to the gospel age.
3. How, then, when he uses the same tense and discusses Gentiles who “sinned without (the) law”, can one conclude that he is discussing Gentiles after the cross and in the gospel age?
4. Paul clearly speaks of a time before the cross of Christ when the law of Moses was binding on the Jews, but not on the Gentiles, who are said to have, at that time, “sinned without the law,” i.e., the law of Moses. This is why the Gentiles need the gospel they same as do the Jews.
5. The time frame will not allow the conclusion that Paul in this text could be limiting what he says to Gentiles who lived after the law of Moses was given, or during the time it was in force, and thus by it would have learned what was right and wrong. For V.12 of necessity includes all who lived before the law of Moses was given, and who had sinned in violation of the will or the law of God revealed to them, of which they had knowledge and by which they were bound.

E. Does the expression of V.14: “...these, having not the law, are a law unto themselves”, mean that they made up their own laws and commandments and lived by them? That they became a law unto themselves? Does it mean they these Gentiles had no revealed law from God, and thus made their own laws by which they worshipped and served God before and during the time of the law of Moses? Does it mean they were their own law-maker and law-giver? Thus their own judge and jury governed solely by their own consciences, because they knew by some kind of “natural religion” or “innate, inborn traits” or by “forces born in us”?

1. We know the answer to this is an emphatic “No”! – because they were guilty of sin against both God and man, and sin is not imputed where

there is no law, for without law there is no transgression, and sin is a transgression of God's law, Rom.4:15; 5:13; 1Jno.3:4.

2. He means, without the Jews and their Law of Moses, the Gentiles or the nations had their own law.
3. God hasn't invested in man the power or the authority to make his own laws.
4. These people, without help from the Jewish system, bind themselves to a system of both positive and moral law because God had bound that upon them in an oral manner rather than a written law, such as the Law of Moses.
5. Though not a written-down code such as the Jews had, written on tables of stone, and even in a book, they obviously had it in the minds. And there is only one way it got there since they were not born with in their minds and hearts.
6. If Paul means that the Gentiles knew this by some kind of "natural religion", then he contradicts all he said about them in other places.
 - a. Should the reply be that people crush and bruise the knowledge of God that is born in them so that they can't recognize God's laws within them, the replay to that surely would be that these Gentiles had not lost the alleged inner moral knowledge.
 - b. This whole view of some kind of inborn moral knowledge of right and wrong on the part of the Gentiles is completely contrary to Paul's argument in Rom.1-3 concerning them and their relationship to God.
 - c. One thing is clear, if people learn God's laws pertaining to them from rational deduction from divinely revealed will, as did these Gentles, then they do not learn it from inborn moral knowledge!

F. What is meant by the expression in V.15: "...the law written in their hearts"?

1. They "show the works of the law written in their hearts".
2. This, likewise, denotes meaning other than some inborn, inherent, instinctive sense or quality or inherent knowledge of right and wrong.
3. These works (the work of the law written in their hearts) (which God required of them) were written in their hearts because God had revealed his will to them – that which he wanted them to have and know.
4. "The expression, 'written on their heart' is – as Moses E. Lard says – metaphorical, and signifies not only that they knew certain things to be right, but felt impelled by conscience to do them."

5. Thus, it is clear that the Gentiles could come to knowledge of “the eternal principles” (which were also a part of the law of Moses) even without studying the law of Moses (a written law).
6. When Gentiles had this knowledge and had the right attitude toward God and the obligations set out in God’s law to them (of which they had knowledge), then it could be said that the obligations of the law (i.e., “the work of the law”) were “written in their hearts” i.e., they knew (had revealed unto them), certain things to be right and they were urged by their consciences to obey or meet these obligations. These obligations are constituent elements of the Patriarchal law, the law of Moses, as well as the law of Christ under the N.T.
7. Furthermore, even the Jews, who had a written law, were instructed concerning those written precepts: “Write them on the table of thy heart,” Prov.3:3; 7:3.
8. Also, Jeremiah prophesied the coming of a new covenant that would not be written at birth on the hearts of Christians. Yet Jehovah said of it, “I will put my laws in their inward parts, and in their hearts will I write it,” Jer.31:33.
 - a. That this was fulfilled when the gospel was preached, believed and obeyed by men, and when it brought forth the fruit of righteousness, is evident in the N.T. revelation, Ac.2:36-38,41; Heb.8:6-13.
 - b. Truth would be “written in their hearts” by the preaching of the gospel when they heard it, believed it, and obeyed it – not by birth!

G. What is the function of conscience? Thus what is meant by the expression of V.15: “their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the mean while accusing or else excusing one another”?

1. One’s conscience is not the standard by which we determine what is right or wrong, nor is it the standard by which we are to be judged; but it is that within us that judges us by the standard of right and wrong.
2. However, the conscience only makes the proper judgment by the proper standard when one has been instructed in or taught the proper standard.
3. Therefore, one may have a pure or clear conscience while engaged in that which is sinful because that one honestly thinks he is doing right. Cf. Saul of Tarsus.
4. But one can never do what he believes to be wrong without violating his conscience, thus being accused or condemned by his conscience.

5. God has so created man that man sits in judgment on his own actions, either accusing or else excusing himself based on what he has been taught and believes to be right or wrong.
6. Some additional thoughts on what the conscience is and does.
 - a. When we use our mind to reason, we call that the “intellect”.
 - b. When we engage our mind in “mulling things over” we call that “meditation”.
 - c. When we use the mind to recall, we call that “remembering” or “memory”.
 - (1) These are not different compartments of the mind (though different areas of the brain may be used in these processes) – they are differing functions of the mind.
 - d. When the mind is at work weighing evidence and making arguments, etc., we call that “reasoning” and when the mind renders a verdict on our conduct we call the **“conscience”**. For the conscience is the mind functioning as a **judge**.
 - e. The mind renders a judgment for or against, depending on the standard accepted by the intellect.
 - (1) Change the standard and the mind will render a favorable judgment on something it formerly condemned.
 - f. The conscience doesn’t determine what is right or wrong.
 - (1) But a person using his or her mind views the evidence (or accepts the testimony uncritically) and adopts the standard.
 - (2) As long as that standard holds sway the “conscience” will abide by it.

III. CONCLUSION

1. There has never been a time when any man or any people on earth or an angel in heaven didn’t have law or were not under law to God, and or accountable to God on the basis of revealed law.
2. Paul in these verses talks of the Gentiles accusing or else excusing themselves; but he doesn’t speak of justification. Cf. Rom.3:23; Gal.23:22.
3. All of this is said to show that the Gentles indeed had law, were aware of it, and couldn’t plead ignorance or an excuse for their sins.
4. They needed the gospel of Christ in order to be saved. The sooner they could see that and obey it the better off they would be!