

What if God Judges Each of us By Only what We Each Know?

Will We Thereby be Vindicated Before God? (Romans 2:1).

As we survey the broad range of human experience, we must surely notice that the concept of being held accountable to keeping moral codes or standards is an imperative for not only *religious* communities, but is the expectation of all societies across the world and down through history, be they religious or secular. Human communities cannot persist over time in the absence of rules of law and the enforcement of such statutes by means of punishing the transgressors of these codes. Indeed, orderly societies demand either that its members agree on a set of principles that are self-imposed, or that such members be ruled arbitrarily by an externally-imposed despotic leadership that forcibly rids itself of detractors. In summary, the notion of a harmonious society that entails autonomous free-will agents immune from accountability by an overseer, is illusory and also conceptually incoherent. Arguably the greatest philosopher in history (non-theist Aristotle) affirms this thesis by famously stating,

“Virtue is within our power, and so, too, is vice ... If doing and not doing good and evil actions are within our power, and if this is what constitutes being good or bad, then being good or bad is something within our power....”

“Individuals and law-givers alike speak in favor of truth of this view. Men punish and condemn those who do bad acts ... But they honor people who do fine things, their purpose being to encourage the latter and to prevent the former.”

*“We punish [people] for the very fact of being in ignorance **if** a man seems **responsible** for his own ignorance. Hence, the fine for offenses committed by drunks is double; after all, he can decide not to get drunk, and it is **this** that causes his ignorance. There is punishment too, when people are in ignorance of a point of law that should be known and is not difficult to know.”*

*“[Similarly] people themselves are responsible for [their carelessness] through living disorderly lives; they are responsible for being unjust or profligate, the former through evildoing, the latter through drinking and so on ... Not knowing that dispositions are attained by actually doing things is a sign of a complete **ignoramus**.”¹*

At bottom then, any suggestion that the concept of judging peoples' deeds is motivated by only *religious* sensitivities is utterly false. This reality renders the belief of popular culture that the Creator of heaven and earth (God) has no legitimate authority to judge His creatures, as ludicrous. It is one thing to doubt God's existence. But it is intellectually absurd to dismiss His existence on the basis of imagining that the very conception of a judging God represents an archaic, incoherent, and irrelevant worldview.

At the same time, questions are raised as to whether the God of the Bible would, or even could be, just in His adjudication of the world. Most specifically, concerns are frequently expressed, while objections are raised, against the notion that people will be sent to hell on grounds over which they have no control concerning their ignorance of the central tenets of the Gospel. I sincerely share this concern since it is true that, despite the missionary efforts over recent millennia, multitudes of people through no fault of their own still have not heard a substantial presentation of the Gospel of Christ. Now, one way to address this concern is to appeal to Scripture itself which states, “*Not many of you*

¹ H.H. Joachim, tr. Renford Bambrough, ed. Philosophy of Aristotle. “Ethics” Book III. (Mentor, 1963), pp. 323-4. Boldface mine.

*should become teachers...for you know that we who teach will be judged with **greater** strictness*" (James 3:1—boldface mine), which implies that God is mindful of distinctions between degrees of opportunity to know certain things. Psalm 98:9 assures us that God's judgment will entail *righteousness* and *equity*. Furthermore, the message of the Gospel, which expresses God's love in giving His only begotten Son for the salvation of the world, discloses a God of such depth of compassion and character as to be both trustworthy and understanding in His judgment. Yet at the same time, this gift of love implies a two-edged sword by demonstrating the weight of the gravity that God places on sin. Redemption from our sins cost God the death of His only Son! Surely this shows that He doesn't consider sin a trivial matter!

Yet when it is suggested that God only judges according to what we know (which may be the case) it would be naïve to imagine that anyone is left off the hook! Even the *secularist* thinker Aristotle (who, as such, didn't rest his views on revelation) argued that people who are ignorant by their design (deliberately) are not exonerated for not knowing what they could have known if they bothered to get their facts of a given concern, straight. The Apostle John stated this aspect of willful self-deception in 1 John 1:7 by saying, "*If we say we are in fellowship with [God] while we walk in darkness [by avoiding His Word], we are lying and not living according to the truth.*" Christ Jesus put it this way, "*This is the judgment, that light came into the world, but people loved the darkness instead of the light*" (John 3:18).

One can validly argue that many people have not had even the *opportunity* to read or hear Scripture. How God will judge such people is a valid question that we can leave in the hands of a trustworthy Redeemer (Pet. 4:19). Yet in Rom. chs. 1-2, St. Paul writes of two additional aspects of God's convicting law that must confront every person, whether they are acquainted with Scripture **or not**. Firstly, he addresses the testimony of nature with respect to the question of whether it is caused by an intelligent creator (God), or merely the aftermath of immoral, finite mythical concoctions.² The very first sin St. Paul addresses in his noted treatise, *The Epistle to the Romans* (1:18-20) is *suppressing* truth, both in general, and facts from nature that indicate a Creator. St. Paul states under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit that we are responsible for how we process that testimony. So, he warns against habitually shoving distasteful truths to the side by cleaving to other "gods" that feed our self-centeredness and sinful lusts. Who, anywhere, can say that we have never suppressed inconvenient facts?

Secondly, in the first half of Romans 2, St. Paul addresses the chronic transgression of imposing onto other people a standard of expectations which we habitually fail to keep ourselves (2:1f). Paul is not appealing to a *specific* agenda here, but instead to a *category* of sins that apply equally to not only the "Bible-carrying" believer (2:17-29), but to the secularist who is dismissive of any *religious* code at all. What this means is that the latter will be liable for violating, not specifically God's written standard, but instead their *own* moral code. Put more simply, one will be held accountable for the sin of breaking the *golden rule* just as surely as for violating the moral law which God has instilled into the heart of every human (2:12-16). The bottom line is that, although no one knows everything, even though some do know more than others, ALL people EVERYWHERE KNOW TOO MUCH about the expectations of truth and morality to imagine being judged guiltless before God who sent His only Son precisely in order to bear our sins on the cross. In any case, what we know in our own hearts to be morally required, yet we fail to keep, should tell us that we need the salvation God urges us to receive (John 1:12; 3:16, 5:24; 7:37). Do not neglect this gift by relying on your own "righteousness." We all know too much for that!

Pastor Gary Jensen, ©May 1, 2020, Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Berlin, PA

² E.g. <https://www.ancient.eu/article/225/enuma-elish---the-babylonian-epic-of-creation--fu/>