

What if We Will Be Judged by *Only* What We Know?

"Therefore you have no excuse oh person whoever you are..." (Romans 2:1).

As we survey the broad range of human experience, we must surely notice that the notion of being held accountable to keeping a moral code or standard 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 their codes. Indeed any society of a kind that is orderly demands either that its members agree on a set of principles that are self-imposed, or that such inhabitants be ruled arbitrarily by an externally-imposed despotic leadership that rids itself of detractors. In summary, the concept 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 my 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 the judgment of peoples' deeds is motivated by only *religious* sensitivities is utterly false. This reality renders the belief of popular culture that the notion that the Creator of heaven and earth (God) should have no authority to judge His creatures is ludicrous. It is one thing to doubt His existence. But it is intellectually invalid to dismiss His existence on the alleged grounds that the concept of God as judge represents an archaic and unnecessary world view.

At the same time, questions are raised as to whether the God of the Bible would or even could be just in His judgment of the world. Most specifically, concerns are being expressed and objections raised against the notion that people will be sent to hell on grounds over which they have no control for their ignorance of the central tenets of the Gospel. I sincerely share this concern since it is true that, despite the missionary efforts of recent millennia, multitudes of people through no fault of their own have not heard a substantial presentation of the Gospel of Christ. One way to address this concern is from the Scriptures themselves which state, *"Not many of you should become teachers...for you know*

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

that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness" (James 3:1), implying that God is mindful of distinctions between levels 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 entails God's activity in giving His only begotten Son for the salvation of the world indicates a God of such depth in love and character that He can be trusted to be fair in His judgment. At the same time this gift of love implies a two-edged sword in that it also suggests the weight of the gravity God places on sin. Redemption from our sins cost God the death of His only Son! Surely He does not consider sin a trivial matter!

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 we are left off the hook! Even the *secularist* (who did not rest his convictions on biblical revelation) thinker Aristotle argued that people who are ignorant by 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 same aspect of feeble self-deception in 1 John 1:7, "*If we say we are in fellowship with [God] while we are walking in darkness [by avoiding the Word], we are lying and not living according to the truth.*" Christ Jesus said 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 multitudes 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 the Redeemer of all the earth. Yet in Romans 1-2 the Apostle Paul writes of two additional aspects of God's convicting law that must confront every person, whether they are acquainted with Scripture or not. First of all he addresses the testimony of nature with respect to the question of whether it is the result of an intelligent creator (God), or instead the work of warring-mythological concoctions.² The very first sin Paul addresses in his noted treatise of his *Epistle to the Romans* (1:18-20) is the *deliberate* suppression of the relevant facts pertaining to the creation. In this context St. Paul is writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit that we are responsible for how we personally process that testimony. His warning is that humans habitually shove inconvenient truths to the side in favor of seeking other "gods" which will feed our personal, sinful lusts. Who anywhere can possibly say we have not suppressed inconvenient facts?

Secondly, in the first half of Romans 2, St. Paul addresses the chronic transgression of imposing a standard of expectations onto other people which we habitually fail to keep ourselves (2:1). Paul is not appealing to a *specific* agenda here, but instead to a category of sins that apply equally not only to the "Bible-carrying" believer (2:17-29), but to the secularist who is dismissive of any *religious* or moral code. What this means is that this latter person will be liable for violating not specifically God's written standard, but instead one's *own* moral code. Put more simply, one can be judged guilty for the sin of breaking the *golden rule* just as surely as violating the moral law which God has instilled in the heart of every human being (2:12-16). The bottom line is that although no one knows everything, while some people do know more than others do, ALL people EVERYWHERE KNOW TOO MUCH about the expectations of truth and morality to imagine being judged to be without sin before God who sent His only Son precisely to bear our sins on the cross. In any case what we know in our own hearts to be morally required, yet fail to keep, should tell us we need the salvation He urges us to receive (John 1:12; 3:16, 5:24; 7:37). Do not neglect this gift in favor of pleading your own righteousness. You know too much!

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