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Humanity Has Knowledge of Right and Wrong without the Law.

(2013)

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Humanity has Knowledge of Right and Wrong without the Law.

Topics.

- Gentiles, who do not have the law by nature, do what the law requires.
- By nature there is in the mind and heart a light of right and wrong.
- The conscience guides by accusing or excusing.
- Jacob knew he had wronged Esau (long before the law came).
- Joseph knew it was wrong to take a man's wife (long before the law came).
- Ungodly people had prisons (long before the law came).
- Joseph's brothers knew it was wrong to kill (long before the law came).
- Midwives knew it was wrong to kill babies (long before the law came).
- Pharaoh knew he sinned against God (long before the law came).

INTRODUCTION: the first section of this study shows that whether a man or woman believes in God or not they know right from wrong and that their conscience acts as a guide accusing or excusing right and wrong behavior.

The second section shows from Old Testament Scriptures that men and woman knew right from wrong long before God gave the Ten Commandments to Israel.

Gentiles, Who Do Not have the Law by Nature Do what the Law Requires.

Romans 2:14-15 ----- ¹⁴For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. ¹⁵They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them

The law in focus here is not the ceremonial law, but the Ten Commandments Gentiles do not have the ceremonial law written on their hearts the law in focus embraces the following six commandments concerning man: -

1. Honour your father and mother.
2. Do not murder.
3. Do not commit adultery.
4. Do not steal.
5. Do not bear false witness.
6. You shall not covet anything that is your neighbour's (Exod. 20:3-17).

When a man asked Jesus, "What must he do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus said: -

- You know the commandments: 'Do not murder, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother' and the man with great possessions said to him, "Teacher, all these I have kept from my youth" (Luke 18:18-23) (Mark 10:17-20).

Here all commandments are mentioned concerning man except for the command: -

- You shall not covet your neighbour's house; you shall not covet your neighbour's wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbour's (Exod. 20:17).

This is because coveting is an internal sin in the mind and heart, it means to set the heart upon, to desire, long for or lust after (rightfully or otherwise) it carries the idea of holding onto or desiring more than one has or needs (i.e., the practice of greediness) and embraces those who live a lifestyle of unlawful sex, orgies adulteries and sexual immorality to fulfil their own lust and to anyone whose heart is craving after and worshipping and exalting another person as a god (an Idolater).

By implication covet: can refer to those who are not honest and true and who use pressure or coercion to force or entice others to fulfil their own selfish need or ambition and to anyone who intentionally deprives somebody of money or property by dishonest means because they are greedy and eager for gain. The commandment, "You shall not covet" exposes human selfishness, pride, ego, lust, and greed etc. It reveals the sinful dysfunctions and aberrations that are imbedded within our fallen corrupted human nature that hinder us from attaining to the perfection of God's Holy law.

It exposes our self-centredness in our desires for more than we need, our excessive avariciousness toward materialism, our overeating of tasty foods the craving to be important or esteemed, our sensual and lustful thoughts, the desire to be rich and have abundantly more than we need etc. The commandment, "You shall not covet" shines a spotlight on our self-interest, it highlight our lack of willingness to give to those less fortunate and those in need, it expose our degrading, resentful, bitter and jealous thoughts of others and the list goes on.

In summary the command, "You shall not covet" embraces all those attitudes and thoughts that dwell within our members that are contrary to the law of love and the Holiness of God which means the entire human race is held guilty before the law and therefore it legally has the right and the power to condemn us all to death which it does without hesitation, compassion or mercy. The law shows no mercy or compassion its demand on those that are under it is strictly official, formal and legal and enforced without compassion or any sense of sorrow toward its condemned victims.

The universal demand of the law: states, "The wages of sin is death" (Rom 6:23) this means if anyone fails to keep the law in any aspect they are guilty of breaking the law. It then without mercy rightfully and legally judges and sentences its guilty victims (all mankind) to death. The law is a perfect a guide that gives us an understanding God's will, but as a means of reuniting us with God who we have sinned against, it is a hopeless failure, but God always knew it would be, not because of a fault in the law but because of a flaw in us. This is why God through Christ cancelled the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands" (the debt being all our trespasses and sins) (Col. 2:13-14).

All of us are capable of living a life without murdering anyone, committing adultery, stealing, lying and cheating and respecting our parents. These are the laws that Paul has in focus when he said, "Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires" (Rom. 2:14). Paul is not talking about being saved to eternal life by keeping these laws since the law, "You shall not covet" declares us all sinners before God.

Paul focus is upon doing what is right and doing what is wrong, he is saying though the Gentiles were not given the Ten Commandments that God gave to Israel at Mount Sinai (not the Gentile world) they do by nature what is right and good they know by nature what is right and what is wrong, what is just and what is unjust, what is kind and what is cruel concerning outward behaviour toward others.

By nature there is in the mind and heart a light of right and wrong: Paul is saying that even though the Gentiles were not given the law they do by their own nature the things contained in the law meaning they act with self-restraint and behave according to justice and mercy and according to what is right. By nature they have something written in their minds and hearts that forbids and condemns some things as wicked, and commends other things as good and that commends some things as honest and forbids others things as dishonest.

There is in the mind and heart the light of nature by which those without God apprehend a clear and vast difference between good and evil. They have a sense of justice and equity, honour and purity, love and charity; the law of nature teaches obedience to parents, pity to the poor, safeguarding public peace and order and forbids murder, stealing, lying, perjury, etc.

By nature there is an inward knowledge of the basic laws of right and wrong that coincides with the laws of God and the law of love. The law of God was written on tables of stone, and then recorded in the books of the Old Testament. This law the Gentiles did not possess, but, to a certain extent, the same requirements were written on their hearts. They have the knowledge of them by the light of nature. The word hearts here denotes the mind itself, not the heart, as the seat of the affections. It does not mean that they love the Law, but that they have knowledge of it; and that that knowledge is deeply engraved on their minds.

The fact that those without God have a law within themselves and act according to it is evidenced from their conduct in civil affairs; and from the correct sense that they have concerning natural justice in their courts of law and in the fairness they treat each other with these are outward proofs that they have a law within that reveals to their mind and heart what is good and decent, just and right and what is not.

The conscience guides by accusing or excusing: the words, "They are a law to themselves" means that though the Gentiles do not have the written law of God as the Jews do they nevertheless have a code of what is right and wrong written on their hearts and minds and it is by this law that their conscience guides them either by accusing them when doing wrong (by guilt) or excusing them when doing right (by mental peace).

Conscience is a thousand witnesses, testifying of that which is most secret which is within and approves what is well done and condemns what is not. Though for a time the conscience may be enlightened or unenlightened, bribed or hardened and its use may be greatly perverted by false opinions those without God are not devoid of the knowledge of what is right and what is not. The purpose of the conscience is not to communicate any new truth, but simply to express judgment, and to impart approval or disapproval for a person's own good or evil conduct. Though the conscience does not reveal any truth or any knowledge its actual exercise proves that those without God have knowledge of the Law of God and the law of love even though they may not acknowledge God or recognise it as being the law of God.

In this manner the conscience is a witness and a law that bears testimony for and against those who break the natural laws of justice and decency and either acquits or condemns them. Though there maybe exceptions to this rule it applies in principal to the character of human nature. Conscience is a natural guide to doing what is right toward others it is that instant approval or condemnation of judgment within the mind concerning right and wrong behaviour. A conscience that is not seared or hardened is an ever attendant witness of a person's conduct since it pronounces judgment on their own doings and in this manner motivates them to do what is right and good by giving mental comfort and peace when they do and by guilt deters them from doing what is wrong.

The conscience is that faculty of the mind that shines a light on whether what a person is saying or doing is right or wrong. If right it gives a comfortable testimony in their own minds and hearts of their own integrity, but if wrong accuses and judges them guilty. Some have called the conscience, "The most righteous judge." This is because it gives its judgment based upon reading and examining the memory as if they were written on a table the things that are done, nothing is hidden and then beholding the law as the standard, pronounces itself either worthy of honour or of dishonour.

When the conscience is not seared, deceived or hardened it is a most righteous judge since it sees what no others can see, conscience is in secret and hidden forever at work reading and examining the mind, its memories and the things that are done and then beholding the law as the standard, pronounces a person either worthy of honour or worthy of dishonour.

Paul concerning his own conscience wrote: -

- I have lived my life before God in all good conscience up to this day (Acts 23:1).
- I always take pains to have a clear conscience toward both God and man (Acts 24:16).
- The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith (1 Tim. 1:5).

The Thoughts of the Mind Accuse or Else Excuse.

Concerning the conscience and thoughts of the Gentiles (those without the law of God) the English standard Bible says:

- Their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them (Rom. 2:15).

The King James Bible says: -

- Their thoughts the mean while accusing or else excusing one another (Rom. 2:15).

The word, "thoughts" embraces reason, opinions, feelings, views, ideas, attitudes, etc. Its meaning here may be expressed by the word reflections. Thoughts differs from conscience, inasmuch as the decisions of conscience are instantaneous and without any process of reasoning whereas thoughts supposes subsequent reflection and means that such reflections would only deepen and confirm the decisions of conscience.

What Paul is saying in these verses can apply to an individual or to a group of people. When applied to an individual it carries the idea of a person reflecting upon their own conduct, behaviour and actions and as a result of these reflections their mind is either filled with comfort and peace or guilt and pain. When applied to a group it carries the idea that their thoughts accusing or excusing one another. They are judging the right or wrong behaviour of each other. It means that not only do our outward acts testify for or against us, but our conscience also approves or condemns not only our own outward acts, but the outward behaviour of others.

Our conscience and the conscience of others testify to the distinctions between what is right and what is wrong. This principle applies among groups, communities and nations their thoughts sometimes excuse and sometimes condemn like a prosecutor accusing or a lawyer defending. Those without God by their writings, their conversations, their reflections, their reasoning's, their discussions, their laws and their courts accuse or acquit one another of wrong doing and of crime. It is obvious to all who open their eyes that those without God have a rule of law within and understand the principles of right and wrong.

SUMMARY: all humans (whether saved in Christ or not) have a law within that shines a light upon what is right and wrong, what is kind and what is cruel. The light of this law within can be bright or very faint depending on the power of selfishness, ego, pride and greed dwelling within the heart and mind.

The Law declares us all (Jews and Gentiles) to be under sin (Rom. 3:23) and therefor all separated from God, but this universal truth does not mean that only those who are united to Christ by faith have the light of right and wrong within their mind and heart. All men and woman have dwelling within them a basic instinct (law) that says doing harm to others is wrong behaviour and doing good to others is right behaviour.

Though those without God do not have not the written law of God, they do to a considerable extent have sufficient knowledge to know what is right and what is wrong and either approve or condemn their own thoughts acts and deeds and their own moral character and conduct. This is why not one of us has an excuse for sin. Those who do not believe in God are not without any law, they have the law of nature and the moral law which by nature and conscience evidences within what is just, honest, respectful and kind etc., and what is unjust, unkind, cruel and wicked.

The words "They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them" (Rom. 2:15) does not mean that they could produce a perfect obedience to the law, but that they know what the law required concerning right and wrong behaviour.

NOTE: this is not about differing laws various cultures may have the law in focus here is the law that is common to all humanity it is the law of love that dwells within the heart and mind that through the conscience shines a light on the universal truth that treating people with dishonesty, deception and cruelty is wrong and treating people with charity and kindness is right and good. Following are a few Old Testament Scriptures that show people had knowledge of sin and an awareness of wrong doing in their minds and lives long before Israel was led out of the bondage of Egypt and long before God gave the Ten Commandments to Moses at Mount Sinai.

Genesis chapter thirty-one shows that Laban, Jacob and Rachel knew stealing was wrong long before God gave the Ten Commandments to Israel. The following events occurred long before Israel went into bondage to Egypt and long before God gave Moses the Ten Commandments.

- Laban asks Jacob, "Why did you steal my gods?" (Gen 31:30).
- Jacob tells Laban, Whoever you find your gods with shall not live (Gen 31:32).
- Jacob said to Laban, "What is my transgression? What is my sin that you have accused me of stealing?" (Gen 31:36).
- Laban warns Jacob if he oppress (mistreats in KJV) his daughters or takes wives besides his daughters, God will see it (Gen 31:50).

In this chapter Jacob is leaving Laban and taking his wives (Rachel and Leah), his sons and all his livestock to return to his father Isaac in the land of Canaan. Rachel stole her father's Laban's household gods, and takes them with her (v19). Laban pursues Jacob thinking he stole his gods. Laban catches Jacob and asks him, "Why did he steal his gods" (v30). Jacob, not knowing Rachael had stolen her father's gods tells Laban whoever he finds with his gods shall be put to death (v32). When Laban went into Rachel's tent she hid the gods she had stolen so Laban never found them (v34).

Jacob offended no-doubt at being accused of stealing said in anger to Laban, "What is my offense? What is my sin that you have hotly pursued me?" (v36). (Jacob had always dwelt honestly with Laban). Laban upon letting Jacob go warns him not to oppress his daughters or take wives besides his daughters because God will see (v50).

- The fact Rachael hid the gods shows she was fully aware that it was wrong to steal them.
- The fact Laban knew he was right in accusing Jacob of taking them shows that Laban knew it was totally wrong for his gods to be stolen.
- The fact Jacob said whoever took the gods shall be put to death shows that Jacob knew it was extremely wrong to steal them.

From this chapter it is clear Laban, Jacob and Rachael knew it was wrong to take and steal other people's property long before the law was introduced.

Jacob Knew He had Wronged Esau (Long before the Law Came).

Genesis 32:9-11 ----- ⁹Jacob said, "O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O LORD who said to me, 'Return to your country and to your kindred, that I may do you good,' ¹⁰I am not

worthy of the least of all the deeds of steadfast love and all the faithfulness that you have shown to your servant, for with only my staff I crossed this Jordan, and now I have become two camps. ¹¹Please deliver me from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I fear him, that he may come and attack me, the mothers with the children.

Jacob was so greatly distressed and afraid when he heard that his brother Esau was coming to meet him that he prayed, "O God please deliver me from my brother Esau for I fear that he may attack me (Gen. 32:6-12). It is in this chapter Jacob wrestled a man of God until sunrise and the man of God touched his hip socket and changed Jacobs name to Israel (Gen. 32:24-28).

These verses which are long before the Law came show that Jacob knew he had wronged his brother Esau by lies and deception and that he was unworthy before God.

Joseph Knew it was Wrong to take a Man's Wife (Long before the Law Came).

Genesis 39:7-9 ----- ⁷Joseph master's wife cast her eyes on Joseph and said, "Lie with me." ⁸But he refused and said to his master's wife, "Behold, because of me my master has no concern about anything in the house, and he has put everything that he has in my charge. ⁹He is not greater in this house than I am, nor has he kept back anything from me except yourself, because you are his wife. How then can I do this great wickedness (evil in the KJV) and sin against God?"

This is long before the Ten Commandments were given to Moses at Mount Sinai and Joseph clearly knew that it was wrong to lie with another man's wife.

Ungodly People had Prisons (Long before the Law Came).

Genesis 40:3-4 ----- ³Pharaoh put his cupbearer and baker in custody (confinement in KJV) in the house of the captain of the guard, in the prison where Joseph was confined (imprisoned in KJV). ⁴The captain of the guard appointed Joseph to be with them, and he attended them.

The cupbearer and the baker of the king of Egypt committed an offense so Pharaoh had them put in prison where Joseph was already confined because the king's servants had accused him of laying with Pharaoh's wife. Prisons were built for wrong-doers and those suspected of wrong-doing; society (even pagan civilisations) understood right from wrong long before Israel was given the Ten Commandments.

The fact they had built prisons for wrongdoers clearly show that they were aware of what was right behaviour and what was wrong behaviour.

Joseph's Brothers Knew it was Wrong to Kill (Long before the Law Came).

Genesis 42:21-22 ----- ²¹Joseph's brothers said to one another, "In truth we are guilty concerning our brother, in that we saw the distress of his soul, when he begged us and we did not listen. That is why this distress has come upon us." ²²And Reuben answered them, "Did I not tell you not to sin against the boy? But you did not listen. So now there comes a reckoning for his blood."

Joseph brothers clearly knew they had sinned by putting Joseph in the pit and leaving him there to die. They were distressed at Joseph's cries from the pit they had cast him into. This clearly shows that long before the law came they knew it was wrong to inflict harm and hurt upon another human and especially wrong to murder them. The jealousy in their hearts was such a strong power that they were able to plot and plan without compassion and do what they knew was grossly wrong.

Joseph Brothers Knew they had Sinned (Long before the Law Came).

Genesis 50:15-17 ----- ¹⁵When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "It may be that Joseph will hate us and pay us back for all the evil that we did to him." ¹⁶So they sent a message to Joseph, saying, "Your father gave this command before he died, ¹⁷'Say to Joseph, Please forgive the transgression of your brothers and their sin, because they did evil to you.' And now, please forgive the transgression (sin in KJV) of the servants of the God of your father." Joseph wept when they spoke to him.

Long before the Ten Commandments came Joseph's brothers clearly understood that they had sinned and committed a gross evil against Joseph and knew they needed to be forgiven for their wrong-doing and their sin.

Midwives Knew it was Wrong to Kill Babies (Long before the Law Came).

Exodus 1:15-17 ----- ¹⁵Then the king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, ¹⁶"When you serve as midwife to the Hebrew women and see them on the birthstool, if it is a son, you shall kill him, but if it is a daughter, she shall live." ¹⁷But the midwives feared God and did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but let the male children live.

Long before the Law was given to Israel midwives understood that life was precious to God and therefore feared killing new born babies at birth and so refused to do as the king commanded. This shows that even without the Ten Commandments there is a rule of law in human nature that knows and understands that murder and doing harm to other humans is wrong and sinful.

Pharaoh Knew He Sinned Against God (Long before the Law Came).

Exodus 10:16-17 ----- ¹⁶Pharaoh hastily called Moses and Aaron and said, "I have sinned against the LORD your God, and against you. ¹⁷Now therefore, forgive my sin, please, only this once, and plead with the LORD your God only to remove this death from me."

Israel is still in bondage in Egypt so this is long before God's Law has been introduced and yet Pharaoh a pagan king and worshipper of other god's was fully aware that his lies, deception and broken promises were grossly wrong and that he has sinned against both Moses and the God of Moses. These verses show that Pharaoh not only understood that wrongdoing brings judgment and punishment, but also that he understood the concept of forgiveness.

CONCLUSION: this study and these Scriptures show that a person does not have to know God to know that treating people with dishonesty unjustly and cruelty is wrong and treating people with charity and kindness is right and good. We are all sinners before the perfect standard of the law and before God's perfect holiness, but that does not mean that all sinners are wicked and evil people. Millions worldwide who do not know the love and grace of God have heart and mind that is compassionate, kind and caring consider the following: -

- People who sacrifice their own leisure time to help communities who have been brought to ruing by a natural disaster such as fires, floods, earthquakes etc.
- Professional people who give up their lucrative careers to help and aid the poor in third world countries.
- The many men and women who give money or time to raise money for charitable organizations such as the Cancer Foundation and those who volunteer their time to give terminally ill children some joy in life and such like things.

Just because a person in unsaved does not mean that their hearts are full of malicious cruel and hateful thoughts toward others, compassion, kindness, mercy, grace, forgiveness and such like things are available to all mankind regardless of their faith or lack of it. Christians are especially called to manifest the fruits of the Spirit of love (compassion, kindness, mercy, grace, forgiveness and such like things) because: -

- Whoever who does not love does not know God, because God is love. (1 John 4:8).
- Whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in them, because God is love (1 John 4:16)
- Living in the fruits of love honours God and brings a good testimony to the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and the Christian faith.
- Living from love fulfills Jesus command, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself" (Mark 12:28-31). James refers to this commandment, as the royal law (James 2:8) because loving your neighbour as yourself means do-good to others not harm.
- Loving your neighbour as yourself fulfils the whole law (Gal 5:14).
- Living a life of love fulfils the law because love does no wrong to a neighbour. (Romans 13:10).

Since Christians are saved by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and by God's grace they do not keep the law to earn salvation, but because it is the right, proper and loving thing to do and brings honour to God and a good testimony to the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and the Christian faith.

FOOTNOTE: some may wonder, "If people know right from wrong without the Ten Commandments why the need for them?" To answer this it should first be mentioned that they were given to the nation of Israel and not to the Gentile world which means that they were to be a light to guide and clearly show God's people what was right and acceptable behavior and what was not and to show those in God's Kingdom what His perfect will is concerning behavior and attitudes toward others.

There is a great lesson those in Christ can learn from the truth that the Ten Commandments were given to the nation of Israel and not to the Gentile world which is this: those in Christ's Kingdom are not called to impose or force God's laws onto the unbelieving world, but invite them into God's Kingdom. Jesus and the apostles never tried to change Rome they simply focused upon calling people out of it through the message of the cross and the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

End.