

"GOD'S JUDGMENT AND GOD'S LAW"

(Romans 2:1-16)

John Stott

The universal knowledge of God's law, which Paul has been demonstrating in verses 12-16, is an indispensable basis both of the divine judgment and of the Christian mission.

First, *the law is a basis of divine judgment*. Paul's thrust has been that God has no favorites; that Jews and Gentiles will be judged by Him without discrimination; and that both groups have some knowledge of His law. Consequently, no human being can plead complete ignorance. We have all sinned against a moral law we have known. Whether we have come to know it by special or general revelation, by grace or nature, outwardly or inwardly, in the Scripture or in the heart, is largely irrelevant. The point is that all human beings have known something of God (1:20) and of goodness (1:32; 2:15), but have suppressed the truth in order to indulge in wickedness (1:18; 2:8). So we all come under the righteous judgment of God.

Verses 12-16 were not written to give us hope that human beings can gain salvation by morality. Natural law can no more save sinners than natural religion. For whatever we may have known of God from creation (1:19f.), or of goodness from conscience (1:32; 2:15), we have stifled it in order to go our own self-seeking way (2:8). Besides, the purpose of these chapters is to prove that all human beings are guilty and inexcusable before God (3:9, 19), and in particular that nobody can be justified by observing the law (3:20).

Secondly, *the law is a basis of Christian mission, of both evangelism and social action*. Take evangelism. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was quite correct to write from prison, "I don't think it is Christian to want to get to the New Testament too soon or too directly."¹ What he meant is that, until the law has done its work of exposing and condemning our sin, we are not ready to hear the gospel of justification. True, it is often said that we should address ourselves to people's conscious needs, and not try to induce in them feelings of guilt which they do not have. This is a misconception, however. Human beings are moral beings by creation. That is to say, not only do we experience an inner urge to do what we believe to be right, but we also have a sense of guilt and remorse when we have done what we know to be wrong. This is an essential feature of our humanness. There is of course such a thing as false guilt. But guilt feelings which are aroused by wrongdoing are healthy. They rebuke us for betraying our humanity, and they impel us to seek forgiveness in Christ. Thus conscience is our ally. In all evangelism, I find it a constant encouragement to say to myself, "The other person's conscience is on my side."

The possibility of securing justice in society is another legitimate deduction from Paul's teaching in verses 12-16, even though it is not part of his direct purpose in the context. What he is saying is that the same moral law, which



¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and papers from Prison*, (Fontana, 1959), p. 50.

God has revealed in Scripture, he has also stamped (even if not so legibly) on human nature. Since he has in fact written his law twice, internally as well as externally, it is not to be regarded as an alien system, which we impose on people arbitrarily, and which it is altogether unnatural to expect human beings to obey. On the contrary, there is a fundamental correspondence between the law in Scripture and the law in human nature. God's law fits us; it is the law of our own being. We are authentically human only when we obey it. When we disobey it, we not only rebel against God, we also contradict our true selves.

In every human community, therefore, there is a basic recognition of the difference between right and wrong, and an accepted set of values. True, conscience is not infallible, and standards are influenced by cultures. Nevertheless, a substratum of good and evil remains, and love is always acknowledged as superior to selfishness. This has important social and political implications. It means that legislators and educators can assume that God's law is good for society and that at least to some degree people know it. It is not a case of Christians trying to force their standards on an unwilling public, but of helping the public to see that God's law is "for our own good at all times",² because it is the law of human being and of human community. If democracy is government by consent, consent depends on consensus, consensus on argument, and argument on ethical apologists who will develop a case for the goodness of God's law.

² Dt. 6:24