

Romans 2:14

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

For when the Gentiles, which have not the law, do by nature the things contained in the law, these, having not the law, are a law unto themselves:

Analysis

For when the Gentiles, which have not the law, do by nature the things contained in the law—ὅταν γὰρ ἔθνη τὰ μὴ νόμον ἔχοντα φύσει τὰ τοῦ νόμου ποιῶσιν (hotan gar ethnē ta mē nomon echonta physei ta tou nomou poiōsin). Φύσει (physei, "by nature") could modify "do" (Gentiles naturally do law's requirements) or "have not" (Gentiles who naturally lack the law). Most likely the former: Gentiles instinctively recognize moral imperatives like honoring parents, prohibiting murder, condemning theft.

These, having not the law, are a law unto themselves—οὗτοι νόμον μὴ ἔχοντες ἔσαντοῖς εἰσιν νόμος (houtoi nomon mē echontes heautois eisin nomos). Not autonomous moral agents, but carriers of internal moral law (v. 15). Paul isn't teaching salvation by natural morality—he'll show all fall short (3:9-23)—but establishing universal moral accountability. Even without Sinai's tablets, Gentiles know murder, adultery, and theft are wrong, making them culpable.

This verse grounds natural law theory: God's moral order is written into creation and human conscience, not solely in written scripture. Calvin developed this into the "general revelation" doctrine. Paul's purpose: eliminate the Jewish excuse that only Torah-breakers sin. Gentiles violate the moral law they instinctively recognize, Jews violate the written law they possess—all are guilty (Romans 1:20, 3:19).

Historical Context

Greek philosophy (Stoicism particularly) taught natural law—moral principles accessible through reason. Jews generally rejected this, seeing Torah as God's unique revelation to Israel. Paul here validates Gentile moral knowledge while subordinating it to special revelation. He's arguing for universal moral accountability: God judges Gentiles by the light they have (natural revelation, conscience), Jews by the fuller light they received (Torah). Neither group escapes condemnation.

Related Passages

Romans 10:9 — Confession and belief for salvation

Ephesians 2:8 — Salvation by grace through faith

Study Questions

1. How does natural law—instinctive moral knowledge—demonstrate God's justice in judging those who never heard the gospel?
2. In what ways do I suppress or rationalize away moral truth I naturally know, requiring biblical commands to reinforce it?
3. If even Gentiles without Scripture recognize basic morality, how does this expose my excuses for sin?

Interlinear Text

ὅταν	γὰρ	ἔθνη	τοῦ	μὴ	νόμος·	ἔχοντες	φύσει
when	For	the Gentiles	the things	not	a law	have	by nature
G3752	G1063	G1484	G3588	G3361	G3551	G2192	G5449
τοῦ	τοῦ	νόμος·	ποιῆι,	οὗτοι	νόμος·	μὴ	ἔχοντες
the things	the things	a law	do	these	a law	not	have
G3588	G3588	G3551	G4160	G3778	G3551	G3361	G2192
ἐαυτοῖς	εἰσιν	νόμος·					
unto themselves	are	a law					
G1438	G1526	G3551					

Additional Cross-References

Romans 2:12 (Word): For as many as have sinned without law shall also perish without law: and as many as have sinned in the law shall be judged by the law;

Romans 2:27 (Word): And shall not uncircumcision which is by nature, if it fulfil the law, judge thee, who by the letter and circumcision dost transgress the law?

Ephesians 2:12 (Parallel theme): That at that time ye were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world:

Acts 17:30 (Parallel theme): And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men every where to repent:

Acts 10:35 (Parallel theme): But in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him.

Romans 1:32 (Parallel theme): Who knowing the judgment of God, that they which commit such things are worthy of death, not only do the same, but have pleasure in them that do them.

Deuteronomy 4:7 (Parallel theme): For what nation is there so great, who hath God so nigh unto them, as the LORD our God is in all things that we call upon him for?

