

The Law After the Fall: Conscience and Universal Guilt

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Date: 30 August 2026

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[0:00] Adam was created upright in the image of God with God's moral law written on his heart. So he didn't have to reason his way to a basic distinction between good and evil.

! He knew his creator, and he knew he owed his creator obedience. Furthermore, God made him with the ability to render that obedience. Then, along with the moral law written on his heart, God gave him one specific, what we call a positive, command concerning the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

In short, Adam knew what God required, and he had the ability to obey it, yet he deliberately chose to rebel. So, that leads to the next question.

What happened to God's law after Adam fell? Obviously, we know what happened to Adam. His nature became corrupt. His understanding was darkened.

His will became hostile to God. He lost the moral ability to render the obedience God required. And because Adam stood as the representative or federal head of the human race, his fall affected everyone who descended from him.

[1:17] Down to us. So, the question is not what happened to Adam, but what happened to the law? Did the fall somehow change the law as well?

Did God perhaps lower his standard to accommodate a fallen people? Did humanity lose their knowledge of the law?

If people did not possess the written law of God, on what basis can God hold them responsible for sin? Well, the opening sentence of paragraph two of this chapter of the confession on the law of God gives us a very concise answer.

It says, The same law that was first written in the human heart continued to be a perfect rule of righteousness after the fall.

So, let's begin with that phrase, the same law. This expresses continuity between the moral law Adam knew before the fall and the moral obligation resting upon all of humanity even after the fall.

[2:27] And the reason for this is not complicated. The law did not change because God did not change. Again, the law of God is not an arbitrary set of rules that God invented out of nowhere.

As we talked about before, God's moral law expresses his holy character and his rightful authority as creator. Murder is evil, for example, because it violates the value that God places upon human life made in his image.

Marriage, falsehood is evil, falsehood is evil because God himself is truth. Marriage, adultery is evil because God established and defined marriage as a covenant between one man and one woman. Idolatry is evil because the creature owes worship to the creator alone. So, the whole moral order rests upon who God is and who we are in relation to him.

So, even though Adam changed, God's standard did not change because God himself did not change. I think I read this last time, but Romans 7.12 says, The law is holy and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.

[3:49] Of course, the Apostle Paul is writing under the new covenant and he says, There is no defect in the law. The law remains holy because God remains holy. The law remains righteous because God remains righteous.

Evidently, human inability to keep the law of God does not erase human obligation. Now, that might sound very harsh because we might imagine that fallen humanity is like a man desperately trying to obey God while external forces are preventing him from doing it.

But that's not true. Romans 8.7 says, The mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God for it does not submit to God's law. Indeed, it cannot. You see, the inability is bound up with our hostility. Fallen man cannot obey God and his law because his nature is opposed to God. And maybe an illustration would help. So, let's say I owe you \$20.

Now, I had \$20 in my pocket. But instead of giving you what I owe you, I decided to stop at the convenience store and buy myself some lottery tickets or something.

[5 : 10] So, now that I've done that, I no longer have \$20 I can give you. I no longer have the ability to pay you what I owe. Does my inability to pay you erase the debt?

No. In fact, the inability itself is directly connected to my culpability. Adam was created to obey God. And humanity's present inability is the result of the fall into which Adam brought us by choice. In other words, our inability to render God the obedience he is due is humanity's fault. It's our fault. So, what this means is that God is not obligated to lower his righteousness because his creatures have become sinful.

If that were the case, we would eventually arrive at a very strange conclusion. It would mean that the more sinful we become, the less obedience God would require.

So, if we were to become as morally corrupt and depraved as humanly possible, we would, what, eventually reach a point where we're completely innocent?

[6 : 29] But that's not how the law of God works. The confession says that the law continued to be a perfect rule of righteousness after the fall. It's still perfect because God is still God.

The thing that broke in Genesis chapter 3 when Adam sinned was not the law. It was us. Now, there's a very simple biblical argument for this in 1 John 3, 4.

John writes, Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness. Sin is lawlessness.

So, lawlessness describes rebellion against God's law. Sin is the creature refusing the authority and the will of the Creator, refusing to submit.

And that's why Adam's sin was so serious. Sin is the creature. Now, we might think of eating a little piece of fruit as being very trivial, but that's only if we isolate the act itself from the meaning or the command that came from God.

[7 : 39] The act represented something greater than the act itself, if you will. The act was essentially Adam saying, God has spoken, but I will not submit to it.

And ever since then, that same spirit of lawlessness has run through fallen humanity. But John's definition also tells us something else.

If there is sin, there must be a law against which sin is committed. Right? You cannot have lawlessness without a law.

You cannot have transgression unless there is something to transgress against. So, the question becomes, was there sin before Moses? Well, of course there was.

Cain murdered Abel. The generation before the flood became so wicked that Genesis 6, 5 says, every intention of the thoughts of man's heart was only evil continually.

[8 : 42] The builders at Babel rebelled against God. Sodom and Gomorrah were judged for their wickedness. Pagan kings were held responsible from everything to adultery, to oppression, to violence, to idolatry.

And all of that happened centuries before God wrote the Ten Commandments on stone. Now, Paul makes the same point in Romans chapter 5, verses 12 through 14.

He says, Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned, for sin indeed was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not counted where there is no law, yet death reigned from Adam to Moses.

Maybe it would be helpful to think about Paul's larger argument in Romans 5. That chapter is primarily about the contrast between Adam and Christ.

Paul wants to show that the actions of one representative can affect many people. Through Adam came sin, condemnation, and death. Through Christ came righteousness, justification, and life.

[9 : 56] Adam is the head of one humanity. Christ is the head of the other. But in the middle of that argument, Paul says something very important for our purposes. He says, Sin indeed was in the world before the law was given.

Now, in this case, when he says the law, he's speaking specifically about the law as formally given through Moses. But of course, there was a long period of time between Adam and Sinai.

Yet during that period, sin was very much present. And Paul gives us the evidence. He says death reigned from Adam to Moses.

Why is that? Well, Romans 5.12 says death entered through sin. Romans 6.23 says the wages of sin is death.

As we know, death was not a biological defect in God's creation. Death was the judgment of God upon sin.

[11:01] So without sin, there would be no death. And if there is death, we know there is sin. So if death reigned before Moses, clearly sin was present before Moses.

And if sin is lawlessness, that means the same moral law was already being violated before Moses ever climbed to the top of Mount Sinai. In other words, Sinai, or the giving of the Ten Commandments, was not the beginning of morality.

God did not suddenly invent sin in Exodus 20. No, the Ten Commandments were written to give clarity to a moral order that already existed.

That is what the confession means here by the same law. Now, if you will, turn in your Bible to Romans chapter 2. Paul is going to explain for us how fallen people who do not possess the written law can nevertheless be morally accountable before God.

I'll read verses 12 through 16. For all who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law.

[12:30] And all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law. For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified.

For 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. 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 on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus.

Actually, let's back up and read verse 11. For God shows no partiality. That's really the controlling principle of the passage. Paul has spent the entirety of chapter 1 exposing the guilt of the Gentile world.

And then here in chapter 2, he turns to the morally respectable, the religious people, namely the Jews. As you might expect, the Jew would be tempted to think, we have the law.

We have Moses. We have the covenant. Surely that gives us protection from God's judgment. But Paul says, no, that's not the case.

[13:53] Possessing greater revelation is a wonderful privilege. But if that revelation is rejected, greater light only means greater accountability.

God judges impartially. Again, verse 12 says, For all who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law.

So there are two groups here. There are those who have sinned without the written law, i.e. the Gentiles. And there are others who have sinned under the law, i.e. the Jews.

And the Gentiles are not innocent simply because they didn't have the written mosaic revelation.

And the Jews who had that written revelation are not safe simply because they had that revelation.

In fact, their knowledge makes their guilt even clearer. Why is that? Well, look at verse 13 again.

For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified.

[15:06] And his point is that possessing and hearing the law cannot justify anyone. If you want to stand before God on the basis of the law, hearing is not enough.

Knowing is not enough. The standard is doing. And I might add that we must do it or keep it perfectly.

The law does not say know what righteousness is. It says be righteous. It does not say hear what God commands. It says do everything God commands.

So, Paul is really tightening the argument around everyone. The Gentile cannot plead ignorance and the Jew cannot plead possession of God's word.

In fact, by the time Paul reaches chapter 3, every mouth will be stopped. No one will have an argument to make for his justification before God. Now, verse 14.

[16:12] For when Gentiles who do not have the law by nature do what the law requires. Stop there. There again, Paul reiterates that Gentiles do not have the law and what he means is they do

not possess the written law given to Israel.

And yet, to some degree or another, they are doing what the law requires. And I think we've observed this, both in ourselves and in other people.

Unbelievers who have never trusted in Christ, who do not know God, may still love their children.

They may still honor their parents. They may still pay their debts.

They may still condemn murder or punish theft. They may even risk their lives to rescue someone else, even a stranger.

However, there is a difference between what we might call civil or outward good and true spiritual righteousness before God.

[17 : 19] You see, a person may tell the truth because he values his reputation. He may remain faithful to his wife because he loves his family. He may donate money because he feels compassion for suffering people.

Obviously, these things are preferable to lying or adultery or selfishness. But the first and greatest commandment is to love your God with all of your heart, mind, soul, and strength.

True righteousness must ultimately proceed from faith and seek the glory of God. So, fallen people do not fulfill the law in that very important sense.

Gentiles. But Paul's point is narrower than that. The fact that Gentiles sometimes do what the law requires shows that they possess real moral knowledge.

Think about how often a man's moral knowledge becomes so very clear when someone sins against him. He might spend years explaining how dishonesty, well, that's complicated.

[18 : 29] Morality, that's relative. But if his business partner steals money from him, moral clarity tends to arrive pretty quickly. He knows what's wrong.

Now, we may be inconsistent in our moral reasoning by nature, but inconsistency is not the same thing as ignorance. Sometimes, our inconsistency actually exposes how much we really know about true morality.

Well, Paul continues, they are a law to themselves even though they do not have the law. Now, this is not Paul's way of teaching, you have your truth and I have mine.

That's in vogue today. He doesn't mean that each individual invents his own morality. No, what he means is that the Gentile has no written copy of the law given to Moses, and yet, he does possess a moral awareness within himself.

And of course, that awareness bears witness to God's standard, to God's law. So, in a limited sense, he functions as a law to himself.

[19 : 43] And then, Paul explains exactly what he means in verse 15. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts. Now, I have to believe that Paul used very precise wording here, very intentionally.

He says, the work or the deeds of the law is written on their hearts. And I think that helps us avoid maybe overstating the doctrine. We shouldn't imagine that every fallen person has a perfectly preserved copy of all ten commandments complete with every application written right there in their hearts.

If that were true, we would have a very difficult time explaining the enormous amount of moral confusion throughout human history. Now, I think Paul's claim is that something real remains.

The moral substance of God's law continues to impress itself upon the hearts of human beings because we do remain creatures made in God's image. We talked about this before.

So, people know enough to distinguish good from evil, justice from injustice, fidelity from betrayal, truth from falsehood, even though that knowledge is severely damaged by sin.

[21 : 02] It's damaged, but it's not erased entirely. Sometimes we talk about the distinction between the natural law or the written moral law, and I think that can be helpful here.

The substance of the two is the same, but the clarity is not. What can be known through creation or through human nature is given far more clarity, far more precision when God speaks, for example, through the Ten Commandments.

So, the man who possesses only natural revelation, he has real light, he has real moral knowledge, but the man who possesses God's word has vastly more light.

God's conscience, you see what I mean? Well, Paul then says their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them.

Now, when you listen to some people talk about the conscience, they present it as though the conscience itself is the arbiter of morality. It creates morality.

[22 : 12] Clearly, that's not the case. conscience is not the law giver. Conscience is a witness to the truth. So, we might think of the conscience as an alarm system.

Obviously, the alarm does not create the fire. It only responds to the smoke or to the heat that it detects. So, the conscience takes the moral standard a person possesses and applies that standard to his own thoughts, words, or actions.

It says, that was wrong. You shouldn't have said that. You lied. You hurt someone. You ought to make that right. Or, it might say, you did the right thing.

You told the truth even when it cost you. You did not steal, though you could have. And that's what Paul means when he says our thoughts accuse or even excuse us.

And again, we know this from experience, don't we? So, let's say someone says something cruel to another person and then they go home and they begin replaying that conversation in their mind.

[23 : 17] Now, he knows he should not have said it. But then he has another thought. He thinks, well, she started it. Or, she deserved it.

You know what? I was very tired today. She has said much worse things to me in the past. So, do you see what's happening? His thoughts are both accusing him and excusing him at the same time. In fact, our excuses often reveal our conscience at work. Why do we construct a defense unless we sense there is something wrong that needs defending? Even so, the conscience has an important weakness.

Namely, it can be misinformed. You see, our conscience judges us according to the moral standard we comprehend to some degree. But our understanding is corrupted by sin.

And that's why the conscience is a witness rather than a final judge. So, you might imagine that our alarm system, maybe somebody is tampered with it. Maybe the batteries are dying.

[24 : 27] I don't know. So, the alarm may fail to sound when genuine danger is present. Or, maybe it goes off when nothing is wrong at all. And the answer is not to throw the alarm away, but to put new batteries in it, to calibrate it according to reality.

And that's what Scripture does for the conscience. In 1 Corinthians 4.4, Paul says, I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted.

In other words, a clear conscience is valuable, but it's not infallible. God is the judge. The Bible is the authoritative revelation of His will, so the conscience must be educated.

It must be corrected and increasingly brought into conformity to the Word of God. So, Romans 2 tells us that moral knowledge does remain even after the fall.

Now, if we turn back to Romans 1, we learn what fallen humanity does with that knowledge. Now, I won't take time to read the full passage, but look at verse 18 of chapter 1.

[25 : 44] For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.

So, first of all, Paul begins by saying that humanity does not lack the truth. truth. They suppress it, but they do not lack it.

And then verse 19 says, for what can be known about God is plain to them because God has shown it to them. Then verse 20 says that His eternal power and divine nature are clearly perceived through the things He has made so that they are without excuse.

And then verse 21 adds, for although they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks to Him. So, our problem is not that we don't know enough.

Rather, it's that we refuse to respond rightly to what we do know. Even fallen man knows there is a God, yet he does not honor God. He receives good things from God, but he does not give thanks to God.

[26 : 55] And then we see how the process of corruption gets worse and worse. Paul says their thinking becomes futile and their foolish hearts are darkened. They exchange the glory of God for idols.

Verse 25 says they exchange the truth about God for a lie. And that verse in particular is very revealing. Man does not simply overlook the truth.

He trades it for something else. Obviously, something lesser. And then three times in this passage, Paul says God gave them up or gave them over.

In verse 24, he gives them over to the lusts of their hearts. In verse 26, he gives them over to dishonorable passions. In verse 28, because they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done.

Now, typically, when we think about God's judgment, we imagine fire and brimstone raining down from heaven. But sometimes, as we see here, God judges sin by allowing sinners to continue in the very rebellion they have chosen.

[28:13] He simply removes the restraints. In other words, he says to them, if you want to reject me, then I'll let you have life without me, and you will suffer the consequences.

But even then, even then, moral knowledge is not completely erased. Look at the end of the chapter, verse 32. though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them, but give approval to those who practice them.

Wow. These are people who have suppressed the truth, they've exchanged the truth, they've become darkened in their reasoning, and have been given over to a debased mind, and yet Paul still says they know.

Again, their problem is not absolute moral ignorance, they know, and yet they continue to rebel.

They know, and yet they continue to approve, even celebrate what God condemns.

So, Paul gives us several distinctions here that we should keep clear in our minds. First, we learn that a person can know moral truth without loving moral truth.

[29:43] Fallen humanity demonstrates that constantly. Second, a person can know moral truth without consistently applying moral truth.

We are often far better at seeing sin in other people than ourselves, aren't we? Third, a person can possess genuine moral knowledge without possessing complete or infallible moral knowledge.

The fall affects the mind as well as the desires. And fourth, a person can know what is right without possessing the spiritual ability to obey God from a holy heart.

God. Yes, the flesh is hostile to God, but Romans 2 is primarily about knowledge and accountability. It's not teaching that fallen people naturally love God's law or have the power to fulfill it, but even so, they know enough and so they are accountable.

I mentioned this before, but we can go all the way back to Genesis and see how all of this is operating well before God gave his moral law at Sinai.

[30:58] And Cain is perhaps the clearest example. So, Genesis 4 is the first chapter after the account of the fall, and already we have worship and anger and envy and murder and lying and judgment and guilt.

I suppose most of us know the story pretty well. Cain becomes angry because God receives Abel in his offering, but does not receive Cain in his offering.

And before Cain murders his brother, God speaks directly to him and says, why are you angry and why has your face fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted?

If you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is contested, contrary to you, but you must rule over it. Now, notice the language. Do well or do not do well.

God is speaking to Cain as though Cain can readily understand these categories. There is already such a thing as good. There is already such a thing as evil.

[32:06] There is already such a thing as sin, and Cain is accountable to that. Then, of course, Cain takes Abel into the field and murders him.

And God says, what have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground. Well, wait a minute. Moses hasn't been born yet.

There are no stone tablets. There are no Ten Commandments. And yet, Cain is guilty before God. Of course, matters get even worse when Cain says, I don't know where my brother is.

Am I my brother's keeper? So here he adds deception to murder. And more to the point, no reader of Genesis really needs Exodus 20 to explain why these things are evil, do we?

The story itself assumes an objective moral order, and the New Testament confirms that reading. 1 John 3:12 says, Cain was of the evil one and murdered his brother.

[33:15] And then John explains, because his own deeds were evil and his brother's righteous. There are those categories again. Evil and righteous. And this is centuries before Sinai.

And we could turn to other places in Genesis and see the exact same thing. And the point is this, moral substance is already operating well before the Ten Commandments were given.

And what that means is Sinai does not create this moral law, these moral realities. It simply publicly states them with, of course, divine authority but also unmistakable clarity.

So, what exactly did the fall do to our knowledge of the law? evil. As we've seen, it didn't erase the moral distinction between good and evil.

It didn't remove human accountability. It didn't turn the conscience into nothing. But it did corrupt us at every level. Our minds are darkened.

[34 : 17] Our desires are pulled away from God. Our wills are hostile to His authority. Our consciences can be distorted. Society itself can institutionalize evil.

We really are seeing that in Romans 1. Our habits can make familiar sins feel very normal.

Something can become culturally respectable, even celebrated, without actually being morally righteous.

Something can stop bothering our conscience and yet it's still an offense to God. God hasn't changed.

God hasn't changed. The law hasn't changed. It's the sinner who has changed. And that is precisely the problem. And that's precisely why we need the Word of God.

That's why we need the written law. The natural moral knowledge that remains in our hearts after the fall is real, but it's not enough to serve as an infallible guide.

[35 : 23] God graciously speaks to us through His Word with clarity, just as He spoke to Israel through the Ten Commandments. Of course, the Bible does not merely reinforce whatever our consciences happen to believe.

Sometimes the Bible confirms the conscience and sometimes it corrects it. Sometimes it awakens it. Sometimes it condemns something we have spent years rationalizing.

And that's why the conscience must always be put in subjection to the Word of God. So understanding all of that, we find this doctrine has several important consequences.

First of all, we learn that no one stands before God as a morally neutral observer, if you will.

Romans 1 does not picture the unbeliever as someone standing outside of God's world, calmly deciding whether God seems plausible.

He already lives in God's world, he sees what God has made, he depends upon God for every breath, and he possesses some awareness of right and wrong.

[36 : 39] Paul says they suppress the truth in unrighteousness. Now, that doesn't mean every unbeliever consciously thinks, I know Christianity is true, I know the Bible is true, but I reject it.

I believe sin works a bit deeper than that. People can distort the truth, they can rationalize against it, they can become so accustomed to falsehood that it just seems natural. It's not that every sinner knows everything, but no sinner knows nothing.

second, we also learn that ignorance of the law is not the same thing as innocence before God.

Romans 2 says those who sin without the written law will still perish, while those who sin under the law will be judged by that law.

Greater light does bring greater responsibility, but a lack of greater light, does not remove the guilt.

The Gentile does not need Exodus 20 to know that murder and theft are wrong, and the Jew cannot appeal to possession of the law as though hearing it made him righteous.

[37 : 57] Paul closes every escape route so that by Romans chapter 3 he can say every mouth will be stopped and the whole world may be held accountable to God. Even so, natural revelation, one's own conscience cannot save us.

Creation can tell us there is a creator, conscience can accuse us when we violate what we know to be right, but neither of them can tell us the Son of God became flesh, bore the curse of sinners, rose from the dead, and justifies the ungodly through faith.

The conscience can say you are guilty, but it does not say Christ died for sinners, and that's why the gospel must be preached.

So as distorted as it has become within fallen sinners, we do have the law of God written on our hearts. sin. So what does a guilty conscience need?

Well, the sinner's most natural response is to try and quiet the conscience by redefining sin, or maybe comparing ourselves to someone who's far worse, or simply waiting for the feeling to pass.

[39 : 22] However, the conscience is often accusing us accurately, and silencing it does nothing about the guilt, and this is why we still need God's law.

God's law is far more merciful. It tells the truth. Through the law comes knowledge of sin, and once the law has exposed our guilt, we learn then that try harder is not really the answer.

Today's obedience is not going to erase yesterday's sins. So what does the guilty conscience really need? It needs cleansing.

The sinner needs a righteousness he does not possess, and that's why Paul in Romans chapter 5 takes us from Adam to Christ. Through Adam came sin, and condemnation, and death, but through Christ comes obedience, and righteousness, and life.

So the answer to the law's accusations against us is not to diminish the law or to deny the guilt, but to actually look to the one who fulfilled the law and bore its curse.

[40 : 39] The law, which is still good and holy and righteous, even under the new covenant, that law shuts our mouths before God, which seems like a bad thing, something we would not want, but at the same time, it is leading us to the gospel, which brings us to Christ, and through Christ, we can actually find justification.

Let's pray. Our Father, your law is holy, righteous, and good, and we confess that our minds and hearts by nature are corrupted by sin.

Thank you for giving us your word to expose our guilt, to correct our consciences, and to ultimately lead us to Christ, and we pray that you would teach us to submit to what you have spoken, and help us to rest in the righteousness and mercy of our Savior.

In Jesus' name I pray, amen.