

Doing Instinctively the Things of the Law

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The title to this week's article comes from a passage of Scripture written by the apostle Paul. Contextually, Paul is demonstrating that in terms of the problem with sin, the Jews were no better than the Gentiles.

"For when Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves."

Romans 2:14 (Emphasis Mine)

The Expositor's Bible Commentary states the position taken by many regarding this Scripture. They write:

"Paul is insisting that the basic requirements of the law are stamped on human hearts."

Commentator Albert Barnes put it like this:

"The expression means clearly by the light of conscience and reason, and whatever other helps they may have without revelation. It denotes simply, in that state which is without the revealed will of God."

What these two resources, and the many others who take the same position are advocating, is that man is born with an innate knowledge of God's moral standards. However, such a position is not consistent with what we find taught elsewhere in Scripture.

The big question to answer here is what does "do instinctively" mean? Some translations render it "do by nature." Is Paul saying (as many have suggested) that man is born with a natural moral sense of right and wrong?

If man is born with a knowledge of right and wrong, why did Israel need God's laws taught to them? They in turn were to teach God's word to their children (Deut. 6:6-9). Why teach their children the Law, if they already possessed it in their hearts? Why study the Scriptures today, if we have the moral requirements of God "stamped on our hearts" from birth?

One Psalmist wrote, "Your word I have hidden in my heart..." (Psalm 119:11 NKJV). He does not say God hid it in his heart.

In Ephesians 2:3 Paul says we were "by nature" children of wrath. "Nature" is the same word translated "instinctively" in the passage in Romans. Would this mean that man was born with an innate immorality? Does this then mean that man is born in sin? We know better!

"Nature," as Paul is using it in these passages, simply means a recognized pattern of practice. In other words, one could reason by man's practices, that he is a sinner (a child of wrath), or as Paul put it in Romans, "All have sinned..." (Romans 3:23).

Therefore, when Paul refers to the Gentiles doing instinctively, or by nature, the things of the Law, he is illustrating their knowledge of God's moral standards. But how did they get that knowledge? Notice how his thoughts continue in the next verse:

In that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them.

Romans 2:15 (Emphasis Mine)

The work of the Law is written in their hearts. The question now becomes, how did it get there? Was the knowledge of the Law placed there "by nature" or was it revealed to them? Scripture would suggest the latter. Consider a couple of Scriptures addressing the subject:

I know, O Lord, that a man's way is not in himself, Nor is it in a man who walks to direct his steps.

Jeremiah 10:23

Jeremiah tells us man lacks the discernment of knowing right and wrong. Man needs to be taught. The Hebrew writer makes the same point:

*For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes only of milk is not accustomed to the word of righteousness, for he is an infant. But solid food is for the mature, **who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil.***

Hebrews 5:12-14 (Emphasis Mine)

Here we see that it is through the teaching and practice of the word, and not an innately given knowledge, that one is able to discern right and wrong. Such discernment does not come "by nature" as some have suggested, but comes through training.

We know this is true by simple observation. We teach (train) our children right and wrong. They learn not to lie, cheat, or steal. These are not "natural" moral concepts that each person possesses independent of revelation.

What all this means is that the Gentiles *were taught* right and wrong. God's moral standards were revealed to them. Paul clearly illustrates this in the first chapter of his Roman letter. Regarding the Gentiles and their knowledge of God and His moral standards, Paul notes:

The wrath of God is revealed from Heaven against all ungodliness... (Rom. 1:18).

That which known about God was made evident to them by God (Rom. 1:19).

They knew God (Rom. 1:21).

They knew the ordinance or requirements of God (Rom. 1:32).

They knew the penalty for sin (Rom. 1:32).

To insist that man naturally knows all of this, is an unnatural conclusion. Paul states it well, "God made it evident to them. How? Through the process of revelation (cf. Rom. 10:17).