

Jeremiah 31:31-34 (Opening)

³¹ *“Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, ³² not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD. ³³ For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ³⁴ And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.”*

Human nature.

What exactly is human nature? Is there one over-arching description of human nature, or are we all so different that there's no way of coming up with a good, general description?

Philosophers, psychologists, and sociologists have been pondering what human nature is for centuries. The first philosopher we know of to think about human nature was Socrates. Aristotle was the first philosopher to actually write down what he thought about human nature, and he wrote volumes about it.

Until more recent times (say, the past two or three centuries), the views of Socrates as told to Aristotle by Plato, were the generally accepted view of Western philosophy.

Here's the basic gist of what Aristotle wrote based on Plato's teachings of what Socrates said.

1. It is human nature to create a family, building a household, and in more successful cases, a clan or small village still organized by patriarchal lines.
2. It is human nature to congregate into communities, to develop more complex communities the size of a town or city, with a division of labor and law-making. This type of community is different in kind from a large family, and requires the special use of human reason, leading to politics and logic.
3. It is human nature to create. Man loves to use his imagination. We enjoy art in all its forms (music, poetry, painting, sculpture, etc). Aristotle says "The reason why we enjoy seeing likenesses is that, as we look, we learn and infer what each is, for instance, 'that is so and so.'"¹

¹ Aristotle, Poetics, 1488b

Over the years, folks have taken a dimmer view of humanity and human nature. Things started to take a darker view of human nature during the so-called “Age of Enlightenment”. I really have to wonder how enlightened these people were, when they started looking at what seems to me to be more of the statistical outliers than the norms and basing their decisions about humanity as a whole on them.

People like Francis Bacon, and René Descartes decided to take a more scientific view of human nature. Over time, the view of human nature was that our nature was to isolate ourselves from communities, have no reason, and no desire to communicate. It seems to me like kind of a sad view of human nature, although there are individuals that may fit into this mold.

But sometimes the simplest observations by the least educated among us end up being the most accurate. You’ve probably heard of Anne Frank, a Jewish teenager, who was being hidden with her family in an apartment attached to her father’s office building in Amsterdam, during the early part of World War II. Even in the dire situation she was in, facing the threat of capture by the Nazis, she wrote this in her diary:

Anne Frank, The Diary of a Young Girl

“It's really a wonder that I haven't dropped all my ideals, because they seem so absurd and impossible to carry out. Yet I keep them, because in spite of everything, I still believe that people are really good at heart.”

She still believed that people were really good at heart.

Are we? Are we really good at heart? Do we really try to do what’s good for people in general, or do we just do what’s good for us? Do we just look out for number one?

We may all be just a mix of good and bad, with some of us tending toward the good, and some of us tending toward the bad, but Paul,

writing to the Romans, says we all face the same fate. If we're under the Law of Moses, or if we're not, we face the same thing.

Let's look at Romans 2:12-16.

Romans 2:12-16

¹² 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.

¹³ For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified. ¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ 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 ¹⁶ on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus.

Paul is saying here in verse 12 that the Law of Moses doesn't apply to those who are not Jews. Not a big revelation to those of us who eat shrimp, catfish, and bacon cheeseburgers. But even in Paul's time, there was an underlying assumption that everyone was under some guiding set of laws.

The Mishnah is the written compilation of the Jewish Oral Tradition. Like our Bible, it's broken into several books. In the book of Jubilees, there is what is called the Noahic covenant or the seven laws of Noah. These laws prohibit idolatry, murder, theft, sexual immorality, blasphemy, eating flesh with blood in it, and require courts for legal resolution to other issues. According to Jewish tradition, this law was given to Noah and his descendants, which would be everyone alive since the flood. Basically these seven laws are taken from God's covenant with Noah in Genesis chapter 9.

If you think about it, most of these laws are accepted in most cultures today. Except maybe the idolatry part, they are written into most of the laws of most of the countries in the world today, and over the past couple thousand years or more. In fact, a fragment of the written law for the city-state of Lagash in what is now Iraq, written around 2400 BC (that's before Abraham, by the way) shows laws against murder, theft, blasphemy, and how to run an honest court system.

So, why am I talking about these different forms of law when Paul talks about people "without the law"? Well, specifically, Paul was talking about the gentiles, the Goyim, the "nations", those people who weren't held responsible to the laws of Moses. Paul is saying that these laws are all nice and everything, but they aren't an eternal standard; if you sin and you're not under the Law of Moses, there's no hope. At least the Jews will be judged by the Law of Moses.

But Paul points out that even those under the Law of Moses aren't "safe". Just being born a Jew doesn't help you. Verse 13 basically says that you can't just be under the law; you have to obey it to be considered righteous before God.

The Jews should have known this. It says in Leviticus 22:31:

Leviticus 22:31

³¹ *"So you shall keep my commandments and do them: I am the LORD.*

Jesus told us the same thing in many places, but one place most of us remember is in Matthew 7:24, talking about wise and foolish builders.

Matthew 7:24

²⁴ *"Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock.*

And James reinforces the idea when he wrote his letter, that hearing isn't enough; you need to obey what you hear.

James 1:22-25

²² *But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.*

²³ *For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. ²⁴ For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. ²⁵ But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.*

That's all well and good for those who hear the word. If you hear it, you have the opportunity to do it. But what about those who don't hear? Paul has an answer for that, too.

In verse 14, Paul points out that there are people "without the law" that do good things. They obey the greater portion of the law without even knowing that's what they're doing! In their minds, they're just doing what seems right to them.

I'm sure you've met people who have been doing lots of good things, but may not be Christians. Or maybe they are, we just don't know. Jesus ran into a situation like that in Mark 9:38-41.

Mark 9:38-41

³⁸ *John said to him, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us."*

³⁹ *But Jesus said, "Do not stop him, for no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. ⁴⁰ For the one who is not against us is for us. ⁴¹ For truly, I say to you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ will by no means lose his reward.*

Gee, Jesus, we saw someone doing great things, and he even used your name, but he doesn't hang out with us. Should we go stop him?

Jesus says if he's not against us, he's for us. But then other people will point at the verse in Luke 11:23.

Luke 11:23

²³ Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.

I'm confused!

I thought it was the other way around!

The circumstances here are different than in the Mark scripture. In Mark, the person is doing good things in Jesus name. In Luke, and the parallel in Matthew 12:30, Jesus was talking to and about people who said that He, the Son of God, didn't have the power to do the miracles that He was doing; that He was casting out demons by the power of the prince of demons. Basically, they were blaspheming; denying the power of God. Of course they were against Jesus. They were the group that was trying to get Him killed because he was causing problems.

So, people can do things that are Christian, but may not be Christians?

Yep.

Think back to what I was talking about at the beginning of this; the "Seven Laws of Noah", and the laws found in Lagash. Maybe this is what Paul is talking about in verse 15, the work of the law is written on their hearts. Maybe it is human nature to know right and wrong. After all, Adam and Eve did eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, right? I have to wonder if before that we only knew what was good to do. We're made in God's image, after all, and God is good.

Genesis 1:26-27

²⁶ Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth."

²⁷ So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

Maybe this "image of God" is the innate ability to know how to do good things for other people, to be unselfish, to care about other people. Sin makes that harder to do.

Paul says it all boils down to one thing. On the last day, when time ends, we'll all be judged.

Ecclesiastes 12:13-14

¹³ The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. ¹⁴ For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil.

God will judge all of us. We will all be judged based on what we have done, what law we fall under, and if we failed to keep that law or not. Not shades of gray, no situational morality. Did you or didn't you do what was right?

Of course, the good news is that if we've accepted Jesus' sacrifice for our sins, those times when we failed to keep whatever law we're supposed to keep, then Jesus' blood covers our sins. It's over. That's what Paul's gospel that he's talking about in verse 16 is all about. And that's what Paul is getting to with his letter to the Romans.

Paul will explain how it all works, but we're not there yet.

We have seen, though, that people, societies, cultures, all tend toward goodness; at least for the most part. There are those statistical outliers that fall outside of the societal and sociological norms. The combination of our sin and the influence of the sins of others causes us to move away from being good.

Our human nature includes certain things that are not acceptable; murder, sexual immorality, theft, lying. We all seek justice for when we have to deal with these in our lives. We **expect** justice.

But, like I said last week, on that last day, I don't want justice. I know what I deserve. I know what I've earned as my reward for my life so far. I don't want justice; I want mercy.

Sin is a horrible thing. It is a disease that's infected the human race since that day in the Garden of Eden. The only cure for that horrible disease is a blood transfusion. You don't need all of it. You just need to come in contact with the blood that has the cure. And we have to make sure we keep in contact with that blood, so we keep the cure in our lives.

How many people do you know that don't have the cure yet, or you're not sure if they have the cure or not? Maybe you should ask them. And if they don't know what you're talking about, you should let them know that there's a cure for the pandemic disease of sin.

Tell everyone you know.

2 Peter 3:8-10 (Closing)

⁸ But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. ⁹ The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. ¹⁰ But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed.