

Mercy, Justice, and Difficult Cases

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This appendix provides the foundational framework that underlies Chapter 16’s personal evaluation. Chapter 16 helps the reader who has heard the apostolic gospel response examine their own conversion against Scripture’s pattern. This appendix addresses the broader question that underlies that examination: how does Scripture handle the full range of human situations—from those who never heard the gospel, to those who heard a partial version, to those who heard fully and disagreed?

This framework is built on three components. The first is the divine mandate to seek God, established in Hebrews 11:6 and Acts 17:26-27. Seeking is the obligation that comes before the gospel commands and shapes how Scripture treats human accountability. The second is what each person was told about God and the gospel, which varies in completeness from no exposure at all to the full apostolic message. The third is the disposition with which they responded to what they received: whether they embraced it, misunderstood it, were prevented from acting on it, or turned away from it.

Behind every case this appendix addresses is one underlying question: is God fair? What about the grandmother who was never baptized? The sincere person who was immersed but taught it was only a symbol? The medieval Christian who was taught incorrectly by the Church and had no way to know otherwise? The seeker who died mid-pursuit? Readers come to this appendix to learn where Scripture extends mercy and where it does not. Abraham pressed the same kind of question at Sodom. He drew near to God and said, “Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? ... Far be it from you to do such a thing, to put the righteous to death with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be it from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?” (Genesis 18:23-25).

Abraham brought the question to God rather than burying it, and his appeal was to God’s character. The reader does not have to invent exceptions to defend God’s fairness—God’s own nature is the defense. These three—the seeking mandate, what each person was told, and how they responded—are how this appendix works through each case. Where Scripture speaks plainly, this framework follows. Where Scripture is silent, we trust God’s mercy and justice.

There is one dependency that must be met before this framework applies: can the person actually understand and respond? Infants, young children, and the mentally incapable cannot. This framework does not apply to them.

Scripture consistently ties moral accountability to the capacity to understand. Jesus states the principle directly: “If you were blind, you would have no guilt” (John 9:41). Guilt requires the capacity to “see”. When God barred the exodus generation from the promised land, He explicitly exempted their children: “Your little ones, who today have no knowledge of good or evil, they shall go in there” (Deuteronomy 1:39). The children were exempted because they lacked the moral knowledge that made their parents’ rebellion punishable. Adam’s fall affected them too, but they had not yet reached the knowledge that would make them guilty. Paul states the underlying principle twice: “Where there is no law there is no transgression” (Romans 4:15); “sin is not counted where there is no law” (Romans 5:13). James confirms it from the other direction: “Whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin” (James 4:17). Knowledge is the prerequisite. Where it cannot exist, neither can the guilt that Scripture attaches to refusal.

The remainder of this appendix assumes a person who can understand and respond. It works through each component in turn, then applies them to the cases readers most often raise. Two mandates from Scripture precede the gospel commands and shape how this framework treats human accountability. The first is the mandate to seek God. The second, for anyone who has received teaching, is the mandate to test what they have been taught.

The Seeking Mandate

Scripture does not present seeking God as merely commendable. It is required.

Hebrews 11:6 makes the requirement explicit: “Without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.” Faith without seeking is not the faith Hebrews has in view.

Acts 17:26–27 frames seeking as the purpose for which God arranged human existence. Paul tells the Athenians that God “made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel their way toward him and find him.” God arranged history to produce seekers, which means failing to seek is failing to do what every person was made to do.

Scripture also says, in the same letter that grounds this mandate, that “no one seeks for God” (Romans 3:11). Paul is not contradicting himself. The two claims belong together. The obligation to seek is real and universal. The failure to seek is also real and universal. Romans 1 establishes the obligation. Romans 3 establishes that no one meets it on their own. The whole point of Paul’s argument is that this universal failure is what makes grace necessary. The seeking mandate does not establish that humans can save themselves by seeking. It establishes that humans are accountable for not seeking, which is what makes the gospel an answer rather than a suggestion. Grace addresses the failure the mandate exposes.

The mandate runs throughout Scripture. Deuteronomy 4:29 promises that those who search with all their heart will find. Jeremiah 29:13 makes the same promise. Isaiah 55:6 gives the imperative directly: “Seek the Lord while he may be found.” Jesus commanded it: “Seek, and you will find” (Matthew 7:7). Paul builds it into the description of those who receive eternal life (Romans 2:7).

The pattern is consistent. Seeking is required, God responds to seekers, and those who do not seek have failed the obligation that comes before every gospel command.

The mandate to seek God extends to every person, not just to those who have heard of Jesus or the God of Israel. Paul says God has made Himself known to everyone through the created world and the human conscience—sufficient to leave every person without excuse for failing to seek Him (Romans 1:19-20; 2:14-15). The person who never heard of Jesus is still accountable to seek the God their conscience and the world around them bear witness to. The discussion of revelation below provides more detail. For now, the point is that the mandate to seek God is universal. No one escapes it by lacking access to the gospel.

The Interrupted Seeker

Some people are actively seeking when an external force cuts the pursuit short. Death is the most common case. They have heard about Jesus, started examining the claims, and are working through what they have read or been told, but the process is incomplete when their lives end. Other external forces can interrupt seeking in the same way—a stroke or brain injury that ends the capacity to continue, imprisonment or captivity that cuts off access to Scripture and teaching, isolation that severs the seeker from any community or text that could carry the pursuit forward. In every case, the person is mid-pursuit when something outside them ends the pursuit. They are not refusers or procrastinators.

Scripture handles this case without requiring us to render a verdict. The interrupted seeker is doing what is mandated. They are not in the category of those who suppress the truth (Romans 1:18) or of those who heard and refused (Hebrews 10:26-29). They are in motion toward God when motion ends. Trusting Belief had commenced.

What can be said with confidence is that the interrupted seeker is not in the same position as the non-seeker. The non-seeker has failed the prior obligation that Hebrews 11:6 and Acts 17:27 establish, while the interrupted seeker has not. Their seeking was real, even if it was incomplete.

What cannot be said with confidence is exactly how God judges the interrupted case. Scripture gives the principle that God responds to seekers and the assurance that He judges with perfect knowledge of every heart. That is enough reason not to declare a verdict on this case, and to trust God’s judgment instead.

A Rare Interruption

The interrupted seeker is a narrow category. It is not the person who heard, intended to look into it sometime, and never did—that person is a non-seeker who postponed seeking until the opportunity ended, and Scripture’s mandate does not exempt postponed pursuit any more than it exempts postponed obedience.

It also does not cover the person who sought briefly, encountered the apostolic teaching, and turned away. Their seeking ended in rejection, not interruption, and Scripture treats this case under the heading of those who refused the truth they received.

The interrupted seeker is a rare case. The pursuit was real, and something outside the person ended it. God knows when this is genuinely the case and when it is not, and that knowledge belongs to Him.

The Testing Mandate

An explicit expectation comes with any teaching about God and the gospel: test what you were taught. The testing mandate is seeking made specific for the hearer who has been told something.

Scripture’s commands to test are direct. “Test everything; hold fast what is good” (1 Thessalonians 5:21). “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world” (1 John 4:1). These are imperatives. They reach every hearer. They make no exception for the hearer who trusts their teacher.

The Bereans show what testing looks like in practice. Luke commends them for examining the Scriptures daily to see if Paul’s preaching was true (Acts 17:11).

Scripture warns again and again that false teachers will come, and that the hearer is responsible for spotting them. “The time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions” (2 Timothy 4:3). “There will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies” (2 Peter 2:1). Paul does not treat the presence of false teaching as an excuse for the misled hearer. He treats it as exactly what makes testing urgent.

Scripture also says the hearer is equipped to test. The commands of God are accessible to ordinary people (Deuteronomy 30:11-14). Scripture is clear enough for the simple (Psalm 19:7; 119:105). The Word is enough to equip the believer (2 Timothy 3:16-17). The testing mandate is not addressed to scholars. It is addressed to anyone who has been taught.

Accountability does not transfer to the teacher. “So then each of us will give an account of himself to God” (Romans 14:12). “The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor the father suffer for the iniquity of the son” (Ezekiel 18:20). Jesus’ image is sharper still: “If the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit” (Matthew 15:14). The follower’s blindness does not exempt

the follower. Both fall.

The testing mandate closes off the most common exemption people try to claim. Scripture commands every hearer to test. The one who did not test has not done what was commanded, and the failure to test cannot itself serve as an excuse.

Revelation: What God Made Known

The seeking mandate established what every capable person owes God. How far each seeker can go, and what response they can give, depends on what revelation they received.

God reveals Himself in two ways, and the difference matters for this framework.

The first is general revelation. God has made Himself known to every person through two witnesses—the created world and the human conscience. Paul says the created world shows God’s eternal power and divine nature (Romans 1:19-20). He says the moral law is written on every heart, and the conscience bears witness to it (Romans 2:14-15). This kind of revelation reaches everyone. It is enough to leave every person without excuse for failing to seek the God it points to. But it is not enough to identify that God by name, to tell us about His covenant, or to make the gospel known. For that, God uses something more.

The second is special revelation. This is information about God that no one could ever discover on their own; it can be known only if God chooses to reveal it. He has done so through prophets, through Scripture, and above all through Christ and the apostolic gospel. Special revelation does not reach everyone. It reaches only the times and places where God has sent it.

Every person has received general revelation, and every person is accountable for whether they sought the God it pointed to. Special revelation varies. The four levels below describe what each person was told about God and the gospel.

Never received the apostolic gospel (R-1). The person did not receive the apostolic gospel of Jesus Christ. This is the largest historical category: every person who lived before Christ and every person after Christ whom the gospel has not yet reached. What revelation they did receive varies. Some received general revelation only. Some lived under the Mosaic covenant. Some encountered Israel’s revelation indirectly—through trade, through migration, through prophetic missions to their cities, as Nineveh did when Jonah came. Some lived in regions the Bible never names, with histories Scripture does not record, where God may have done things Scripture does not tell us about. The unifying feature is that the apostolic gospel did not reach them. The varying feature is what other revelation did—and in many cases, only God knows. In every case, the person is accountable for what they did with whatever revelation God gave them, and not for an apostolic response they could not have known.

Told that Jesus saves, but taught that no response is required (R-2). This includes hyper-grace, antinomian, and free-grace traditions that explicitly deny the gospel’s call for a response. The person was told the name of Jesus and that He saves. They were not told that they needed to respond.

Taught a non-apostolic version of the gospel response (R-3). Any deficiency in any of the four elements—belief, repentance, confession, baptism—places the hearer here. R-3 covers any teaching that diverged from apostolic content, whether by omission or substitution. Two kinds of teaching fall under R-3 and should not be conflated. The first is partial: a real fragment of the apostolic response made known, such as a tradition that calls for trust and repentance but never reaches confession or baptism. The second is substitute—a counterfeit prescription offered as the complete answer, such as the sinner’s prayer presented as the moment of salvation.

Given the full apostolic response (R-4). Belief, repentance, confession, baptism for the forgiveness of sins, are presented as the unified response Scripture prescribes.

Two more things to know about the R-levels.

First, a person can advance through the levels as more of God’s plan is revealed to them. The R-level describes what a person was first told. If more revelation reaches them later, their R-level moves up. A person who was originally at R-3 and later encounters R-4 teaching is no longer at R-3, regardless of what their tradition continues to teach. Acts 17:30 names how this works: “The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent.” The “now” is the moment revelation arrives in a person’s life. Once it arrives, the overlooking ends.

Second, the R-levels are shaped by access. A person at R-3 in the medieval era had no realistic way to reach the apostolic teaching—he was without access. A person at R-3 today, with Scripture in hand, has every way—they are with access. This framework treats these as different cases. When the difference matters, the appendix uses with access or without access alongside the R-level. This applies mostly to R-3, sometimes to R-2.

The R-levels describe what each person was told. What they did with what they were told is the question the next section takes up.

Disposition: Response to the Apostolic Gospel

Hearing the message and responding to it are different things. Two people who hear the same message can respond in very different ways, and Scripture treats those responses with care.

The Four Levels of Belief, established in Chapter 3, describe what happens inside a person as they engage divine revelation: Unbelief, Intellectual Belief, Trusting Belief, Saving Belief. Trusting Belief completes itself into Saving Belief through the

engagement of the mind, heart, will, mouth, and finally the whole body.

This pattern holds across all of salvation history. What changes is the content of the response God commands. For Abraham, the response was to leave Ur. For the Israelites under the Mosaic covenant, the response was to keep the Law God had given them. For the post-Pentecost hearer who has received the apostolic gospel, the response is belief, repentance, confession, and baptism for the forgiveness of sins. The Four Levels themselves are how Scripture treats every capable person's engagement with whatever God has revealed to them. The cases this appendix takes up are the post-Pentecost ones readers most often raise.

Trusting Belief, by its nature, moves the will toward the response God has commanded—this is established in Chapter 3. The Trusting-to-Saving connection cannot be stopped from inside the person. What looks like a stalled Trusting Belief is actually a lower level of belief mistaken for Trusting Belief. But the connection can be stopped by factors outside the person's control. External interruptions are real, and this framework addresses them separately below.

The question is simple: how did the person regard the gospel commands when they encountered them?

For that question to even apply, the gospel commands had to have actually reached the person. If they didn't, there is no disposition to evaluate; the person wasn't refusing or agreeing or misunderstanding the gospel, because the gospel was never set before them.

So, who faces that question? Anyone who encountered the real apostolic gospel—whether their original teachers gave it to them, or whether they came across it later through Scripture or corrective teaching. Once the apostolic command has been set before someone, what they did with it becomes the question.

Who is not in disposition territory? Anyone the true gospel never reached. The R-1 hearer who never heard about Jesus. The R-2 or R-3 hearer who never had the apostolic gospel reach them, because what they were taught was something else. These people are not refusing or disagreeing—the apostolic gospel was never set before them. Their case is handled by what they did with the revelation they actually got, and by whether they tested what they were taught.

The four disposition categories below describe the four ways someone can respond to the apostolic gospel command once it has actually reached them.

The Misunderstood Command (D-1). The person genuinely did not understand that the gospel called for the response. Their failure to act traces to misunderstanding, not to refusal. The category sits at the edge of the framework's logic—capacity by definition implies the ability to understand, so a true D-1 case approaches incoherence. The framework includes it for completeness, recognizing that edge cases (medical, psychological, physical state, etc.) may exist that the framework cannot adjudicate; these belong to God's judgment.

The Externally Prevented (D-2). The person was moving toward the response when external forces stopped them. Death intervening, physical restraint, kidnapping, catastrophic incapacity, extreme isolation, unavailability of water—these are external prevention. D-2 is not procrastination. The person who delayed and ran out of time did not have external forces prohibiting action; they had time they chose not to use.

The Disagreer (D-3). The person heard the apostolic teaching, understood it as a command, examined it, and concluded it was not actually required. This is intellectual rejection after access.

The Refuser (D-4). Willful rejection. Procrastination also falls here. The person who knows they should respond and does not—whether by active refusal or by indefinite deferral—has rejected the command they perceived.

D-2 deserves to stand as its own category even though Scripture does not declare a verdict on it. The person whose seeking was externally interrupted is not in the same position as the person who postponed.

D-3 and D-4 are closely related. Both have failed to obey what was revealed, and neither is exempt. The distinction matters pastorally and apologetically. The disagreeer needs scriptural engagement and the Berean pressure. The refuser needs the urgency of Acts 22:16 and James 4:17.

Applying the Framework

The cases readers most often raise are grouped here by what each person was told and how they responded.

The Genuinely Unreached (R-1). A person who lived and died without ever receiving the apostolic gospel is accountable for what they did with the revelation they did receive. For some, that was general revelation alone—the witness of creation and conscience that obligated them to seek God and to obey the moral law (Romans 2:14–15). For the pre-Christ Israelite, it also included the Mosaic covenant and the prophetic witness. For the unrecorded populations of history—Europe, Asia, the Americas, Africa, and the lost centuries of countless regions—it included whatever God did that Scripture does not tell us. The principle is the same in every case. A person is accountable for the revelation God gave them. A person is not accountable for revelation God did not give them (Romans 4:15). This framework refuses to pronounce on individual cases God has not made known to us. Scripture does not declare a verdict on the eternal status of every R-1 hearer. We do not know what each person did with the revelation they received, and we do not need to know—God does. The Judge of all the earth does what is right (Genesis 18:25). We trust Him.

The “Heard but Told Nothing Was Required” Without Access (R-2 without access). A person who heard that Jesus saves but was told no response is required, and who had no realistic way to find corrective teaching, is in a kind of “times of

ignorance” with respect to the apostolic response. A missionary from a Free Grace tradition reaches a village in the Amazon or rural Africa, preaches that intellectual belief in Jesus’ promise is sufficient, and leaves behind no Bibles in the local language. The villagers were told there was nothing further to do. They have no exposure to dissenting voices. They could not have reached what was not made available to them. Acts 17:30 acknowledges that ignorance has been a real factor in God’s dealings with humanity. God knows how to judge such cases. This framework does not declare a verdict here either. Genesis 18:25 holds. The Judge of all the earth does what is right.

The “Heard but Told Nothing Was Required” With Access (R-2 with access).

A person at R-2 today, with a Bible in their own language and corrective teaching within reach, is not in the position of the person who had no access. The “times of ignorance” framing of Acts 17:30 does not extend here. Revelation has arrived. The overlooking has ended. The seeking obligation that applied to them before is no longer general—they now have a specific person to seek, and they have access to the apostolic account of what He commanded. Scripture commands every hearer to test what they were taught (1 Thessalonians 5:21; 1 John 4:1), and the Bereans are the example Luke commends—they examined the Scriptures themselves to see if what they had heard was true (Acts 17:11). The question for the person at R-2 with access becomes whether they examined, and what they did with what they found. The person at R-2 with access who did not test does not get to claim their teacher’s account as their defense. Scripture commanded them to test it. The failure to test is itself a failure to obey. Where access existed and testing did not happen, Scripture treats this as failure to act on what was commanded (Hebrews 2:1-3; James 4:17). The full scriptural case for the testing mandate and the verdict on its neglect is developed in the R-3 with access section below.

The Mistaught Without Access (R-3 without access). A person who lived in an era when the apostolic pattern was obscured, and who had no realistic way to find corrective teaching, is in a kind of “times of ignorance” with respect to that pattern. The medieval Christian is the standing example. They were taught that salvation comes through the rites administered by the Church. They had no Bible in their own language. They had no exposure to dissenting voices. Acts 17:30 acknowledges that ignorance has been a real factor in God’s dealings with humanity. God knows how to judge such cases. This framework does not declare a verdict here either. The person at R-3 without access could not have reached what was not made available to them, and Scripture has reason to expect that God will treat the constraint as the constraint it was. Genesis 18:25 holds. The Judge of all the earth does what is right.

The Mistaught With Access (R-3 with access). This is the framework’s most important distinction. A person at R-3 today, with a Bible in their own language and corrective teaching within reach, is not in the medieval Christian’s position. The “times of ignorance” framing of Acts 17:30 does not extend here. Revelation has arrived. The overlooking has ended. The testing mandate developed in the R-2 section fully applies here. The question for the person at R-3 with access is the same: whether they examined what they were taught, and what they did with what they

found. The person at R-3 with access who did not test does not get to claim their tradition's teaching as their defense. Scripture commanded them to test it. The failure to test is itself a failure to obey.

There is a harder version of this case. Some hearers have been so shaped by their prior teaching that the apostolic pattern does not register even when they read the texts themselves. They open Acts 2:38 and read straight through it. The systematic theological framework they were given is acting as a filter on the plain reading. This is real and common. It is not a capacity problem. The faculty to understand is intact, but they failed to exercise the testing Scripture commanded. The testing mandate engages exactly here. Testing means examining not only the texts but the framework through which they are read. The failure to test the framework itself does not exempt the person from the response the test was meant to reveal. Scripture treats this neglect of the testing mandate as failure to act on what was commanded (Hebrews 2:1-3; James 4:17). Paul warned that even apostolic-sounding teachers could be preaching a different gospel and stand accursed for it (Galatians 1:8-9), which is why testing what one was taught is itself a command, not an option. Jesus declared that when the blind follow the blind, both fall into the pit (Matthew 15:14)—the hearer who follows a teacher's error is not exempt from the consequence. What God overlooked in the times of ignorance He no longer overlooks where revelation has arrived (Acts 17:30-31).

The Externally Prevented (D-2). A person who was moving toward the apostolic response when something outside them stopped them falls under the same principle as the interrupted seeker. Death, physical restraint, sudden incapacity, no water available—these are real interruptions, not delays. The person was not refusing. The person was not putting it off. Their heart had already engaged the response when something outside them prevented its completion. Scripture does not declare a verdict on this case, and this framework cannot confirm for the reader that their loved one is saved. Still, the case is not that of the refuser, the disagreeer, or the procrastinator. The person was moving toward God when something stopped them. Scripture says God rewards those who seek Him (Hebrews 11:6), and the Judge of all the earth does what is right (Genesis 18:25). We trust His judgment with hope.

The Disagreeer (D-3). A person who heard the apostolic commands, examined them, and concluded they were not actually required is in a different position from any of the cases above. They have not lacked access. They have not been prevented. They engaged the question and reached a conclusion against the apostolic answer. This framework finds no scriptural exemption for this case.

D-3 is not a modern category. Scripture records cases directly. The Judaizers taught Gentile converts that they had to be circumcised and keep the Law to be saved; Paul wrote that those who accepted this teaching were severed from Christ and had fallen from grace (Galatians 5:2-4). The Nicolaitans taught compromise with pagan worship; the risen Christ said He hated their teaching and threatened to war against those who held it (Revelation 2:6, 14-15). The Gnostics and Manicheans of the early centuries held that material rites could not be the channel of spiritual salvation; the Church treated them as heretics, not as exempt sincere believers.

The most common version of this case today is the inheritor of a tradition that teaches against baptism's role in salvation. The person has read the plain teaching of Acts 2:38, Romans 6:3-4, Colossians 2:12-13, and 1 Peter 3:21. They have heard corrective teaching. They continue to hold their tradition's reading. Scripture treats this case directly. When the apostles encountered sincere believers who had been mistaught, the pattern was correction, not exemption. Apollos was taught more accurately by Priscilla and Aquila, and the Ephesian disciples were rebaptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. The person who has been corrected and still disagrees is not in the position of the person who has never been corrected. Scripture declares the disagreeer's category lost. What Paul named against the Judaizers (Galatians 5:2-4) and what the risen Christ named against the Nicolaitans (Revelation 2:6, 14-15) is the framework's verdict on this contemporary case.

The Refuser (D-4). A person who perceived the apostolic commands as binding and refused to comply has rejected what they knew. This is not the atheist or the agnostic. This is the person who has heard the gospel, accepted it as God's command, and chosen not to obey. At root, this is not a problem of information or persuasion. It is a problem of submission. The refuser may want forgiveness. They may want assurance. They may even want Jesus as savior. What they will not do is surrender control. They will not give up the throne of their own life. They will not let Jesus be Lord. The refusal may be active and explicit, or it may take the form of indefinite delay. James 4:17 names the principle: "whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin." Acts 22:16 names the urgency: "And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name." Scripture declares the refuser's category lost. Paul names the verdict explicitly: those who do not obey the gospel "will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord" (2 Thessalonians 1:8-9). Hebrews 10:26-29 and Mark 16:16 reach the same conclusion.

The cases above do not exhaust every situation. They cover the patterns that occur most often in real conversation and show how this framework's components combine to handle each one.

The Empty Exemption Categories

Many objections to this framework rest on cases that don't merit hope for an exemption. When the exemption falls apart, so does the objection. The rest of this section walks through the most common ones.

Sincere disagreement after access. The argument runs like this: a person who has heard the apostolic teaching, examined it, and sincerely concluded the response is not required should be exempted because their disagreement is sincere. Scripture does not authorize this exemption. Sincerity is not the test. The Pharisees were sincere. Saul of Tarsus was sincere when he persecuted the church. The Judaizers were sincere. The Nicolaitans were sincere. Sincerity in error is not the same as response to truth, and Scripture treats them differently throughout. The disagreeer's sincerity is real, but it does not stand in for the response Scripture prescribes.

Indefinitely deferred but intending. Some people think their situation is different: they have not responded yet, but they mean to. It is not different. It is refusal in slower motion. Jesus told a parable for exactly this person. A rich man congratulated himself that he had ample goods stored up for many years—he would relax, eat, drink, and be merry. God’s response was direct: “Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?” (Luke 12:19-20). The man had plans. He had every intention of enjoying what he had built. The plans did not save him. The intention did not save him. The night came. The person who knows the response is required and has not responded has refused. Intending to act later is not acting.

Wanting a more suitable Gospel. The objection rarely takes this name. It shows up in other phrasings: I don’t see why baptism matters that much. My faith is what matters; the rest is just ritual. God is bigger than something so specific. Underneath each of these is the same move—the gospel as presented is rejected in favor of a version that would have asked less. The person is saying, in effect, that they would have responded to a gospel that did not require what God’s gospel requires. Scripture cannot give this exemption. God does not hold people accountable to a gospel He did not give. He holds them accountable to the gospel He did give. A gospel the person would have preferred is not the gospel God revealed.

The Narrow Corner Case

The apostolic gospel response—belief, repentance, confession, baptism—applies to everyone who can hear it. Those who have access and refuse are without excuse. Those who sought, weighed the evidence, and concluded against God are not innocent seekers. They are, in Paul’s words, those who suppress the truth in unrighteousness (Romans 1:18). The corner-case category is narrower than it first appears. It does not cover the willfully resistant (D-4), the casually indifferent (also D-4), or the proud rejecter (D-3). It covers two kinds of people only: those who genuinely trusted Christ but were mistaught about the response without access to corrective teaching (R-2 or R-3, without access), and those whom the apostolic gospel never reached (R-1).

The Inclusivism Question

Even in these two cases, the temptation is to embrace inclusivism—the view that a sincere response to whatever revelation a person had is enough, even without the apostolic gospel. Inclusivism has serious advocates and a good impulse. The Catholic doctrines of baptism of desire and invincible ignorance, Karl Rahner’s anonymous Christian theology, C.S. Lewis’ literary treatment in *The Last Battle*, and evangelical inclusivists like Clark Pinnock and the later John Stott all want to honor God’s justice. The impulse is right. The doctrinal conclusion is not.

The error in inclusivism is not its compassion. It is the move from honest case to doctrine. Inclusivism takes the real corner case, builds a category around it, and

supplies a rule: sincere belief in whatever revelation a person had can stand in for the apostolic response. Once that rule is granted as doctrine, the gospel itself softens. If sincerity might be enough for those who could not obey, the pressure eases on those who can. The exemption, once opened, expands. It expands to cover the very people Scripture says are without excuse.

Scripture does not authorize this category. Nowhere does Scripture say that sincere response to lesser revelation secures what the apostolic response secures. Scripture says something different.

Abraham, pleading for Sodom, asks God: “Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is right?” (Genesis 18:25). The question is rhetorical. It assumes its answer. God’s justice has shape—He will not sweep the righteous away with the wicked. Paul makes the same move in Romans 2:16: God will judge the secrets of every person by Christ Jesus, with the Gentile’s conscience bearing witness on that day. Neither passage establishes a doctrine of corner-case salvation. Both give us confidence in the Judge’s character.

That confidence is what gives us hope in honest cases. We expect God’s justice to account for those who obeyed all the revelation they were given. We expect the mistaught believer who genuinely trusted Christ and had no access to corrective teaching to be treated differently from the one who refused Him. We expect the person whom the apostolic gospel never reached not to be condemned for failing to obey what was never made known. But we can *only* expect.

The Pastoral Humility Version

This framework sometimes meets a different kind of objection. Not all inclusivism rests on a doctrinal argument. Some of it comes from a gut-level refusal to believe that sincere people who loved Jesus could be lost. It calls itself pastoral humility—the posture that says, “I’m not God, so I won’t tell someone they’re lost.” It sounds like deference to God’s judgment. But deference to God’s judgment would leave God’s words intact. This doesn’t. It edits them. The structure underneath is the same as the inclusivism just addressed.

The argument works by exempting specific cases. The sincere believer who was sprinkled instead of immersed. The one baptized as an infant. The one mistaught that baptism is symbolic. Each exemption is offered with pastoral weight. Each one sounds reasonable on its own. But the exemptions add up.

If the sincere mistaught believer in one tradition is saved on grounds of sincerity, the sincere mistaught believer in every tradition is saved on the same grounds. The principle does not allow for selective application. Once sincerity stands in for obedience for anyone, it stands in for obedience for everyone. By the time the cases are added together, sincere belief in any tradition’s gospel has become enough, which is faith-alone with sincerity as the filter. This drift is not hypothetical. Churches that claim to teach the apostolic response—including many in the

Restoration Movement tradition from which this book was written—have quietly stopped applying it. The response is vaguely affirmed from the pulpit while a baseline of sincerity is accepted at the door. These churches claim that the response is required while quietly collapsing into soft inclusivism on sentimental grounds.

This framework refuses this collapse. Sincerity is not the test. The Judaizers were sincere. The Nicolaitans were sincere. The Gnostics and Manicheans were sincere. Paul, Christ Himself, and the early Church treated each as condemnable despite their sincerity. This framework does the same.

There is a test for any position like this: ask who it would actually leave unsaved. If the only person left is the willful refuser, and every sincere case is exempted, the position is functionally universalism. This framework does not arrive there. The disagreeer who has been corrected and still disagrees is not exempt. The procrastinator who never acts is not exempt. The sincere believer in a non-apostolic gospel who had access to corrective teaching and did not test it is not exempt—Scripture commanded every hearer to test (1 Thessalonians 5:21; 1 John 4:1), and the failure to test cannot itself become the excuse. These are hard conclusions. They should not be softened.

Proclamation, Not Condemnation

Teaching what Scripture says and judging what God will do with the mistaught are two different responsibilities, and most of the confusion around these questions comes from collapsing them into one. The teacher who conflates them begins adjusting the message to fit the verdict he hopes God will deliver. That is precisely what this framework refuses to do.

God judges with perfect knowledge of every heart, every circumstance, every degree of revelation a person received. He alone knows what each person was given and what they did with it. No teacher can stand in for Him—and no teacher needs to, because the task Scripture assigns is not sentencing but announcing.

Scripture announces the eternal destinies of those who refuse the gospel, and it commands us to repeat what it announces. The prophets understood this. *Nabi*—the Hebrew word for prophet—means spokesman, one who speaks for another. Jonah told Nineveh, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown” (Jonah 3:4). Ezekiel stood as watchman over Israel, charged to warn the wicked of their way (Ezekiel 33:7-9). Jeremiah warned Jerusalem of the destruction already decreed against the city. Each prophet delivered the warning God had given—without softening it, without appending a verdict of his own.

The New Testament extends the same charge. Paul tells Timothy to preach the word, to reprove, rebuke, and exhort, in season and out of season (2 Timothy 4:2). He tells the Ephesian elders that he is innocent of the blood of all, because he did not shrink from declaring the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:26-27). Jude tells ordinary believers to “save others by snatching them out of the fire” (Jude 23). Speaking

Scripture’s warnings is commanded work, and commanded work is not judging.

The apostles carried out that work without flinching. Paul wrote that “those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus...will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord” (2 Thessalonians 1:8-9). He warned the Galatians: “You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace” (Galatians 5:4). He told the Athenians that God “commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness” (Acts 17:30-31). Paul wept over his unbelieving kinsmen—but his teaching never changed to accommodate his grief.

God has already rendered His verdict on those who refuse the gospel. Scripture names what that verdict is. The teacher who repeats Scripture is not usurping the Judge. He is announcing what the Judge has already decided.

The reader who insists the mistaught believer must be safe is not defending God’s justice. He is anticipating God's verdict on God's behalf, drawing on information only God possesses. The intention is generous. The result is that Scripture gets edited to protect people from a God whose judgment the reader does not fully trust.

Teach what Scripture reveals. Trust God with what He has not revealed.

Summary of Cases

The following table summarizes how this framework handles the cases readers most often raise. The full treatment of each case is in the sections above. Where Scripture declares a category lost, the framework announces that declaration; how God measures severity within each category is His prerogative under Luke 12:47-48 and Genesis 18:25.

Table 14. Treatment of the Difficult Cases

If you are asking about...	App G Category	What Scripture announces
A child too young, or a person whose cognitive impairment prevented understanding any moral teaching	Capacity prerequisite not met	Scripture does not assign accountability where capacity does not exist
A person who lived and died without ever hearing about Jesus	R-1	Accountable for response to whatever revelation they did receive; verdict belongs to God
A person who lived where corrective teaching was not reachable – the medieval Christian, the village reached by a Free Grace missionary, etc	R-2 or R-3 without access	Treated under "times of ignorance"; verdict belongs to God
A person who was taught a gospel that did not include the apostolic response, who never tested what they were taught against Scripture	R-2 or R-3 with access	Scripture declares this category lost
A person who heard the apostolic gospel and, despite having capacity, genuinely did not perceive it as a command for them	R-4 / D-1	A rare edge case; the response is still required; verdict belongs to God
A person whose heart had engaged the response in trusting belief when death, force, or circumstance prevented baptism	R-4 / D-2	Treated as response interrupted; verdict belongs to God
A person who heard the apostolic gospel, examined the teaching against Scripture, and concluded the response is not required	R-4 / D-3	Scripture declares this category lost
A person who heard the apostolic gospel and would not respond, or kept putting it off	R-4 / D-4	Scripture declares this category lost

The framework's R-levels and D-levels together cover every case of revelation and disposition. The specific cases shown in the table above are those that readers most often raise.

The Limits of Reasoning

This appendix works within the framework the book has established. The book has shown what the apostolic gospel response is: trusting belief, repentance, confession, and baptism. That is not in question here. What this appendix has taken up is a narrower task—thinking through how God’s mercy and judgment *might* apply to cases Scripture does not directly address, or appears not to. Scripture speaks to these cases in pieces: commands, warnings, examples, principles. This appendix has arranged those pieces into categories to think through what those pieces, taken together, would say.

That arranging work is interpretive. Three places in particular required choices Scripture does not directly settle.

Where the line of “access” gets drawn. Scripture commands every hearer to test what they were taught. Scripture does not define what counts as having had the chance to test. This appendix draws the line at access in the practical sense—a Bible in the reader’s language, corrective teaching reachable. A different reading of Scripture could draw the line differently, requiring some standard of formation or comprehension before access counts. Scripture does not settle this; a choice had to be made. The choice this appendix makes is the one Acts 17:30 supports: once revelation has arrived, the overlooking ends.

How Luke 12:47-48 gets weighted. Jesus says the servant who did not know gets a lighter beating than the one who knew. This appendix reads the verse as proportional severity within the verdict—the category verdict applies, but God measures the level of punishment within it. A different reading could take the same verse as proportionality that modifies whether someone is a member of a category itself. Scripture’s text does not require either reading. This appendix takes the more sober reading because of what it does not do; it does not create a class of people exempt from the gospel response on the grounds that they did not fully understand it.

Whether the verdicts cover the students of false teachers. Paul’s verdict against the Judaizers and Christ’s verdict against the Nicolaitans fell on active proponents of teaching against the apostles. This appendix treats the students of those teachers—those who sat under the teaching and never tested it—as falling under the same verdict-bearing category, on the strength of the testing-mandate texts and the categorical neglect passages (Hebrews 2:1-3, James 4:17, 2 Thessalonians 1:8). A different reading could argue that the named-group verdicts apply only to the teachers themselves and that their students sit in a softer category. This appendix finds no scriptural ground for that softening, as those students will almost inevitably repeat the words of their teachers anyway. The testing mandate is universal. Neglect is verdict-bearing. The students who had access fall under what Scripture announces about those who do not obey the gospel.

Honest readers, different verdicts. The three pivots above are reasonable readings of what Scripture leaves open about cases at the edges. This appendix has

made the choices it has made and shown the scriptural grounds for each. Another reader, working honestly with the same texts, could weigh the pivots differently and reach softer category verdicts for some of the cases. The author does not pretend the edge-case reasoning is as settled as the apostolic teaching itself.

What does not depend on any of this. Whether this appendix has drawn the edge-case categories exactly right or not, the call on the reader does not change. The book has shown what the apostles taught. The reader who has heard the apostolic gospel is called to respond to it. The categories in this appendix help the reader think through what Scripture says about people whose situations were less direct than the reader's own. They do not soften, qualify, or postpone the command on the reader. The Gospel Commands stand. Obey them.

Where This Leaves You

You may be reading this appendix because you are uncertain about your own status. Or you may be reading it because you are uncertain about a loved one. Each case has its own answer.

If you are uncertain about your own status, return to Chapter 16. This appendix lays out the framework for understanding accountability when the apostolic gospel has been encountered (R-4).

If you are uncertain about a loved one, maintain grounding and clarity on the distinction between teaching and judging. We do not render a verdict on another person's eternal destiny. We only *report* what God has indicated He would do. In matters of uncertainty, be certain God knows every heart, every opportunity, every response. Trust His judgment.

This appendix has given readers the tools to think clearly about cases Scripture treats clearly, and to trust God with cases Scripture does not. For some readers, this framework offers real grounds for hope—those whose loved one never received the apostolic gospel at all, those whose loved one lived in genuine isolation from corrective teaching, those whose loved one was actively seeking when something outside them ended the pursuit. Scripture does not condemn these cases, and neither does this framework. For other cases, it offers no grounds for hope beyond what Scripture itself gives—and Scripture gives little for those who heard the apostolic gospel and refused, disagreed, or postponed. The eternal status of any specific person is something only God knows. The offer this framework makes is the same in every case: clarity about what we are responsible to teach and what God is responsible to judge. The reader who holds to that distinction may find that the difficult cases remain difficult. Abraham asked the hardest question anyone has asked about God's justice, and he asked it to God's face. He did not construct exemptions to force God's fairness. He brought the hard question to God and rested on God's character for the answer. That is where the difficulty belongs—not resolved, but entrusted to the Judge of all the earth, who does what is right.

This appendix is reproduced from *Eternal Stakes: The Response Grace Demands* by Joe Tenga.

For the full argument, including Chapter 16, see the book.

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