

Romans, Part 6 5-15-22

Truth Suppressors

If there is no God, why do so many believe in God? Many of the great philosophers and psychologists have sought to answer that one. The popular argument is that God is a psychological crutch. Life without purpose, without meaning, without any transcendent touch-point is too threatening and so men and women must imagine a God who is there watching over them. Makes sense. I think I rather agree – if we grant the argument its presupposition – which I don't. But what is rarely pondered by humans is the other side of the question. If there is a God—why are there atheists? Why do so many deny that central reality?

Our sixth study in Romans is our second look at this brilliant portion of Scripture which begins in verse 18. Romans 1:18-32 *For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness,* ¹⁹*because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them.* ²⁰*For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse.* ²¹*For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened.* ²²*Professing to be wise, they became fools,* ²³*and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures.* ²⁴*Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them.* ²⁵*For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.* ²⁶*For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions; for their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural,* ²⁷*and in the same way also the men abandoned the natural function of the woman and burned in their desire toward one another, men with men committing indecent acts and receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error.* ²⁸*And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do those things which are not proper,* ²⁹*being filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, evil; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice; they are gossips,* ³⁰*slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents,* ³¹*without understanding, untrustworthy, unloving,*

unmerciful;³² and although they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them.

Last time we saw how the wrath of God is currently being manifest in the self-destructive, crazy behavior that characterizes so many on this planet. We saw that the wrath of God toward sin results in judicial hardening. There was wrath and reprobation, resulting in sexual insanity and many other perverse behaviors. Today we consider three more of the Rs – revelation, responsibility and rejection. We have seen what results from the wrath of God – today we see the basis for it which is found largely in verses 18-21 *For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness,¹⁹ because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them.²⁰ For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse.²¹ For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened.*

Well, Pastor, what I don't understand is how God can hold people responsible for rejecting Christ if they have never heard of him? Ever heard that objection to the Christian message? The innocent native in Africa argument? It is really not a hard one. God never holds anyone responsible for those things they have no way of knowing. Never. Does that mean that the native in Africa who died without hearing of Jesus avoids judgment? No. The apostle here presents us with an exceedingly clear word on the basis for divine judgment. Humans will be judged on the basis of what they did know – that's a Biblical principle. And, the more light the more responsibility. But what Paul is telling us is that every human, of normal intelligence at least, bears moral responsibility because every human has known something of the true and living God. Look at the language used in our text. Verse 18 says that men suppress the truth. Now, before you can suppress the truth, you must first, what? You have to have the truth. Verse 19 says men do have the truth because there are theological realities which God made evident to us. Verse 21 says that fallen sinners actually know God. That language is confusing for us because normally we speak that way to describe those who live life in a personal communion with the Lord – but here it just means that folks deep down are actually alert to his reality, regardless of what they may say and regardless of what they may do with that awareness.

From whence cometh this awareness of God that is evident within them? The text doesn't say it but I can't help but think of how we are made – Humans are made in God's image. It's as if God's reality is stamped on our consciousness from the outset, by how we are made. Yes – but where Paul also points us is toward creation. 20 *Since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made.* Common people have always been puzzled by how anyone can look at the world around us and not believe in God. The very notion that a world as finely tuned as ours, as vast as ours, as delicate and complex, as beautiful and mysterious could just show up without a grand designer, rightly strikes most of us as ludicrous beyond words. That feeling is more than sentimental. It is biblical. Psalm 19:1-2 *The heavens are telling of the glory of God; and their expanse is declaring the work of His hands. ²Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night reveals knowledge.* If great mountains or a beautiful sunset or the smile of your child move you to worship God it is because they reveal a portion of who and what He is. Sophisticated thinkers like to roll their eyes at such a popular sentiment, but they can never refute the simple logic of normal folks who think it is the atheist who is crazy for denying what seems obvious.

Whittaker Chambers, in 1952 wrote about his transition from a communist atheist to a Christian. He writes: *my daughter was in her high chair, I was watching her eat. She was the most miraculous thing that had ever happened in my life. I liked to watch her even when she smeared porridge on her face or dropped it on the floor. My eye came to rest on the delicate convolutions of her ear – those intricate, perfect ears. The thought passed through my mind: "No, those ears were not created by any chance coming together of atoms in nature....They could have been created only by immense design."* The thought was involuntary and unwanted. I crowded it out of my mind.... I had to crowd it out of my mind. If I had completed it, I should have had to say: *Design presupposes God.* End quote – and, of course. The grand design of the universe and all its numberless parts, requires a designer. God is utterly necessary to explain what is. Imagine you are driving through South Dakota when you come upon a mountain bearing the unmistakable likenesses of four American presidents. All the science and all the evolutionary theories in the world cannot change that. Robert Jastrow, the famous author, professor at Columbia and former director of NASA's Goddard Institute for Space Studies admits that science has no answer to the question of ultimate causes. Evolution doesn't even address the issue. It speaks of development, not cosmic

origins. Jastrow writes and I quote, *For the scientist who has lived by his faith in the power of reason, the story ends like a bad dream. He has scaled the mountains of ignorance; he is about to conquer the highest peak; as he pulls himself over the final rock, he is greeted by a band of theologians who have been sitting there for centuries.*

So, Paul argues that people know a great deal about God from the creation. Clearly, they can see that He is brilliant beyond words, that He is infinitely powerful. You can also see how He provides for His creatures in so many ways. Then there are the evidences of His displeasure – storms and earthquakes – awesome displays of power, but also of wrath on a rebel planet. What else might be included in this knowledge of God I cannot say, but I can say that it is clearly enough to undercut any excuse-making on the part of sinners. The revelation of God in creation leads to the responsibility of men before the court of heaven. The revelation of God in creation leads to the responsibility of men before the court of heaven. They, we, are without excuse. They, we, cannot plead ignorance. This is repeated in verse 32 where we read that human sin was committed not in ignorance but in the awareness of what is right and wrong. Call it the image of God. Call it conscience, but know that humans are responsible moral agents who, at some level, know their conduct has been indefensible. Some know more than others. Some therefore, are more responsible because they are more aware. Jesus said there would be special condemnation on judgement day for those humans who were alive in Galilee and saw his miracles and heard his sermons. Their privilege brought added responsibility. But who exactly will be able to plead ignorance? No one who can read or understand the apostle's words can do that. The revelation of God in creation gets through, and that revelation makes us responsible.

So, humans had the truth, says Paul. What happened? What did they do with that truth? Did they say, *Oh God you are worthy and awesome!* Did they ask Him for guidance in living their lives? Did they confess their sin and seek His mercy? We are told that men did not honor God and did not thank God. Instead, what they did was suppress the truth. They cancelled God. They unfollowed Him. They kicked Him off their platform. They smothered the truth. The word *suppress* means to hold down. It is a term we use in psychology. It means you push something to the bottom of your psyche – deep into your subconscious and you cover it up, you bury it with make-believe and lies. Humans do this kind of thing with traumatic events in life. Those who have terrifying experiences like watching someone burn to death, suppress such a memory to the point that, in a few years, they can't

remember it. They know it and yet they don't know it. They find hypnosis can bring stuff out that has been suppressed for years and even lost as far as conscious knowledge goes. And this is what happens with unregenerate men. They suppress the truth in unrighteousness. But why?

Just as the mind can forget traumatic events it forgets God, in a sense, because it does not want to remember. To think about God is uncomfortable. Such thoughts, such reality, interferes with my own self-rule and self-pride. John Stott writes: *they have made an a priori decision to live for themselves, rather than for God and others, and therefore deliberately stifle a truth which challenges their self-centeredness.* Jean-Paul Sartre said it plainly, "there can be no God, because if there is man is not free." The existence of a personal, moral deity interferes with the working out of my own sinful desires. Psalm 10:3-4 *For the wicked boasts of his heart's desire, and the greedy man curses and spurns the Lord. 4The wicked, in the haughtiness of his countenance, does not seek Him. All his thoughts are, "There is no God."* "There is no God," he says. And then he invents vocabulary to support this – He speaks of the power of chance. He speaks of nature. He speaks of fate – anything but a personal God to whom I am accountable. To admit that there is a God is to come face to face with judgment and sinners run from that, psychologically. But the running from God psychologically leaves us guilty and blamable morally. Verse 18 says the suppression of truth is carried out in unrighteousness. And when we talk about these things we are penetrating to the heart of our fallenness, our sinfulness. In a sense, every sin we commit is a manifestation of our basic rejection of God. When I want to tell a lie, my first step is to shut down my conscience – in essence to block God out of my thinking. You can see Psalm 10 describing how this works in the thinking of the wicked. They say, *there is no God, God doesn't know, I will get away with this.* And the self-deceit takes root sufficiently to clear the runway for sin to take off. But, no matter what the sin, it all starts with our disposition toward our sovereign Creator. Look at how Paul describes the inner working of sinful hearts. They did not honor Him or give thanks. They wanted to take credit for all things good and blame God for their deprivations. Verse 23 speaks of a great exchange – they exchanged our glorious God for stupid idols because those idols were not so morally exacting. Verse 25 says they exchanged the truth for a lie. They exchanged the truth for a lie. Remember who is the father of lies. They preferred darkness, lies, deceit. They were more comfortable with that. Verse 28 says they did not see fit to acknowledge God. In all these ways, Paul is telling us what he will later make plain

in Romans 5 and 8 where we read that we were enemies of God and hostile to Him. The general disposition of fallen sinners toward a holy God is that they simultaneously hate Him and deny His existence.

Now, most people react to that by saying, *huh, I am not hostile to God*. Maybe not to some imaginary God you have devised, but the God of Scripture? Consider His attributes. RC Sproul notes that men hate God's omniscience – His sovereignty. Do you like it that God is in charge and not you? That God can tell you what to do, but not the other way around? I don't think so. Do you like it that God is all-knowing? Omniscient? That you can't escape His knowledge of what you are doing, where you are, even your inner thoughts? You like that? I don't think so. Jonathan Edwards even said that men hate God's immutability. He never changes and that bugs us. I was doing some street witnessing at the Pittsburgh art festival a few years back. I asked a woman what she would say to God if she encountered Him at judgment. She told me, *I would say, I hope you have changed your mind about some things*. I asked her what she had in mind and she mentioned the Biblical prohibitions related to sex. Hmm. She doesn't like the idea of God being immutable. He needs to get with the times, He needs to get on the right side of history.

If you are following this you will understand that the human rejection of God is not rooted in our mental inabilities, our incapacity to grasp that God is, some calculation that God hasn't given us enough reason to believe – no, no. Our rejection of God is rooted in a commitment to our own autonomy and our hostility to all that He is. John Piper puts it this way: *Why did they reject the truth and suppress the truth and not love the truth? Because they "took pleasure in unrighteousness." When you love sin, you cannot love the truth. The truth is too threatening. It threatens to take away your illicit pleasures. I would venture to say that virtually all falsehood comes from this: a stronger affection for the pleasures of sin. That is what unrighteousness is: loving sin more than loving God and his truth.* Think about this --- when you hear someone in a religious context, a political context, maybe a personal context say something that strikes you as bizarre, as totally nonsensical, (and we hear more of this than ever nowadays don't we?) - do you ever wonder whether that person actually believes what she or he is saying? For me, this happens most often in political contexts. I will routinely hear a politician say something that just seems so obviously false that it is rather stunning. I wonder, is this person a fool or a liar? Do they believe what they are saying? Sometimes they do. Sometimes they know they are lying and are fine with doing

so. And sometimes it is a mixture. Like the teenage girl who told her mom, *if my boyfriend isn't a good guy why is he doing 500 hours of community service?* You get the sense that, in a more thoughtful moment, they would admit the self-deceit. But the affirmation of lies is typically rooted in personal corruption that distorts my thinking and thus my believing and thus my speaking.

Curiously, Paul suggests that the downward slide into aggravated depravity started with a failure to give thanks to God or to honor him. Wow! This is so profound. It takes us back to the garden of Eden with our first parents. There they were in a paradise made by God for their delight. King and queen --- and all was good until the serpent came around and did what? He pointed Eve to the one thing that was forbidden and said to her, *hey, has God really said you can't eat from that tree? You know, God only said that because he doesn't want you to become like him – that tree will make you more equal with God. He is selfishly depriving you, Eve.* And Eve went for it. Adam too. The fall began when Eve felt herself to be what? Deprived? *Poor me! I am not getting all that I deserve.* And when someone feels victimized, resentful, that person feels justified in taking from another. Adam and Eve's son, Cain, does the same thing. His brother's offering was accepted by God and Cain's was not. So, Cain commits murder. When I feel myself to be overwhelmingly blessed by God, when I can sing of amazing grace for sinners like I, and I mean that, the allurements of evil have lost their power. But, when I think God has been unfair, when I think that I am owed by God or by society, my conscience is set free to spit on his rules and take what I see as mine.

James Boice writes this about Genesis 3, with reference to the one that was off-limits. *As Adam looked at the tree, it was a great offense to him. The tree stood for limitations on his personal desires. It represented something he was not allowed to do. So, Adam said, in effect, "That tree is an offense to my autonomy. I do not care if I can eat all the trees north of here, east of here, south of here, and west of here. As long as I allow that tree to remain untouched, I feel less than human. I feel diminished. Therefore, I am going to eat of it and die, whatever that means.*

Resentment is a curse. Gratitude is a wonderful gift. You would think that these two things have some relationship with a person's outward possessions, but it doesn't seem so. Some billionaires are bitter victims. Some prisoners are grateful. It is the perspective. What does one feel one has? What does one feel one is owed? How do you see yourself; how do you see God? The Christian, says Paul, is overflowing with gratitude. I love that language from Colossians 2:7 – *overflowing with gratitude.* That means songs of praise, day and night – in palaces and in

prisons. The gift of gratitude, which must, which will accompany and grow with our grasp of the gospel. The gospel which Paul is unveiling before us is precisely designed to turn entitled, angry self-righteous sinners into humble, grateful children of God who do give thanks and who do honor God. We went so terribly wrong in the garden. Things have gotten worse in so many ways. But Jesus has come to make all thing new, beginning with our vision of reality – a reality that includes a God who has revealed Himself in creation and to Whom we are responsible and unto Whom we may look to have restored all that we gave away in our folly and rebellion.

We have one more week to swim around in the profound truths of Romans one. Let's close today with a prayer I found in Raymond Ortlund's devotional commentary on Romans. Let's pray this out-loud together as we close – *Oh holy God, your wrath is neither impulsive nor neurotic, nor hypocritical. It is just. It is right. It is fair. We deserve it. Our hypocrisy deserves it. We resort to any clever excuse, however preposterous, to rationalize our guilt. But our evasive tactics only prove, O God, that you are in the right. Never, never, never let me twist your truth into an excuse for allowing my evil. Rid my mind of such devilish thinking. While I humble myself before you right now, O Lord, renew my mind with exalted and reverent thoughts of your righteousness and with a loathing hatred for my own sinfulness. In the holy name of Christ. Amen*