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Enjoying God Ministries
Romans #5
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Will People Who Have Never Heard the Name of Jesus be Condemned? Romans 1:18-23

Last week we talked about the reality of shame when it comes to sharing the gospel with unbelievers. I related my own experience with a high school classmate who, by God's grace, actually came to saving faith. But as I told you last week, I was afraid that he might ask me a question that I couldn't answer. The fear of being challenged in a way that we feel inadequate to address often keeps Christians silent when they know they should speak.

There is no better example of that than the question that is found in the title to today's message: Will People Who Have Never Heard the Name of Jesus be Condemned?

Several years ago, in an interview with Sally Quinn of *The Washington Post*, Rob Bell, author of the very bad but best-selling book *Love Wins*, muddied the waters over the question of the fate of those who've never heard about Jesus. In doing so he also greatly misrepresented the evangelical answer to this question. Here are his words:

“If, billions and billions and billions of . . . people who never heard about Jesus are going to suffer in eternal agony because they didn't believe in the Jesus they never heard of – then at that point we will have far bigger problems than a book from a pastor from Grand Rapids.”

Bell is responding to evangelicals who purportedly believe that people “are going to suffer in eternal agony because they didn't believe in the Jesus they never heard of.” Let me say this as clearly as I can: ***No one will ever suffer for any length of time in hell or anywhere else for not believing in the Jesus they never heard of.*** Should I say that again or is it enough that you heard it once? Let me say it again . . .

There are a lot of questions that non-Christians ask us about our faith, such as: What about the problem of evil? Is Jesus the only way to God? What happens to infants when they die? And so on. One of the most frequent that I hear is: “What about the heathen in Africa?” Or again, “What about the heathen in America?” The point of the question is that most non-Christians think we believe that people who never hear the name of Jesus will be condemned eternally for not believing in him. And I can assure you, that is not true. That doesn't mean they are saved. So what's the answer to this question?

Bell and others who make this sort of outrageous claim have evidently failed to look closely at Rom. 1:18-23. Here we read that the wrath of God revealed from heaven is grounded in the persistent repudiation by mankind of the revelation God has made of himself in the created order. In other words, there is a reason for God's wrath. It is not capricious. God's wrath has been deliberately and persistently provoked by man's willful rejection of God as he has revealed himself.

The Revelation of God's Wrath

Last week I spoke about the wrath of God and the way in which many have wriggled free of it and find justification for denying it, or at least diminish its importance in our understanding of God. One of the ways they do this is by denying that wrath is a personal attribute of God. Wrath, they say, is an impersonal principle that explains why and how the wicked will be held accountable for their sins. But that simply cannot account for the number of times that the NT in particular describes wrath as being “of God.”

“Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him” (John 3:36).

“For the wrath *of God* is revealed from heaven . . .” (Rom. 1:18).

“Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath *of God*” (Rom. 5:9).

“Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath *of God*, for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord’” (Rom. 12:19).

“Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath *of God* comes upon the sons of disobedience” (Eph. 5:6).

“Then the kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, calling to the mountains and rocks, ‘Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath *of the Lamb*, for the great day of *their wrath* has come, and who can stand?’” (Rev. 6:16-17).

That is just a small sampling of the many texts that speak of wrath as “God’s” wrath. It is an expression of his personality, his personal, holy hatred of sin. In fact, the NT consistently speaks of the wrath “of God” in precisely the same way it speaks of the grace “of God” and the love “of God” and the holiness “of God.”

Another reason why some reject wrath as a personal characteristic of God’s nature is because they misconstrue the meaning of wrath. They think of it as the loss of self-control; an irrational and capricious outburst of anger; a celestial bad temper. But nowhere in Scripture is wrath portrayed in this way. God’s wrath is the righteous indignation of a just and holy God to all that is unholy. It is God’s hatred of moral evil and idolatry.

There is one final reason why people don’t like the idea of wrath in God. They think it is unworthy of him. After all, if God is love (and he is), he cannot be a God of wrath. The two are mutually exclusive. Wrath and love cannot coexist in the heart of God at the same time. Really? Let me ask you a question. What would you think of a man or a woman who did not experience moral outrage at murder or rape or child abuse and did nothing to hold them accountable to justice? And what would you think of a so-called “God” who reacted the same way? J. I. Packer put it this way:

“Would a God who took as much pleasure in evil as He did in good be a good God? Would a God who did not react adversely to evil in His world be morally perfect? Surely not. But it is precisely this adverse reaction to evil, which is a necessary part of moral perfection, that the Bible has in view when it speaks of God’s wrath” (*Knowing God*, 136-37).

The fact is, God’s wrath is the expression of his love for truth and justice and goodness and mercy.

With that being said, notice that in v. 18 Paul says God’s wrath “is being revealed” from heaven. It isn’t something reserved solely for the future. It is being expressed now, in the present age.

In What Ways is God’s Wrath Even Now Being Revealed?

We know that God’s wrath is coming on an unbelieving and idolatrous world. Paul specifically spoke of Jesus as the one “who delivers us from the wrath to come” (1 Thess. 1:10). He likely has in view the wrath of God that will be manifest at the final judgment.

But it’s important for you to see that the same Greek verb that is used in v. 17 is used again in v. 18. In v. 17 Paul says that the righteousness of God “*is revealed*” in the gospel. And in v. 18 he says that the wrath

of God *“is revealed.”* In both cases the verb is in the present tense, pointing to something that is happening now, not just in the future. So, how is God’s wrath being revealed today?

First, we see it revealed in the universality of human death. Death is the judgment of God on the unrighteousness of the human race. Of course, we must remember that although Christians die physically, we do not experience death as God’s wrath. In fact, physical death is God’s mercy in that it brings us into his presence. That is why Paul can say in 1 Corinthians 15:54b-57,

“Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 15:54b-57).

I love the way John Piper expressed it. He said that “for believers, death is not the wrath of God toward them. It is the last gasp of a defeated enemy who unwittingly opens a door to paradise.”

Second, God’s wrath against human sin is also seen in the ravages of nature. Later in Romans 8, we will read that “the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God” (Rom. 8:20-21).

Third, and most important of all, the wrath of God is presently revealed in the way God gives people over to a deeper and more intense expression of their sin. We will examine this theme in the next few weeks, but for now note the recurring phrase in Romans 1: “God gave them up” (v. 24), “God gave them up” (v. 26), and “God gave them up” (v. 28). The point is that God’s wrath is revealed when people persist in their sin and God gives them over to an even deeper and more egregious practice of it. People often ask, “Will idolatry and sexual perversion and disregard for life ultimately bring God’s wrath?” Folks, the ever-increasing spread of idolatry and sexual perversion and disregard for life *is* the wrath of God! In other words, ***God reveals his wrath against sin by giving people up to be more sinful.*** But I’m getting ahead of myself. More on this in the next few weeks.

What “Truth” do the Unrighteous Suppress?

The reason for God’s wrath is made clear in v. 18. It is because people *“suppress the truth”* in their unrighteous conduct. What “truth”? What is it that people suppress or push down or try to ignore and openly deny? The answer is given to us in vv. 19-23. Simply put, the “truth” that people suppress is the truth that God has made known to them about his existence and his character.

This revelation *about* God has come *from* God. Therefore, in this case if the pupil does not learn it is not because the teacher did not teach. The phrase “God has shown it to them” (v. 19), is better rendered either “in” or “among” them, probably the latter. And yet in v. 19 Paul goes on to say that God has made himself known “to” them by means of his works in creation and providence.

Observe Paul’s paradoxical language in v. 20. God is by nature invisible. He is spirit. He cannot be seen. Paul said much the same thing in 1 Timothy 1:17, where he described God as “the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.” The apostle John echoes this truth in two texts. In John 1:18 he said that “no one has ever seen God.” Of course, he is talking about God as God in his fundamental nature. When God became a man in Jesus, he showed us God. But that is not what Paul is talking about in Romans 1. John says in 1 John 4:12 that “no one has ever seen God.”

So, if God’s attributes are “invisible” (Rom. 1:20a), and he cannot be seen and never has been seen, except of course in the person of Jesus, how can Paul say that his nature or his attributes and characteristic features “have been clearly perceived” (Rom. 1:20b)?

Paul answers that question for us. Although God is invisible and cannot be seen, there is much that “can be known” about him (Rom. 1:19a). Indeed, what can be known about the invisible God “is plain” to people (Rom. 1:19b). In fact, God himself “has shown it to them” (Rom. 1:19c). His point is that the invisible is made visible by means of creation or nature. God’s wisdom, power, creativity, eternity and goodness, for example, are not in themselves visible, but their reality is undeniably affirmed and apprehended by the effects they produce in nature. That there is a God, supreme, eternal, infinite in power, personal, wise, independent, worthy of glory and gratitude, is clearly evident in the creation.

Paul doesn’t merely say that God has made his existence and nature known in creation. He says that all this about himself is “**plain**” to mankind. He says that his existence and nature “have been **clearly perceived**” (Rom. 1:20). Simply put, **all people know there is a God, and they know what he is like**. For how long or since when has this been the case? Well, Paul says in v. 20 that “ever since the creation of the world” his existence and power and divine nature have been seen by all and “clearly perceived” by all.

How so, you ask? Well, look again at the end of v. 20. It is in or by means of “the things that have been made.” These things, a reference to nature and all of created reality, are visible. They can be seen. And from these things, says Paul, the existence and nature of the Creator himself can be seen.

God has left the indelible mark of his fingerprints all across the vast face of the universe. Those who do not have a Bible in which to read of his existence and nature, as well as those who never hear the name of Jesus spoken in the gospel, can still look at the moon in its beauty, the sun in its brightness, the stars in their order, the thunder and lightning in their power, the human body in its exquisite detail, the mountains in their grandeur, the oceans in their expanse, and the vast array of species in the animal kingdom and see without mistake that there is a God of power and majesty and holiness and love. Herman Bavinck put it succinctly in declaring that “there is not an atom of the universe in which God’s power and divinity are not revealed.”

Paul’s point here in Romans 1 is that this revelation is sufficiently clear and inescapable that it renders all “**without excuse**” (Rom. 1:20b). Consequently, **there is no such thing as “an innocent native in Africa” any more than there is “an innocent pagan in America.”**

What does Paul mean when he says that all humanity is without excuse? “The excuse that is banished,” notes R. C. Sproul, “the excuse every pagan hopes in vain to use, the excuse that is exploded by God’s self-revelation in nature is the pretended, vacuous, dishonest appeal to ignorance. No one will be able to approach the judgment seat of God justly pleading, ‘If only I had known you existed, I would surely have served you.’ That excuse is annihilated. No one can lightly claim ‘insufficient’ evidence for not believing in God” (*Classical Apologetics*, 46).

Therefore, the problem is not a lack of evidence. The problem is not that there is insufficient proof of the existence of an all-powerful, holy and good God. The problem is the innate, natural, moral antipathy of mankind to God. The problem is not that the evidence is not open to mankind. The problem is that mankind is not open to the evidence.

Note well Paul’s words in v. 21: “For although they knew God” (v. 21a). Again, “what can be known about God is plain to them,” not hidden, obscure, uncertain, ambiguous, but disclosed, clear, undeniable and inescapable.

In Search of an Honest Atheist

What I’m going to say next will most likely strike you as bizarre. Some of you may even be offended. But I cannot be held captive to what you find as either plausible or bizarre. I cannot be held hostage to what may or may not offend you. I can only be held captive to what God has revealed in his Word. And here in Romans 1 we are being told in no uncertain terms that **there is no such thing as an honest atheist!**

All people know God. Please understand. When I say that all people “know” God I’m not saying that all people are saved. You may recall John 17:3 where Jesus said: “And this is eternal life, that they *know* you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (John 17:3). There is a massive, eternal distinction between, on the one hand, a cognitive apprehension of God, i.e., knowing that there is a God and that he is worthy of obedience, worship, gratitude, and, on the other, a saving or redemptive knowledge of God. All people experience the former whereas only the redeemed experience the latter. Thus the problem, again, is not that people have failed to honor and acknowledge something they’ve never seen or known. No, the problem is the willful refusal to honor and acknowledge what they clearly and inescapably know.

Paul believed the unbeliever’s knowledge of God was “real” though not “saving”. They have more than an “awareness” of God. They know both that he exists and that he is of a certain moral character and that they themselves are accountable to him: to honor him and give thanks to him (v.21). The God they truly and “really” know, they hate and refuse to honor. Their response, however, is not borne of ignorance but of willful rebellion and self-centered sinfulness.

So let me ask this controversial question again: Do professing atheists actually believe in God after all? Or again: Do honest atheists exist? By “honest” I don’t mean atheists who pay their taxes and keep their promises and choose not to steal or lie. I am happy to report that I know several who profess to be atheists who are extremely civil and law-abiding and keep their promises. What I mean in asking the question is whether or not there exists an atheist who honestly believes there is no God.

There are, undoubtedly, many who *claim* to be atheists. They insist, often loudly and angrily, that there is no God and that religion is the cause of virtually all human pain and suffering. The only ultimate reality, so they say, is matter. Physical substance, whether helium or hormones, whether water or fire, is all there is. Everything can be explained or accounted for in terms of the existence and interaction of material substance of one sort or another. In other words, there is no spiritual realm. There are no angels. There is no immaterial soul in man, and above all, there is no “god” or deity or divinity or supernatural being of any sort.

So I’ll ask again: do honest atheists exist? You may think that to be a silly question given the notoriety of such prominent professing atheists as Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens, just to name a few. But the operative word here is *professing*. Yes, many profess to be atheists and make a pretty good living writing books about it or appearing on talk shows or teaching in our universities and colleges. But my question is again whether or not these people, in the depth and quiet of their own hearts, honestly believe there is no God.

I contend they do not. I contend that they are living and speaking in denial of what they know to be true. I contend that they are laboring to persuade themselves of what is indelibly and inescapably inscribed on their hearts: that there is a God and that they are morally accountable to him. Some may push back and say, “Sam, who are you to question the true heart-felt beliefs of another person? How do you know what they do or don’t believe?” But I’m not questioning it. God is. God is saying through Paul, “They all know me, whether they choose to openly acknowledge it or not.”

God has taken steps to make himself known in such a way that no one can plausibly deny his existence. There is no people group anywhere in the world, at any time in human history, that can avoid the revelation God has made of himself in creation. Oh, yes, they can verbally “deny” his existence and develop elaborate philosophical arguments to buttress their case, but none is persuaded by his own reasoning. The presence of God is inscribed on all of nature and thus is inescapably known by all humanity.

No matter how vocal their denials or sarcastic their laughter or loud their derision, they know God is there and that he is worthy of their praise and is to be thanked. Underline these words in your Bible: they “suppress the truth” (v. 18). You can’t suppress what you don’t know. They know the “truth” about God

and choose to suppress it or push it out of mind. Again, “what can be known about God is plain to them” (v. 19a). Why is it “plain”? It is “because God has shown it to them” (v. 19b). His existence and attributes “have been clearly perceived” (v. 20a). Again, in v. 21, “they knew God.” And the only reasonable conclusion from this is that “they are without excuse” (v. 20b). In other words, they can’t appeal to ignorance. They have no excuse for not honoring and praising God and giving him thanks.

This inescapable “knowledge” of God, however, is not redemptive. It does not save a soul. That is to say, we must differentiate between an awareness of God’s existence and an enjoyment of it. It is one thing to acknowledge that Deity exists. It is another to repent and seek him and cast oneself in humble dependence upon his grace and receive by faith his gift of life in Christ Jesus.

Paul is explicit: “although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him” but “became futile in their thinking” and “exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things” (Rom. 1:21-22). They cannot escape “the truth about God”, so they exchange it “for a lie” and worship and serve “the creature rather than the Creator” (Rom. 1:25).

So, how do we know that all men know there is a God? On what grounds do we refuse to honor their claim to being atheists? Paul gives two answers, only one of which concerns us today. Later in Romans 2 he will appeal to the existence of the conscience in every human being that bears witness to the existence of God and the responsibility of us all to obey him (see Rom. 2:14-16). But here in our text Paul appeals to God’s handiwork in creation, in the natural realm. People cannot open their eyes without being compelled to see him. Upon all his works in the natural order of creation “he has engraved unmistakable marks of his glory, so clear and so prominent that even unlettered and stupid folk cannot plead the excuse of ignorance” (Calvin, *Institutes*, I.5.1).

Whether in astronomy or anatomy or botany or the power of lightning, wind, and storm, God has made himself known. Whether in his providence over nations or his lordship over creation or his sovereign sway over the lives of men, the glory and majesty of God shine forth. Whether in the unmistakable indications of design in creation, in the sub-atomic world of particle physics or the trillions of stars in distant galaxies, God is saying: “I’m here. I did that. This is my handiwork.”

But what does the unbeliever, the professing atheist do with this revelation that God has made of himself? He refuses to “honor him as God or give thanks to him” (Rom. 1:21). The fault is not with what God has revealed. There is no shortcoming or defect in his handiwork. The failure is in the human heart. The dullness and stupidity and delusion are wholly due to the darkness in the human soul. The problem isn’t that mankind lacks sufficient evidence for the existence of God. The problem isn’t that the evidence suffers from lack of clarity or beauty or falls short in its persuasive power.

The problem is that mankind, apart from Christ and his regenerating grace, *despises* and *hates* what he sees and knows. The problem isn’t that men look upon creation or contemplate the conviction of their own conscience and turn away saying, “It’s not enough; proof is lacking; it doesn’t add up; God doesn’t exist.” The problem is that they willfully and selfishly and knowingly loathe the God whom they see and know to exist and would rather indulge their own fleshly lusts and worship their own souls than to honor and give thanks to the God of glory (cf. Rom. 1:21-25).

That is why I say that there is no such thing as an honest atheist. There are many who with their mouths scoff at the notion of God and formulate their arguments to “prove” he does not exist. Perhaps there are even some who from years of willful rebellion and self-induced hardening of heart have anesthetized their souls to God’s powerful presence. Perhaps there are some (many?) whom God has simply “given over” (Rom. 1:24,26,28) to the deeper cultivation of their self-delusion, some (many?) who have degenerated to such a degree that they’ve rendered themselves impervious to the clearest and most persuasive of evidence. But in any and every case, they are still “without excuse” (Rom. 1:20). The plea of ignorance will not suffice at the final bar of judgment.

Do not go in search of an honest atheist. You won't find one. Turn, instead, to the heavens above which "declare the glory of God" (Psalm 19:1a). Turn, instead, to the sky that "proclaims his handiwork" (Psalm 19:1b). "Lift up your eyes on high and see" the trillions and trillions of stars and worship the One who "brings out their host by number" and calls "them all by name," whose power alone sustains them so that "not one is missing" (Isaiah 40:26).

And then worship! And then share these glorious truths with a "professing" atheist and direct him to the revelation of Christ in Scripture and pray that the God who said "Let light shine out of darkness" might shine in his heart "to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6).

The Basis of the Judgment of the Heathen in Africa and America

As I said at the start, no one will be condemned for not believing in the name of Jesus, whose name they have never heard. On what basis, then, will they be held accountable at the final judgment? They will be judged on the basis of their rejection of the God who has made himself clearly known in their conscience and in creation.

Hear me well: *the so-called heathen are not condemned for rejecting Jesus, about whom they have heard nothing, but for rejecting the Father, about whom they have heard and seen much.* Whatever about God is included in Paul's words, "his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature" (Rom. 1:20), the knowledge of such is universal and inescapable and renders all mankind without an excuse for their unbelief, without an excuse for their failure to honor God, without an excuse for their refusal to thank God, and without an excuse for turning from the one true God to the worship of idols.

What we have seen from this brief look at Romans 1:18-23 is that God has made his existence and attributes known to all mankind in every age: people of every religion in every nation on earth. These people may never hear the name of Jesus. They may never hear the gospel proclaimed. They may never hear of the cross or the resurrection. They may never hold in their hands a Bible in their own language. But they are totally and justly and righteously "**without excuse**" before God for their failure to honor him as God and their subsequent idolatrous turn to created things as a substitute for the Creator.

They will not be judged for their rejection of Jesus, of whom they have heard nothing. For anyone to suggest that we believe people will suffer eternally in hell for not believing in a Jesus of whom they know nothing is a wicked distortion of what we affirm, and worse still is a distortion of what Paul clearly taught. People will be held accountable and judged on the basis of the revelation that God has made of himself to them. And this revelation is unmistakable, unavoidable, and sufficiently pervasive and clear that the failure to respond as well as the turn to idolatry renders them "without excuse." They will be righteously judged for rejecting the Father, not for rejecting the Son.

Concluding Implications for Evangelism and World Missions

(1) In spite of their protests to the contrary, everyone you meet knows that God exists and that he is deserving of their praise and gratitude. You don't have to argue with them to prove the existence of God. Often times, the demand from unbelievers that you prove God's existence to them is simply a diversionary tactic by which they hope to avoid the underlying issue: their sin. This leads into the second point.

(2) The ultimate reason why people refuse to acknowledge that God exists and refuse to submit their lives to him is because of their "ungodliness" and "unrighteousness" (Rom. 1:18). Simply put, they can't afford to openly acknowledge what they know to be true, or else they would be compelled to abandon their sinful and ungodly lifestyle. People remain in unbelief because they love their sin more than God.

(3) Don't be afraid to openly and honestly speak about the wrath of God. People need to hear about the eternal consequences of their unbelief and ungodliness.

(4) After warning them of the wrath of God to come, be sure to remind them of the truth of John 3:16. The same God who will pour out his wrath on the unrepentant and unbelieving is the God who will pour out his love and forgiving grace on those who repent and trust in Jesus.

(5) If they confess to feeling hopeless and helpless, remind them of Romans 1:16-17! There is power in the gospel to save even those who are convinced they are beyond recovery.