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Without Excuse

Romans 1.18-23

Series: The Pure Gospel

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I. Introduction

A. Interesting to study the attacks of atheists on the faith of Christians

1. Every one of us, at one time or another, feels the accusation
 - a. Faith is a crutch
 - b. You need to believe in God because you're afraid to face reality
 - c. Something weak, even cowardly, about faith in God
 - d. Faith, then, is a psychological phenomenon
 - e. God is a figment of our imaginations
 - f. Imaginary creation of humanity to explain what we can't explain
 - g. The only reason you believe in God is that you lack the psychological strength to maintain sanity
2. Atheists pose the question, **"If there is no God, why is there religion?"**
 - a. Treat it as an anthropological issue
 - b. Curious as to why, if there is no God, there is religion, of one sort or another, in essentially every culture

B. Freud – issue was the control of nature

1. Since societies and cultures found the forces of nature impossible to control, they assume there must be gods other than humans to control things
2. Consequence – humanization of nature
 - a. Freud: If forces of nature have some kind of personality, we can approach them, argue with them, plead with them, appease them, sacrifice to them... deal with them
 - b. That's where religion came from
 - c. Whether it's polytheistic animism or monotheism
3. Judeo-Christian religion – based on tribal relations with fathers
 - a. Struggle between fathers and sons
 - b. Much of which involves guilt
 - c. Resolved only through sacrificing
4. Freud had other things to say about mothers, of course
 - a. Bottom line – Christian religion originated psychologically through issues of the control of nature and relationships within tribes and families

C. Marx – issue was fear of economic revolution

1. Marx's world was materialistic, economic

- a. Religion was a manifestation of class struggle
 - b. Means by which the ruling class controlled the proletariat
- D. Nietzsche – issue was control of power
 - 1. Source of the God is dead theology
 - a. Bumper sticker
 - b. “God is dead” – Nietzsche
 - c. “Nietzsche is dead” – God
 - 2. Religion based on struggle for power
 - a. Fear of losing power to a supreme power, a hero, a superman (ubermensch)
 - b. Contrasted a slave and master morality
 - c. Slave morality – exalts own weakness
 - d. Master morality – exalts own strength
 - 3. Christianity developed a morality which controls the superman and protects the weak
 - a. Christianity was fundamentally weak, wimpish
 - b. Slave morality
 - 4. Nietzsche’s philosophy most forcefully was brought to bear in Hitler
 - a. Marx in Stalin, Mao Zedong
- E. Formally or informally, Christian faith is attacked as being a psychological phenomenon
 - 1. Puts us on the defensive
 - a. Onus of responsibility on us is to prove the historical elements of the faith
 - b. Demonstrate philosophical proofs for the existence of God
 - c. Demonstrate that there are elements of Christian faith which can’t be explained by psychology
 - d. These are all legitimate pursuits of apologetics
- F. Graduate school – read *The Brothers Karamozov* by Fyodor Dostoevsky
 - 1. Story of three brothers
 - a. Alyosha – protagonist
 - b. Theme – nature of faith
 - 2. Remember a conversation about faith
 - a. One character argued that faith was a psychological phenomenon
 - b. The other character cautioned that to explain anything by psychology was a two edged sword
 - c. The opposite could always be proved by the same means
 - 3. Just as easily as faith could be attributed to psychology, so could unbelief
- G. So, why are we so defensive?
 - 1. We are always being accused of needing faith for psychological reasons
 - 2. Why doesn’t anyone ever accuse atheists of the psychological foundation for their unbelief?
 - 3. Atheist: If God does not exist, why is there religion?
 - 4. We should ask: If God does exist, why are there atheists?
- H. That’s essentially the question Paul asks, and answers, in Romans 1

- I. Learned in the previous messages that the theme of Romans is the Gospel
 1. And in the last message we learned that Paul was not ashamed of the Gospel
 2. And why he was not ashamed
 - a. Gospel is good news
 - b. Gospel is powerful
 - c. Gospel is unto salvation
 - d. Gospel is for everyone who believes
 - e. Gospel is applied by faith
 - f. Gospel reveals God's righteousness
- J. We also learned that Paul doesn't immediately unpack the meaning of the gospel following his thematic verses of 1.16-17
 1. That he essentially will start to do that in Chapter 3 where he repeats the essence of the theme verses in 3.21-24
 2. And that in the meantime – 1.18-3.20 – Paul clears some ground, does some site preparation, for understanding the gospel
 - a. Why should we be at all interested in the gospel?
 3. Well, Paul argues in 1.18ff that in order to understand the good news, we need to understand the bad news
 - a. And that specifically – we are the bad news!
 - b. We are sinners, destitute of righteousness
 - c. Desperately in need of the righteousness that can only come from Jesus Christ
 4. Paul does that by demonstrating the sinful condition of humanity by looking at two groups of people
 - a. In fact, the only two groups of people that matter in terms of relationship with God
 - b. The only two groups of people that would have come to mind in the 1st Century
 - c. Jews and Gentiles
 5. And Paul shows how both Jews and Gentiles are in need of righteousness
 - a. And he begins in 1.18 with the Gentiles
- K. Text
 1. **Romans 1:18–23** (ESV) —
 - a. 18 For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven
 - b. against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men,
 - c. who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.
 - d. 19 For what can be known about God is plain to them,
 - e. because God has shown it to them.
 - f. 20 For his invisible attributes,
 - g. namely, his eternal power and divine nature,
 - h. have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world,
 - i. in the things that have been made.
 - j. So they are without excuse.
 - k. 21 For although they knew God,

- l. they did not honor him as God
- m. or give thanks to him,
- n. but they became futile in their thinking,
- o. and their foolish hearts were darkened.
- p. 22 Claiming to be wise, they became fools,
- q. 23 and exchanged the glory of the immortal God
- r. for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

II. **Wright Thinking about Wrath**

- A. Ok, I know – Wright should be spelled “right”
 - 1. But then it wouldn’t be as exact an alliteration with the word “wrath”
 - a. And I thought it might make some you smile
 - b. And after this, in talking about wrath, there isn’t much to smile about
 - 2. But I do think it’s important to think rightly about wrath, regardless of how you spell it
- B. **Four Spiritual Laws**
 - 1. When I was in college I was introduced to the Four Spiritual Laws
 - a. Published and distributed by Campus Crusade for Christ (CRU)
 - b. One of the most widely used methods of sharing your faith in the world
 - c. A very concise way to present the gospel and to bring people to a point of decision
 - d. I used the little pamphlet in sharing the gospel many times
 - e. Can be a very effective tool
 - 2. One of things we know about the Four Spiritual Laws was that Paul didn’t write it
 - 3. That’s because the first of the four spiritual laws, the first thing we would share with someone, is this:
 - a. “God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life.”
- C. This is how Paul begins his presentation of the gospel
 - 1. **Romans 1:18** (ESV) —
 - a. 18 For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.
 - 2. If Paul had written the Four Spiritual Laws, I think he would have put it this way:
 - a. “God is angry with you and has a wonderful plan for your life.”
 - 3. Our tendency is to ease into a conversation about the gospel, to try to develop a relationship, seek not to offend someone
 - a. We want to meet them on some common ground
 - 4. One of the common grounds is what some call “felt needs”
 - a. Once they express their felt needs, then we try to show them how the gospel can meet that need.

5. Precisely what Paul doesn't do
6. Boice: Paul knew that what matters in the final analysis is not whether we feel good or have our felt needs met or receive a meaningful experience. What matters is whether we come into a right relationship with God. And to have that happen we need to begin with the truth that we are not in a right relationship to him. On the contrary, we are under God's wrath and are in danger of everlasting condemnation at his hands.
7. Lloyd-Jones: Why is [Paul] ready to preach the gospel in Rome or anywhere else? He does not say it is because he knows that many of them [the Romans] are living defeated lives and that he has got something to tell them that will give them victory. He does not say to them, "I want to come and preach the gospel to you in Rome, because I have had a marvelous experience and I want to tell you about it, in order that you may have the same experience." ... This is not what Paul does.... There is no mention here of any experience. He is not talking in terms of their happiness or some particular state of mind, or something that might appeal to them, as certain possibilities do – but this staggering, amazing thing, the wrath of God! And he puts it first; it is the thing he says at once.

D. **What it is**

1. So what is the wrath of God?
2. **Wrath – orge (Gk)** – not a sudden outburst, but an abiding anger the part of God
 - a. Not an irrational anger
 - b. Not God flying off the handle in a fit of rage, like a petulant child who doesn't get his way
 - c. This is an abiding revulsion to actions and attitudes of God's moral creatures which are fundamentally antagonistic to His nature and character
 - d. Basis is in the sinfulness of humanity
3. "Against all ungodliness and unrighteousness"
 - a. Two aspects of the same sin
 - b. **Ungodliness (asabea – Gk)** – general irreligion, irreverence; state of opposition to God
 - c. **Unrighteousness (adikea – Gk)** – assault against God's character and righteousness
4. Both of these characteristics are centered in one particular sin

E. **How it is revealed**

1. **"Suppress the truth"**
 - a. **Katecho (Gk)** – hold down, stifle, hinder
 - b. Also means to repress – which has psychological overtones

F. **Why it is revealed**

1. **"By their unrighteousness"**
2. Katecho (suppress) has both positive and negative connotations
 - a. In the NT it often means to hold fast, e.g., to spiritual values, even to God

- b. But here, the something that is being held fast is being held fast by unrighteousness
 - c. The truth is being suppressed illegally, immorally
 - d. The truth is being suppressed, held down, repressed – and it should not be held down
- G. There has always been the suppression of the truth in unrighteousness by everyone who has desired to live lives apart from the accountability of the almighty, holy, righteous God
 - 1. But it is hard to see a more blatant suppression of truth than what is taking place today in the trans movement
 - a. And you don't have to read the Bible to know it
 - 2. To reject what is plainly true scientifically and medically about one's sex at birth is a suppression of the truth
 - 3. And the result is catastrophic for children
 - a. Who we wouldn't trust to drive a car or buy alcohol
 - b. We're saying they can decide for themselves to pursue chemical castration and surgery to remove healthy body parts
 - 4. This is what ultimately happens when the truth about God is suppressed
- H. By the way – it is not unloving to say these things
 - 1. And God is not unloving to reveal His wrath
 - 2. Because to suppress the truth in unrighteousness is destructive of God's creation
 - a. And it is the means by which humanity will destroy itself
 - 3. The most loving thing we can do is to say, "Stop!"
 - a. God really does have a wonderful plan for your life
- I. Long before there was the trans movement, there was plenty of truth suppression
 - 1. And nearly every facet of human life is threatened by any and every ideology that suppresses the truth by unrighteousness
- J. This is why the wrath of God is revealed from heaven
 - 1. This why God is angry
 - a. Lovingly angry!
 - b. We'll see how He's angry in the coming messages

III. Plain Thinking about God

- A. We've been doing some right think about wrath
 - 1. Now it's time to do some plain thinking about God
- B. **Romans 1:19** (ESV) — 19 For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them.
- C. The truth that is being suppressed is a knowledge of God
 - 1. Not an obscure knowledge, only knowledge the spiritual elite can understand
 - a. Like mystics or modern day gnostics
 - 2. Knowledge of God that is evident, plain, obvious
 - 3. In fact, it's even evident within them; really among them

- a. “What can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them”
- b. Context has shown that
- c. Creation is external evidence
- d. But God has made sure that every human being has received that evidence
- e. God has shown it too them

D. **His Perspicuity**

- 1. One of the things we see in this verse is the aspect of God’s character known in theology as “perspicuity”
- 2. You all know how fond I am of complicated theological concepts that begin with the letter ‘p’
 - a. Remember propitiation
 - b. Perspicuity means “clearly expressed and easily understood”
- 3. We can’t know everything there is about God
 - a. He’s infinite; we’re finite
 - b. But God has revealed Himself in ways that are clear and obvious
- 4. “What can be known about God is plain to them”
 - a. That’s perspicuity
 - b. Knowledge is plain because God has made it plain
 - c. To claim lack of evidence for God is to accuse God of sin
- 5. Bertrand Russell – legendary skeptic of the last century – said he didn’t believe because of lack of evidence
 - a. In doing so he compounded one sin on another
 - b. First – his unbelief
 - c. Second – accuses God of being the cause of his unbelief
 - d. I’d hate to answer for his first sin; but then to have to answer for the second
- 6. By the way, Russell called himself an “agnostic”
 - a. That’s what a lot of those who suppress the truth by their unrighteousness like to do
 - b. Sounds a bit softer; gives the impression they are thoughtful, circumspect, reasonable
 - c. Agnosis (Gk) – without knowledge
 - d. Latin for agnosis – ignoramus
- 7. When Bertrand Russell – or any other so-called agnostic or atheist – says they don’t have enough evidence, they are lying through their teeth

E. **His Attributes**

- 1. Well, what is it that God is revealing about Himself so plainly?
- 2. **Romans 1:20** (ESV) — 20 For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived...
- 3. Invisible attributes in mind
 - a. Eternal power – God’s extraordinary abilities
 - b. Divine nature – cause of all that exists is beyond human capacities; only a divine Being could have done these things

F. **His Medium**

1. And what is the medium of God's communication?
 - a. Medium in the sense of an artist's medium of communication
2. **Romans 1:20** (ESV) — 20 For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. ...
3. The creation, in no uncertain terms, displays the nature and character of God
 - a. The created world is the canvas on which the Supreme Artist has painted His self-portrait
4. **Psalms 19:1–6** (ESV) —
 - a. 1 The heavens declare the glory of God,
 - b. and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.
 - c. 2 Day to day pours out speech,
 - d. and night to night reveals knowledge.
 - e. 3 There is no speech, nor are there words, whose voice is not heard.
 - f. 4 Their voice goes out through all the earth,
 - g. and their words to the end of the world.
 - h. In them he has set a tent for the sun,
 - i. 5 which comes out like a bridegroom leaving his chamber,
 - j. and, like a strong man, runs its course with joy.
 - k. 6 Its rising is from the end of the heavens,
 - l. and its circuit to the end of them,
 - m. and there is nothing hidden from its heat.
5. The creation displays the nature and character of God in unmistakable ways
 - a. And those who suppress the truth about God in creation find themselves to be the objects of the abiding wrath of Almighty God
6. But it is the wrath of a loving God
 - a. Who indeed has a wonderful plan for your life
 - b. Who in love sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to give you the righteousness that you so desperately need
 - c. If you would only stop fighting the truth about God, cast yourself on His mercy, and trust in Jesus alone – in His righteousness, and in His having paid the penalty for your sin
7. Even the greatest truth suppressor is not without hope

IV. **Honest Thinking about Humanity**

- A. But how has humanity normally responded to this display of the nature and character of God?
 1. How has humanity suppressed the truth?
- B. **Romans 1:21–23** (ESV) —

1. 21 For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.
2. 22 Claiming to be wise, they became fools,
3. 23 and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

C. **Will against Worship**

1. Having suppressed the truth about God
 - a. Although every human being knows about God – knows that He exists, knows His eternal power and divine nature
 - b. They will do everything they can to avoid worshiping the One Being in the universe who is worthy of worship
2. “Although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him...”
3. First step is very subtle – we ignore God
 - a. Do everything we can to live without Him
4. Os Guinness: ... rebellion against God does not begin with the clenched fist of atheism but with the self-satisfied heart of the one for whom “thank you” is redundant.
5. Lloyd-Jones: Man does not thank God for his mercy, for his goodness, for his dealings with us in providence... God is the “giver of every good and perfect gift”; he is “the Father of mercies.” Yet people go through the whole of their lives in this world and they never thank him; they ignore him completely. That is how they show their attitude toward God. In this way they suppress the truth that has been revealed concerning [him].
6. Dostoyevsky: If he is not stupid, he is monstrously ungrateful! Phenomenally ungrateful. In fact, I believe that the best definition of man is the ungrateful biped.

D. **Futility in Thinking**

1. **Romans 1:21** (ESV) — 21 For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking...
2. The mind of the unbeliever is distorted
 - a. He or she sees the world upside down
 - b. Thinking becomes futile
3. That’s why you can have the most brilliant people play the fool
 - a. How you can use all that brilliance to make decisions and enact policies that destroy whole societies – even civilizations
4. Those who will not worship God will not for long have a mind capable of an accurate appraisal of the human condition
 - a. And certainly not a mind capable of leading a society in solving its many problems
 - b. In fact, the more they try to solve them, the worse they get
 - c. The law of unintended consequences seems to always prevail
5. Because those who suppress the truth are futile in their thinking

E. **Darkened Souls**

1. Not only the mind is affected
 - a. The soul – the mind, will and emotions – the core of the human personality, the heart, is darkened
 - b. The seat of, not just emotions, but morality, of conscience
2. **Romans 1:21** (ESV) — 21 For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.
3. Emotions enraged over all the wrong things
 - a. Moral motions are turned in the wrong direction
 - b. What is true is deemed to be false; what is false, true
 - c. What is right is cast aside as immoral; that which is immoral is the new virtue
 - d. We see darkened hearts all around us

F. **Foolish Exchange**

1. Finally, there is a foolish exchange
2. **Romans 1:22–23** (ESV) — 22 Claiming to be wise, they became fools, 23 and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.
3. Human beings are incurable religious
 - a. CS Lewis: When people turn from God, it's not that they will worship nothing; it's that they will worship anything.
4. They will not worship God
 - a. But they will always worship something
 - b. Creatures
 - c. Animals
 - d. Idols
 - e. The planet
 - f. Power
 - g. Influence
 - h. Material possessions
 - i. Themselves
5. It's a foolish exchange
 - a. As Jeremiah puts it, why would you forsake the fountain of living waters for a broken cistern that can hold no water (Jeremiah 2)

G. That's what human beings do in suppressing the truth about God

1. Why God is angry – why the wrath of God is being revealed against ungodliness and unrighteousness
2. Why human beings will do anything to avoid worshiping God
3. Why human beings are literally losing their minds and their hearts

V. **The Consequence – Without Excuse**

- A. The consequence of all this is that human beings who suppress the truth about God are without excuse

- B. One of the greatest human attributes – and we all share in it, even us believers, from time to time if we're not careful – is the making of excuses
 - 1. We love to make excuses
 - a. And we're good at it
- C. Boice: Yet, in spite of our finite nature, human beings do seem to have an almost infinite capacity for some things. One of them is for making excuses... Accuse a person of something, and regardless of how obvious that fault may be, the individual immediately begins to make self-serving declarations. "It wasn't my fault," "Nobody told me," "My intentions were good," "You shouldn't be so critical." The two least spoken sentences in the English language are probably "I was wrong" and "I am sorry."
- D. Jean and I watched a movie a couple of nights ago – the story of George Foreman
 - 1. Included a scene when, some months after George had been beaten by Mohammed Ali in the famous Rumble in the Jungle in Zaire, George showed up at Ali's home unannounced
 - 2. Ali fully expected that George would push for a rematch, or otherwise engage in trash talking – which seems to be the coin of the realm in professional boxing
 - 3. But George had come to ask Ali's forgiveness
 - 4. Forgiveness for hating Ali during the time of the fight
 - 5. It was a stunning moment; one that would lead to the two adversaries becoming best of friends as time went on
 - 6. It was the forgiveness of Jesus Christ that led George Foreman to forever cast aside excuses, and reconcile with his nemesis
- E. When the atheist – or agnostic, or anyone who suppresses the truth about God – stands before God at the judgment, there will be no self-serving declarations, no excuses
 - 1. Boice: There is enough evidence of God in a flower to lead a child as well as a scientist to worship him. There is sufficient evidence in a tree, a pebble, a grain of sand, a fingerprint, to make us glorify God and thank him.
 - 2. Luther: The atheist trembles at the rustling of a leaf.