

## **Romans: We Know God, But Don't Glorify Him**

**Romans 1:21-23**

By [Dr. J. Ligon Duncan](#)

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If you have your Bibles, I would invite you to turn with me to Romans chapter 1, verses 21-23. As we continue to work through the first chapter of this great Epistle. Paul announced the theme of the book in verses 16 and 17, and said that the gospel was the power of God to salvation and that in it, the righteousness of God was revealed. And he was truly moved by that reality, that fact. He had experienced the power of the gospel, himself. He had embraced and received the righteousness which the gospel brings. And he knew it to be the only answer for a world sick with sin. But immediately as he comes to verse 18 of Romans chapter 1, he puts on his garb as God's prosecuting attorney. And he keeps on that particular role or position all the way to Romans chapter 32, verse 20, because he knows that you and I will not and cannot understand the good news until we understand the bad news. Until we understand what we deserve, we cannot appreciate the depths and depth of the grace of God.

And so the Apostle began in verse 18, to bring a charge against everyone. He is speaking especially in Romans chapter 1 to Pagans. He will speak to religious people in Romans chapter 2. But his strictures are brought against everyone in the world. And in Romans chapter 1, verses 18-20, we saw him make two very important points. First of all, he indicated that God was right to be wrathful against sin and sinners who are in rebellion against Him. He made it very clear that God had every justification and as part of explaining the justification of God in His wrath against sin and sinners who had not embraced Christ, but rather who had rebelled against Him. The Apostle said, the reason that God is just in this impart at least is that we know Him and yet we still do not honor Him. It is very important that we see Paul's argument. Paul's argument is not that there is not excuse for ignorance. It is not like when you are driving through the town and you say to the policeman, but I didn't know this was a 35 mph zone. And he says ignorance is no excuse. You should have read the sign. That is not Paul's argument. Paul does not say, well, look, God has revealed it clearly, therefore, your ignorance is culpable. That is not Paul's argument. Paul actually says, you are not ignorant. You know God. God has not only displayed His knowledge of Himself in creation to you, But God has revealed himself to you and you possess that knowledge. His knowledge revealed in creation had gotten through. His

knowledge as implanted in the image of God is present. No, in fact, he says at the end of verse 18, you are suppressing that knowledge. You are suppressing the truth that God has given to you. So Paul's argument for our culpability, for our responsibility to God, that though God had given this knowledge, we didn't worship it. It is not that we are ignorant of God, but in fact, that we are knowing of God. We know Him, we know a lot about Him. And yet we do not honor Him as God. Now, Paul, in these verses we study today is going to elaborate on that point. So let's turn our attention to Romans 1, beginning in verse 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, professing to be wise, they became fools. 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.

Thus ends this reading of God's holy and inspired Word. May he add His blessing to it. Let's pray.

*Lord this is Your word. We ask that You would teach us Your truth by it. So many of us come this day, having heard this passage and perhaps the whole book of Romans read many times in our upbringing, in our own Christian walk. We pray that You would refresh us with a new appreciation with the truth set forth in this passage. Others of us, O Lord, may come skeptical this day, apathetic about the truth of God, uncertain of You, uncertain of Christ, uncertain of the Gospel. Cynical about cardinal Christian teachings, we pray that by the Holy Spirit, that You would open their eyes, that You would challenge them with the Gospel. That they would see and appreciate, all these things, we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Paul began his presentation of the bad news in verse 18. First, the bad news, then the good news. And he explained that God was just in His wrath because we are without excuse having the knowledge that we possess. Because we suppress that knowledge, we suppress that truth, in unrighteousness. Now, in these verses, Paul explains just how it is that people go about suppressing the truth in unrighteousness. You know someone might respond to Paul, well, what do you mean, Paul, surely you aren't saying that everything suppresses the truth in unrighteousness who is not a Christian? And the Apostle Paul says, well, as a matter of fact, that is exactly what I am saying, and let me tell you how they do it. And that is precisely what he does in three parts in this section today.

The first part you will see in the first half of verse 21. Then in the second half of verse 21 and 22, you will see a second aspect of Paul's argument. And then in verses 23, you will see a third part of the argument. Look with me at verse 21 first.

## **I. The true knowledge of God is suppressed.**

Here, Paul shows us how the true knowledge of God was suppressed in the hearts of the Gentiles. Maybe I should put it this way: here Paul shows us how the true the true knowledge of God is suppressed in the hearts of the Gentiles. He is speaking to all Pagans. I don't use that word in a majority here. By Pagan, I mean someone who thinks that there is another way to express religious belief validly apart from the Lord Jesus Christ, who rejects the uniqueness of the Gospel and of the Lord Jesus Christ and there are many people in our culture who have done that. They think of themselves as post Christian. They want to be religious. They want to have a spirituality, but they want to have it apart from Christianity and a perfect name for that is Pagan. Not in a condescending way we say it, but simply to identify it as a distinctively religious non-Christian view of life. Paul is saying, this is how Pagans suppress the truth of God in their hearts. He says, that we suppress the knowledge of God by failing to glorify and thank Him. Look at the first section of verse 21. Even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks. This verse explains and elaborates the final phrase in verse 18. Look at that phrase, where Paul says, that we suppress the truth in unrighteousness. That phrase indicated that it was depravity that had obscured the knowledge of God. In other words, Paul is telling you how the truth was suppressed. The truth was suppressed not because there wasn't enough evidence. The truth was not suppressed because it wasn't intellectually compelling, the truth was suppressed, he said by unrighteousness. They suppressed the truth by unrighteousness.

In other words, there is a moral problem here. Not an intellectual problem. The origin of this rejection of the truth of God in general revelation finds itself not in the intellect, not in the cognitive, but in a moral rebellion, corruption, depravity, by their unrighteousness, they suppressed the truth. And this verse that we are looking at now, verse 21, tells you two specific ways that that occurs.

It happens first, through failing to fulfill the fundamental purpose for which God created you, and that is, to glorify Him. If you have the knowledge of God and you don't use it to promote Him glory, you fail the fundamental purpose for which He created you, and for which He gave you knowledge in the first place. And secondly He says, that truth is suppressed when we are ungrateful for God's kindnesses. And so in two ways, the truth of God is suppressed. They saw God's creation. They saw God's glory, they saw God's providence, and they did not glorify Him as God, they saw His eternity, they saw this world, they knew that the world didn't just get here like it is, it hasn't always existed, that it was brought into being by something that was greater than it, by an infinite, omnipotent personal force who had the power to make an order and vast universe. A universe, which was not eternal, but made by a being, which was eternal, and they did not end up worshipping Him. Despite the fact that His eternality and His power, and His wisdom were displayed, His goodness in the creation, they did not worship Him. They didn't worship Him, when they saw His justice revealed in providence. They didn't worship Him when they saw His mercy, His patience, His forbearance

revealed in providence.

You are asking yourself, well how is His mercy, patience, and forbearance revealed in providence? Let me illustrate. A while back, there was a man who was married, a professing Christian who became involved in an extramarital affair. Coming back from one of his rendezvous, he was in a near fatal automobile accident. He languished for days on the edge of death. Christians, who prayed for him, longed that that wake up call from God would drive him back into the arms of God. Instead he announced later after his recovery that that event had been decisive in his decision to live life like he wanted to live it. Oh my friends, that providence was a revelation of the mercy of God. But it was misread. It didn't lead to a person saying, I embrace God in thankfulness for His patience and forbearance to me. I embrace the wife of my youth. I repent, I seek, reconciliation and I ask forgiveness. No, it doesn't lead to the worship of God in that way, it leads to rebellion. And so the Apostle Paul says, the truth is suppressed. The truth clearly revealed by God. And they didn't give thanks to Him. There is no one who is not indebted to God for His many kindnesses and when we do not show thankfulness to Him, when we do not acknowledge the things we have come from Him, we haven't earned them ultimately. No matter how hard we have worked. God's kindness has been at work in our experience. When we don't acknowledge that, we suppress the truth. We don't acknowledge that the gift comes from the Giver. And in these ways, Paul says, we suppress the truth.

Our central purpose in life is the promotion of the glory of God, and the knowledge of God serves that in. There is a necessary connection between knowing and believing and obedience and worship. And when that connection is severed, the truth is suppressed. When the knowledge of God does not lead to the worship of God, when the link is broken between knowledge on the one hand, and belief and obedience and worship on the other, that knowledge appears to be vacuous and irrelevant and it is suppressed.

Henry Schafer is a theoretical chemist and a Christian who has taught at the University of California, Berkley, and is now at the University of Georgia. And during his Apologetics lectures at First Presbyterian Church at Augusta, Georgia, a couple of years ago, he told the story of two incidents which made a profound impact on him in his upbringing. He had been brought up in a nominally Christian home. They attended a relatively conservative evangelical church, but he said two things happened in his relationship with his dad, or rather in seeing his dad in his younger days, which caused him to reject Christianity. Once, they were in an argument, and he quoted the Bible in his favor on his side of the argument, and his father, responded, well, in this case the Bible is wrong. Then when his younger sister graduated from high school, he noticed that his father and his mother stopped going to church. And from those two experiences, he decided that Christianity must be worthless. If God's word is not authoritative, if his father's word can effectively challenge God's Word, well God's Word must not

mean much. If his father had only gone to church simply because it would be good for the kids, then Christianity must not be relevant. It took him years and the grace of God to get over that physical demonstration of the break between the linkage of knowledge and worship, knowledge and faith, knowledge and obedience. His father had broken that link and thus, had ended up suppressing the knowledge of God. That is what happens to all so-called theoretical and practical atheists and agnostics. The knowledge bears no godly proof. Paul does not say that they didn't have the knowledge. Paul simply says, they suppressed that knowledge, that truth. It has been marginalized in their heart and their experience. Now there are so many implication of this, so many applications of this, that we could spend all day. But let me just think about a couple of them with you for just a moment.

We live in a day and age where there are a number of people who call themselves atheists and agnostics. Last week, we argued according to Paul's words, and in Romans chapter 1, verses 18-20, that really there is no such thing as an atheist or an agnostic, because God has implanted His knowledge in everyone. But there are still people who claim to be atheists and agnostics. In this passage, Paul makes it clear to us, that the reason that they claim to be atheists and agnostics is not because they are smarter than we are; it is not because they have got intellectual problems with the evidence of Christianity; that they have got intellectual problems with the credibility of the belief. The origin of their problem is not intellectual: they are moral. In unrighteousness, they have suppressed the truth. There is a moral suppression of truth going on. And that means a lot of things. But one thing it means is that it is not your job to go out and try to prove God to atheists and agnostics. He has already proved Himself and their problem is not intellectual. In fact, Paul Vince has just speculated that the best instrument of atheism and agnosticism in terms of its being perpetuated is an absent or a bad father. You ought to take a look at his book, ***Faith of the Fatherless***, sometimes and see his argument about the origins of atheism. Atheism does not come from being smarter. Atheism does not come from intellectual superiority. Atheism comes from a moral suppression of the truth. And we need to understand, in addition to what Paul is saying here, about the basis of the divine final judgment.

You know, a lot of times as evangelicals, we think on the last day, those who have heard the Gospel, and accepted will be saved, and those who have heard the Gospel and rejected it will be condemned. Well, so far, so good. But then the thought pops into our minds: well, what about those who have never heard? And many well-meaning evangelicals attempt to find other ways for people to come into eternal saving fellowship with God apart from the Gospel, because they think, well, if your acceptance or rejection of the Gospel is the basis of your final judgment or acceptance, and you never had the chance to hear, well, surely then God provides some other way. The Apostle says, no, no, no, you don't understand. All people know. The problem is not ignorance here. The problem is moral rebellion. If we don't understand that, we will get into all sorts of self-

created problems in terms of our Christian witness.

The reason we share the Gospel to the nations, is not because they don't know, but that because they do know and they suppressed that truth. And only the Gospel can savingly liberate them from that self-imposed bondage. That is why we go to the nations. You know, if it was true that the way that people are condemned is by their hearing of the Gospel and rejecting it, if that was the only truth out there, you see, then the best way to make sure that people got to heaven would be not to tell anybody the gospel. And that way, they couldn't reject it, then that way; they could get to heaven some other way. But the Apostle Paul says, no you don't understand, the nature of the problem is not that people don't know. The nature of the problem is that they do know and they still reject God. That is why we need the Gospel. So Paul tells us that the way we suppress the knowledge of God is by failing to glorify and be thankful to Him.

## **II. The results of suppressing the true knowledge of God.**

And then He goes on if you look at the end of verse 21, and the first part of 22, to show you the results of suppressing the true knowledge of God. Whenever you suppress the true knowledge of God, there are consequences and in this brief passage, he shares three consequences of suppressing the true knowledge of God. When you ignore or reject the true knowledge of God, everything else goes haywire. There is always a consequence for the rejection of the truth. And the results of their failure to glorify and thank God according to Paul are several. First of all, their speculations become empty. Second their hearts become more obscured from the truth. And third, while professing wisdom, they display foolishness.

Notice these words: they become futile in their speculations. Their foolish heart was darkened, and professing to be wise, they become fools. Their speculation becomes futile. Once their knowledge is divorced from praise, it becomes empty. You know, you have heard it: well, I like to think of God as .. and then fill in any crazy idea you want. Reject the true knowledge of God; you will come with all manner of nutty things to believe. It doesn't matter how smart they are. Smartness is not as protection against superstition. Smartness is not a protection against embracing incredibly crazy beliefs. It is amazing isn't it, that there are people out there that believe scientology and L Ron Hubbard's *Dianetics*. Relatively intelligent people who embrace that as a worldview. There are people out there who build buildings on the basis of Feng Shui. You know, you have got to have the bathroom in the right part of the building or the spirit of the building will cause your business to collapse. There are intelligent people who embrace that kind of thinking. Their smartness has not protected them from the results of their suppression of the truth.

And Paul goes on to say: their foolish hearts are darkened. You know the heart

stands for the whole of the inner life. You know, that inner core of our being. Leon Morris put it this way, "the heart is the center of the inner life, from it, the person's direction is determined, his whole course is shaped, his basic commitments formed." And Paul is saying that in the very core of their being they become more impervious to truth. Truth is often pictured in the Scriptures as light. He says their hearts become darkened. That is, it gets harder for their dark hearts to accept truth when they do run into it. By suppressing the truth, their heart becomes more obdurate against the truth. And then finally, they claim to be wise, and yet they become fools.

Many of you were at the National Center for Fathering Conference last week, and during it we saw a clip from major broadcast news source. One of the three media giants. I won't tell you which one; because the story I am about to tell you is so embarrassing. And we were seeing a clip from a series that this particular main broadcast channel had done on fathering. And a relatively intelligent sounding reporter stared us in the eyes through the camera and said, with a straight face, "more and more research indicates today that fathers are important for children." Now all of us in the conference reacted just the way you did. We said, exactly what research did you need to do to figure this out? And yet, my friends, you see when you come from a culture that has a grid, that has an agenda to try and marginalize the importance of fathers, and to promote experimentation in same sex marriages, and single parent child rearing, it is blind to things that are perfectly obvious to any human being with an IQ larger than his shoe size. And the Apostle says professing to be wise, they became fools. And the knowledge of God always goes bad when it is not deployed as it is supposed to be. When we suppress the knowledge of God and it does not lead us to praise, it always goes bad on us. And so, professing to be wise, we become fools. And so Paul says here, not only that we suppress the knowledge of God by failing to glorify Him, and thank Him, but that having failed to glorify and thank Him, it leads everything else go haywire in our thinking and in our living.

### **III. Idolatry is the consequence of suppressing the true knowledge of God.**

And finally in verse 23, he takes us to the next step. Here he tells us that idolatry is the degrading but inevitable consequence of the suppression of the true knowledge of God. When we refuse to worship the one true God, it is not that we worship anything; it is that we will worship anything. If you refuse the one true God, who has revealed Himself in you, and around you, you will worship anything. Idolatry is the central religious problem. Not theoretical atheism, not agnosticism, but idolatry. God has made us to be religious people. If we won't worship Him, we'll find something else to worship. There is a God we want and there is a God who is, and the two are not the same. And if we don't want the God who is, we will invent the god we want, and we will worship him.

And we see this in the Old Testament. The people of God did it right in the wake

of the Exodus. They said they would worship the true God, through the golden calf. Isaiah mocks Pagans who would go out and they would take a tree and they would cut it down, part of it they would make kindling and make firewood. Part of it, they would build a house out of. The rest of it, they would make their god, and they would worship it. And Isaiah said, this is ridiculous. And of course it is ridiculous. And we can stand back and say, well, we will get more sophisticated for that. We don't do that anymore. But we make God in our image all the time.

Many of here grew up in the old Southern Presbyterian Church, and back during the 1950's we became concerned about the curriculum that was coming out of the Christian Education Department in Richmond. It was beginning to question traditional teaching about the doctrine of Scripture, and it denied the inerrancy and authority of Scripture. It began to question traditional teaching about the doctrine of salvation, traditional Christian teaching about the nature of God. And people became concerned; they began to talk about it. But you know, if you had gone into a member's home, in the 1950's and said this, you know if you get off on the doctrine of Scripture, off the doctrine of God, why, you know what, one day you will be worshipping other gods. They would have looked into your eyes and they would have said, you are stark raving loony. And yet our descendants have been involved in sponsoring a conference where the worship of the goddess Sophia was participated in.

Oh my friends, when you refuse to worship the one true God, according to His knowledge, you will worship anything. And the irony of this, of course, is that when we refuse to decentralize ourselves to displace ourselves and to acknowledge the one true God, to be the proper focus of all life, the center of reality and we replace ourselves and we decide that we are going to be the center of reality and what we think is going to be the center of reality. We end up killing ourselves. Because we can't support the weight of reality. We can't generate satisfaction and blessedness and happiness only the displacement of the self to the worship of the one true God, can bring blessedness and satisfaction and happiness, so the Apostle Paul says, until you come to grips with the realization that the suppression the truth of the one true God, that truth which has been given to every human being is a universal reality, you are not ready yet, to appreciate just how good the good news is that I am going to share. May God enable us to see the folly of our own hearts, and to flee to the only answer to that folly, the Lord Jesus Christ. Let's pray.

*Our heavenly Father, we humble ourselves before You, and we confess that we have not known You as we ought. You have revealed Yourself to us, and we haven't worshipped You, and we ask O God, by the grace of the Holy Spirit, that we would see Christ in all of His benefits, that we would trust in Him, and so would come to worship You as You are, as You reveal Yourself in the Gospel. We ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen.*



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