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A1420 – May 18, 2014 – Romans 1:18-20
Suppressing The Truth In Unrighteousness

In Romans 1:16-17 the theme is set forth; the gospel is the power of God unto salvation to everyone who believes. Historically this began with the Jew first and then went to the Gentile. This salvation is accessible because a God-kind of righteousness has been provided by Jesus Christ on the cross. Each time a human exercises faith this God-kind of righteousness is supplied so that we are pleasing to God. Initially His righteousness is imputed to us legally, thereafter it is imparted to us ethically, in the end it is inherent in us ontologically. When salvation is complete we will be fit for God to dwell with us for all eternity. This is the good news. However, Paul knew that in order to get a man to exercise faith he had to first realize he is lost and in need of salvation. One does not seek a doctor unless he is first convinced he is sick. Therefore Paul now turns to man's need or his just condemnation.

In these pages we find the most extensive and insightful commentary on the heart of man in all of Scripture. For almost three chapters Paul is going to give thought-provoking evidence that every man is condemned. In the end the honest student cannot contend that there is any inherent goodness in man; there is none good, no not one. God has reached out to man all day long but man has not reached out to God. As McClain says, showing a man that he is condemned is absolutely critical to preaching the gospel. "As powerful as this gospel is, there is one thing that this gospel cannot do: it cannot save any man until that man sees himself as a guilty, lost, condemned sinner...If the world of men is not lost, absolutely condemned, then preaching the gospel is foolish."ⁱ Thus Paul's apologetic encounters in Acts 13, 14 and 17 as well as his doctrine of apologetics in 1 Corinthians 1-2 and here in Rom 1-3, consistently demonstrate that he first sought to get his audience lost so that

they would be convicted that they were culpable and therefore condemned by God, without any excuse.

These chapters make several key contributions, some of which we want to highlight briefly. First, how do I defend the gospel or what is the proper apologetic method? Apologetics is “defending the faith.” Peter commands us to “always be ready to give a defense” and to do so “with gentleness and reverence.” There are many defenses throughout Scripture. From God to Adam and Eve in Gen 3 to God and Job in Job 38-42, to Elijah and the Baal Prophets in 2 Kgs 18, to Stephen and the Sanhedrin in Acts 7 as well as to Paul to the Athenians in Acts 17. How did they defend the faith? Did they do it as is so commonly done by modern evidentialist or rationalist apologists, as a piecemeal approach, assuming the neutrality of the unbeliever and trying to prove that God exists, assuming that the unbeliever can look at and interpret the evidence objectively, without bias, and able to use logic correctly? Or did they do it as a modern presuppositionalist, with a holistic approach, by bringing the entire system of Christianity to bear upon the unbeliever, assuming the unbeliever is suppressing the truth he knows about God and deliberately reinterpreting the evidence by the use of rationality and irrationality in order to hide from God? How one understands these apologetic encounters goes a long way in forming one’s own apologetic methodology. Second, what about those who’ve never heard or what about the hot-n-tot in Africa? Did Paul do what is so commonly done today and claim that there are those who have never heard and therefore God will not condemn them? Or that He will not condemn them until they have a chance to hear and believe after they die? Or did Paul argue that everyone has heard and yet they suppressed what they knew about God and are therefore condemned? Again, the way one understands Paul’s argument goes a long way in forming how missions minded one is. If people have never heard and are not condemned then why send a missionary? However, if people all have knowledge and are condemned then sending missionaries is a vital endeavor. These questions will have to be answered as we go through the text.

In short, these three chapters are critical and address some of the deepest concerns of men. But without doubt their greatest accomplishment is painting man’s dilemma as very dire indeed. Never was there a portrait of man’s plight so dark as Romans 1:18-3:20. But it is just that portrait of

darkness which makes the light of salvation that follows in 3:21-8:39 appear all the brighter. The world is a dark place; Jesus is the light of the world.

Paul here divides the human race into three branches. How does Paul divide the human race? In verse 16 Paul divides men into two groups; Jews and Gentiles. In verses 13-14 the Gentile world is further subdivided into Greeks and barbarians. So there are two groups; Jews and Gentiles but the Gentiles can be subdivided into Greeks and barbarians. We're going to refer to the barbarians as pagan Gentiles and to the Greeks as cultured Gentiles and to the Jews as Jews. These are the three divisions Paul follows in showing that all men are condemned. In 1:18-32 Paul shows that pagan Gentiles are condemned, in 2:1-16 he shows that cultured Gentiles are condemned, in 2:17-3:8 he shows that Jews are condemned and finally, in 3:9-20 he shows by summary that the whole world is condemned. Who are these three groups? First, who are the Jews? They are the covenant people of God descended from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. They were given the Law of God through Moses. They are monotheists, holding to the one true God. Who are the Greeks? The Greeks are cultured Gentiles. They are educated, influential, well-off and live a supposed moral life. They are the upper and middle class of a society. They are interested in politics, law and ethics and are not usually religious in the modern sense of the word. They think they are not in need of a religious system to help them, they can help themselves. Who are the barbarians? The barbarians are pagan Gentiles; heathen. They are uneducated, base and immoral. They are the lower class of society. They are trying to survive. They lie, steal and cheat in order to get ahead. They worship sticks and stones and animals.

Now those are the three divisions of the human race given to us by Paul. Having given a general sketch of each branch which would you say is most in need of the gospel? The pagan Gentile. This is the one everyone says is in need of the gospel. He is base and corrupt and in need of help from God and so we readily expect Paul to address the pagan Gentiles need of the gospel. This Paul does first in 1:18-32. Yet then, quite to our surprise, Paul turns to the cultured Gentile, and says that despite his education, his status, his wealth and morality he too is in need of the gospel. Paul addresses his need for the gospel in 2:1-16. And then, most unexpectedly, Paul turns to the Jew, the favored race of Abraham, the covenant people of God, given the Law of God at Mt Sinai and he says that this privileged people also are in need of the

gospel. Paul addresses the Jews need for the gospel in 2:17-3:8. So there is a crescendo to Paul's argument; he starts where we expect, with the pagan Gentiles, he then surprises us by turning to the need of the cultured Gentiles and at the last shocks us by explaining that even the Jew is in need of the gospel. In the end Paul says the whole world of men is condemned and in need of the gospel in 3:9-20. There is none righteous, not even one, none who understands, none who seeks for God, none who does good, not even one! Yet God has reached out to each of them, to the pagans through creation, to the cultured through conscience and to the Jew through the Law, yet each group has not reached out to God, each group has rejected His reach and therefore stands condemned.

Today we will start looking at pagan Gentiles and their condemnation. In verse 18 Paul says, **For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, 19because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. 20For 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.** Now the most obvious thing about these verses is what? That all men know God. There is nobody who does not know about God. If we have a friend who tells us he does not know God then the question is, "Who are we going to believe?" Our friend or God. God says you should believe Him and not your friend because your friend is lying to you. Now your friend may have done something to the truth. Verse 18 closes saying that he has suppressed the truth in unrighteousness. So he may have buried it so deep that it takes some time to break through all the flack in order to draw it out, but to grant that your friend does not know God is simply not something you can afford to grant. He does know God and he knows Him very well.

How does he know Him? By what means? Through what God has made, through creation. People refer to the revelation of God in creation as general revelation. The term general is used because it is revelation that is available to all men. It stands in distinction from special revelation. The term special is used because it is a revelation that is available only to a subset of all men. And it is usually referring to verbal revelation, the Scripture. So we have general and special revelation and here Paul is clearly talking about general

revelation, the revelation of God in creation that is available to all men. Let's turn to Ps 19. Here's a Psalm that speaks of general revelation in the heavens. "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. 3There is no speech, nor are there words; Their voice is not heard. 4Their line has gone out through all the earth, And their utterances to the end of the world." Notice that the heavens speak. They don't speak with words but they do speak and what they are saying is heard and understood clearly by all. They speak continually and inescapably; what they are saying is perfectly known. How do the heavens speak? They reveal an order, a stability, a pattern that we as image-bearers of God detect. In fact we are designed to detect the patterns and when we see the order we know it's not there by chance, we know it is there because another mind has ordered it. That's general revelation, revelation about God that is available to all men through their contact with the world as image-bearers of God. Let's turn to another great passage on general revelation, Job 12:7. Here Job points us to animals, to birds, to the earth and to fish, all aspects of nature. He says nature is a teacher we are to learn from. "But now ask the beasts, and let them teach you; And the birds of the heavens, and let them tell you. 8Or speak to the earth, and let it teach you; And let the fish of the sea declare to you. 9Who among all these does not know That the hand of the LORD has done this, 10In whose hand is the life of every living thing, And the breath of all mankind? 11Does not the ear test words, As the palate tastes its food?" What is Job saying? That nature is a teacher and we ask questions of nature and the answers we discover reveal clearly that the LORD has designed it. He's a master craftsman, a stunning engineer. We piggy back on His designs. Medical personnel, researchers, artists, architects, poets, musicians, they all borrow God's ideas to design, to create. They are not original, they are borrowing from Him whom they very well know designed it all. And Job is saying that it is perfectly obvious that God designed it all and men know this perfectly well, all men. Finally, turn to Ps 139:13, this is a Psalm of David and here he's looking at that part of creation that is unique, man, the image-bearer of God, and when we contemplate man we know God. Verse 13, "For you formed my inward parts; You wove me in my mother's womb. 14I will give thanks to You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; Wonderful are Your works, And my soul knows it very well." "Knows" there is *yada*, a very intimate knowledge. The human body is so intricate, so complex that David knows as well as everyone knows that the God who created it is an awesome

Being. The care, the thought, the power that created the billions of tiny parts that all work together in a chemical, electrical, biological tapestry is stunning and every man's soul knows it very well. That is what Paul means when he says in 1:19 that **that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. 20For 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...** That is general revelation or the clear revelation of God through both man and nature that renders all men culpable or responsible. What are all men supposed to do with this revelation? What did David do? He gave thanks. What does verse 21 imply they should do? Honor Him and give thanks. Did they do that? No, they did not do that.

Well, what did they do with that knowledge? Scan back up to verse 18. There's a key expression in verse 18 that just invites us to dive into the world of unbelief. What did they do? They **suppressed the truth in unrighteousness**. Let that sink in a moment because it's packed and we want to attempt to unpack the suppression. Before we do let's make some observations. First, the KJV simply translates this "holds the truth in unrighteousness." If you have this translation that is a very poor translation. The word $\kappa\alpha\tau\epsilon\chi\omega$ does not mean "to hold" but "to hold down." The picture of holding something is very different from the picture of holding down something. This word was used by Paul in 2 Thess 2:6 to describe the restraint being imposed on the anti-Christ, but in this case it is unbelievers who are the active agents in restraining. They have erected a barrier in the inner recesses of their soul to shield themselves. Van Til described it as steel reinforced concrete ten feet thick. What have they erected this barrier to shield themselves from? The truth. Second, think about that, if they're holding down or restraining the truth do they know the truth? Of course. Can we say then that unbelievers know truth? Yes, absolutely. How do they know truth? Verse 19 is part of the answer. God made it evident to them through general revelation. God actually makes the truth plain to all men, absolutely clear. It's just not true to say that unbelievers don't know the truth. They know the truth, they are simply holding it down, suppressing it. Third, if that's the case then are unbelievers ignorant? No. Unbelievers are not ignorant. They know the truth but they do not acknowledge the truth. Apparently it's not a pleasant knowledge and so they suppress it; they do something to hold it down so they don't think about it. It's not true that

unbelievers do not know the truth, they know perfectly well the truth but they are holding down the truth. It's that activity of holding down the truth, that energy spent in restraining the truth that condemns them. Fourth, what specific truth do they know? Verse 20, **His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen.** Do unbelievers know God? Yes. Do they know of a god in general or do they know the God specifically? In other words, do they have a general concept of a higher being, a force, a deity or do have they have a specific concept of the God. Paul says they have a specific concept. They know His eternal power and His divine nature. He says they see Him clearly. By the way, that's the only weakness I find in using the expression general revelation. The expression is helpful because it is pointing out that this kind of revelation is available to all men; but it's hurtful because it gives the impression that this kind of revelation is less clear, less sharp, even blurry. But in v 20 this knowledge of God is not blurry at all; it is clearly seen. The word means to intently see, to see or know clearly. Fifth, how do they know it? Verse 20 answers again, **being understood through what has been made.** In other words, God has made it clear to them through general revelation as we spoke of before. So what Paul is saying is that all men look at creation and they know the qualities and attributes of the one true God. They don't just know about a god; they know the God. General revelation is therefore specific. It plainly and infallibly points to the God of the Bible and all men know very well the God of the Bible. Finally, how do they suppress the truth? Alternative explanations/interpretations of general revelation. For example, the hypothesis of evolution. In its broadest sense, is an alternative explanation or interpretation of the evidence. It's not that unbelievers are looking at certain evidences and believers are avoiding the evidence. We all have the same evidence, it's how we interpret the evidence. What is your interpretive authority? Everyone has presuppositions or better, pre-commitments to a worldview that tells you how to interpret the evidence. And what I've tried to show is that they know very well that God is the one who designed the whole world but they are predisposed against Him. They know in their souls very well that the structures and functions are God created and God-sustained. So when they posit an alternative explanation they are lying to themselves and they know they are lying to themselves.

Why are they doing this? Go back all the way back to verse 18. What do you see there as far as why they are lying to themselves? Because they are

ungodly and unrighteous. If you know God but you are ungodly, are you going to want to keep Him in your thoughts? They don't want to think about Him. They have short accounts with Him. So to avoid Him they spend all their time and energy constructing alternative explanations and telling them to others in order to create a world that has totally blocked out God. There's a strategy at work here. It's uncomfortable for them and so they are trying to make the world comfortable for themselves. They create mutually supporting myths so that every thought is a thought that blocks out God. This is why all the disciplines have been aligned around the central unifying theory of evolution. Anthropology, zoology, chemistry, physics, et. al., have all been designed as mutually supporting myths in a grand quest to suppress the truth of God in unrighteousness because He is a very uncomfortable thought. That means you, that means me, we can't be in the picture because we keep bringing Him back up. That's why people get so angry when you talk to them about God. They're doing all they can to shut Him out and you are bringing Him in. It's terribly distressing for them. They know He is the authority, they know it very well, and they know that they are rebels. Rebels don't want a run in with the authority. So they are doing all they can to suppress the truth in order to avoid a run in.

Do you think God is mad about this? Does He have a right to be mad about this? What has He done for them? He's given them everything. The whole creation He has made and He sustains and they know He has made it and they know He sustains it and have they honored Him? No. Have they given thanks to Him? No. Does God have good reason to be mad at them? Yes. That's why we find in verse 18. God is mad and He is presently revealing wrath. **For the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven.** Note that this is not a future wrath, we tend to think that God's wrath is going to come in the future, and it is, but this is a present **wrath**, it is now being revealed in the world. You can look right outside your window and see it. What is it? What am I looking for so I know the wrath of God when I see it? Verse 24 tells us that the first sign of God's wrath is heterosexual immorality. "God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them." When you have a society that glorifies sex between a male and a female outside of marriage you are seeing God's wrath. He has turned them over to that behavior because they are suppressing truth that they know about Him. That includes co-habitation, casual sex, adultery or even fantasizing about these behaviors. Those behaviors themselves are

God's wrath. He is judging them by turning them over to these destructive behaviors, behaviors that destroy both themselves and society. They wreak havoc on a societal level in that they break down the family and destroy the economy. They wreak havoc on the individual level in that they are the cause of much mental and physical illness. Verse 26 tells us that the second sign of God's wrath is homosexual immorality. "God gave them over to degrading passions; for their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural, 27and 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." When you see a society glorifying sex between persons of the same sex you are seeing the wrath of God. He has turned them over to that behavior as a penalty for rejecting their knowledge of Him! The LBGT movement is the wrath of God being revealed right now in our country. Those actions are penalties for their error of not acknowledging Him and giving Him thanks. We're not waiting for God's judgment by way of an EMP or an atomic bomb. Those things may come, but the wrath of God is already here. Every time you see another case of heterosexual immorality, every time you see another push for homosexual immorality you are seeing the wrath of God more and more and more. On the deeper level, what's the problem? Why is this on the rise? The cause is people are suppressing the truth that they know about God; the effect is heterosexual and homosexual immorality. If you are talking to someone and they say, "It's just not clear to me that God is there." They have just called down the wrath of God. God says it is clear. God says He made it clear. But that's not all. Verse 28 tells us that the third sign of God's wrath is all kinds of evil. "God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do those things which are not proper, 29being filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, evil; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice; they are gossips. 30slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, etc... etc... etc... When you see a society full of moral vice you are already seeing the wrath of God. God gave them over to that because they are not acknowledging Him. They know Him, they see Him but they do not acknowledge Him. It is very serious. We are not waiting for the wrath of God to come, it's already here.

Finally, why has God made Himself completely clear to all men? The end of verse 20 answers, purpose clause, **so that they are without excuse**. The words **without excuse** are *αναπολογητος*. It means without a courtroom

defense. In a court of law they would have no defense. You see, there are people who will never hear the gospel but they will be condemned nonetheless. Why? Because they had adequate information and they rejected that information. People are not condemned because they don't believe; people are condemned because they reject the revelation God has made available to them. These people had a clear revelation of God in creation, they knew Him perfectly well, but they did not want Him in their knowledge so they suppressed it in unrighteousness. People are not on a quest for truth, they are on a quest to suppress the truth. If they were on a quest for truth they would be acknowledging God, honoring God, giving thanks to the God who is there. But they don't want Him.

What then are we to do? One thing we must do in our apologetics or defense of the faith is put stock in what God has said about the unbeliever. We have no way of seeing into a person's psyche and measuring their thoughts. However God knows everything in a person's thoughts. Therefore, as Scott Oliphint says, "When God speaks about the human psyche...we would be wise to listen carefully." What God has said here is that they know Him. Therefore, should we spend gobs of energy trying to prove God's existence? That is the traditional method of apologetics, to construct an argument for the existence of God. Many arguments have been developed. For example, the teleological or design argument. This argument posits: major premise - design manifests a designer; minor premise - nature has a design; conclusion - God designed nature. Great. But do we really need that argument? Or is that already known? Paul insists that is already known and what you are doing by using the argument is refusing to trust God. Besides, the argument can be outmaneuvered by a slick unbeliever. All he has to do is plug God into the major premise. If God manifests design then who designed God. So all you've done is created an abstract universal and put it above God and now you're in trouble. Take another argument, the cosmological or origins argument. This argument posits: major premise - everything that exists has a cause; minor premise - the universe exists; conclusion - the universe has a cause and that cause is God. Great. But should we use that argument? Or do they already know that the universe was caused by God? Paul says they already know that and all you are doing is spending gobs of energy to try and prove what they already know is true but are suppressing in unrighteousness. Besides, the argument is easily destroyed by any atheist worth his salt. All he has to do is plug God into the major premise again. If

everything that exists has a cause and God exists, then who caused God. You've made a mistake because you tried to be God by creating an abstract universal. You can't say everything has a cause without violating the Creator-creature distinction. Well, what are you trying to do then if you're not trying to prove to unbelievers that God exists? You're trying to remind them of truths they already know. The late Dr Francis Schaeffer wrote a neat little book years ago called, *He is There and He is not Silent*. The point of that title is simply to reiterate what I've already told you, that unbelievers know He is there. In that little book he says what we are trying to do is break through the barrier that they have erected to suppress their knowledge of Him. How do we do that? How do we break through ten feet of reinforced concrete in a person's soul? Of course this involves the Holy Spirit. Paul never denied that. I never denied that. But Paul in his evangelistic encounters in Acts 14 and 17 shows us the technique the Holy Spirit uses to break through the concrete. The Holy Spirit has means of accomplishing the breakthrough. In short, what Paul does is he never grants that his audience is neutral. He immediately accuses them of suppressing truth that they know about God. In other words, he begins with a judgment. Then he reminds them that they are creatures of God and that God has supplied everything for them and they have not given thanks to Him but instead created alternative explanations of reality. He then shows from their own culture that they know very well that this God is there so they have no excuse. Finally he warns them that God has set a day in which He will judge and that He is calling all men everywhere to repent concerning this God whom they know but are suppressing. If they repented, Paul would then preach the gospel of Jesus Christ who died and rose for their sins. In other words, Paul always preached repentance toward God first and then faith in the Lord Jesus Christ second. As Paul himself said in Acts 20:21, "solemnly testifying to both Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ." It was always a two-step procedure. Paul did not jump to Jesus; Paul started with repentance toward God which means a change of mind concerning God. Instead of suppressing the truth they knew about God they needed to honor and thank God for supplying all their needs. If they had this change of mind then Paul would preach Jesus and call for faith in Him. We should follow the same procedure because this is how the Holy Spirit breaks through the suppression and prepares a person for the gospel.

Being revealed (present passive) for (explanatory) a wrath of God (not the wrath but a wrath, the wrath is yet future, a wrath is yet now) from heaven (the wrath comes from heaven) upon all ungodliness (asebeian, impropriety, failure to do what they should have done with the revelation) and unrighteousness (moral, unrighteous behavior) of men the ones suppressing the truth in unrighteousness. 19because the knowledge of the God is revealed/plain in/among them, for the God made it evident (aorist) to them. 20For (explains how God revealed it plainly among them, namely, through creation) the invisibility of Him from the creation of the world

ⁱ Alva McClain, *Romans: The Gospel of God's Grace*, p 61.

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