

When in Romans Do as the Righteous Do

"The Grace of Wrath"

1:18-20

"Has the God who prepared the gospel for all peoples also prepared all peoples for the gospel?"

It's a question Don Richardson asks then answers in his classic book, *Eternity in Their Hearts*. It is full of historical information showing ways various unreached peoples have exhibited a divine preparation for the gospel.

In biblical terms we would say that God has given all men everywhere for all time a witness of Himself in creation as the Creator. The next three verses in Romans chapter one (18-20) talk about that witness.

The witness is both *external* and *internal*:

- Externally you read in verse twenty, "For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen..."
- Internally you read in verse nineteen, "...what may be known of God is manifest in them..."

Let's look more closely at these verses to determine what they mean.

Romans 1:18 For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness,

Paul in verse seventeen has just told us that "the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith..." We talked about exactly what he meant. He meant that God saves ungodly sinners and gives them a right standing before Him without violating His holy nature when they believe what Jesus did for them on the Cross. God justifies them, declaring them righteous. He sees them 'just-as-if-they'd' never sinned.

Now Paul says that something else is “revealed.” The "wrath of God is revealed from Heaven..."

God hates sin. His hatred of sin brings His “wrath.” God's wrath is not what we think of as anger. It is simply His terrible judgment upon sin and sinners.

God's wrath has been compared to the waters that gather behind a dam. While the dam holds, all who live in the fertile valley below are secure to go about their business as they choose, giving no thought to their danger. When the dam breaks all who have ignored their danger are engulfed and destroyed.

God's longsuffering with mankind is the dam that holds back His wrath. As you read in Second Peter 3:9, "the Lord is not slack concerning His promise [of judgment to come], as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance."

Paul says that the wrath of God "is revealed from heaven." It *has been* revealed in the past and that it will *ultimately be* revealed.

- God has in the past intervened to reveal His wrath against sin from Heaven. Noah's Flood and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah revealed God's wrath.
- God will intervene in the future to reveal His wrath against sin from Heaven. Revelation chapters six through eighteen describe the outpouring of God's wrath against sin during the future Great Tribulation that is coming upon the whole planet earth.

God's wrath is "against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men..."

- “Ungodliness” is a wrong relationship with God.
- “Unrighteousness” is a wrong relationship with men.

We'll see more of this, the specific acts of unrighteousness, in the closing verses of chapter one.

Men are said to "suppress the truth in unrighteousness." It means that they suppress the truth for the sake of their own unrighteousness. They love their sin and so they don't want to acknowledge the truth.

What is the "truth" that they suppress? It is the witness of the Creator, both internally and externally, described in verses nineteen and twenty.

Romans 1:19 because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them.

Are folks who have never heard the gospel really lost? Yes, but not because they haven't heard the gospel. It's because they refuse the witness God has given them.

Charles Hodge is described as "the most influential American Presbyterian theologian of the nineteenth century." This extremely conservative theologian writes concerning Romans 1:19,

The knowledge of God [described here] does not mean simply a knowledge that there is a God... it is not of mere external revelation of which the apostle is speaking, but of that evidence of the being and perfections of God which every man has in the constitution of his own nature, and in virtue of which he is competent to apprehend the manifestations of God in His works... This knowledge is a revelation; it is the manifestation of God in His works, and in the constitution of our nature.

Everyman everywhere for all time has a capacity to know God. Solomon described it in Ecclesiastes by saying that God "has put eternity in their hearts" (3:11). You were created with an internal capacity to respond to God's revelation of Himself as your Creator through His external creation.

The external witness of God's creation is in verse twenty:

Romans 1:20 For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse,

Design demands a Designer; Creation calls for a Creator. In Psalm 19:1-4 you read,

Psalms 19:1 The heavens declare the glory of God; And the firmament shows His handiwork.
Psalms 19:2 Day unto day utters speech, And night unto night reveals knowledge.
Psalms 19:3 There is no speech nor language Where their voice is not heard.
Psalms 19:4 Their line has gone out through all the earth, And their words to the end of the world...

Paul, in full agreement with the psalmist, is saying that all men everywhere for all time have a witness of God both through His creation and in their own capacity to respond to God's revelation of Himself through creation.

He is also very specific about what attributes of God can be known to all men everywhere for all time: "His eternal power and Godhead."

We might summarize this by saying that creation declares both a power and a person. Creation reveals the power and existence of God.

This knowledge leaves you "without excuse." It leaves you without excuse for remaining alienated from God in your unrighteous condition. All men everywhere for all time are held accountable for personally rejecting God's revelation of Himself to them through creation.

One author commented, "man are not condemned for rejecting a Savior they have never heard of, but for not being faithful for what they could know of God."

Men cannot be saved by the witness of God to themselves through creation alone. Ecclesiastes 3:11 reads in full,

Ecclesiastes 3:11 He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also He has put eternity in their hearts, except that no one can find out the work that God does from beginning to end.

In other words, God has revealed Himself to everyone through creation, and He has given them the capacity to respond to that witness, but the witness of creation to your heart is not sufficient for you to "find out the work that God does from beginning to end." You need further revelation from God to be saved.

Evangelicals hold the position that God further reveals Himself to those who respond to His universal witness of creation to their hearts.

Theologian Robert Lightner puts it best when he says,

God has given to all a revelation of Himself in [creation]... In lands where the gospel has not reached, God holds men responsible to receive the revelation He has given them. When they receive it, He in sovereign grace sees to it that they hear the Good News of salvation in Christ alone so they can believe and be saved. Response to God's message in [creation]...does not bring salvation, but it does reveal a willingness to respond to God. It gives evidence of an open and receptive heart.

Pastor John MacArthur writes,

Every person, no matter how isolated from God's written Word or the clear proclamation of the Gospel, has enough divine truth evident both within and around him... to enable him to know and be reconciled to God if his desire is genuine.

Is this going too far? **Not at all!** Paul says the same thing himself, in Scripture, in Acts 17:26-27,

Acts 17:26 "And [God] has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their preappointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings,

Acts 17:27 "so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us;

We would add to this an understanding that God saves those who, for one reason or another, cannot believe. That would include children who have not reached an age of accountability and those with diminished mental capacity.

But how can they be saved? On what basis, since we are all inheritors of sin?

Salvation is made possible by Jesus dying on the Cross and rising from the dead. Commenting upon the salvation God has provided, the apostle Paul said in First Timothy 4:10,

1 Timothy 4:10 For to this end we both labor and suffer reproach, because we trust in the living God, who is the Savior of all men, especially of those who believe.

It's an important statement because it establishes that the Cross of Jesus Christ is sufficient to save the entire human race. Those who exercise faith and "believe" are actually saved. Those who do not exercise faith remain dead in their trespasses and sins.

The question we are asking is, "What about all those, like infants and children, who cannot believe, who cannot exercise faith?"

Those who cannot believe are never called upon in the Bible to believe!

Only adults capable of making a decision are called upon to believe. Infants and young children, and we would add anyone who is mentally incapable of making a decision, are never called upon to believe in order to be saved.

Faith has no merit of its own. It adds nothing to the salvation provided by Jesus Christ. Its absence in those who cannot believe does not exclude them from being saved.

Is this universalism? Am I saying that everyone is saved? Of course not! I'm saying that in the case of all who cannot believe God is able to apply the finished work of Jesus Christ on the Cross without the need for them to exercise faith.

God Himself often distinguishes between the decision-making capacity of adults and children. We find one important example in the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy. God was explaining to the Israelites that because of their prior decision to disobey God they would never enter the Promised Land. God, however, would not hold their children accountable for that decision.

Deuteronomy 1:39 'Moreover your little ones and your children, who you say will be victims, who today have no knowledge of good and evil, they shall go in there; to them I will give it, and they shall possess it.

There are other passages we could cite that speak of children as having no “knowledge” of good and evil and, so, not held accountable (Jonah 4:11 & Romans 9:11). They are still sinners, inheritors of a sin nature. But when the die God can save them by His grace based on the shed blood of Jesus without faith that they cannot possibly exercise.

Some would argue that the Bible never states a particular ‘age of accountability.’ That’s true, there is no one age at which accountability kicks-in. But it is clear from the passage in Deuteronomy that God Himself distinguishes between adults who can be held accountable for their decisions and children who cannot.

Am I going out on a theological limb? If so, I’ve got company!

James Strong, theologian and famous for the Strong’s Concordance, writes,

The condition of salvation for adults is personal faith. Infants are incapable of fulfilling this condition. Since Christ has died for all, we have reason to believe that provision is made for their reception of Christ in some other way.

Robert Lightner writes,

Faith has no merit of its own. It adds nothing to the complete salvation provided by Christ... Since faith contributes nothing, its absence in those who cannot exercise it does not hinder the sovereign God from accomplishing in them all that He does in those who can and do believe. All who can believe must do so to receive eternal life. All who cannot believe receive the same eternal life provided by Christ for them at the time of death because they are able to neither receive nor to reject it.

Regarding the place of personal faith in salvation, even the Reformer, John Calvin, insisted that while Romans 10:17 (“so then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God”) makes hearing the beginning of faith, Paul was only describing the usual method which the Lord uses in calling people to Himself. Calvin said, “[Paul is] “not laying down an invariable

rule, for which no other method can be substituted” (Institutes of the Christian Religion, book IV, 542).

In other words, God *can* save apart from a person exercising personal faith, and He does in fact save in the case of those who cannot exercise faith, e.g., infants and children and the mentally disabled.

All men everywhere for all time are in God's heart to save. When they respond to His revelation of Himself in creation, He in Sovereign grace sees to it that they receive more revelation. Thus all men everywhere who reject God's witness through creation are without excuse; they are "suppress[ing] the truth in unrighteousness."

Let me read to you (in closing) an account from Don Richardson’s book. It is in a section subtitled, *The Chinese and Their Writing System*.

Early missionaries to China faced a formidable obstacle. They had to learn the Chinese writing system. As westerners, accustomed to writing with European alphabets of approximately 26 letters, they gasped! Chinese writing, they found, used a system based upon 214 symbols called “radicals.”

They gasped again when they learned that those 214 radicals... combined to form between 30,000 to 50,000 ideographs.

Why on earth would the sovereign God permit any people to develop a writing system so “radical”? ... [It seemed] that Chinese writing placed an almost impassable barrier in the way of communicating the gospel to one-quarter of mankind.

One day, however, one of the missionaries... was studying a particular ideograph, the one which means “righteous.” He noticed that it contained an upper and a lower part. The upper part was simply the Chinese symbol for a *lamb*. Directly under the lamb was a second symbol, the first personal pronoun *I*. Suddenly he discerned an amazingly well-coded message hidden within the ideograph: ***I under the lamb am righteous!***

It was nothing less than the heart of the gospel he had crossed the ocean to preach.

