

The World will Hate You (Part 2)

Last week we looked at Jesus' statement that the world would hate Christians. He said, in John 15, that the world would love us if we belonged to it, but we don't belong to it because Jesus has chosen us to come out of the world. We're different and because we are different, we are hated. The other aspect of this that we noticed was that because we represent Jesus, we represent His moral judgments as well, and He told His brothers that the world hated Him because He accused it of sin and of doing evil. I said last week that we don't have to say one word of judgment for people to believe that we're judgmental -- simply because we stand with Jesus and His judgments against human sinfulness.

Now, I'm not trying to create paranoia. I'm not trying to make you afraid of your neighbours because they hate you. I'm simply trying to prepare us for evangelism, for witness into the world that has rejected Jesus and His judgments.

Last weekend at the Apologetics Canada Conference we heard a speaker, Dr. John Coe, address the topic "The Psychology of Unbelief." He used the first chapter of Romans as a launching place for the discussion of why people refuse to believe the good news and I am going to follow that same path today.

But before we get there, he noted that there are two kinds of people that he meets and who are resistant to the gospel. The first kind has reasons for unbelief and in the second case there are causes of unbelief. The person who has reasons needs to find answers for their questions. They are looking to know why you believe, what the evidence is, and what answers you have found that satisfy your desire to know. The person with causes has had a previous encounter that is now experienced as a feeling and that feeling controls belief or unbelief. They may have been hurt by a church decision or by something someone said and that hurt is now related, in their mind, to the Christian faith. They may not say the words, "I don't want to believe," but that's exactly what their emotions are telling them. Dr. Coe made the statement, "Passions determine belief." And he said that when we are in a conversation with someone and the subject of faith or God or who Jesus is comes up -- if the person becomes defensive, if they tune out of the conversation, if they try to change the subject, you are likely dealing with someone who has *causes* of their unbelief rather than reasons for unbelief. So you can give them a hundred reasons to believe and you won't get through to their heart and help them to believe.

Let's turn to Romans 1, and I'll start reading at v. 18:

God shows His anger from heaven against all sinful wicked people who push the truth away from themselves. For the truth about God is known to them instinctively. God has put this knowledge in their hearts. From the time the world was created, people have seen the earth and sky and all that God has made. They can clearly see His invisible qualities -- His eternal power and divine nature. So they have no excuse whatsoever for not knowing God.

Let's look at this more closely before we move on. Paul is saying that people know

the truth and that they don't like it. Because they don't like what they know is true, they "push it away from themselves", they deliberately reject the knowledge they have. Is that possible? Would good, smart people like you and me, push away the knowledge of something we know is true and good just because we don't like the implications? Did you ever do anything like this before you started to follow Jesus? Yeah, we've all done this. For most of us, I would guess, it was because we didn't want to obey something in God's word. For others, we didn't like something that a whole group of Christians thought was right, so we wouldn't go along.

A big question from this passage is the statement that people can know God from just looking at the Creation He has made. But notice that it's more than just looking at the stars or the mountains or sailing over vast oceans. The text says that God has put a certain kind of knowledge in the hearts of all people, SO THAT when they look at the stars or the mountains or consider the vast oceans, they will not only be aware that there IS a God, but they will know what He is like. "They can clearly see His invisible qualities -- His eternal power and divine nature. So they have no excuse ..." This is not just looking at evidence and making a decision about it -- it is looking at evidence through the lens that God has planted in your heart. Let's keep going:

Yes, they knew God, but they wouldn't worship Him as God or even give Him thanks. And they began to think up foolish ideas of what God was like. The result was that their minds became dark and confused. Claiming to be wise, they became utter fools instead. And instead of worshiping the glorious, ever-living God, they worshiped idols made to look like mere people, or birds and animals and snakes.

Here again, right off the top, is the claim that people who have rejected God did not do so out of ignorance, but by a decision. People chose to reject God because they didn't want to worship Him, or even give Him thanks. But what happens when people reject what they know is true in order to do what they want? They make excuses, rationalizations, and one of the worst is mentioned in this verse: "they begin to think up foolish ideas of what God is like." If God is a monster who indiscriminately wipes out nations and a child abuser who sends His Son to the cross, then surely we, the very clever people of the 21st century don't have to take Him seriously. That's how you would move this passage forward 2,000 years. But, when you choose to ignore what you know is true and choose to make up excuses to try and make yourself look good, there are consequences.

"The result was that their minds became dark and confused." The sense of these words is the obvious one: people who chose to deliberately deny the truth that God placed within them, became unable to discern, foolish, lacking understanding, in the dark. Then the next sentence says, "Claiming to be wise, they became utter fools instead." And from there, Paul says that, at least in his day, they have been so blind as to worship images of people, animals and birds instead of the real thing, the God who created them.

So let's look at the analysis of humankind that is given to us through these verses in

Romans 1.

1. Every person who lives beyond the age of innocence, who grows up to the age where he or she can think about complex issues like, “Where did I come from?” -- every person knows enough to know that God is real, that He made the universe and that we are in some way accountable to Him, responsible to Him for what we do.
2. Humans don’t like this revelation, this understanding. Instead, it is our natural bent to rebel against God and then to make excuses for our rebellion that put the blame on God, make Him out to be something that is unworthy of our worship and obedience.
3. This messes with our minds, because we are denying something we know is true and therefore we impair our ability to discern what is and is not true. We still think that we are wise -- Paul makes that clear -- but only because we have blinded ourselves to the truth. The reality is that when we reject God, we become foolish. We worship things that are unworthy of worship and we say things about God that show no wisdom or depth of insight.

What’s the key step in this progression from revelation to foolishness? At some point, people choose to reject their Creator, pushing the truth away from themselves, even though they know He is real. Why?

Yes, they knew God, but they wouldn’t worship Him as God or even give Him thanks.

That was the decisive step. After that we see the invention of foolish ideas about God, we see darkened and confused minds and we see people descending into utter foolishness. The New American Commentary on Romans says this about v. 21:

Disbelief requires an act of rebellion against common sense. It displays humanity’s fatal bias against God. Although the created order cannot force a person to believe, it does leave the recipient responsible for not believing.

Because this rebellion is deliberate, people who reject God are described as “without excuse”, which suggests that, from a legal standpoint, they have no defense. But none of this answers the question we started with - “Why?” Why do people who know God refuse to worship Him and why would they choose to not even say “thank you” for the gift of life, for the beauty of Creation, for the love He has shown?

Reason #1: Worship implies submission to someone who is greater than myself. If I admit that God is real and that He is greater than I am, I am admitting that He is worthy of my obedience, the surrender of my will, and my life-long devotion. What if I don’t want that? What if I want to do what I want to do and make all my own choices? What if I am afraid that God would make me good in areas where I don’t want to be good, at least not by His standards?

Reason #2: Let me turn back to Dr. Coe for reason #2. He said that, although the experience of natural revelation is a universal experience, typically it is repressed because it awakens guilt in us. Of course, this has to be true. If we are able to see the power and goodness and holiness of the Creator, we must also see that we don’t

measure up.

If we instinctively fear a holy and just God, who has the power to create the complexity of even this little corner of the universe where we live, we naturally assume that He has authority over us. It's to be expected that we would have to answer to Him at some point. So, humans tend to suppress their awareness of God so that they don't have to feel guilty, so they don't have to feel responsible to a being who is better and wiser and greater than they are.

At the end of Romans 1, we read Paul's version of this suppression of human guilt:

When they refused to acknowledge God, He abandoned them to their evil minds and let them do things that should never be done. Their lives became full of every kind of wickedness, sin, greed, hate, envy, murder, fighting, deception, malicious behavior and gossip. They are backstabbers, haters of God, insolent, proud and boastful. They are forever inventing new ways of sinning and are disobedient to their parents. They refuse to understand, break their promises, and are heartless and unforgiving. They are fully aware of God's death penalty for those who do these things, yet they go right ahead and do them anyway. And, worse yet, they encourage others to do them, too.

People who are "fully aware" of God's standard, of what He requires of those who rebel against Him, are guilty before God. Those who know that their behaviour will be judged by God and yet go ahead and continue to act the same way and encourage others to do the same are not only rebellious, but they are suppressing their guilt by inviting others to join them in their journey. The more folks they can get on board, the less they will have to face the fact that they are living in rebellion against God and His ways. But what strikes me again in this passage is that they are fully aware -- Paul says they know what they are doing.

Dr. Coe argued last weekend that it is painful for the unbeliever to think about God. To minimize that pain, or to get rid of it altogether, a person is likely to argue science, to rationalize an inconsistent lifestyle, or to oppose God -- in much the same way that the new atheists like Dawkins and Harris and Dennett do.

How do you talk to someone who has repressed their knowledge of God and repressed the guilt that such knowledge presents to their minds? That's the important question and one that I was happy that Dr. Coe addressed directly. Here are the quick points I was able to scribble into a notebook as he was talking:

a. Conversion to Christian faith is never a discovery of a brand new field of knowledge.

The person who comes to faith always has some sense, some awareness, of their need, of who God is, and of what He expects of them.

b. He described an evangelistic encounter with a person who has 'causes' rather than 'reasons' for their unbelief as "therapy for spiritual repression". He said that the answer to repression, this stuffing down of any knowledge of God or His will, is to find therapeutic or healing triggers to help people to be able to look into their own heart.

- c. We can do that by asking questions that peel the heart. Dr. Coe actually called Apologetics “heart surgery” in this context. In the heart are things like anger at one’s father, anger at the church, anger at some Christian who judged you unfairly. And so we should ask questions like, “What do you believe about?” “How do you feel about the debates between Christians and atheists?”
- d. But here’s the really important thing -- even if you are very skilled at this kind of conversation, at doing heart surgery with someone who doesn’t want to believe, it takes time. You can help someone see into their heart and realize that their anger against God is really not caused by God but by some human agent . . . but then they will need some time to process that knowledge, and maybe rebuild defenses.
- e. There are two things that have proven to be effective in reaching into the lives of unbelievers, two things that go beyond having all the answers, two things that say more about relationship than about intellect.
 1. the person experiences a major trial, an event in their life that is best described as suffering.
 2. the person experiences the love and acceptance of a Christian person over an extended period of time.

What if someone experiences a major trial and doesn’t have any contact with a Christian person who can bring comfort and insight into their trial? Do you see how vital that second condition is? If you have friends in the world who don’t want to give any thought to Jesus, you are most likely dealing with people who have “causes” of unbelief rather than reasons for unbelief. If you abandon them because of their hostility to the gospel, then you won’t be there when the crisis comes into their life and you won’t be there to bring the love of God to bear on their difficult circumstances.

You may not have a ton of time for keeping alive every and all relationships you’ve ever had with unbelievers -- and it’s not realistic to expect that. But if you’ve ever had a best friend who rejected your faith, maybe even rejected you to some degree, try at least to keep the relationship open, and, if possible, the friendship alive. If you have such a friendship, then ask the surgery questions. It’s okay to ask people what they believe, then to ask why they believe something to be true, and even to advance your doubts as to whether their position is true. If you do it in love, within friendship, you should be able to ask a lot. Be patient and don’t push too quickly beyond the level of that friendship -- trust the Spirit to lead you through the process of leading a person out of the pain that causes them to reject the amazing love that God has for them, that He wants them to experience.

The topic for last week and this has been, “The World Will Hate You”. My goal for this message has been to think a bit more deeply about why some people have rejected good news and feel anger or hatred towards Christians. What they feel, what passions drive them, shouldn’t stop us from loving them, because that’s what God does. As Jesus once said, God causes His rain to fall on the just and on the unjust. He extends grace even to those who hate Him, and we’re called to follow that path of love. And, as Abraham Lincoln put it, “Am I not destroying my enemies when I make friends of them?” No one should be a slave of hatred towards the God who made

them, who loves them and who wants them to live close to His glory forever. We can help free at least of few of those in our community who have been poisoned against God and who need to be set free.