

The Crime of the Ages (Romans 1:21a)

Introduction: Please open your Bible to Romans 1:18-21.

There is a long line of philosophers whose ideas have shaped the world for good or for ill one of whom was **Friedrich Nietzsche**. Friedrich Nietzsche was a German philosopher who was born in 1844 into a Christian family in which his father and both of his grandfathers were pastors. At an early age Nietzsche was a student of theology but around the age of 20 he abandoned the Christian faith and became an atheist.

He built his life upon a philosophy known as **Nihilism** (Latin for nothingness). Nietzsche has been called a **consistent atheist** because he understood that if there is no God then there is no ultimate meaning to life. In a world without God there is no purpose. There is no absolute truth. There is no right and wrong. There is no comfort. There is no hope. There is just nothingness. In a world without God ultimately nothing matters.

One cannot claim to be an atheist and at the same time also believe in ultimate meaning, in absolute truth, or in right and wrong because these all come from a Christian worldview. To claim atheism and to try to also claim such things as ultimate meaning, absolute truth, and ethics is what is called **living on borrowed capital** which we will say more about later this morning. Nietzsche recognized this and therefore he understood that **nihilism is the logical outcome of atheism**.

What Nietzsche is most famous for was his claim that **God is dead**. He made this claim in one of his most famous works known as the **Parable of the Madman**. In that parable, the madman is someone who believes in God. The madman runs into a marketplace announcing that he is seeking God. But the people standing by mocked him and laughed at him because they did not believe in God. As the madman stood in the midst of the crowd he said to them, “Where has God gone?...I mean to tell you! We have killed him, you and I! We are all his murderers!...Do we not hear the noise of the gravediggers who are burying God? God is dead! God remains dead! And we have killed him!”

In the phrase “God is dead” Nietzsche did not mean that God had literally died. But rather that, due to the advances of living in a modern world, the Christian concept of God upon which western civilization was built, was no longer believable.

Given the fact that the main character in that parable was a madman, it is **no small irony** that Nietzsche himself suffered a mental breakdown and spent the last 11 years of his life in an insane asylum where he died at the young age of 56. In his later years Nietzsche referred to **horses** as his brothers. His **sister** exploited his fame by selling tickets for people to see him in the asylum. And he **signed personal letters** as “the crucified one” because in his madness he saw himself as the reincarnation of Christ. What an irony. What a sad, tragic, and wasted life.

The world has had its share of people like Friedrich Nietzsche who reject God in very aggressive and blasphemous ways claiming that there is no God. But the vast majority of people, both in the past and in the present, do believe in the existence of God or in some higher power. They do not

reject the existence of God, but they do **reject God in a more subtle way**. In fact, their rejection of God is **so subtle** that many people do not even recognize it. They do not reject God by arguing for His nonexistence or by speaking against Him like Nietzsche did. Instead they reject God **by ignoring Him**.

This is what I call **the crime of the ages**. Ignoring God is the crime of the ages because it is **the crime of all crimes** that sinners commit against God. And ignoring God is what unbelievers do in every generation. It is indeed the crime of the ages. That brings us to **Romans 1**.

At this point in our study of **Romans** we are now looking at the **second major section** of the book...

I. The Gospel Introduced (1:1-17).

II. The Gospel Explained (1:18-4:25).

The way Paul begins to explain the gospel is **by explaining our need** for the gospel. We are calling this...

A. The Need For Righteousness (1:18-3:20).

And the way Paul establishes our need for righteousness is **by proving our condemnation** before God. He begins with...

1. The condemnation of Gentiles (1:18-32).

Under this point we have looked at...

a. The reality of God's wrath (v. 18a).

Last time we began to look at...

b. The reasons for God's wrath (vv. 18b-23).

The wrath of God is not **arbitrary**. It is not **capricious**. It is **never without good reason**. The wrath of God is **directed** against ungodly and unrighteous people. In **vv. 18b-23** Paul masterfully gives **two reasons** for the wrath of God. There are two things in particular that sinful man does to provoke God's righteous anger the first of which is by...

1) Refusing the knowledge of God (vv. 18b-20).

God created the world in such a way that it is the theater of His glory. Creation is God's revelation of Himself. In particular, creation reveals the existence of God and something of what God is like, namely His power, His wisdom, and His eternity.

God is a **spirit**. He is therefore **invisible**. But the invisible God has **made Himself visible** in His creation. Creation, therefore, is a **witness for God**. It is a **clear witness**. It is a **profound witness**. And it is a **constant witness**. Everywhere in the world God is **always speaking and revealing Himself** in creation. Thus the knowledge of God is inescapable and undeniable. And yet, sinners **suppress** the knowledge of God because they/we are **biased against God**. By nature we reject God. By nature we refuse the knowledge of God.

The famous British atheist, **Bertrand Russell**, was once asked what he would say if he was wrong about God and were to stand before Him. He said that he would look directly in God's eye and say, "Not enough evidence."

But **Romans 1** teaches that no one rejects God because of a lack of evidence. God has so clearly revealed Himself in His creation that men are without excuse.

Rejecting God, then, is not an intellectual problem. Believing in God is not now unbelievable because we live in a modern world. Rejecting God, is now as always, a moral problem. The reason people reject God is because they don't want God to be God. If you acknowledge God, then you must acknowledge that you were **made by God** and are **accountable to Him**. If God is your **Creator** He is also your **Judge**. And if God is your Judge, then you are answerable to Him for how you live your life. By nature, we as sinners, hate God. We don't want God to rule over us. We want our autonomy. And so we resist the knowledge of God. This is why God is angry with sinners. And this is why we deserve the wrath of Almighty God.

That brings us to the **second reason** for the wrath of God against sinners, that is...

2) Replacing the worship of God (vv. 21-23).

There is so much for us to see in this text that we will only be able to look at part of **v. 21** this morning...

v. 21 "For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks..."

Please notice how Paul **continues here** to make **logical arguments**. He begins with the word "for" which is a word of explanation. Paul is **continuing to make his case** that sinners deserve the wrath of God. And he does this **by showing how sinners suppress the knowledge of God**. When you read **vv. 21-23** think of them in this way: This is **how** sinners suppress the knowledge of God.

He says in **v. 21**, "For even though they knew God."

What an incredible statement! Let that sink in. Remember what kind of people Paul is talking about. He is talking about ungodly, unrighteous, unbelievers. And yet he says they know God.

But how do they know God? Certainly, Paul is not saying that unbelievers have a saving knowledge of God because they don't. He is saying that **all people know about God**. All people know that God exists. All people know that God is including people like Friedrich Nietzsche and Bertrand Russell.

In our culture there is a lot of interest over whether certain things exist:

- bigfoot (there are even big foot hunters).
- ghosts.
- aliens (area 51).

Let me tell you what definitely doesn't exist: Atheists. There is **no such thing as an atheist**.

There is **no such thing even as an agnostic**. If you were to meet a professing atheist or an agnostic, you could say to him, you are not an honest man. Why? Because all people know God. There is no such thing as an honest atheist or an honest agnostic.

There is someone I have known for a long time who claims to not believe in God. But whenever I have tried to talk to this person about God, he gets angry. Why would someone get angry about something that doesn't exist? They wouldn't. Over the course of my life I have gotten angry about many things but I have never gotten angry about **leprechauns or unicorns**. Why? Because they don't exist. But professing atheists tend to get angry if you talk to them about God because deep down they know that God is. They know God. But the problem is, they hate God and don't want Him to exist.

And so sinners know God in the sense that they know that God is. But how do they naturally respond to God?

“they did not honor Him as God or give thanks.”

Dear people, this is the crime of the ages. This is the crime of all crimes. This is the crime of every generation.

When you think about an unbeliever, what is it that most characterizes their life? They do not honor God nor do they give Him thanks. One of the best ways I know how to describe the essence of sin is the picture of a sinner raising a clinched fist toward God in defiance. There is a sense in which all sinners do this. But not all sinners manifest their rejection of God as loudly and aggressively as Friedrich Nietzsche or Bertrand Russell. While some people raise their clinched fist at God in outward and obvious way, what most people do is to simply **ignore God**.

When you think about what sins most characterize the unbeliever it is right here in **Romans 1:21**: “they did honor Him as God or give thanks.”

Let’s think about these one at a time...

“they did not honor Him as God”

The verb “honor” comes from the Greek verb **δοξάζω**. The noun form of this word is **δόξα**. We get our English term “doxology” from this word. It means “glory.” The verb form means to glorify, to glorify God. It’s **a term of worship**. This is what sinners refuse to do. They refuse to worship God. This is the crime of all crimes. The refusal to worship God is the crime of the ages.

Remember the first question from the Westminster Shorter Catechism?

Question 1: What is the chief end of man?

Answer: Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy Him forever.

Think of that question and answer in light of **Romans 1:21**. Man’s chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever. But according to **Romans 1:21**, this is what sinners refuse to do.

The **proof text** that is cited for the catechism answer is **Romans 11:36**. God is infinitely glorious! As Christians, we love the glory of God! Whether we eat or drink, we do all things to the glory of God! We were created for the glory of God. And we were saved for the glory of God. We find our greatest joy and pleasure in the glory of God (**Rom. 15:5-6; 16:27**).

But unbelievers **have no taste for the glory of God**. The glory of God **means nothing** to them. They **yawn** at the glory of God. They **ignore** the glory of God. They place more value in trivial and temporal things like tv or sports or cars or houses or money or their appearance than they do the glory of God. This is no small thing. It is a huge problem!

If the chief end of man is to glorify God, what then is the chief sin? If the chief end of man is to glorify God, then the chief sin is to not glorify God.

The greatest crime is to be made by God, to know that God exists, and yet refuse to glorify Him as God. The greatest crime is to ignore God and to live as if God doesn’t matter.

ILLUSTRATION: Shelley and I took our boys to a **Texas Rangers baseball game** two Fridays ago in Dallas. Around the 3rd or 4th inning we took a walk around the stadium and we eventually ended up at the highest point where you can stand in the stadium. It's a platform that goes way above the stands in left field. As we were standing up there we weren't really paying attention to the game when all of sudden we heard the sound of a canon and fireworks and the crowd erupted in cheering because one of the Rangers hit a home run. It about scared us to death.

Now, imagine if when that player hit the home run, the crowd ignored him. Imagine him hitting a home run and everyone just sitting there eating their food, talking to their friends, or looking at their phones, but no one cheered the player. That would never happen because people don't do that at baseball games.

When we witness something that is great and praiseworthy we celebrate it. We do that at a **ballgame**. We do that at a **concert**. We do that at a **Broadway play**. We applaud and we celebrate man. But by nature, we ignore God. And that is because unbelievers do not love God. They do not value God. They have no taste for the glory of God. They live life as if God doesn't matter. This is the chief sin of man, to refuse to glorify God.

The second thing Paul says unbelievers refuse to do in **v. 21** is to "give thanks" to God. In our family we teach our kids that whenever someone gives you something or does something for you, you always say "Thank you." But this is what sinners refuse to do with God. What sins most characterize unbelievers? They refuse to glorify God and they refuse to thank God.

Generally speaking, unbelievers tend to be unthankful people especially in our culture of entitlement. But it's not just thankfulness that is missing in unbelievers' lives, it is giving thanks to God.

Unbelievers aren't thankful for who God is. They aren't thankful that God is their maker and their provider. They aren't thankful for their life as the gift of God. They aren't thankful for God's common grace to them. They aren't thankful for God's patience toward them. They aren't thankful for God's mercy to them.

Voddie Baucham, "Do you know it was His mercy that woke you up this morning? Because His judgment should've killed you last night."

We **live** in God's world. We **breathe** God's air. We **drink** God's water. We **eat** God's food. Everything we have has been given to us by God. And yet unbelievers do not thank God. Instead, they ignore Him. They live as if God did not matter, as if God were not their Creator and their provider.

ILLUSTRATION: Imagine meeting a **destitute person** and inviting him to live in your home. You provide him with a room. You give him nice, clean clothes. You give him food and drink. In fact you give him three meals a day. You provide everything he needs for free. And you don't do this just for a week or so, but for the rest of his life.

And now imagine that person never says, "Thank you." He never even acknowledges you. He

ignores you. He acts like you are not even there. That would be terribly offensive. We wouldn't put up with that. And yet that is what sinners do to God, day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year, decade after decade. They live as if God doesn't exist or as if He doesn't matter. The vast majority of people do not claim to be atheists. But all people by nature live as **practical atheists**, as if God were not real.

They **ignore God as a way of life** even though no one can live without God. As much as sinners resist God and ignore God, no one can live without God. No one can live without God because God is the one who gives us our life and sustains our life. But there is more to it than that.

I want to expand upon an **apologetic principle** that I mentioned earlier called **living on borrowed capital**. Last time we talked about the apologetic principle called **the myth of neutrality**. No sinner is neutral in his/her relationship with God. They are biased against God. For this reason, what is necessary in the conversion of the sinner is not just evidences and arguments in favor of the Christian faith, but a new heart by the grace of God.

But now I want to consider the idea of sinners **living on borrowed capital**. Most people don't have the financial ability to purchase a home with cash. And so most people have to borrow money from the bank or from a lender to buy a house. In our culture we call this being a homeowner but technically you don't actually own the home until you pay off the loan. Until then you are living on borrowed capital. This concept was applied to the field of apologetics by Cornelius Van Til in the 1960s.

Cornelius Van Til, "Unbelievers can count, they just can't account for their counting."

What in the world is he saying? He is saying this: **In a world without God, counting is not possible**. In a world without God there are **no universals** including **the laws of mathematics**. But because we do in fact live in God's world there are universals including the laws of mathematics.

For example: **2+2=4**. $2+2=4$ yesterday, today, and tomorrow. Why? Because God made it that way. It's a universal mathematical law. All people, believers and unbelievers alike, recognize that $2+2=4$. **But counting only make sense in the Christian worldview where there are universals.**

When an unbeliever rejects God and tries to live without God and yet still believes that counting is possible, he is living on borrowed capital. He is borrowing from the Christian worldview. When an unbeliever tries to reject God and yet says that $2+2=4$ he is living an inconsistent life.

Listen, it is impossible to reject God and live consistently as if God doesn't exist. If there is no God, then everything is meaningless, random, and ruled by chance. But not even the most ardent atheist really believes that or lives that way. There are universal laws of mathematics, universal laws of logic, universal laws of science, universal laws of justice, universal laws of ethics. Why? Because this is how God made the world. And no one, no matter how hard they try, can escape God in this way. No one can live without God.

ILLUSTRATION: One preacher illustrated this by using the alphabet (Brian Borgman). Imagine there is a person who says he doesn't believe in the alphabet. He is an **alphabet atheist**. But he uses words to tell you that he doesn't believe in the alphabet. Is that a problem? Yes. Because words are made up of letters from the alphabet. It's not possible to say that you don't believe in the alphabet by using words that are made from the alphabet. That is living on borrowed capital. You can't say you don't believe in the alphabet without using the alphabet. Only a fool would use words to claim he doesn't believe in the alphabet.

But this is what people do with God. They live in God's world. They live according to the universals of mathematics, logic, science, justice, and ethics. But they reject God. But no matter how hard they try, unbelievers cannot shake the knowledge of God. They can count but they can't account for their counting. The knowledge of God is tenacious. God's fingerprints are everywhere.

Let me give you an example: The very moment someone appeals to something as moral they are relying on God's alphabet. **Christopher Hitchens** was a famous atheist who died several years ago of cancer. He wrote a book called, *God Is Not Great*. In that book he calls the New Testament "evil." Do you see the inconsistency? He cannot make that statement without borrowing from the Christian worldview. There are no categories of good and evil apart from God.

In a world without God, there is no transcendent value to human life. In a world without God, nothing matters. We are just accidents of unguided mutations. In a universe that is governed by chance and randomness in which there is no meaning, how can anything in that world be called evil?

It can't because even the very concept of evil assumes God. As human beings we can reason, we can communicate with one another, we can build skyscrapers, and we can determine if something is true or false. This is only possible in a world made by God. Only the Christian faith can explain why this is. And so someone like a Christopher Hitchens must steal from the Christian worldview even to deny the Christian faith. Man can't even reject God without God.

We see this even in the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

Donald Grey Barnhouse, "God will give a man brains to smelt iron and make a hammer head and nails. God will grow a tree and give man strength to cut it down and brains to fashion a hammer handle from its wood. And when man has the hammer and the nails, God will put out His hand and let man drive nails through it and place Him on a cross in the supreme demonstration that men are without excuse."

Conclusion: This Friday we dropped off Ian at LA Tech. It was much harder than I expected. I fought back tears all the way home. It was sad to leave him and it was sad to leave that chapter of our lives. But as drove home the sun was setting directly in front of us and it was spectacular. In the midst of sadness my heart was filled with praise and thankfulness to God. I praised and thanked God for my family. I praised and thanked God for my church. I even praised and

thanked God for the things we have talked about this morning, the universals of mathematics, logic, etc. But I praised and thanked God most of all for His grace to us in Christ.