

September 10, 2017

Sunday Morning Service

Series: Psalms

Community Baptist Church

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Greer, SC 29650

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CONCERNING PRACTICAL ATHEISM

Psalm 14

Viewed through the eyes of modern western-culture Christians, this seems like a rather odd song. David wrote it for the choir, which he also appointed, to sing as the people corporately worshiped God. Frankly, a song about how foolish sinners are, how corrupt they are, and how God is going to shame them and judge them is probably not going to make the top 10 on the next Billboard Praise and Worship Chart. We might even chuckle at the thought of Pastor Cameron trying to lead us in a song about humanity being unwilling and unable to do good and seek after God. That is definitely not being seeker sensitive!

C.H. Spurgeon decided that since the Psalmist did not attach a particular title to this song, he would call it, “Concerning Practical Atheism.” The title fits the psalm well. While most people in our circle of influence would be horrified to take the title of atheist, in reality more people act like atheists than can be imagined. In fact, Paul picked up on this theme and quoted some of the words from this song to teach the sobering truth that being practical atheists is the natural inclination of all people.

By *practical atheists* we mean that while a person would shun the trait of being a God-denier, in the way they live they actually deny God’s existence or, at the very least, God’s lordship over their lives all the time. No doubt there are many people who deny the God of the Bible. But in their minds they allow for the existence of another god, a god of their own making, or even the existence of many gods. If they deny the one true God revealed in His Word the Bible, they are atheists. Even if such people claim to believe in the

God of the Bible but order their lives in conflict with His character, they are, like atheists, denying God.

Okay, but are atheists all that bad? Given enough time, yes. We learn from practical experience that at some point the person who denies God in theory or in practice will run into a conflict with the child of God who loves his or her Heavenly Father deeply. Jesus warned, “*If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you*” (John 15:18-19). It is not unusual for that scenario to work out in the child of God’s life. How do we respond?

David, as he typically did, ended this song with very encouraging words. God loves His children. God will care for His children. God will eventually bring the evil of evildoers crashing down on their heads. That means that we are not responsible for vengeance. We can trust God to care for us in keeping with His perfect will. And we can trust God to deal with the people who reject Him also in keeping with His perfect will.

The LORD Looks, And What Does He See?

David understood that the LORD is watching. In that God breathed out what David should write, we learn that He pictures Himself looking down from heaven. *The LORD looks down from heaven on the children of man* (v.2a). In a way, this is a simple picture but it conveys a truth that is very difficult for us to comprehend. For example, where is heaven? What is heaven? If God is a spirit, does He have eyes with which to look and see? How can God see all the people on earth at the same time? If that is true, how can God see people in the Western Hemisphere when the Eastern Hemisphere is facing toward Him? Obviously, the problem is our inability to comprehend God. Though He created us in His image, He is not finite like we are.

The answer to all these questions is the same. We trust what God says about Himself. Heaven is His throne room from which He rules and reigns in sovereignty. God is omnipresent, which means that He is everywhere at once. God is omniscient, which means that

He knows everything at once. God is omnipotent, which means that He is able to do everything He chooses to do all the time. God is perfect in justice. He cannot lie. He cannot be unfair. He cannot be mistaken. Therefore, when God makes conclusions based on the evidence He sees, His conclusion is just, righteous, and undebatable. And God always arrives at the conclusion He has known for eternity. In other words, “Nothing ever occurs to God.”

Therefore, we dare not access God according to our experience or the standard of ourselves. We do not always come to the right conclusions. We have limited knowledge. We cannot see hearts, the invisible part of a person. We are definitely not eternally omniscient. Therefore, we trust God’s conclusion and appeal to Him for help.

God is in heaven looking at all people. He is looking for something in particular. He is looking *to see if there are any who understand, who seek after God* (v.2b). People do not seek God to glorify Him, but to benefit themselves. People do not seek God alone, but seek things attached to God like religion, good works, or fame. People do not seek God in His Word alone as heretics do. People do not seek God in all His Word as hypocrites pick and choose. People do not seek God first but spend life seeking things and pleasures. People do not seek God consistently. People do not seek the person of God but only His approval.

God looks from heaven to see if anyone will seek Him. We don’t. When God looks at the children of men, He does not find anyone seeking after Him. Instead, the Lord sees fools who refuse to acknowledge Him. The fool has decided that God does not exist. *The fool says in his heart, “There is no God”* (v.1a). “Fool” is a rather choice word that we would not normally use. What, or who, is the fool? The Hebrew word is *nabal*. We are familiar with the word through the story of David and Abigail who rightly assessed her husband as a fool. She said to David, *“Let not my lord regard this worthless fellow, Nabal, for as his name is, so is he. Nabal is his name, and folly is with him”* (1Samuel 25:25a).

In the Proverbs, this person is pictured as a boor who is insensible to God and insensible to good morals. In similar fashion, the men of the city of Gibeah were fools for desiring homosexual relations with the sojourner (Judges 19:23-24). Amnon was a fool for contemplating premeditated rape (2 Samuel 13:12). The fool is closed

minded toward God and rejects God’s wisdom found in the Bible (Psalm 74:18; Proverbs 17:7).

What is the fool’s conclusion about the various evidences of life? He concludes, *“There is no God.”* It is an expression of defiant rebellion. The fool concludes this because his pride is in himself (Psalm 10:4). And because the fool is so full of himself, that pride is often revealed as impatience with authority (Job 21:7-15). And so even in the face of convincing evidence, the fool rebels against God. Paul argued, *For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them (Romans 1:19)*. But people who are full of themselves really don’t care about God’s self-revelation. *Claiming to be wise, they became fools (Romans 1:22). And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done (Romans 1:28)*. Therefore, the fool cannot help but be a fool.

It is not just that some religious folks think it is a bad idea to reject God. Rather, in this psalm God assessed the people who reject Him and He did not draw a pretty picture. First, God concluded that *they are corrupt* (v.1b). The word generally means to destroy. Applied here it means that the fool destroys God’s creation. Because he rejects the Creator, he has no desire to be what the Creator made him to be. With the fool, good becomes evil and evil good.

Second, God said that *they do abominable deeds* (v.1c). The fool’s lifestyle flows from his errant rejection of God’s person, character, and law. He does that which God abhors. Their actions are abominable as judged by ceremony (religion) and ethics.

Third, this rejection of God by foolish people is actually universal. God concluded that *there is none who does good* (v.1d). No one does what God considers to be beneficial, pleasant, useful, or excellent. People without God cannot accomplish such things. The ability escapes them.

And why are they without God? Because *they have all turned aside* (v.3a). The fool has removed himself from the setting in which God created him. He no longer reflects the image of God well. And we are not only born with a propensity not to do good but given the first opportunity we move further away from God.

God looks at this mess called humanity and says, *“Together they have become corrupt* (v.3b). This is a different Hebrew word

than the one translated “corrupt” in verse one. This word speaks of becoming filthy in spiritual matters. It is corrupted worship typically expressed in idolatry. God’s assessment is that idolatry is at the heart of human nature.

As a result, *there is none who does good, not even one* (v.3c). In case we missed it, “not even one” does what is good. It is a universal problem. People who reject God are not all equally evil or bad. There are varying levels of evil like there are varying levels of good. But ultimately, every single person is born with a propensity to reject God and His Word. And suddenly we realize that sin is foolishness, we all sin by nature, so we are all born with a propensity to be fools on some level.

Contrasted to that natural, sinful, human condition are people who know God and love God. The people who love God read God’s assessment and are incredulous. We ask with David, *Have they no knowledge, all the evildoers who eat up my people as they eat bread and do not call upon the LORD* (v.4)? We know that evildoers cause trouble for God’s people. On some level there will be disagreement with the person who has rejected God. At some point, they will hinder our path of fellowship with God. It might be as simple as deciding not to hang out with us. Or it might be as serious as imprisonment or death.

And all the while the evildoers avoid us, we know that if they trusted God they wouldn’t be so difficult to live with. But they have no knowledge of God. In spite of the fact that God has revealed His person, character, and law in so many ways. Which causes us to also know that they won’t turn to God. That baffles us. We are incredulous that the sinners choose not to call upon God. They choose not to pray to the only true God. They choose to rely upon themselves and fellow humans. At the end of their road called life, there is no reward but only eternal, horrifying judgment.

The LORD has an eye for His people.

There is great contrast in the fact that what is blessing for God’s people is terror for the fool. God’s favor to the righteous causes fear for the evildoer. That is what David meant when he wrote, *There they are in great terror, for God is with the generation of the righteous*

(v.5). The foolish person who is rejecting God lives in terror. He should. And yet, Almost everyone who is rejecting God will disagree with that assessment. Look around and realize that it’s the people who have no time for God who are having the best of times – who appear to be the happy people, the fun-loving people, the carefree people. It’s the sinners who reject God – the foolish people.

But we must acknowledge that we do not have the ability to get into those people’s minds and assess their thoughts when they are alone. What do such people think in the face of massive hurricanes, floods, wild fires, earthquakes, and wild-eyed nuts in North Korea? Well, yes, but even Christians are anxious about those things. Why would they be when they have the blessings of God? In the final analysis, God concluded that the people who reject Him really do live in terror. They tremble with dread and fear.

David picked up this same thought in Psalm 53 which sounds almost the same as this Psalm 14. In that Psalm David said, *There they are, in great terror, where there is no terror!* (Psalm 53:5a). Why are the people who reject God fearful? Because they can plainly see that God makes a difference between them and His children. Look at the last phrase in verse five of our text: *God is with the generation of the righteous* (v.5). Now go back and compare the fifth verse of Psalm 53: *For God scatters the bones of him who encamps against you; you put them to shame, for God has rejected them* (Psalm 53:5b). Many people who reject God in life come to the precipice of eternity and tremble in fear about the “Great unknown.”

While the evildoer is traveling a road that comes to a terrifying end, God is busy caring for the evildoer’s victims along the way. *You would shame the plans of the poor, but the LORD is his refuge* (v.6). It is often quite obvious that God intercedes for those victims who His enemies would put to shame. Consider how God has delivered His people so often that the gospel is still a powerful force in the world today. Had it not been for God making Himself the refuge of His people, the good news of salvation through Christ would be a relic of history.

Yes, but what about our brothers and sisters who have been martyred by Islamic radicals and throughout history have been the victims of God-deniers? The game is not over yet. Listen to the prayers to God of souls who are martyred during the Tribulation:

When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne. They cried out with a loud voice, “O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” (Revelation 6:9-10).

But hear also what John saw will be the conclusion of the matter: *And I heard the angel in charge of the waters say, “Just are you, O Holy One, who is and who was, for you brought these judgments. For they have shed the blood of saints and prophets, and you have given them blood to drink. It is what they deserve!” And I heard the altar saying, “Yes, Lord God the Almighty, true and just are your judgments!” (Revelation 16:5-7).* God is in charge through history and into eternity. He will care for His children. He will vindicate the victims of the evildoers who reject Him.

Sometimes God even uses His people to bring shame on the ones who would shame God's people. David learned according to Psalm 53 that sometimes God uses His people to shame the evildoer. He wrote, *You put them to shame, for God has rejected them (Psalm 53:5b)*. They reject God and God rejects them. In the end of the age, when God tells His people to enter His kingdom, they will put the rejecters to shame.

There is only one thing left for God's people to do. Trust God to deliver His promised blessing. Look for example at God's promise to Israel as David rehearsed it. *Oh, that salvation for Israel would come out of Zion! When the LORD restores the fortunes of his people, let Jacob rejoice, let Israel be glad (v.7)*. God promised the Messiah who will come out of Zion to save His people. God promised to restore the fortunes of His people, to reestablish David's kingdom. The people of Israel still look for that day. In that day they will rejoice because they will finally understand that Jesus Christ is their Savior and restorer.

Now by way of comparison, consider God's promise to His children. Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome and taught them, *For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has*

been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience (Romans 8:19-25).

Let's look at these verses for a moment and learn about God's promise. We know from experience that all of creation eagerly longs for the completion of the redeeming of God's children (v.19). It is groaning toward that end. Along with creation, we who love God are very uncomfortable with sin that plagues all of creation (v.20). We long for all rejection of God in every fashion to be done away with (v.21). We who have the guarantee of the Holy Spirit living within ache for full redemption (v.23). God's promises give us hope (v.24).

Will God keep His promise? Yes, He will. The Lord will restore the fortunes of His people the Church as certainly as He will restore the fortunes of the nation of Israel. Our fortune forfeited by sin was pure and perfect fellowship with God. God has promised to bring us again into the perfect fellowship with Him for eternity. It is a promise built on the finished work of our Savior Jesus Christ who paid the price to bring us into reconciliation with the offended Creator. His promise gives us confidence even in the difficult time.

Often we are beset with confusion and discouragement. That there are people who blatantly reject God, His character, and His law is obvious. There are others who create false gods and pretend that it is the God of the Bible. We have no difficulty recognizing them as rejecters of the true God. We are confused sometimes by people who name the true God as their God but then live in conflict with His character. In the face of confusion and wondering where it will all end, we must remember God's plan to redeem His children. That hope gives us fresh strength to continue the work of glorifying Him.