

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, November 26, 1995, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

ROMANS 1:20

“...so they have no excuse at all!” (Today’s English Version)

WHAT ABOUT THOSE WHO HAVE NEVER HEARD THE GOSPEL?

A number of years ago I received a letter that went like this:

Dear Dr. Smith,

Your sermon of April 10 has caused me deep concern. If, as you seemed to indicate, Jesus Christ is the only true way to God, what happens to the poor innocent native in Africa who has never had, and perhaps never will have, the opportunity to hear about Jesus? I would be interested in your response to my question.

You talk about “throwing down the gauntlet”!

Now, of course, this is the question that comes up perhaps more than any other when we seriously address ourselves to a consideration of Christian truth. What about that person, an African native, an Australian aborigine, someone in a mud hut on the banks of the Amazon, or even someone here in the U.S.A., who has never really had any exposure whatsoever to the message of the New Testament? What is their status before God?

First of all, I would like to answer the question very simply: “What happens to the poor innocent native in Africa who has never heard about Jesus?” Let me tell you: He has nothing whatever to worry about. When he dies, he goes straight to heaven.

Does that answer startle you? Are you saying, “Well, that doesn’t sound like the rest of your theology. You must be a ‘closet liberal’ after all! How on earth can you say that we can only be saved through Christ and at the same time tell us that you think the poor innocent native, who has never heard of Him, can get to heaven without Him?”

My answer to that is really quite simple. The key word in the question is what —? It is the word “INNOCENT.” If the native in Africa or India or Australia or South America or any other place is “innocent” with respect to the holy Law of God, he has nothing to fear. He doesn’t need a Savior because innocence doesn’t require redemption. Innocence has its own reward. Innocence implies a lack of guilt of any kind. Remember that Jesus said, “I did not come to invite virtuous people, but sinners to repentance” (Matt. 9:13).

However, the inevitable question which we must face is this: “Are there any ‘*innocent*’ natives in Africa?” Or: “How many ‘*innocent*’ people are there in the world?” You remember the story of Diogenes in ancient Greece, who lived in a bath tub, and who went about with his little lantern, searching far and wide for a human being who was completely honest. But he never found such a person!

“Are there any “innocent” people on this Earth? My dictionary defines “innocent” as “free from moral wrong; sinless; not guilty.” Everyone seems to agree that the one thing that all human beings have in common is the *lack* of innocence. “No one is perfect,” we say. No one conforms in every detail to the demands God lays upon His creatures. Therefore, it is surely safe to say, at least in the light of the New Testament, that there are no “innocent” people in Africa or anywhere else, for “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23).

So, the question really boils down to this: “What happens to the ‘*guilty*’ person; what happens to *anybody* who hasn’t heard about Jesus?” Will God punish a person for not believing in Jesus if that person never had the opportunity to hear the Gospel at all? Surely the answer to that is obvious in the light of everything we know about God’s justice. God would be perfectly malicious if He would hold people accountable for information that they had no opportunity to receive. God will never punish someone for rejecting Jesus if that person never heard of Jesus.

Do you realize that a new and terrible record will be set today? More people will die today without ever hearing about Jesus than died in that condition on any other day in human history! The record that is being set today breaks the record that was set yesterday, and today’s record will be broken tomorrow, because we’re living through a population explosion which sees the population of the world increasing at a higher percentage rate than that of the Christian Church.

Well, what happens to that person who will die today who has never heard the Gospel? God is certainly not going to punish him for rejecting Christ of Whom he has never heard, and yet he is not *innocent*. Does that mean that because he is ignorant of Christ he gets a free ticket to heaven?

Paul, of course, sheds a great deal of light upon this particular dilemma here in the first chapter of Romans. As I have already reminded you, in verse 18 the Apostle begins a discussion of what theologians refer to as “General Revelation.” Now “General” Revelation is distinguished in theology from the concept of “Special” Revelation, and the distinction is basically two-fold:

- (1) General revelation is general with respect to the content of what is being revealed, and
- (2) It is general with respect to the audience who receives that revelation.

Let me explain that to you. General revelation is that revelation of God by which He reveals or unveils a certain amount of information about Himself. He reveals first of all that He exists — that He is God, that He has eternal power, that there is an eternal distinction between

right and wrong, and that He holds all creatures accountable to Him. He reveals that suffering follows wrongdoing. Break the laws of agriculture, and the harvest fails. Break the laws of architecture, and your building collapses. Break the laws of health, and your body suffers. Paul was saying, “Look at the world. See how it is constructed. From this world you know what God is like. Then look at the sun, the moon, and the stars and ask yourself, “Where did all this come from?”

However, in this general revelation there is no information communicated about the Trinity or about God’s plan of redemption; nothing about the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus. It is knowledge of God in general.

Now, who receives that revelation? Well, again the audience is general. This is revelation that all people receive: the native in Africa and the sophisticated pagan in the U.S.A. In Romans 2:15 the Apostle says that “the conduct [of these people] shows that what the Law [of God’s] commands is written in their hearts. Their consciences also show that this is true since their thoughts sometimes accuse them and sometimes defend them.” In other words, they know the difference between right and wrong.

Tertullian, the great early Church theologian, wrote: “It was not the pen of Moses that initiated the knowledge of the Creator. Mankind, though they have never heard the name of Moses, know the God of Moses none the less.” “Nature,” he says, “is the teacher; the soul is the pupil.”

So, the question really is: What does that native in Africa or anywhere else do with the information he receives through general revelation? For the answer we go back to Romans 1:18: “The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness.” As we have discovered, when Paul speaks here about God’s wrath, he is not speaking about God being angry for no reason at all. God doesn’t just fly off the handle without just cause. But His wrath is directed against what —? Against godlessness and wickedness; things like idolatry, lying, stealing, murder, and so on. These are general sins. But notice, Paul says that there is a specific kind of sin that is both ungodly and wicked, and it is this one particular sin that provokes God’s wrath against all mankind. What is it? It is the godlessness and wickedness of men who hold back or hold down or suppress or stifle the *truth*. The verb in Greek means “to hold, using counter forces.” For example, you are holding on to your German shepherd, and suddenly a rabbit hops in front of you. Immediately your dog lunges forward, and you have to hold on with all your might to hold him down. The same verb is used positively in 1 Thessalonians 5:21 where Paul says, “Hold fast that which is good.” Hang on to it; hold it tight; don’t let it go!

Now, what kind of truth is being held back or stifled or suppressed by those natives in Africa or South America or the U.S.A.? Paul continues: “What may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world, God’s invisible qualities, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that mankind has no excuse whatsoever.” You don’t have to have an I.Q. of 160 to understand this revelation that God has given concerning His moral nature. It isn’t concealed behind the bushes or under the rocks. It is plain and clear and visible for anyone

to see since the foundation of the world “so that mankind has no excuse whatsoever.”

Why do you suppose Paul tacks on those words: “They have no excuse whatsoever”? Simply because these natives might plead ignorance. People might say, “Oh God, I’m sorry I didn’t obey You and give my life to You. I certainly would have if only I would have known that You really existed. I sought for You, God. I prayed. If only You had manifested Yourself to me, I would have believed, so please excuse me for my ignorance!”

But Paul says, “God has made it plain and clear to them,” so “they are without excuse.” But you say, “Dr. Smith, didn’t you say a moment ago that God would not hold people responsible for rejecting Jesus if they never had a chance to hear of Him?” Yes, I said that. “Well,” you say, “doesn’t their ignorance excuse them from believing in Jesus?” Yes, it does. “Well, how can you then say with Paul that these people are ‘without excuse’?”

And right here is where the confusion arises. People have the tendency to think that the only punishable sin for which people will be held accountable at the Judgment Day is the sin of rejecting *Jesus*. But what about the person who rejects God the Father? — those millions who have not heard of Jesus, but who stifle and suppress the truth about God the Father which He has made plain and clear to them? Let us not make, the mistake of assuming that the only thing God punishes people for is rejecting God the Son. What does God do with people who reject God the Father? That is what Paul is talking about here in Romans 1:18-32. It is the Father Who has revealed Himself to *all* people from the foundation of the world, so they are left completely inexcusable.

Ignorance is no excuse. In Roman Catholic moral theology, a distinction is made between what they call “vincible” and “invincible” ignorance. “Vincible” of course means that which can be conquered. “Invincible” is that which can’t be conquered. “Invincible” ignorance is ignorance that no person could possibly overcome. “Vincible” ignorance is ignorance that a person could and should have overcome.

Let me illustrate. Suppose Mrs. Smith and I drive down to Florida, and she is driving through St. Petersburg, and she goes through a red light. Immediately we see another red light flashing on the top of a car, and a policeman pulls us over. As I look steadfastly through my side window I hear him say, “Ma’am, I’m going to have to give you a ticket for going through that red light.” And do you know what my wife says to him? “Officer, no one ever told me that it’s against the law to go through a red light in Florida. Please don’t give me a ticket. If I had known, I wouldn’t have done it!” And the policeman says, “I see by your tags that you’re from Virginia. Do you know it’s against the law in Virginia to go through a red light?” “Oh yes, indeed, but I didn’t know that applied to Florida!” But he replies, “I’m sorry; that will not excuse you, because if you drive your car in Florida it is your responsibility to find out what the traffic laws are. They are available to the public.”

Now, that is what we mean by “vincible” ignorance. My wife could have known and should have known; she was responsible for knowing and therefore she was without excuse. But suppose the City Fathers of St. Petersburg at a Monday night meeting of the City Council decided to have a “get rich quick” scheme to raise much needed revenue for the city. Their deci-

sion was that beginning Tuesday morning at 6 a.m. they would levy a \$50 fine if a car didn't *stop* at a green light and *go* at a *red* light. And they would have a policeman at every corner to rake in the shekels. They don't publicize the new law at all. Now, if you were pulled over for going through a green light on Tuesday morning and said, "I didn't know it was against the law to go through a green light," no court of law would condemn you. You were not only ignorant of the new law, but you were invincibly ignorant. There was no way you could have known. It is true that there are people in this world who are dying right now with invincible ignorance of Jesus Christ, but nobody dies with invincible ignorance of God the Father. And it is what people do with that knowledge that gets them into trouble.

Let us read on in Romans 1:21-24: "They knew all the time that there is a God; yet they refused to acknowledge Him as such, or to thank Him for what He is or does. Thus they... plunged their silly minds still farther into the dark. Behind a facade of 'wisdom' they became just fools, fools who would exchange the glory of the immortal God for an image of a mortal man, or of creatures that run or fly or crawl. They gave up God; and therefore, God gave them over to be the playthings of their own foul desires" (Phillips).

Paul is saying here that the reason why God is angry is because of what people do after they receive this general revelation. After God reveals Himself to them, their natural inclination is not to honor Him as God, or to be grateful to Him, or to obey His moral dictates which He has written on their hearts. Instead they slide downhill into paganism and create gods for themselves. They make all sorts of idols and worship them rather than the living and true God.

We say, "But that native somewhere, bowing down before his idol — he's at least religious. Isn't that all that God requires?" But what Paul is saying here is that the worship of idols comes *after* the knowledge of God has been revealed, *not* as a step along the way to the knowledge of God. He's saying that idolatry is practiced by people who knew the true glory of God, but who suppressed and stifled that knowledge, and exchanged the glory of God for the glory of the creature. And that produces God's wrath because it violates the fundamental prohibition that God gives to all people, the prohibition of idolatry.

Think of how the prophets addressed the children of Israel when they entered the Promised Land. Even with their profound knowledge of Jehovah, the Israelites began to worship the idols of Baal and of the Philistine gods. And the prophets said, "What's the matter with you people; you're intelligent and yet you're acting like fools." Even when Moses had been up on Mount Sinai receiving the Ten Commandments, the people made a golden calf and began to worship it!

Isaiah (44:16-17) with scathing sarcasm tells of a man, a carpenter, who cuts down a tree. With part of it he cooks his meal over a fire and also warms himself. And then, from what is left over of the wood, he carves a god for himself and bows down and worships that which his own hands have created. Isaiah is really saying, "How dumb can you get?!"

But God says, "I won't stand for that, because it is a gross indignity to My being and My glory. I have revealed Myself to you from the foundation of the world, but you have exchanged the glory of the holy, omnipotent Creator of the heavens and the earth for that — for something

you have created with your own hands! Certainly, it is religious, but it is not religious according to the *truth*. What you have done with My revelation and My truth is inexcusable, and I hold you accountable for it.”

And remember, idolatry is not restricted to Africa or the South Sea Islands. It happens here, even in the Christian Church. I’m afraid that the so-called “Christian” faith that some people embrace and practice is nothing more than a sophisticated exercise in idolatry. Let me ask you — is your God a God according to the truth, or have you made your God into what you *think* He should be? I’ve heard people say, “I believe in a God of love, not a God of wrath. My God would never send anyone to hell!” Now, if you are upset when the Bible speaks about the wrath of God and eternal punishment, maybe you don’t worship God. Maybe what you worship is an idol that looks like a benign old Santa Claus. Where did you learn of the love of God in the first place? Certainly not in Vietnam or Bosnia-Herzegovina with their horrible carnage. You learned about the love of God in the New Testament. But don’t ever forget that the same inspired source that reveals to us the love of God also reveals His justice, His holiness, and His wrath against sin. But what do some people do? They come to the Scriptures and they read, “God is love,” and they say, “Oh, that’s good; I’ll believe that.” And then they come upon the phrase, “the wrath of God,” and they say, “I don’t *like* that and I won’t believe it.” So, they reshape and refashion God to be like what they want Him to be. They don’t carve an idol out of wood, but the concept of God that they worship is every bit as corrupting as the worship of a totem pole. And God will not hold us guiltless when we are involved in even the most sophisticated form of idolatry.

So, what happens to that person who rejects God the Father? Perhaps his punishment will not be as severe as that of the person who rejects both the Father and the Son. Have there been people through the ages who never heard the Gospel and yet who have lived according to the light they had, living moral lives and seeking the truth that God the Father has revealed? Will Plato or Aristotle or Socrates be in heaven? I don’t know, but this I *do* know: The person who lives in the U.S.A. and knows not only general revelation but also special revelation is in a situation that we call “double jeopardy.” If he rejects the Father *and* the Son he is doubly guilty. But the person who has never heard the Gospel is not *innocent*, because he has rejected God the Father and is therefore exposed to the just judgment of the holy God.

Perhaps you say, “It’s not fair. God has given us *special* revelation and He hasn’t given it to them.” But remember, no sinner *deserves* to be saved. We have no claim on God’s mercy whatsoever. All that any person deserves is condemnation. Salvation is by grace alone, but because grace is undeserved, we can never claim it for ourselves or for anyone else.

But still you say: “It just isn’t fair. God should love those people enough to make sure that they hear the Gospel.” Well, He does love them enough. But He has laid the responsibility for their *hearing* the Gospel right on *your* doorstep and *mine*. If you’re upset about those who haven’t heard the Gospel, what are you doing about it? Two thousand years ago the risen Christ said to His disciples: “Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation” (Mark 16:15).

David Livingstone said that he went to darkest Africa because he couldn’t bear the awful realization that people by the millions out there were dying and going to a lost eternity because

there was no one to tell them of Jesus. If you believe, as the Word of God teaches, that every person the world over is exposed to the just wrath of God, then we should be absolutely zealous in seeing to it that they have the opportunity to hear the Gospel, either from our lips or from the lips of those whom we send. If we fulfilled our Lord's "Great Commission" then there wouldn't be any question about what happens to that "poor innocent native in Africa" who hasn't heard about Jesus because there would no longer be any such unfortunate human being. All would have heard the story of redeeming love if Christ's people were only obedient!

We used to sing Reginald Heber's famous missionary hymn that begins, "From Greenland's icy mountains." One stanza in that hymn has always presented to me a relentless challenge:

Shall we whose souls are lighted
With wisdom from on high,
Shall we, to men benighted,
The lamp of life deny?
Salvation! Oh salvation!
The joyful sound proclaim,
Till each remotest nation
Has learned Messiah's name!

Go yourself or provide the means for someone else to go in your place — because no one has the right to hear the Gospel *twice* till everyone has heard it *once!*

AMEN.