

*every man or woman who falls from faith
falls by being overwhelmed by his or her own desire
after casting the warning of God to the winds*

- 1926 -

the Judgment of God on the Ungodly
according to Romans 1:18-32

August Pieper

The most appalling thing in all nature is *death*. Its rule is universal, its consequence terrible. There is no escape from death. We do not know how, when, or where death will call at our door; but somehow, sometime, and somewhere we shall surely die. Death robs us of all we have, of life itself. It tears us from the land of the living and places us at the great gate of eternity. Then what? Is death complete annihilation, as some would have it? Will it transport us to a fairer world ... or usher us into that place of utter darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth?

the sting of death is sin

Why must we die? Is there no possibility to fathom death's mysterious abyss, no pathway through its dismal gloom leading back to life and joy and happiness again? Why does not science, so boastful of its many achievements, offer a satisfying answer to these questions of prime importance to every living soul?

What death means, God who has inflicted it on a sinful world alone can tell. And he has told us, "Death is the *wages of sin*" (Ro 6:23). "Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned" (Ro 5:12).

the power of sin is the law

Is sin, then, such an enormity as to deserve such awful punishment? So we are told by God himself: "Sin is *the transgression of the law*" (1 Jn 3:4). There is such a thing as law, God's law. God himself is not law; he is a free spirit. But when God wills, or speaks, or acts, or creates a

definite thing, its very definiteness, made by God, becomes its law. We speak of the *law of nature* which rules the world. That is but saying that the world is what it is. It moves and acts as it does by the will of God. Such it should *be*; so it should *move*.

Then there is what we call *the Moral Law* which governs man's conduct. That is not something arbitrarily and externally imposed on him, but is involved in his distinctive nature as the image of God. By the mere fact that he was made God's image, he was so made that he could not help but acknowledge God as his creator and lord, and honor and love and willingly obey him. Had man been created not a man but some kind of animal, that animal's nature would have determined his law of conduct. It is the interrelation of differently-constituted beings that shapes their respective laws of mutual relationship.

These different laws are really only one law, insuring the harmony of coexistence, the orderly course of the entire world. If it were possible to abolish law, the world would become a chaos. *Law is inherent in creation*. It exists and vanishes with it. There is no getting rid of it as long as God and we exist. Law, being God's, whether *physical* or *moral*, is absolutely *inflexible*. Every infringement carries with it its punishment; it ultimately kills, it crushes its transgressor.

physical law

It may seem an insignificant thing when you are in the mountains to lean your body one inch too far over a sheer drop; but if you do it, the law of gravity will hurl you head first to your death. It is by breaking the laws of nature that we kill so many people with the automobile. God's law will never yield a hair's breadth to its violator; it is inexorable.

moral law

So is his *moral* law. "You must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it, you will surely die" (Gn 2:17). It seemed so small a thing to pluck that fruit. But it was not a matter of eating some fruit, but of

- man's obedience to God's will,
- of his subjection to God's authority,
- of staying within the confines of that measure of knowledge which corresponded to his God-made nature as God's image.

God did not make man *another* God; he made him an *image of God*. That was *knowledge* and *power* and *authority* aplenty for all purposes. By making man an image of himself, God had confined him to a *limited* knowledge. A ruler of the world, but subject to God - - that was the law of his nature. To be or not to be subject to God - - that was the question. Man, woman chose the latter. They wanted to be like God in knowledge and in authority. They stretched forth their hands to gain deity, and the result was death! They had leaned over the cliff too far; they had reached over the realm of humanity into the realm of God. A world of human beings was hurled to eternal destruction. There cannot be two Gods; the pretender, the rebel has to die.

This is what Scripture, by an *anthropo-pathism*, calls the *wrath* of God, or his *anger*. It is God's wrath that wreaks vengeance on the sinner for his ungodliness and unrighteousness. "We are consumed," says Moses, "by your anger, and terrified by your indignation. You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins the light of your presence. Therefore all our days pass away in your wrath; we spend our years as a tale that is told." And he adds, "Who knows the *power* of your anger, and your wrath how fearful it is?" (Ps 90, original).

who knows how fearful your wrath is?

How fearful God's wrath is in a special respect, we will learn from the passage which I selected for the present discussion. It is the latter half of the first chapter of St. Paul's epistle to the Romans, beginning with the 18th verse, and continuing to the end of the chapter:

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven
against all the godlessness and wickedness of men
who suppress the truth by their wickedness,
since 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 men are without excuse.

For although they knew God,
they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him,
but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.
Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools
and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images
made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.
Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desire of their hearts
to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another.

They exchanged the truth of God for a lie,
and worshiped and served created things
rather than the Creator - - who is forever praised. Amen.
Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts.
Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones.
In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women
and were inflamed with lust for one another.
Men committed indecent acts with other men,
and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion.

Furthermore,
since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God,
he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done.
They have become filled with every kind
of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity.

They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice.
They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant, and boastful;
they invent ways of doing evil;
they disobey their parents; they are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless.

Although they know God's righteous decree
that those who do such things deserve death,
they not only continue to do these very things
but also approve of those who practice them.

I. the Wrath of God is Revealed

Romans 1:18-27

It is futile to try to comprehend the nature of the emotion in God which the Scripture calls his wrath or anger. God being infinite in every attribute - - finite minds can form no adequate conception of his emotions. All we can do is, by analogy, infer that it is something similar to human anger. But unlike our own anger, God's wrath is without sin and connected with no unhappiness in God. Nevertheless Scripture attributes even rage and fury to God, in order to warn us of the fearful intensity of his antagonism to sin.

- It is excited by sin exclusively;
- once aroused it knows no bounds;
- its effect on the sinner is death - - not temporal only, but eternal death.

"It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (He 10:31).

St. Paul speaks of the wrath of God as being *revealed from heaven*. God has not hidden his wrath from mankind; he has revealed and manifested it to them very clearly - - from heaven above, in words and deeds not human, but divine, of irresistible impressiveness. Together with the *law* and the *consciousness of sin*, the *wrath of God* is written with indelible characters on every person's heart, making him a slave to the fear of judgment all his life (He 2:14-15). God has blazoned his wrath with letters of flame on the pages of history, a solemn warning to all future generations. The Creator has engraved it in ineffaceable script on the very face of creation: blighting all joy of life, blasting every hope, voiding every effort, and turning all people and all things to destruction, making this wonderful world a habitation of misery, a vale of tears, a dungeon of pain and agony. The world is always filled with agonizing people like Job, whose life is one great torture. The hills and hollows of every land on earth are constantly resounding with lamentation. Rachel is still "weeping for her children, and refusing to be comforted, because her children are no more" (Je 31:15). It is absolutely true: "We are consumed by your anger, and by your wrath we are troubled" (Ps 90).

God's general curse

The first manifestation of God's wrath was made as soon as sin had been committed. "Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life ... by

the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are, and to dust you will return" (Gn 3:17-19). That curse has gone through the ages of history sweeping generation after generation from the face of the earth.

Now and then that curse has assumed the proportions of fearful catastrophes. The Flood, the destruction of Sodom, the plagues against Egypt, the destruction of Jerusalem, the Babylonian exile of the Jews, the subversion of the ancient empires, the dispersion of the Jewish nation among the heathen, the fall of Rome, the ruin of the Christian East, the Thirty Years War, the enthronement of Bolshevism in Russia, the World Wars - - all these are but a few of the majestic manifestations of the wrath of God against the sin of humans.

God's specific curse

The words of our text, however, are full of special meaning. "The wrath of God is revealed from *heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress (halt, hold up) the truth by their wickedness*" (v 18). God's wrath does not turn against an isolated illegal act of man committed unawares. "Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart" (1 Sam 16:7). It is man's evil heart God turns against - - its evil inclination, his *godlessness and wickedness*. God's creature does not care for God. They despise and *hate him*. That is human ungodliness.

They likewise despise and *hate* God's solemn Moral Law, its demands and its demanding - - that is their unrighteousness. To these two sentiments (godlessness and wickedness) which in reality are only one, Paul adds a product of the two: an action which, when growing into a habit, finally brings down God's wrath in judgment on the sinner's head. "*From his godlessness he suppresses the truth by his wickedness,*" that is, the human wantonly resists, opposes, and fights the truth about God which God makes known to him. Sinful mankind thus effectually prevents it from entering into and conquering his heart.

Ungodliness, the parent form of sin in humans, is not like a sleepy pool into which one dips occasionally to perpetrate some sinful act. On the contrary, "the wicked are like the tossing sea, which cannot rest, whose waves cast up mire and mud" (Is 57:20). Ever alive and active, ungodliness naturally grows and develops until it reaches its full measure. Through what stages it passes, what proportions it assumes, the apostle pictures in the following verses.

the ungodly have no excuse

In writing of this development, the apostle first premises and proves that, in ascending the scale of sin, the ungodly are without excuse. We read: "... since what may be known about God is plain to them, since 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 men are without excuse. For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him" (v 19-21).

There is no justification, no excuse for any person on earth for being ungodly, for not glorifying God as God, for being an infidel, an atheist. Why not? Mark this point well. It is of the utmost importance for your own condition as a believer in the living God. It is of the utmost

importance for the effectual refutation of unbelievers, with whom you may come into a discussion about religion.

The Scripture teaches with great emphasis, and St. Paul in this passage lays great stress on the fact, making it the basis of his argument and repeating it in various words through three verses, *that there is a clear and distinct knowledge of God in everyone's heart*. The apostle states as a fact, it is manifest, that they have a certain knowledge of God. He tells us *from where* humans have it, namely, *from God himself* ("since God has made it plain..." (v 19).

Paul proceeds to tell us *by what means* God made it known to them: although God in his being and doing is invisible and imperceptible to man's physical senses, he is clearly seen and perceived *from the creation of the world*, being understood *by what has been made*, that is, by his works of creation. And finally, Paul tells us very definitely *what it is* they know of God, namely, *his eternal power and divine nature, his deity*. And all this he sums up in the words, "*they knew God*" (v 21).

where there are humans, there is a religion

There is not a truth in the world

- taught by a teacher of such absolute authority
- driven home by a method of such decisive impressiveness
- so universally known and so firmly fixed in the heart of man

as the truth of God's existence and divine nature. Anthropologists and students of the history of religion have never yet found a race of men without a religion. Africa, Polynesia, the jungles of the Amazon - - bushman, cannibal, or aborigine - - always has been found some form of religious worship. Let us not be deceived by any human being. There is not a child in the lowest slums of New York or Chicago, not a student in a public school anywhere in our country, who does not know that God *is*, and that he is *God*, without being taught so by mouth or book.

The world around us everywhere - - the innumerable wonders of creation on this earth and in the sky, exhibited without interruption to our physical senses - - are an object lesson of overpowering force. It convinces our hearts of the unlimited power and wisdom and goodness of an eternal, living personal God. It constrains us to glorify him as God. "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the works of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge. There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard" (Ps 19; see also Isaiah 40:26; Ps 104).

some examples

The mountains, tossed on the earth as it were out of eternity. The sea in its calm or in its rage. The rippling brook and the mountain torrent. The flash of lightning and the sudden growling, grumbling, far-off roll of thunder. The lovely calm of a spring day and the devastating fury of a tornado.

The modest blue of the violet ... the beauty of the rose ... the splendor of the lily ... the gorgeous glory of the peony and the chrysanthemum. The butterfly and its chrysalis. The noble steed and the ignoble toad. The smile of a baby and the heart-thrill of happiness in its mother. The wonderful mind of man and the even more wonderful heart of woman.

There is not a bird on a twig, not a worm in the dirt, not a leaf on the tree, not a blade of grass in the meadow, not a breath of man or beast, not a thing in the world that does not very distinctly and impressively proclaim the majesty, the infinite power and wisdom and goodness - - *the glory* - - of God. And it is a testimony which every human heart cannot help but perceive as *the voice of God* himself. There is no denying it. It is the fool, the mocker, that says in his heart, "There is no God" (Ps 14; Ps 53).

another revelation

We may add here, from the second chapter of Paul's epistle (v 15), that besides the *revelation through the works of creation*, there is in the heart of every human *another* self-revelation of God. God has written his law, the law of righteousness, directly and distinctly *into the heart* of man. Every human soul knows of itself that the commandments, "Love the Lord your God above all things" and "Love your neighbor as yourself," "Honor your father and your mother," "You shall not murder, not commit adultery, not steal, lie, covet," are of divine, not of human, origin. They are the unalterable Moral Law of the holy God. The law-breaker will bring on himself the wrath of God. The doer will receive his due reward.

Every human being has a conscience. A conscience is nothing but the knowledge of the Moral Law and the consciousness of being answerable to God for keeping or breaking it. It is conscience in action when "thoughts now accuse, now even defend them" (Ro 2:15), according as we have broken or kept the law. While the works of creation proclaim the infinite *power* and *wisdom* and *goodness* of God, the divine law written in our hearts teaches us his *moral perfection*: his holiness, his love, righteousness, truthfulness, and justice. Every human soul is inwardly persuaded that God punishes wickedness and rewards well-doing.

In the face, then, of these two witnesses for the glory of God, there is no excuse for anyone for not glorifying, obeying, and serving him as God. There is absolutely no justification for being an atheist, for leading an ungodly life, for being a mocker or scoffer. You cannot say "I did not know." You did know, and you do know, by the irrefutable and convincing testimony of God himself.

what about science?

It will not help a man to point to the so-called findings of science as the refutation of the existence of God. The "science" that calls in question or denies the existence, the personality, the divine nature, the works, the righteousness, the justice, the goodness - - the glory - - of God, is not science. *It is a willful lie*, proceeding from an ungodly heart.

Today it is the doctrine of evolution which boldly claims that it has furnished incontestible proof for the non-existence of an eternal, personal God. It claims to have furnished proof for the eternity and indestructibility of matter and force, for the absolute eternity of the laws of nature,

the impossibility of a creation or any other act of interference by a higher power called God. Miracles, they say, are absolutely impossible. What is called the revelation of God is - - to their minds - - an imagination and a dream of superstitious people. Man is simply an overdeveloped chimpanzee or orangutan. Give him enough time, and he will develop the superman who will reject with scorn the idea of a personal god and make himself the absolute ruler of the universe.

There is not, however, a particle of real scientific evidence for the theory of evolution. "They have inferred much," says John Henry Newman (English theologian and author, d. 1890) very aptly, "from slender premises, and conjectured when they could not prove." It is just one of their many attempts to "*suppress the truth by their wickedness*," to stifle the testimony of all nature, and to smother the witness carried in their own conscience.

the culprit will cover his crime

In addition, let us mark well that the apostle writes "they suppress the truth by their wickedness," that is, *by* it and *because* of it. Our Lord says "Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God" (Jn 3:20). Every culprit is anxious to cover up his crime, every boy his mischief, every lewd woman her shame. A criminal will commit a greater crime in order to cover up the first. A robber will not hesitate to shoot his pursuer in the hope of escaping from the hands of justice. That is the case of the atheist exactly. If the atheist had a clean life, a life of righteousness to show to God, he or she would not think of denying God. They would gladly acknowledge God as the righteous judge, who would make that person's righteousness manifest to all the world.

But being conscious of his unrighteousness, and fearing the judgment of a righteous and just God, the atheist will commit the greater sin of denying the existence of God and denying his impending judgment. They will not shrink from denying palpable facts and obvious truths. They will strangle their own conscience in order to be free to satisfy the desires of their sinful nature. The atheist is *suppressing the truth by his wickedness* to justify his ungodliness.

But a poor excuse "science" will prove to be on Judgment Day, when the hearts of all men will be bared. "But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed. God will give to each person according to what he has done" (Ro 2:5).

consequences in the heart

In the following verses St. Paul describes the destructive consequences of suppressing the truth by their wickedness on the hearts of such people. "Although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, *but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools*" (v 21-22). Their thinking became futile - - the meaning of this expression is twofold.

On the one hand, their imaginations became without substance, empty, void. They imagined things which have no real existence. Their thoughts about the world and mankind were

illusions - - all wrong. To their mind the world is an automaton - - an impersonal machine which has its momentum, its motive power, within itself. Think of a self-made clock that winds itself and goes by itself. The human soul, our self-conscious feeling, thinking, willing - - is nothing but the result of chemical action. The Moral Law is nothing but a necessary, conventional rule for governing social interaction.

But all such thoughts are mere imagination; there is no truth in them. They are illusions of their ungodly minds. There is no such thing as an automatic world. This world of ours is God-made, God-enlivened, God-preserved, God-ruled from the sun in the heavens down to the tiniest dewdrop. There is no such thing as a chemically-made human soul; man's soul is a God-breathed image of God. There is no such thing as a merely conventional moral law. The Moral Law is the holy will of God, written in the hearts of men by the finger of God. All ideas eliminating God from the world are vain imaginations of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness. It is God who "himself gives all men life and breath and everything else." It is in him "we live and move and have our being" (Ac 17:25-28).

People who indulge in such vain imaginations, actuated by a *foolish*, that is to say, an *ungodly* heart, necessarily become *darkened in their understanding*. They become blinded to the facts of the world and to the truth of God. They can no longer see the wonders of God exhibited by creation; to them all things seem natural. They can no longer hear the voice of God in their conscience. All its accusations and warning are to them mere human thoughts arising from their own brain. Finally they see black white, and white black, wrong right and right wrong, true false and false true.

And where spiritual and moral darkness rules a person's mind, all their aims, their dreams, their strivings and efforts become vain and meaningless. The unbeliever seeks contentment and happiness in the possession of riches, of glory, and of pleasure catering to our sinful nature. He or she is trying to catch the wind, which always eludes the grasp of the chaser and wears them out as well. To such a person life itself, the world, and all existence becomes a meaningless mystery. The worst of it is that "the fleeting joys of transient life are bought with lasting woes."

evolution: "the law that governs the universe"

Their thinking became futile in a more intensive sense. St. Paul proceeds, "Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools" (v 22). Do you want to see a thoroughly conceited man, puffed up with pride in his pretended knowledge? Go to the unbeliever, to the professed atheist, more especially to the avowedly atheistic scientist. He absolutely *knows* that there is no God, that all is nature, that all religion is stupid superstition of uneducated men. There is no end to their boasting of the wonderful achievements of the human mind and the marvelous progress of science. Look at the locomotive, the gas engine, the telegraph, the telephone, the phonograph, the radio, the airship. We are sailing the air like birds; , we crossed the North Pole; we are daily succeeding better in harnessing the powers of nature and making them subservient to our pleasure. Think of our achievements in chemistry, biology, physiology, eugenics.

Then take the advance of astronomy! We have computed the size, the distance, and the courses of the planets and a number of comets. We today know the parallaxes of a dozen or more stars

of the first magnitude. We know, for instance, that the distance of stars of the sixteenth magnitude is so great that it takes their light, traveling 214,000 miles per second, 24,192 years to reach the earth. Which, by the way, *proves* (doesn't it?) that the stars existed 18,000 years before the creation of the world!

Still, this is not the acme of scientific claptrap. It is geology that caps the climax. It tells us that this earth of ours is at least 20,000,000 years old. But that is altogether too conservative! Just lately an American university professor figured out "scientifically" that its age is 20 *billion* years.

They positively *know* now that evolution is the one great and almighty law that governs the universe. The present shape of the world and all existing forms of life on this earth are the result of that law. They *know* that either the anthropoid apes are our forbears, or that we, at least, are their cousins by a common progenitor. Science, they claim, although in its infancy, has advanced far enough to prove all religious teaching, including that of the Bible, a delusion. Indeed, in professing to be wise, they are not modest at all.

a fundamental mistake

But the apostle adds that in doing so "*they became fools.*" When it comes to the acid test, the mass of so-called scientific details heaped up by the investigations of ages, dwindles down to a very small pile of real facts. True science can do no more than *make observations* of phenomena, *register*, and *classify* them. And it is right here that the average scientist makes his fundamental mistake. He draws *general* conclusions from *particular* premises. He presumes fundamental laws of nature, such as the law of gravity, of cohesion, adhesion, of chemical affinity, of matter and force, etc. His great mistake is to assume these laws to be absolutely universal, active as far as existence goes. He presumes that these laws are absolutely unchangeable, eternal, omnipresent, absolute.

How does a scientist come by such knowledge? He or she will tell you "by experience, by scientific investigation." But the scientist deceives himself and all his credulous pupils. Their observations are self-evidently and admittedly *limited*. They did not travel through all the universe observing and experimenting whether the law of gravity, or of chemical or mechanical action holds good everywhere, did they? No. How, then, can they assert with absolute assurance that such laws are absolutely *universal*? They will answer, because, these premises hold good on this earth. But do you not see that they make a *general* conclusion from a *particular* premise? That their logic consists in a false generalization arrived at by an incomplete induction? A *limited* observation of phenomena can, logically, never lead to an *unlimited* assertions.

This holds good in regard to all so-called *laws* of nature. Their absolute universality, eternity, permanency, is a mere presupposition, proved by no observation or experiment. It is worth as much as saying that because the sun rose regularly every morning these 6,000 years of *history*, it will keep on doing so forever. Or, that the sun rose every morning from all *eternity*. Every sane man will admit that such an assertion is not science. But it is exactly by this same fallacy that the talk of the absolute universality of all laws of nature has become the belief - - *belief*, I say, the presumption - - of so-called science. Granted that the Newtonian law rules the earth - - or our entire solar system, for that matter - - under the present conditions. Where is the logical right to

say that it governs the entire universe, always did, and always will govern it? All such unlimited assertions are *a priori* incapable of proof. Yet it is on such unprovable though plausible assumptions, that scientists base their conclusions - - *illusions*, I ought to say - - of the eternity of matter and force, of the evolution of the higher organism from the lower, of the enormous age of the world, of the impossibility of miracles, of revelation, etc, etc ... all without the least particle of scientific proof. Beyond the description and classification of phenomena all so-called science is not *fact* but *imagination*. All talk in science of the *universal*, the *eternal*, the *unchangeable*, the *absolute* is just so much babble, deceiving an unthinking public. Knowingly maintained it becomes downright fraud and one of the worst enemies of the kingdom of God.

not satisfied to be limited

Science has accomplished much that we ought to be thankful for. But the human heart is not satisfied with the knowledge of mere phenomena. Ever since Eve stretched out her hand for the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, humans - - being religiously darkened - - want to know more. We know that we and the world about us exist. This is the most astounding fact in all human experience. We were not ... and here we are. How can anything *be*? From where did we and the world come? What is the sense of being? What does human life mean? What is all this great hubbub of mankind about - - its thoughts and its toil, its griefs and its joys, its awful pains and its many pleasures, its tears and its laughers, its living and dying? Outside of faith, every man is by sin condemned to desire the knowledge Eve desired, the knowledge which it is God's privilege to have, which he has absolutely hidden from mankind, which he forbids us to acquire, as far as he has not revealed it to us. He has revealed so much through the works of *creation*, through *conscience*, and finally through the *Gospel*. We have today as much knowledge about God and all his creation as Adam and Eve ever had.

We know from where the world came. What it is for. What human life means. Our Lord Jesus Christ is the full explanation of all things (Cl 1). Together with the thousand and one diverse phenomena of the world, this knowledge is entirely sufficient for all practical purposes. But sinful man wants to know more; he wants to know it all; he wants a knowledge of things like God's knowledge. But he can never acquire it, try as he may. Pretending knowledge of things, of which he cannot and does not know a bit, he makes a fool of himself.

a second fundamental mistake

But there is another fundamental mistake scientists make in denying the existence and the eternal power and godhood of God. It is, like the one spoken of, another mistake of scientific method, induced by ungodliness and unrighteousness. Their theory of cognition is all wrong. *They presume two organs of cognition only: the physical senses and the intellect.* Humans very obviously have three. Beside the two named, there is *the soul* or spirit, by which we perceive the emotional, the moral, and the divine.

By the *physical* senses we perceive physical things only, such as colors by the eye, sounds by the ear, smells by the nose, solid bodies by touch. By the powers of the *intellect* we arrange and adjust the physical phenomena into a uniform mental system comprehensible by reason. But there are more things between heaven and earth than our physical senses and our intellect ever dreamed of. You cannot see, hear, touch, or smell or taste love, compassion, benevolence,

anger, hatred or disgust - - the emotions in a person's heart. They can only be perceived by the heart or soul. They are felt by the organ in which they have a place. By this organ they are perceived as readily as an object seen by the eye or heard by the ear.

You cannot weigh kindness in the scales and compute it by the pound. You cannot measure the delight of a mother's heart at the birth of a child by a yardstick. Nor could you measure the depth of her grief at its death by the multiplication table. But if anything in this life - - although imperceptible by the *physical senses* and incalculable by the *intellect* - - is real, it is these affections of the heart or soul. It is, in fact, by them alone that *the value of life* is and can be rated. Take the heart, the soul, the sense of inner feeling out of life and it becomes absolutely worthless.

the far higher faculty

But within the general emotional faculty there is in man's soul a faculty of a far higher kind. This elevates him far above the order of all other animal creatures, and at once stamps him as "the offspring of God," as St. Paul expresses it in Acts 17:28. I mean his moral and religious sense. I repeat, there is not a normal human being without a conscience or the *faculty of distinguishing between right and wrong*; a moral sense that compels every human being to approve of the right and to condemn the wrong. This moral sense may have been impaired, weakened, blunted by sinning against it, by environment and false teaching; but it cannot be entirely blotted out except by God's decree.

This faculty is always combined with the likewise *inborn religious sense or knowledge of God*. Man knows without being taught that the Moral Law is divine, not human. It is God's; humans are responsible to God for keeping or breaking it, and will receive their due reward for either. St. Paul asserts with great emphasis that "what may be known about God is plain to them, for *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" (v 19-20).

And this religious faculty is constantly functioning. The testimony of the works of creation of God's godhood never ceases. It goes on continually by day and by night ... and his human creature does perceive it. The knowledge of God never entirely leaves him. "They knew God," St. Paul declares. Our religious sense is always functioning as soon as we look at the works of creation or observes right or wrong in ourselves or others.

objective truth

The faculty of physical sight and its functioning incontestably prove the objective existence of visible things - - for there could be no perception of them by the eye, if they did not exist. So the functioning of the moral and religious sense irrefutably proves the objective existence of the eternal power and divine nature of God, and of the divine nature of the Moral Law. The moral and religious sense in man could not function, if God's godhood and the divinity of the Moral Law had no objective existence. In fact, the idea of God and his law could never have been conceived in man's heart, if the testimony of God to that effect were not an objective reality.

I am well aware that the unbelieving scientist will object to this argumentation. They will say, "May these ideas of God and law not be imaginations? And do you mean to say that all imaginations prove the objective existence of the things imagined?" I answer, "No." I believe or know, like St. Paul in our text, that the unbelieving mind is full of "vain imaginations" concerning the non-existence of God, and that there is absolutely no objective reality to such imaginations. I don't mean to say that, when a drunk sees three moons where sober men see only one, that there is something the matter with the moon. I would rather infer that something is wrong at the other end. But if all sober men really see a moon, the very fact of their seeing it proves it is there. What if all normal people on earth have the same idea of the eternal power and godhood of God and of the divine nature of the Moral Law? I am inclined to think that those who deny God and divine law must have had access to some kind of mental or spiritual intoxicant - - and have not yet sobered up. All atheism, agnosticism, denial of God and his laws is the artificial result of the false teaching of ungodly men who halt the truth by their wickedness. "Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools" (v 22).

no limits for the spiritual fool

There is, however, no limit to the absurdities the fool will go to. St. Paul proceeds, "They became fools, and *exchanged the glory* of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles" (v 23).

A human cannot rid himself of the idea of God by simply denying his existence. All history bears witness that every man, after having rejected the one true God, will make a god of his own for himself. The history of the heathen nations is mainly a history of their idolatry. Whether savage, barbarian, or highly cultured - - a god, or gods they would have ... gods, to be sure, after their own desires.

St. Paul is speaking of the highly cultured Greco-Roman world, as he had learned to know it in the metropolitan cities of Athens and Corinth. On every hill he found a temple, in every open space a statue of a god. In Rome there was beside other temples, the Pantheon, the temple of the gods of all nations. They worshiped images of "gold or silver or stone - - an image made by man's design and skill" (Ac 17:29). Not that they worshiped the material from which the statues were made. They worshiped the forms cut out of the materials as being expressive of the properties attributed to their gods.

The Greeks and Romans believed their gods and goddesses to have the properties of human beings, of men and women. They therefore carved or sculpted them in such forms as would express their particular character to them. Beside the human figures they adored figures of the ox, the ibis, the serpent, and other animals as representative of the character of their different deities. What foolishness! Knowing God as the invisible Spirit, the Almighty, the Eternal, Unchangeable, the Maker of all things, the Good and Holy One, they changed his incorruptibility into images of corruptible things. They endowed them with corruptible qualities, and some of these being of the vilest character. The Greek and Roman gods were mostly treacherous criminals and lustful evil-doers. To such gods they paid homage and offered sacrifice. To such they surrendered themselves body and soul. And finally all this idolatrous worship became a worship of the goddess Aphrodite, as the Greeks - - or Venus, as the Romans called her. The goddess of *love* they termed it, but in reality of *sexual gratification*.

Near the city of Corinth was a lofty hill, called the Acro-corinth. On this hill a temple had been built, in which a thousand Grecian virgins surrendered their bodies to the gratification of the beastly lusts of lewd men - - in honor of this most highly worshiped idol. In fact, the idol-worship of all the cultured nations of history has been generally accompanied by festivals of unlimited drinking and frenzied indulgence of sexual lust. *Idol-worship became sex-worship.* That was the final upshot of their wisdom!

add it up

They rejected, in their wickedness, the one true God, who had revealed himself to them through the works of creation and the Moral Law written in their hearts. They suppressed this divine truth by their unwillingness to be bound by any law whatever. They built up in their hearts an imaginary world, which had no existence. Imagining themselves to be wise, they denied and despised the God of heaven and earth, and made gods to their own liking. In the worship of their gods they indulged in and praised as the highest virtues the most humiliating and shameful vices of which human nature is capable.

today: the last step of idol-worship

The unbelieving world of today is not a bit wiser. Oh, it may refrain from making images of its gods like the heathen of old. Ultimately, however, with the men and women of the world, everything is fleshly desire for honor, wealth, and sexual gratification. In fact, the world of today is entering upon the very last stage of idolatry - - the worship of woman.

Worship of the female is not, to be sure, for her vaunted mental eminence (which the world rather laughs at). No, it is for her physical body, which it desires with uncontrollable lust. And the unbelieving woman is no less sensual than the male. She is more disrespectful than he of any law. She is entirely given over to appearance and outward show. She, however, sees through the beastly sensuality of the men to the bottom. Her experience in public life, fairly recent in history, has made her shameless. Now she knows how to enslave male sensuality to her own. There is the ever-new device of uncovering her body - - by means of clothing that pretends to conceal. In our country, like in Paris and Berlin, it has come to this, that the stark naked woman appears on the public stage in "artistic" dance. Lately an American judge pronounces this justified, and praises it as the highest expression of human art. Like the desire for *preferred treatment and wealth*, so the lust for *sensual gratification* is again dominant in the civilized world of today. The unbelieving world is no more ashamed of it. "Naturale non sunt turpia" ("What is natural can't be disgraceful," they say).

one dissenting opinion

But St. Paul tells us that there is one in heaven who has a different opinion of all this sin and shame. "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men." They despised God and became idolatrous and worshipers of sexual lust. "Therefore," Paul proceeds, "God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another" (v 24). And again, "Because of this God gave them

over to shameful lusts" (v 26). And for a third time "God gave them over to a depraved mind" (v 28). The apostle makes triple use of the same phrase. What does it mean?

If these men and women knew its full import they would shudder with horror. St. Paul means that *God passed judgment on them*. It is an awful thing to be given up (*given over*) by God. It means that God interfered in the common order of things ... and performed a special act concerning the condition of their heart and their standing before him. This time of ours, the world's time, and our lifetime is a time of God's grace and patience toward sinners. St. Paul expresses it this way "In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent" (Ac 17:30). By the common order of things under God's dispensation there is a chance to repent and be saved for every sinner so long as the sun shines.

beyond the point of no return

When, however, God gives him or her up to sin, this chance is cut off. The LORD has ceased to have patience with that individual, but delivers such a person to the absolute dominion of sin. God passes a judgment of wrath on the sinner, saying "You would not, therefore you will not be able to. You would not acknowledge me as God, therefore you will no more be able to acknowledge me. You desire to be a fool, therefore you will be a fool from this moment on, forever. You desire to be an idolater, therefore you will be an idolater to the end. You desire to serve your sinful nature, therefore you will serve it to the limit, and will not be able to free yourself from its bondage. Sin shall from now on be your lord and drive you to the utmost limit of ungodliness and wickedness."

when conscience goes silent

This is the consequence of the wrath of God, of which Paul speaks in Romans 1. After this judgment has been pronounced upon a sinner, the condition of servitude to sin becomes irretrievable. For him or her the voice of the heavens proclaiming the glory of God is not audible any longer; the conscience speaks no more. He curses and blasphemes God with perfect non-concern. He thinks no more of sin and vice and crime than of the ashes on his cigar. To such a person wickedness is pleasure, ungodliness delight.

St. Paul mentions some of the things the heathen were compelled to commit through their own lusts, after they had been given over to the full domination of evil. God gave them over to "sinful desires" and "shameful lusts." Women as well as men became insatiable in sexual lust. In consequence, "Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion" (v 26-27).

God is a terrible mocker of those who try to mock him. Oh, those highly educated, learned, wise men of Athens, the teachers of the world in all sciences, arts, and philosophy - - sexually attracted to young boys! Oh, the fine, cultured, elegant, perfumed women of Corinth - - homosexuals, Sodomites! No class of dumb brutes has ever so debased itself. And all this the curse of a righteous and just God for their ungodliness - - "they suppressed the truth about God by their wickedness" (v 18).

walking in the footsteps of paganism

To understand the causes of the rapid spread of irreligiousness and immorality of today, we Christians must not forget the counsels of God here revealed through St. Paul. The unbelieving world of today is walking in the footsteps of ancient paganism, both in denying the eternal power and divine nature of God, as well as in dedicating their lives to the service of riches and of sexual lust. They will bring on themselves, and are already incurring, the same judgment of God. Because of their obstinacy in denying God, and of their insistence to live as they please, God is again giving them over to the shameful disgrace of the ancient unbeliever.

We need not dwell at length on this subject. The daily press is full to overflowing of the moral filth that pervades the social life of all classes. Still, not half of it ever comes to light. And publishing it only spreads the disease. The theater stage, movies, the nightclub, much of current literature, even (especially?) the Sunday paper, have become potent forces of unbelief and immorality. Our government is helpless and indifferent in consequence. The public school does not and cannot stop the ever-rising tide. The theory of evolution taught there as established science swells the deluge.

The same must be said of the behavior of today's unbelieving woman. Her daring fashion, her mannish manners, the way she thrusts herself forward, her lack of restraint! The home is little concerned about it. Many mothers of today, given to idleness and luxury, themselves fall prey to its lure. The shallow level of everyday conversation offers an open field for its ravages. To what extent has coeducation served as an efficient agency for the moral ruin of many young men and women? The multitude of cases of marital unfaithfulness, of incest, and other unutterable sins - - as bared in the court proceedings all over the country - - these things bear ample witness that the ungodly world of today is running headlong into that judgment of God of which St. Paul writes in our text. It will be so much the more terrible than that passed on the ancient pagan world, as the world of today has not only resisted the testimony of *creation* and *conscience*, but in addition, the *testimony of the Spirit of God in the Gospel of Christ*.

II. The Wrath of God Finds Even Further Expression

Romans 1:28-32

Beside the vice of unchastity, however, there is *another* class of sins, to which God delivered the heathen who suppressed the truth by their wickedness. St. Paul goes on to say "Since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done."

Let us note that the apostle assigns the same reason for God's giving them over as he did in the first instance. It really means that they did not hold God worthy of acknowledgment. They passed him by as unworthy of notice. Therefore God gave them over to a depraved mind. A reprobate mind is a corrupted mind, corrupted as far as distinguishing between true and untrue, right and wrong is concerned. God condemned them to mistake right for wrong and wrong for right. They now had to do those things which "ought not to be done," that is,

improper, foul, detestable, and abhorrent. A truly horrible state of mind, as we see by its legitimate fruits, which the apostle enumerates in the following catalog.

"They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil ..." (v 29). These vices are general in character, denoting utter vileness, as being the wellspring of all the following. To these he adds *greed*, covetousness - - wanting all things for one's self and never getting enough - - and finally *maliciousness*, the spirit of delighting in harm or misfortune to another.

With such vices they are filled to overflowing. Therefore, as St. Paul goes on to specify, "*they are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, and malice*," like Cain the brother-killer. Then the apostle adds a number of sins against the eighth commandment. They are *gossips*, that is, defamers in secret. They are *backbiters* or slanderers of their fellowmen. Moreover, the sins of self-aggrandizement and haughtiness against God himself and their neighbor: *God-haters, insolent*. Then *arrogant, boastful, they invent ways of doing evil, they disobey their parents; they are senseless* - - invincible by argument. Finally St. Paul concludes the list with sins issuing from a loveless heart, calling such men *faithless, heartless, ruthless* (v 31).

not just sins but approval

A long list of hateful vices and sins indeed! But St. Paul, in conclusion, adds another feature which greatly intensifies every one of them. *Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them* (v 32).

It sounds almost unbelievable. The knowledge that death is the judgment of God on *every sin* was to a great extent obliterated in the minds of the heathen. That *sins of such wickedness* deserved eternal punishment - - that the people of Paul's generation still knew. Their own idea of Hades bears witness to this. They also knew that their own law codes demanded that crimes like rape, adultery, incest, sex with children, homosexuality, robbery and murder be punished by death at the hands of the state. Still they not only committed such deeds themselves. *They felt delight in seeing others do them*. They did them for the fun of it. Such wickedness is not human; it is devilish.

Now remember how St. Paul describes this dreadful development of sin in the heathen. It is the consequence of God's judgment for considering the eternal power and divine nature of God as unworthy of notice. Now we will have some understanding of the fury of God's wrath against all practical and theoretical atheism. Willfully to suppress the natural knowledge of God leads inevitably to that awful judgment: that man or woman is condemned to become a very devil in uncleanness and wickedness.

of what importance is this doctrine?

As a part of Paul's letter to the Romans, this doctrine serves to substantiate his great subject: there is only one way for any human being to be saved from sin, namely, faith in the righteousness of God, which he prepared for all people in Jesus Christ our Savior.

No man can save himself by efforts of his own. He is by nature ungodly. He will suppress the truth about God by his wickedness. Left to himself, he will naturally run the course of the unbeliever and incur the judgment of God. This, as we have heard, ends in complete slavery to sin. The righteous law of God is known to him, but he will not do it. Therefore it will not save, but damn him.

Sinful humankind must be saved through faith in Christ, or will not be saved at all. *To make this clear is the purpose of this section in the letter to the Romans.* And this letter was written to every Christian and to every person on earth. Let all learn from this epistle of God that as long as they have not obtained forgiveness of sin and justification through faith in Jesus Christ, they are and shall remain under this judgment of God: condemned to be slaves of sin in time and eternity.

a special lesson for the Christian

But there is a special lesson in this text for Christians. It has pleased the God of all grace to reveal his Son in us. By the Holy Spirit, we now know that Jesus Christ is our Lord and our God. "God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit" (Ro 5:5).

- Our sins are forgiven,
- our sonship is assured,
- our inheritance is with Christ in heaven,
- having escaped from the dungeon of sin, we have become free people in Christ,
- presenting our bodies as living sacrifices, acceptable to God.

All this comes through faith in the atoning blood which was shed for us. If we continue in our faith, we receive the goal, the salvation of our souls (1 Pe 1:9).

But we have not yet finished running our race. We still have flesh and blood. We are still vulnerable to temptation. Having escaped the pollution of the world, we are still liable to be again entangled in sin and overcome by it. Then the latter end would be worse with us than the beginning (2 Pe 2:20). The Church has always had to mourn for renegade sons and daughters. Scripture tells of Saul the king, of Demas and Hymeneus, of Alexander and Philetus, Phygelus and Hermogenes, and of Judas the traitor. The Church of today is losing hundreds and thousands of her young men and women who fall from the faith.

What is it that ensnares them? Let me assure you that no man or woman was ever enticed away from the faith by his or her knowledge of things that exist, by the real facts of science, and by logical reasoning based on them. Many of the so-called educated class of renegades make this claim. They are simply deluding and deceiving themselves. It is nothing but a pretense to cloak the real reason. There are no facts of science, there is nothing in the reasoning faculty of man to prevent him from believing Christ and the Bible. The Gospel of Christ carries its own spiritual evidences with it. There is, in reality, only one cause for apostasy, for falling away from the faith. This is absolutely general - - working in all cases. *It is giving way to the lure of sin against the warning of conscience.*

conscience vs. desire

St. Paul says time and time again that the mystery of faith can be kept only in a good conscience, that is, in a conscience heeding God's warning against sin (1 Tm 3:9). He asserts of Hymeneus and Alexander that they have made shipwreck of their faith (1 Tm 1:19). Consider also, "teachings that come through consciences seared with a hot iron" (1 Ti 4:2). "I strive to keep my conscience clear before God and man" (Ac 24:16); "keeping a clear conscience" (1 Pe 3:16). "Baptism now saves you also - - not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God" (1 Pe 3:21).

Giving way to the lure of sin against the warning of conscience - - it was thus that Adam and Eve fell from faith. King Saul lent his heart to pride. David succumbed to sexual lust, Demas to the love of the world, Peter to the love of staying alive, Judas Iscariot to the desire for money. So every man or woman who falls from faith falls by being overwhelmed by his or her own desire, after casting the warning of God to the winds. "Then after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death" (Js 1:15). God in his unsearchable ways called David and Peter to repentance and won them back.

Yet God left Saul and Judas and others to their sins. Do you know what God will do to you, if you yield to the lure of sin, and strangle the warning voice of God? "So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall" (1 Co 10:13).

a special lesson for the one who has fallen

That is the special lesson of this text for *Christians*. But let *those who have fallen* also remember the voice of God calling to them,

- "Return, faithless Israel," declares the LORD, "I will frown on you no longer, for I am merciful," declares the LORD, "I will not be angry forever" (Je 3:12),
- "Where sin abounds, grace does much more abound" (Ro 5:20).

. . .

III. Afterword

We have finished with our text for this time. In conclusion I will try to answer a few questions which are usually raised when this passage is discussed.

In describing the debasement of the heathen of his time - - does St. Paul include every individual among them, or not?

No, not directly. When we speak of Paris or New York as wicked cities, we don't mean that every inhabitant of them is wicked. There were 120,000 children in Nineveh not personally guilty of the vices rampant in that city. Certainly not every child in Sodom was personally

guilty of sodomy. There were still decent men and women left in Athens, Corinth, and Rome. But the vices St. Paul speaks of had become more or less general among high and low, and had full sway, because *public moral conscience was no longer strong enough to rise up against them and stamp them out*. So they were exponents of this general immorality, which was insensible to the shame of such vices. In Sodom, we are told, there were not ten righteous people left when God resolved to destroy her. The civilization of the heathen world had ended in complete moral bankruptcy, and perished in vice and crime.

Is that act of God which St. Paul here designates as his "handing them over to the power of sin" (v 22-26), or "giving them over to a depraved mind" (v 28), the same as that which in Scripture is generally called "hardening of the heart?"

I would answer: It is, and it is not. It is the same, as far as *the form of the act* is concerned. In either case the heart of the sinner is made impenetrable to divine truth. In either case the self-hardening of man precedes the action of God.

It is always this: "You would not, therefore you will not be able to." The classic example of heart-hardening is Pharaoh in his refusal to release the children of Israel. After stubbornly refusing to obey God's command, he was made *unable* to obey - - and so confirmed in disobedience that he *could* no longer obey.

If human beings refuse to acknowledge their Creator by the knowledge of creation and conscience, God will not take that knowledge away from them. God will destroy that person's sensibility for the truth that he or she knows. God so inclines their will against it that they can no longer will to give heed to it. Sinners are compelled by their own will to do the very opposite. This holds good as well in the case of opposing *the natural knowledge of God*, as in the case of resisting *the Gospel of grace*.

But while the two cases are alike in form, they are very unlike *in the matter acted upon*. In the *former* the *natural* religious capacity is destroyed. In the *latter* case the faculty for the reception of the *Gospel* is annihilated. In either case man is excluded from the benefits of Christ's work, if God does not - - in some way of his own - - intervene. Pharaoh and Judas were alike irrecoverable, headed for final and irrevocable spiritual ruin.

will God not intervene?

In the case of the unbeliever of whom St. Paul speaks in our text, God did, generally speaking, intervene. God spoke according to the law and passed the decree of death upon the sinner. The same God substituted the dispensation of grace in Christ Jesus for the dispensation of the law for all sinners. To the very same heathen whom God had delivered to sin and a depraved mind, he sent Paul.

Paul would "open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they might receive forgiveness of sins" (Ac 26:18)!

But whether or not God will rescind his judgment in this or that individual case is not for us to say. "Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden" (Ro 9:18).

concerning hardening

The same rule applies to the hardening of the heart against the Gospel. In neither case can the hardened sinner extricate himself from the judgment passed on him. "With man this impossible, but with God all things are possible" (Mt 19:26).

Of the hardened part of Israel, St. Paul writes (Ro 11:23), "And if they do not persist in unbelief, they will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again." Compare Ezekiel 36:26, "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh." On the other hand (Romans 9:18), "Therefore God has mercy on whom he want to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden," remains true also in this case.

one unforgivable sin

There is only one sin which is absolutely irreparable and unforgivable. Our Lord himself tells us of it in Matthew 12, Mark 3, and Luke 12. Says he "And so I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven - - either in this age or in the age to come" (Mt 12:31-32).

What is this terrible sin?

- it is not simple resistance to the *natural knowledge* of God
- neither is it simple resistance to the work of the Holy Spirit through *the Gospel*
- it is not *simple final resistance*, although this too is irreparable and unforgivable by its very finality
- it is *blasphemy against the Holy Spirit*

So the Lord terms it. *What* the Lord terms so, is evident from the circumstances related in the text: the Lord, endowed with the Spirit of grace, had traveled about in the land performing all the works of mercy and grace which the promised Messiah was to perform according to the prophecies of the Old Testament, in proof of his Messiahship. Among other works of mercy he had cast out devils, proving thereby to every man accessible to proof that he *was* the Messiah. The kingdom of God and of grace had come to them. And in their hearts they were convinced of that by the irresistible testimony of the Holy Spirit himself.

But the Scribes and Pharisees did not *only refuse to accept* this testimony, but *stigmatized* these deeds of love and mercy and grace and salvation as works of the devil himself. They said "it is only by Beelzebub, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons" (Mt 12:24).

definition of the unforgivable sin

This *willful slander* the Lord calls blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, and testifies that it is an absolutely unpardonable sin.

- Denouncing the saving works of grace of the Holy Spirit, or
- denouncing his word of salvation as works of the devil - -
- doing so in willful opposition to the testimony of the Holy Spirit - - that constitutes the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.

Whoever can utter such blasphemy has thereby become a devil at heart, and absolutely incapable of repentance, of faith, and of forgiveness.

Some teachers have gone so far as to maintain that only people who have once believed are capable of this terrible sin. But that is a dogmatic construction. The persons whom Christ accuses of being guilty of this sin never were believers. But it is true that no one will commit this sin to whom the Holy Spirit did not bear efficient witness: with Christ and his works and his words, the kingdom of God has come to them.

On the other hand, Christians are sometimes tormented by the fear of having committed this appalling sin. Let them be told that their very anxiety is absolute proof that they are not guilty of it. The man that has once committed this devilish sin is incapable of any such anxious thought. Like the devil himself, he can only laugh at every sin.

conclusion

In conclusion I will say that much of this article of faith will ever remain a mystery to human understanding. We must not try to unveil it, lest we be led astray. Abiding by what the Scripture reveals concerning it, we know enough.

What the apostle of the Lord declares at the close of his entire discourse (Ro 11:33-36), also applies to this subject in particular. So we join in his words:

Oh, the depths of the riches
of the wisdom and knowledge of God!
How unsearchable his judgments,
and his paths beyond tracing out!
Who has known the mind of the Lord?
Or who has been his counselor?
Who has ever given to God,
that God should repay him?
For from him and through him and to him are all things.
To him be the glory forever!
Amen.

Note to the Reader

This message was originally read, not printed. The audience heard it in the German language: *Gottes Zorngericht ueber die Gottlosen nach Roemerbrief 1:18-32*. Later the message was "done into English in a somewhat altered form" by the author. Northwestern Publishing House then printed it in pamphlet form:

“a paper read before the meeting of the West Wisconsin District
of the Ev. Lutheran Joint Synod of Wisconsin and other States
held at Beaver Dam, Wisconsin, June 15-22, 1926”

Now threescore and ten years have gone by. On my bookshelf is a ragged, yellowed, pencil-highlighted copy of August Pieper's message in that pamphlet format. After reading it I thought of sharing the paper with one of my brothers in the ministry. Then it occurred to me Prof. Pieper's words might be appreciated by a wider audience in my local pastors' study group. So instead of photocopying a disintegrating pamphlet, I began to retype it.

Almost immediately I was faced with a dilemma - - do I update the paper? Am I editing an important man's work? What business do I have doing this? After all, the presentation had already been translated into English, by the author himself.

In my judgment, however, the 1926 English is now somewhat difficult to read and therefore to understand. American English has changed since the Roaring Twenties. When spoken language changes, preaching and writing change, too. My colleagues, congregation and community are far removed from the time between the World Wars.

Perhaps someone familiar with the original 1926 draft will take exception to changes made in the present script. I gladly yield on all points. This little project was for me not a work of church history. I only want to share a meaningful sermon with fellow Christians who would otherwise have to go on without it. Forgive me for choosing not to use brackets in the manuscript to mark my editing. I felt that any reader (i.e. myself) would become needlessly frustrated and a spellbinding sermon would be spoiled.

Following are the general changes:

- 1) Scripture quotes are from the NIV (1978).
- 2) Out-of-date language is often recast.
- 3) Running paragraph heads are added to the paper to break it up for the eyes.
- 4) Long sentences become multiple short sentences.
- 5) The 2013 edition reflects changes in spelling, pronouns and punctuation.



Professor Pieper's discussion will be especially appreciated by all who grapple with the preaching and teaching of Law and Gospel. Christ for us!

*Omaha, Nebraska
Pastor Tom Jeske
May, 1997
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