

Romans: The Good News of God

God Will Judge Men's Secrets

Romans 2:16

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Scripture

Let's read Romans 2:12-16 and focus especially on Romans 2:16, our text for today:

¹² All who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who sin under the law will be judged by the law. ¹³ For it is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God's sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous. ¹⁴ (Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, ¹⁵ since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them.) ¹⁶ **This will take place on the day when God will judge men's secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares.** (Romans 2:12-16)

Introduction

Even though we are not strongly liturgical in our worship, there are parts of a liturgy that I appreciate. One is found in the invocation that comes from the Anglican Order of the Administration of Holy Communion. It begins:

Almighty God, unto whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid:

I think that is a powerful expression. It reminds us that in a world ordered by an omniscient God there are, in the final analysis, *no secrets*. We may have secrets, hiding from others what we are or do. But there will be no secrets on the Day of Judgment when all secrets will be brought to light before God.

Lesson

The idea that God is omniscient and that we have no secrets before him is the essence of today's text. Paul tells us that God will uncover all our secrets on the Day of Judgment in Romans 2:16: **“This will take place on the day when God will judge men's secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares.”**

I. The All-Knowing God

The Bible teaches that God knows all things—even now.

God spoke of the Jewish people to Isaiah, saying, “For I *know* their works and their thoughts” (Isaiah 66:18, *KJV*).

King David wrote of himself: “O LORD, you have searched me and you *know* me. You *know* when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you *know* it completely, O LORD” (Psalm 139:1-4).

The author of Hebrews declared: “Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account” (Hebrews 4:13).

This is one reason why non-Christians repress their knowledge of God, as Romans 1:18-20 declares they do. We looked at this when we were studying those verses. If God knows all things (as he must if he is God), he knows us not as we wish to project ourselves before others, but as we really are. And none of us can stand the thought of such perfect and penetrating knowledge.

In a series of essays called *The Words*, philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre tells how he came to be an atheist. He had been raised in a Roman Catholic home, and as one of his assignments in the Roman Catholic school he attended he had written a paper on the Passion of Christ. When the awards were presented for these papers, Sartre was given only a silver medal rather than the gold. He resented it and blamed God. Sartre wrote, “This disappointment drove me into

impiety. . . . For several years more, I maintained public relations with the Almighty. But privately, I ceased to associate with him.”¹

Then Sartre tells how, during these years, there was a time when he felt that God existed: “I had been playing with matches and burned a small rug. I was in the process of covering up my crime when suddenly God saw me. I felt his gaze inside my head and on my hands. I whirled about in the bathroom, horribly visible, a live target. Indignation saved me. I flew into a rage against so crude an indiscretion, I blasphemed, I muttered like my grandfather, ‘God damn it, God damn it, God damn it.’” And then Sartre says, “He [i.e., God] never looked at me again.”²

That story alone, it seems to me, explains the life and philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre. It is sad and tragic. It is sad because it is mistaken. Sartre says, “He [God] never looked at me again.” That is wrong. God never stopped looking at Sartre. God looks on all things and sees them all perfectly. Actually, it was Sartre who had stopped looking at God.

But the story is also tragic because by turning his back on God, Sartre turned from the one being in the universe who could have helped him.

Sartre’s solution to the problem of being under the gaze of God and of being overcome by natural feelings of shame, fear, guilt, and embarrassment was to banish God from his universe—to become an atheist.

But, friends, this is wishful thinking. If there is a God, as Sartre indirectly admits, then he cannot be banished, certainly not by human beings.

Furthermore, if God is omniscient (as he must be if he is God), then not only has he seen all the evil deeds we have done and known all the evil thoughts we have had, he also remembers them. And one day he will produce them for exposure and judgment before the entire universe.

It is what Paul speaks about when he writes in Romans 2:16

¹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Words*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (Greenwich, CT: Fawcett Publications, 1966), 64.

² *Ibid.*, 64.

of “the day when God will judge men’s secrets through Jesus Christ.”

II. Naked Before God and Man

Let me take you from that future Day of Judgment to one of the very first days of human history. It is the day when Adam and Eve stood before God in the Garden of Eden shortly after having sinned by eating of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

The story is in Genesis 3, but the theme is set in Genesis 2, before the fall, where it is said: “The man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame” (Genesis 2:25).

Clearly Adam and Eve were physically naked. Otherwise the making of fig-leaf clothes for themselves, which we are told about later, has no meaning. But they were psychologically naked too. Adam and Eve were not ashamed in their nakedness *before* they sinned. It was only *after* they had sinned that they were conscious of it.

Why were they unashamed before the fall? The answer is obvious. Nakedness has to do with exposure, not only with external, physical exposure but, more importantly, with internal exposure. They were not ashamed in their nakedness before the fall because they had nothing to be ashamed about.

Before the fall, Adam and Eve were unashamed in three directions.

A. *They Were Unashamed Before God*

First, they were unashamed before God.

Adam and Eve had done nothing that would have been any cause for shame. They were without sin at the time, and their relationship with God was one of complete openness. They delighted to see God when he came to them in the garden. They talked with him freely.

We don't do this, and the reason we don't is because sin has now entered into our relationship with God. Sin causes us to hide from God, as Adam and Eve did when God came to them. Sin causes us to flee from him. We think we can hide from God but we cannot.

Have you ever played "hide-and-seek" with a toddler? I remember when Lauren was about 18 months old. We were playing "hide-and-seek." It was her turn to hide. I counted to 10 and shouted, "Ready or not, here I come!"

As I walked into the living room I saw Lauren hiding behind the sofa between the sofa and the wall. She had wedged herself in head first so that her bottom was sticking out from behind the sofa.

Now, what was Lauren thinking? I suppose she was thinking, "Daddy cannot see me because I cannot see him!"

But, of course, this was not true. I could see her perfectly well. Naturally, I pretended to keep looking around for a while until she finally popped out from behind the sofa and ran to base.

Now, when God was walking around the Garden of Eden after Adam and Eve had sinned calling out to them, "Where are you?" (Genesis 3:9) do you think that God really did not know where Adam and Eve were? No! Of course God knew where Adam and Eve were. He was calling to them so that *they* could become fully aware of their sin. Adam and Eve, like the toddler playing hide-and-seek, might think that God could not see them because they could not see God. But of course God is all-seeing and all-knowing. He saw them perfectly well all the time.

And ever since the fall, men and women have been playing hide-and-seek with God. Some hide in atheism, as Sartre did. Some hide in materialism. Some hide in pleasure. Some hide in drugs. Some hide in money.

All of us try to hide from God. But it is futile because God sees and knows all things.

Are you trying to hide from God? Are you trying to hide by ignoring him? By busying yourself so that you have no time for him? By preoccupation?

Friend, you cannot hide from God. He sees all things even though you may think that he cannot see you.

So, before the fall, Adam and Eve were unashamed before God.

B. They Were Unashamed Before Each Other

But second, they were also unashamed before each other, and for the same reason.

They had nothing to be ashamed about. They had not lied to each other. They had not falsely accused one another, as they later did, trying to shift the blame for their sin to others. They had not hurt one another. As a result they could be completely themselves.

Today, no one is completely open in a relationship. In some good relationships we come close. But still, there is a residue of ourselves that we keep hidden even from a spouse or a very close friend. Why? Because we are ashamed, and we fear that if we reveal the fault, the other person will cease to love or to respect us.

Before the fall, Adam and Eve were unashamed before each other. But since the fall, and because sin has entered the world and into our relationships, we find it difficult, if not impossible, to be completely unashamed before each other.

C. They Were Unashamed in Their Own Eyes

And third, Adam and Eve were unashamed in their own eyes.

In those first days, Adam could look at himself and know that he had nothing to hide. And Eve could look at herself and know that she had nothing to hide.

What about us? Today, most of us will hardly stop our mad race through life long enough even to take a brief glance at who we are. Generations ago when people lived more slowly they could reflect on who they were and where they were going. Modern life has intensified the pace. Most of us cannot even come into a room and sit down for two minutes without feeling the need to snap on

the television set or radio to fill our heads with stimulation—anything to keep us from thinking and appropriate introspection.

The reason we want “noise” is that we do not want to consider that we are naked before God and that nothing is hidden from him before whom we must give account.

III. Hidden from God

What we are and do comes out in the continuation of the Genesis story. Adam and Eve sinned, in spite of the warning God had given them concerning the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. So when God came to them in the garden, they hid themselves—or at least they tried to.

Actually, they had already tried to hide, first from themselves and then from each other. They did it by trying to make clothing from fig leaves.

The very first effect of sin was the opening of the eyes of Adam and Eve to perceive that they were naked, in response to which “they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves” (Genesis 3:7). In other words, as sinners they found their psychological exposure intolerable and tried to cover up. At first they used leaves. Later, when God appeared to question them, they used evasions and excuses and tried to shift the blame to each other and even to God.

After they had sinned, Adam and Eve did the best they could to cover themselves with good works. They made their clothes from fig leaves and they tried to cover themselves by their “fig-leaf righteousness.” It was a way of saying, “We are all right. We are not sinners. We are good people.” Well, as long as it was just the two of them, they got by, since they were both sinners. But the fig leaves were utterly inadequate when they finally stood before God, just as our good works will be utterly useless at the judgment.

I do not know what happened to those fig leaves when God finally appeared to Adam and Eve and called them to stand before him. Perhaps they fell off. But whether or not they did, they might

as well have, for nothing could have hidden from God what they were or had done.

So it will be in *our* judgment. We commit our sins in secret. We present a false face to the public. We declare that God does not exist. We brand ourselves atheists or agnostics. We think we are safe. But we do not need reporters hiding in the bushes to observe what we are doing and report it in the *National Enquirer*. We do not need a talk-show host to reveal our cover-up transactions. God knows. God remembers. And one day he **“will judge men’s secrets through Jesus Christ.”**

What a dreadful last scene to human history!

The Psalmist said, “If you, O LORD, kept a record of sins [and he does], O Lord, who could stand?” (Psalm 130:3).

IV. Naked—Yet Clothed Before God

I come to the climax of the story of Adam and Eve’s sin, and it is chiefly for this reason that I tell it.

God told Adam and Eve that the punishment for their eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil would be death. But when he confronted them in their sin and exposed it, the death he had promised fell not on them but on a substitute. And here is a truly thrilling point: *It was with the skin of the substitute that they were clothed.*

The Bible tells it tersely, saying, “The LORD God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them” (Genesis 3:21). The text does not indicate what animal (or animals) God killed in order to get the skins with which he clothed Adam and Eve. But, in view of the development of this idea later in the Bible, it seems to me that God used the skin of a lamb.

Certainly, the incident is meant to point to Jesus Christ as the only sufficient cover (atonement) for sin, and Jesus is pictured as “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). Whatever they were, God must have killed animals in order to have the skins with which he clothed our first parents.

Think what this must have meant to Adam and Eve. Their first thought, when they saw the animals lying dead in front of them, must have been, “So this is what death is!”

They must have regarded the scene with horror. God had told them, “You must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die” (Genesis 2:17). But since they had not witnessed death before this, because death had not yet entered the world, they may not have taken God’s threat seriously. Now suddenly death was before them, and they must have sensed for the very first time just how serious it is to disobey God.

In that instant it must have dawned upon them that if death is the result of sin, then sin is far worse than anything they could have possibly imagined. Moreover, *they* were sinners, and their sin was damnable.

But there is something else that must have gripped them in that instant, and that was a deep and growing wonder at God’s mercy. God had told them that their sin would be punished by death. And it was! But wonder of wonders, it was not themselves who died, but the animal. They had broken God’s law. God had every right to take their lives in forfeit of his broken commandment. But instead, he showed that that there could be a substitution. An innocent could die in their stead.

And there was another marvel too. They were exposed as sinners. All the secrets they had were revealed. But although their sins were exposed—their nakedness was a symbol of it—they did not have to remain naked. Rather, God clothed them with the skin of a slain animal.

So they were both exposed and covered at the same time.

Conclusion

This is what must be done for us. We cannot escape our guilt. The guilt is there and is well documented. We can try to deny it, but everything in our lives, culture, and psychological makeup will

refute the denial. We show our guilt by doors and blinds and shower curtains and the clothing industry—as well as by calculated attempts to hide from one another. These patterns testify to the truthfulness of God's Word.

But the gospel tells us that God deals with this guilt. He does not just deny, forgive, or forget it. He deals with it in Jesus Christ. Christ died for sin; the penalty for sin has been paid. Now God clothes those of who believe in Christ with Christ's righteousness, as the hymnist says:

Jesus, thy blood and righteousness
My beauty are, my glorious dress;
'Midst flaming worlds, in these arrayed,
With joy shall I lift up my head.

Whoever you are, the day is coming when you will stand in the judgment court of God, and God will judge even the deepest secrets of your heart.

How will you manage on that day? You can appear before God in only one of two ways. Either you will stand before him in the righteousness of Christ, your sin atoned for by his death, or you will stand in the horror of your own spiritual and moral nakedness.

The Bible speaks of people who will be like that. It describes their terror. "Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. They called to the mountains and the rocks, 'Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?'" (Revelation 6:15-17).

Do not wait until the day when God will expose and judge all secrets. Flee to Christ for his righteousness today. Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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PRAAYER:

Almighty God, unto whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid: Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your Holy Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

CHARGE:

Go and glorify God in all that you think, do, and say! And as you do, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.