

THE PERFECT KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

Psalm 19

Isaiah 1:1-4

The vision concerning Judah and Jerusalem that Isaiah son of Amoz saw during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah. Hear me, you heavens! Listen, earth! For the LORD has spoken: "I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me. The ox knows its master, the donkey its owner's manger, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand." Woe to the sinful nation, a people whose guilt is great, a brood of evildoers, children given to corruption! They have forsaken the LORD; they have spurned the Holy One of Israel and turned their backs on him.

Psalm 19:1-4; 7-14

The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they reveal knowledge. They have no speech, they use no words; no sound is heard from them. Yet their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world. In the heavens God has pitched a tent for the sun. The law of the LORD is perfect, refreshing the soul.

The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple. The precepts of the LORD are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the LORD are radiant, giving light to the eyes. The fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever. The decrees of the LORD are firm, and all of them are righteous. They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the honeycomb. By them your servant is warned; in keeping them there is great reward. But who can discern their own errors? Forgive my hidden faults. Keep your servant also from willful sins; may they not rule over me. Then I will be blameless, innocent of great transgression. May these words of my mouth and this meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer.

Romans 1:18-20;24-25

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, 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 people are without excuse...

Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen.

MESSAGE:

Which is more important for a Christian: what he knows about his religion or how he feels about it? Is saving faith a matter of the heart or of the head? The answer is, of course, that it is both. True religion involves a heartfelt faith, but it also involves knowledge. What we believe is just as important as how fervently we believe it. After all, we're not saved by our believing--we're saved by the One we believe in—the crucified and risen Jesus Christ.

If our religion is limited to "head knowledge," we end up with a dry and dispassionate faith which moves nobody—including ourselves. Even the demons know the facts about Jesus

Christ and God, yet they are bound for destruction. On the other hand, if our religion is all emotion, we lose discernment and become suckers for every new theological novelty that comes along. The cults are full of people like this—people who openly say: “I don’t care if Mary Baker Eddy’s or Joseph Smith’s or Charles Russell’s ideas are weird and conflict with history or even if every single one of their prophecies has proven wrong, I still believe them because I have decided to do so. This isn’t theology, it’s “me-ology”: believing something or someone simply because it pleases one to do so. That may be fervent belief, but it isn’t saving faith.

The simple truth is that God gave us the ability to feel and the ability to think as two distinct ways of understanding Him and He want us use them both.

We live at a time, however, when people tend to trust their hearts more than they do their heads—especially when it comes to religion. How often have you heard someone say “I *feel* that thus and thus is true,” rather than, “I *think* that thus and thus is true.” When church shoppers are asked what they look for in a church, many say something like, “One that makes me feel good.” Churches have responded to this expressed—dare I say “felt”—need by offering worship services which are designed primarily to arouse positive feelings—especially excitement—rather than convey knowledge. Worshippers rate the worship experience in terms of how it made them feel rather than what they may have learned. Every Sunday becomes a quest for a “mountaintop experience.”

Now there is nothing wrong with mountaintop religious experiences; even Jesus provided a few for his disciples. But there is a problem—a serious problem—with making the pursuit of emotional highs the main point of worship. The God of the Bible is a God of balance and of order. He wants us to grow in knowledge as well as in passion for our Savior. When we exclude the importance of knowledge and look mainly to our emotions, we ignore a vital component of spiritual growth. We become like children who try to get all their nourishment from ice cream and cake.

The popular emphasis on the emotional aspect of worship in churches, and the downplaying of the importance of teaching doctrine is part and parcel of a pervasive and extremely dangerous intellectual current in modern society. This current goes by different names—postmodernism, deconstructionism—but its basic message is that there is no such thing as objective truth—only different perspectives. Those who subscribe to this idea—and it is particularly appealing to young people—are suspicious of any claims to absolute truth. They have become convinced that there can be “many truths”: your truth, my truth and the other person’s truth as well. “You believe “A”; I believe “B”; he believes “C”—and that’s cool as long as we are tolerant of each other’s beliefs—that’s the important thing. In their minds, Martin Luther’s oft-repeated dictum in his *Catechism*. “*This is most certainly true,*” should be replaced with.” “*Whatever.*” Such radical subjectivism is appealing because it seems to offer a safe haven from conflict. If nobody stakes out a claim to absolute truth since all truth is relative—then what can there be to fight about? And if there’s no fighting— isn’t that peace? And didn’t Jesus come to bring peace?

In a word: No. At least not that kind of peace. Jesus came to bring peace between man and God—not between one man and another. Quite the opposite, as today’s Gospel

lesson makes clear. *“Do not think that I came to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law—a man’s enemies will be the members of his own household.”* (Micah 7:6; Matthew 10:34-36) The division that Jesus brought comes from His word which is the truth, as He said: *“If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples. Then you will know the truth and the truth will set you free.”* Nevertheless, *“My word is a sharp two-edged sword, dividing soul from spirit and joint from marrow.”* You see, truth, like the God from whom it comes, is not many, but one. Twenty-five conflicting statements can all be false, but two conflicting statements cannot both be true. Truth—by its very nature—stands alone. Two plus two can only equal four, not more, not less. And since truth stands alone, it causes conflict because it cannot have fellowship with lies any more than light can have fellowship with darkness. And Jesus embodies a truth so pure and unique that he not only divides a man from his neighbor and family members from each other—he even divides us against ourselves: *“...soul from spirit; joint from marrow.”*

And the truth that Jesus brought is this: *“All men have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by His grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.”* In short, He brought the Gospel truth and we need to know this truth in order to be saved from our sins and inherit eternal life. So what’s the problem? We’re all good Christians; we all know and believe the Gospel to be the truth—don’t we? Well—in a way, yes, and in another way, no. Our problem is that not very far under the surface of our love of the truth, we have a way of thinking that sometimes, there is a place for lies. Even when we were without sin in the Garden, when we had the truth straight from God’s mouth, we were willing to listen to the lies of the devil when he flatly contradicted God by saying: *“You’re not gonna die! You’re gonna be just like God!”* And ever since we chose to believe the father of lies rather than the God of all truth, we’ve had a taste for falsehood that abides deep down in our sinful nature. How many times have you debated whether or not to employ a well-intentioned lie rather than take a chance on the truth?

St. Paul described sinful humanity this way: *“...[They] suppress the truth by their wickedness...[and]... exchanged the truth of God for a lie”* (Rom. 1: 18, 25) And herein is a very important fact about our sinful natures: we don’t merely forget the truth God has given us about Himself: we suppress it. There are times when we would rather banish God and His truth from our thoughts because they interfere with our freedom to sin. We would prefer to bury our heads in our sins and ignore God’s wrath over them, convincing ourselves that what we don’t know can’t hurt us. And we end up exactly like Israel in Isaiah’s time, when he said: *“Israel does not know; my people do not understand... They have spurned the Holy One of Israel and turned their backs on Him.”* (Isaiah 1:3-4)

Our minds and our imaginations are so colored by sin that the truth seems ugly to us. Take today’s Gospel lesson, for example. It is not at all appealing to think that Jesus Christ can come between us and the members of our own family and as a result we are tempted to suppress that truth and invent a kinder, gentler theology that allows us to think more congenial thoughts. The truth is only beautiful in a world that loves the truth, and this world does not love the truth—quite the opposite.

So how can we who willfully consign ourselves to ignorance by suppressing the truth be brought to love and honor the truth? Only by a God who refuses to leave us alone in our lies and ignorance. A God who continually seeks us out with knowledge of the truth—and gives us the faith to accept it and trust it. How earnestly does He try to seek us out with the knowledge of the truth? Listen to our Psalmist for today: *“The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work 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. Their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world.”* (Psalm 19:1-4)

God’s truth seeks us out continually through the display of his ordered and designed creation, through the truth of His Word, and through the council of the Holy Spirit. His truth calls us out of darkness into the light of eternal day.

Such knowledge, such truth, is too wonderful for us, it’s true. When we consider the perfect love of our great God for us and how far we have fallen short of deserving it, like the tax collector at the temple, we cannot even lift up our eyes to heaven but only cry out: *“Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner!”*

The perfect knowledge of God seeks us out day and night—the knowledge of His power and majesty which shows us our sins, and the knowledge of our Savior, who shows us His mercy and grace. What can we say in the face of such perfect knowledge? Only this: *“May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight, my rock and my Redeemer.”* (Psalm 19:14)

Amen.