

A Race of Fools

Psalm 53

As you know, Joanne and I were in Colorado last week for the triennial Van Dyke reunion. One of the things that you notice at a reunion are certain distinguishable family traits such as voice, mannerisms, or appearance. The Van Dyke family loves to sing, and it's a highlight for me. At one point we had about 20 of us guys up there as an impromptu men's chorus – and it was terrific. I was commenting to the daughter of one of my cousins how much I enjoy singing with the family. She's a music major at Grand Valley and I said, "There's a distinct Van Dyke tonal quality that I can't quite describe." And she smiled and replied, "Strained?" It's not exactly the word I was looking for, but it fits.

Our text this evening speaks of a distinguishing characteristic of the human family, the human race. The children of men, as a race, descendants of Adam, share a unique, universal, defining spiritual trait. To a person, we share a deep denial of God and subsequent embrace of evil. We are a race of fools.

If you know your psalms, you will realize that Psalm 53 is nearly identical to Psalm 14, with just a few minor differences. Scholars have debated why this is the case, but I think Rick Phillips is right to point out that the Bible uses repetition for emphasis. And I think that's what is happening here. Psalms 14 and 53 contain a critical truth that is essential to the whole gospel message and the redemptive purposes of God. They tell us the core problem with mankind. Paul uses these very words in Romans 3 to summarize the universal human dilemma and the essential necessity for a gospel of salvation by grace alone through faith alone. There is NO ONE who does good. Not even one.

Imagine you are a medical doctor, treating a patient for a potentially terminal disease, but the patient isn't taking their pills. They don't like the pills, and their disease isn't really noticeable. They don't feel any pain, they have energy. And the pills make them feel bad. Your only option, as a doctor, is to communicate the actual, deadly truth of the disease.

That's what God is doing in Psalm 14, Psalm 53, and Romans 3. The Holy Spirit is repeating this basic truth so that we will understand the fatal severity of the human condition and the utter necessity of a gospel of salvation as a gift – not a work.

The Hebrew word for "fool" is "nabal." Consequently, commentators suggest that David may have written this psalm in response to the incident with the man named Nabal, found in 1 Samuel 25. David was on the run from King Saul and asked Nabal, a very wealthy landowner, for some aid, some food and provisions. David and his men had provided

protection for Nabal's shepherds and David was asking for a favor in return. But Nabal responded with derision:

1 Sam. 25:10–11 *Who is David? Who is the son of Jesse? There are many servants these days who are breaking away from their masters. Shall I take my bread and my water and my meat that I have killed for my shearers and give it to men who come from I do not know where?*

Nabal almost certainly was not so named by his parents. No one would name their child "the fool." He got his name the old-fashioned way – he earned it. As Abigail, his wise and beautiful wife freely acknowledged to David, "Nabal is his name and folly is with him." Nabal was the personification of a fool – and a fitting representative of mankind.

While this Psalm may have been inspired by that incident, it is certainly not intended to be limited to it. The psalm indicts not just one man, but the entire human race.

53:3 *They have ALL fallen away...there is none who does good, not even one.*

I. The Fool

David begins this psalm by introducing the fool. In biblical terms the fool is not someone who is silly as much as someone who is spiritually deluded, morally deviant, and intentionally defiant towards God.

"Says in his heart" – The heart is the wellspring of life. It is at the core of a person. It is the seat of our desiring, our choosing, and our deepest commitments and convictions. People are what they are and do what they do because of the heart within them. And the fool holds in his heart a deep conviction: "No God."

"No God" – The words "there is" are not in the original Hebrew. They have been added to make the line more readable in English. But the Hebrew reads, "The fool has said in his heart 'No God.'" Or more specifically, "No Elohim."

No Creator of heaven and earth.

No Lord or King to obey.

No God who fashioned me in his likeness .

No God to whom I owe thanksgiving and worship.

No God who sees all that I am and do.

No God to face on the Last Day and to whom I must give an account.

Now, it would be easy to identify the fool of Psalm 53 with the atheist of our day – men who confidently say, "No God." And they are, without a shadow of a doubt, great fools. Of all the faiths of the world, nothing is more preposterous and utterly confounding than the faith

of an atheist. An atheist stands on God's created earth, completely surrounded by the work of God's hand, he himself made in the very image of God; and yet, in the face of a universe screaming God's name, he boldly declares, contrary to all the evidence around him, that there is no God.

God exposes the utter folly of the atheist in **Isaiah 29:16**:

*Shall the potter be regarded as the clay,
that the thing made should say of its maker, "He did not make me";*

Atheists are great fools and their folly will be gloriously exposed when Jesus Christ rips open the skies and returns to judge the earth.

I think Psalm 53 is helpful to understand the age in which we live. We are living in a particularly "foolish" day as our society increasingly ignores and excludes thoughts of God. Jamie K. Smith, of Calvin College, makes the point we are increasingly living in a society that has no sense of God at all. Millennials are increasingly, thoroughly secularized. As they think about life, about morality and meaning, there is just no second floor. Five hundred years ago, it would have been impossible for a person living in the western world to talk about ultimate issues with no reference to God in some form. To do so today is considered odd and offensive. For instance, if you would object to the transsexual madness by suggesting that there is a God who actually created us as male and female, and that we should honor that, you would be roundly scorned. How dare you bring God into the discussion!

Our culture is rapidly embracing darkness because it has lost sight of the reality of God. The brakes are off.

But this psalm doesn't leave us professing Christians off the hook. In Romans chapter 3 Paul applies those words to Gentiles and professing Jews! The Gentiles have the law of God written on their heart – but they do not keep it. The Jews had the law of God written on their heart and on tablets of stone, read every Sabbath - and they don't keep it either!

Rom. 3:9–12 *What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all. For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin, as it is written:*

"None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one."

You don't need to be an atheist to be a fool. The belief of the Jews was, at heart, just like the unbelief of the Gentiles. Their life was a manifestation of "No God." Religion is no cure for the folly of mankind. In fact, religion can actually embrace and promote it.

Sociologist Christian Smith of Notre Dame spent 15 years studying the religious beliefs of American young people. What he found was that most professing Christian young people actually hold to a religion of "No God." He coined the term "Moral Therapeutic Deism" to describe their faith. They believe there is a God, and that he wants us to be nice to people, but beyond that he isn't real concerned about ethics, particularly sexual ethics. He understands that we are human and need to express ourselves – and loves us anyway. He doesn't interfere but promises to be there for us when we need him.

I just read an article by Rod Dreher in which he pointed out Moral Therapeutic Deism displayed on prime time TV. Apparently one of the contestants on the TV show "The Bachelor" professes to be a Christian, and yet freely acknowledged that she has sex outside of marriage – but feels no shame or fear because "Jesus still loves me."

The fool says, there is no God who sees and is offended by sin and responds in judgement.

I have to confess that I sometimes find this same spirit in me. I know that my thoughts, attitudes, and actions are not pleasing to the Lord, that I need to repent. But I don't feel an urgency to do so. My pride or selfishness or lust or greed feels comfortable. That is a "No God" moment. That is the essential problem of mankind.

II. The Folly

The folly of such a conviction of "No God" is glaringly evident due to the revelation of God in creation:

Psalm 19:1-2 *The heavens declare the glory of God,
and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.*

Day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge.

Furthermore, the Bible says that God has placed eternity in the heart of man. Every man, woman, and child is born with a sense that there is a God to whom they are accountable. There is no evolutionary rationale for guilt, and yet every person experiences it. Yet in spite of all the evidence around us and the inherent, God-given knowledge within us, the fool says, "No God."

Why would the fool insist on “No God”? Has he come to this conclusion through careful consideration of the salient facts? No, the fool comes to this conviction primarily by desire – he doesn’t WANT there to be a God.

Thomas Nagel: “I want atheism to be true...It isn’t just that I don’t believe in God...I don’t want there to be a God; I don’t want the universe to be like that.”¹

Why would you want a universe in which there was no God? Because we want to go our own way, be our own boss, and live as we please.

Aldous Huxley: “I had motive for not wanting the world to have a meaning...For myself, the philosophy of meaninglessness was essentially an instrument of liberation, sexual and political.”²

Rod Dreher: “In my past, I kept my distance from Christianity exactly for this reason — not wanting to submit to Christian sexual morality — but I told myself that I had serious theological doubts about this or that Christian claim. I was a sophisticated self-deceiver; my objections were, deep down, entirely about my refusal to accept and obey teachings that limited my options.”

So, though we know there is a God, we suppress that truth so that we can be our own God. We have willingly deceived ourselves – and we love it that way.

This is the universal predicament of mankind.

53:2 *The LORD looks down from heaven on the children of man, to see if there are any who understand, who seek after God.*

The tense of the verb “look down” suggests a continuous act. No matter what the fool may say in his heart, Elohim is in heaven – and has never once taken his eye off this world. He’s looking to see if there are any who “understand.” Any who grasp the reality of the glory of God.

53:3 *They have all turned aside; together they have become corrupt; (that is, defiled, no longer fit for use)*

there is none who does good, not even one.

Mankind seeks after sex, money, reputation, comfort, and security. They seek careers and music and sports and movies. But not God.

Now undoubtedly, sinful men and women can and do accomplish valuable, honorable,

¹ “The Last Word” by Thomas Nagel, Oxford University Press: 1997

² Huxley, A., *Ends and Means*, 1937, pp. 270 ff.

helpful things.

Plumer: "Many unregenerate men make great proficiency in science, in literature, in the arts of war and peace, of government and civilization. But in religious matters, in his soul's affairs, every wicked man defies every maxim of sound wisdom, every dictate of divine knowledge. Sin is as great a madness as it is a wickedness." (194)

III. The Prayer

53:7 *Oh, that salvation for Israel would come out of Zion!
When God restores the fortunes of his people,
let Jacob rejoice, let Israel be glad.*

As David surveys all the foolishness of sinful man, as he reviews the corruption, as he considers all the abominable acts of men who defy God and desecrate his creation, David longs for a savior. Oh, that salvation would come out of Zion!

And the prayer includes a profession of faith: "When God restores the fortunes of his people, let Jacob rejoice, let Israel be glad."

As David prays, his view is limited to Israel. Salvation was salvation for Israel. This is a prayer that God would send a Jewish Messiah to redeem Israel. But David's prayer was answered in greater fashion than he could've imagined. Jesus was the Savior come out of Zion. He was born in Bethlehem to a Jewish virgin named Mary. But Jesus was sent not only to make Israel glad – he was sent to make the nations glad.

As Paul so masterfully describes in Romans 3, Psalm 14 and 53 indict all of humanity – not just the foolish Gentiles. There are none who do good. Consequently, salvation by grace alone is our only hope. Salvation has to be a **free gift**, or we cannot be saved!

The glory of the gospel is that Jesus did not come for the righteous, he came for the fools. He came for people like you and me, people who by virtue of our sinful nature have denied the truth of God; people who have lived at times as practical atheists, who have our own way, refusing to live under the sovereign lordship of Elohim. We have said and done abominable things. We have violated God's holy law and desecrated his good creation.

But the glory of the gospel is that God sent his son into this world not to condemn the world but that through him the world might be saved. The glory of the gospel is that at just the right time Christ died for the ungodly. The glory of the gospel is that God loved this foolish, corrupt world and gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life. In Jesus Christ we find the "wisdom of God." Jesus is

my wisdom. And Jesus takes us from the race of fools and makes us a kingdom of priests to serve him. Let's do that this week.