

# Our Lives Confirm Humanity's Guilt

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[0:00] This morning, we are going to turn back to Romans. We're going to read again from chapter 1, verses 18 to 21. For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.

For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived ever since the creation of the world in the things that have been made.

So they're without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.

We've been doing a little series recently called Glory, Goodness, Guilt, Grace, and it's just a three-part series where we are thinking about a category known as natural theology.

Now, don't worry if you missed the first part of the series. You'll be able to follow it, no problem, today. Natural theology, as we've been saying, is not so much referring to what the Bible says about nature, so we're not thinking all about what the Bible says about the world, this universe, everything else.

Instead, it's the other way around. Natural theology is talking about what the world tells us about God. And it's based on the assumption that every time we look out there, every time we look at ourselves, we are being spoken to.

[1:23] And that voice is teaching us about God. So there's a quotation we've gone back to each time from William Cunningham, a theologian from about 150 years ago in Edinburgh, and he said, The natural theology is the information that may be obtained concerning God from the natural exercise of our own powers upon ourselves and upon the objects around us.

In other words, he's saying, If you look at the world, look at yourself and think, then we can learn information about God. And so we've been looking at three things.

Glory, first of all. And to think about that, we looked at Psalm 19, where it says, The heavens declare the glory of God. The sky above proclaims its handiwork. Every time we step outside, look up and see the universe, or see that we're part of the universe, it's declaring to us the glory of God. But last week, we thought about goodness, and we were in Acts chapter 14. And in Acts chapter 14, Paul is telling us that the goodness in the world around us is a means by which God bears witness to himself.

And you'll see that then in verse 17. God did not leave himself without witness, but he did good by giving you rain from heaven, fruitful seasons, satisfying your heart. And last Sunday night, we were thinking about how the fact that the good things that we receive in our lives are all speaking to us about God, all bearing witness to God.

[2:48] And also, we spoke about the fact that that our whole categories of moral goodness, of right and wrong, of good and bad, that also speaks to us about God.

It's telling us that if we're going to have these things as categories, as key categories in our worldview, then there has to be a God that defines them. So, the glory of God is seen in the world around us.

The goodness of God is seen in the privileges that we enjoy and in the ethical values that we treasure. All around us, the world is speaking to us about God.

But, we've been saying every time that even though that voice is there, and even though that voice is loud, we struggle to hear it. And often, we choose not to listen to it.

So, we take an object of wonder, the world around us, and humanity has made it an object of worship, whereby we worship either things, stars, sun, or more common nowadays in the Western world, we worship people, and we place them at the ultimate part of our lives.

[3:50] We are more than happy to accept the good gifts that God gives us, but we don't want to conform to the good guidelines that God sets for our lives.

And so, although we see glory, we see goodness, that natural theology is actually teaching us about our guilt. And we made a wee diagram to say that, that glory, the world around us is amazing, it's good, but actually, it's going to expose the fact that we push God away, we don't want to listen to his voice, and that exposes our guilt.

But the arrow at the top is important, because the fact that we're guilty doesn't mean that God's not glorious or good, it actually confirms that he is these things, because it confirms that his standards are perfect, and we fall short.

And so, this is really what Paul is setting before us so powerfully in the chapter that we read.

Natural theology is telling us that God's glorious.

Within that glorious creation, there's so much that's good, but sin has affected our minds and our hearts. Paul says, we've become futile in our thinking.

[5:07] We can pop that verse, that passage up. We've become futile in our thinking. You can see that in the second line. Foolish hearts have become darkened. We've distorted our view of the world around us. We see the glory.

We marvel at the goodness. But we quickly forget about God, and we start worshipping the creature rather than the creator, that you can see in the bottom line there. All of that means that we're guilty. It all confirms our guilt. And so our diagram, which I think should be back there, yeah, it just confirms that cycle that we're caught in. And all of this is reinforcing a key point that we're trying to make through this series, that natural theology is not neutral theology.

Sometimes we make that mistake. We think that natural theology, so looking at the world around us and trying to learn about God, is a kind of neutral territory for us. And people do that when they try to either prove that God exists or to prove that he doesn't exist.

So people have often gone to natural theology, to the world, and thought, okay, we can find proof for the existence of God by doing this, this, this, this, and this. And other people do the opposite.

They're like, well, we can prove that there's no God by looking at the world and saying this, this, this, this, this, and this.

[6:14] And neither of those things actually work because both of them are based on a false assumption. They're both assuming that we can stand on neutral territory and assess the world around us and come to a clear, objective, rational conclusion about whether there is or isn't a God.

You're assuming neutrality and you're thinking that that takes you to a logical and objective decision. The big point we're trying to make is that neutral territory doesn't exist.

We never stand neutral before God. And our minds are finite. We can't, we can't, I think we said this a couple of weeks ago, I said this last week, as an engineer, I could lift an engine out of a quad or something and put it on a, on a, on a workbench and I can look at the whole engine and figure it out.

I can't put the universe on the bench and I definitely can't put God on the bench. We are, we are tiny and we cannot assume that our thinking can lead us to, to, to conclusions that are completely objective and that are completely reliable.

Natural theology is not neutral theology. And as Paul emphasizes, it's even worse that not only are we finite, sin has affected the way we think.

[7:35] And that means that natural theology is always limited in its effectiveness. It's going to teach us about glory. It's going to teach us about goodness. As we'll see today, it'll teach us about guilt. But in order to be saved, we need more than that.

We need grace. And that's why grace is in a wee category of its own because grace isn't revealed to us in natural theology. Grace is revealed to us in the gospel.

And so these are the big points we're trying to make. The world teaches us about glory, but we ultimately need grace. The world teaches us about goodness, but we ultimately need grace. Today we're going to think about how the world teaches us about guilt and that ultimately we need grace. And so we're going to look at this from Romans 1, 2, and 3. And our three headings are grace, guilt, we're focusing on guilt, guilt is denied, guilt is delightful, and guilt is devastating.

So we're going to whiz through this very quickly. First of all, guilt is denied. Now, in our list of three things, glory, goodness, guilt, guilt is kind of the odd one out because glory and goodness sound nice, whereas guilt doesn't.

[8:42] It's kind of an offensive-sounding, uncomfortable, threatening concept. And because of that, because guilt is a kind of unpleasant thing to think about, often our instinctive response is to deny it.

And that's something that you see right through the Bible. In fact, the very first response of Adam to his sin in Genesis 3 was denial. He tried to hide his guilt and deny his responsibility.

You see that in Genesis 3. I won't read it, but you can go back and look at it if you want. Romans 1 just picks up the same thing again. And Paul emphasizes the fact that there's another way that we can deny guilt, not just hiding it to say, I didn't do it.

But what Paul speaks about is the fact that sometimes we actually argue that the thing that we've done wrong isn't actually wrong at all. And so sometimes we'll deny guilt by saying, I didn't do it. And other times we'll deny guilt by saying, well, I did it, but there's nothing wrong with that. And that's what Paul is getting at here, that we not only do things that are wrong, but we give approval to those who practice them.

[9:45] And all of this is just examples of pushing back against the idea of responsibility and accountability towards God. And in terms of how we think about natural theology, boundaries are set by God, these boundaries are good, we transgress those boundaries, our conscience speaks to us, but that is not a pleasant voice to hear.

And so instead, we respond with denial. But there's a massive problem with thinking like this with denying guilt because denying guilt means that we lose moral boundaries.

And that's a massively important thing for us to recognize. Denying guilt means that we lose moral boundaries. If we want boundaries, then we have to accept the concept of guilt if someone transgresses them.

And this applies in loads of areas of life. Paul, in Romans 1, in the last part of the chapter, applies it to sexual ethics. Now, this is obviously a massively controversial subject in terms of, because this is one of the big areas where the Bible is at odds with the way the Western world thinks today.

And we just recognize that. I don't want to dwell too much on that. But just to highlight the fact that today's culture is very much one where there is a strong resistance to boundaries in terms of sexual ethics.

[11:10] instead we want the expectations people should be able to do what they want to do and express themselves in whatever particular way they want to do. The interesting thing is that this is not new. It's actually exactly what the Romans were living with in the first century.

And the patterns that we see in the UK today and in other nations are actually just very much returning to the norms of Greco-Roman culture. Back then and today, same idea.

people want to be able to just fulfill themselves sexually and they do not want to feel guilty about doing that and they do not want boundaries imposed on their lives.

But the huge challenge is what we're trying to emphasize. If you want to eliminate guilt, you have to sacrifice boundaries. If you want to eliminate guilt, you have to sacrifice boundaries.

If you sacrifice boundaries, it moves you towards territory where nobody wants to go. And that applies to every category of moral behavior.

[12:10] It definitely applies to sexual ethics. And again, I don't want to go into this in too much detail at all, but it's in the passage and so we do want to just think about it a little bit. I just want to put a wee arrow up on the screen just now, a wee diagram that just, I think, reinforces Paul's point.

Here we have to recognize that somebody's sexual ethics lies somewhere between these two extremes. And so, on that side, you've got the viewpoint that says absolutely no sexual contact between two people is acceptable.

Now, obviously, that's absurd because the human race would be extinct after a generation if that was the case. So if you said absolutely nothing is allowed, then we're finished. But at the other end is the viewpoint that says absolutely anything is allowed.

And again, if you think about that, you're like, well, hang on. There's a ton of things that are crimes. There's a ton of things that are abusive.

There's a ton of things that are totally inappropriate that I absolutely would not accept. So if you have these two extremes, the nothing and anything extremes, we are not at nothing and we are not at anything.

[13:23] Everyone in here and everybody out there is somewhere between these two extremes. The big question is where are you? And then once you think, okay, I'm here, I'm here, I'm here, I'm

here, the next question you have to ask is why are you there?

In other words, what defines your boundaries in this particular topic? Now Paul is speaking about sexual ethics in Romans 1. You can apply this to any other category of model behavior.

You can have a nothing and anything extremes in terms of anger. You might say that it's never, ever, ever, ever appropriate to be angry. Or you might say you can be angry in any way you want at any time at all.

Nobody can live with either of those extremes. There are certain things that are wrong that should make you angry. If somebody hurts my kids, I'm angry. And rightly so. So nothing is not the option there.

But for me to get angry at any, for me to just get angry whenever I want, in any way I want, and to be aggressive and moody and grumpy and horrible, that's not acceptable either. I've got to be somewhere between the two.

[14:28] Where am I? And why am I there? And so just this question of ethics, it's all about thinking where do we put our boundaries? And this is the big thing that Paul is emphasizing. We have to be somewhere between these boundaries.

And the problem is, if we say I do not want to ever feel guilty about anything, if I do not want guilt as a category in my life, then it's pushing you that way.

It's pushing you further and further towards anything. And it's moving us as a society, and you can see this before your eyes, you can see it before your eyes, it's pushing our society more and more and more towards a state where people are doing things that all of us are becoming increasingly uncomfortable with.

and the only way to prevent our society moving in that direction is to say, look, there's a line that you can't cross. And that's exactly the kind of thing that Paul is getting at.

The whole point here is to emphasize that the world around us wants to deny guilt in a whole host of areas, not just sexual ethics, but in a ton of areas.

[15:45] And as verse 18 tells us, Paul is saying that when we do that, we are suppressing the truth. We are suppressing the truth. And so guilt is denied, but guilt is also delightful.

Now, what do I mean by that? Well, there's actually two aspects to that. There's some people whose minds are tragically kind of, I don't know, there's a level of kind of insanity, I think, where there are some people who just take delight in wicked, evil actions.

And that's just kind of a horribly twisted thing. It's something that you see throughout history, you see it in their own society, and there's some people who just get a kick out of doing awful things, and there's a kind of major mental sort of illness and instability there.

That's not actually what I'm referring to here. What I'm referring to is something else. I'm referring to the fact that there is a sense in which the society that we live in today takes great delight in exposing guilt.

And so on the one hand, society wants to deny guilt, to say, look, don't tell me I'm wrong, don't tell me I'm a bad person, don't tell me that I shouldn't do that, don't set boundaries over my life, don't tell me that I'm accountable.

[17:06] So we want to deny guilt in that way. And yet at the very same time, if somebody does something that's wrong, whether that's a politician or a celebrity or one of us or whoever, there is this pile on, usually on social media, exposing their guilt.

And people love that. They love exposing the guilt of others. They love it. And it happens in so many different ways.

There's just this, like, I don't know how to describe it, but you can see that there's just this absolute thirst to attack those who you disagree with.

So a big example just now of this, particularly in America, is to do with women's sports. So maybe you've seen there's been loads of controversy, particularly to do with women's basketball. And the whole question of whether biological men who identify as trans women should be allowed to compete in women's basketball.

And the majority of people around that basketball world are saying absolutely, yes, they should be able to fulfill themselves. And some of the women have said, no, please, like, this is not, we're not happy with this, we're not comfortable with this, and we can't do this.

[18:27] And you've got some people who have tried to support those women, and they are getting, they are getting a massive pile-on. They are getting attacked and exposed and ridiculed

because of the stand that they're taking.

And you'll have seen that on social media, but it's not just big things like women's sport. Even if someone parks badly at Tesco, people will take a photo, stick it on Facebook, and slaughter them because they park badly.

you'll see all these, I don't know, I'm going to start ranting if I talk about it too much, because the thing is, but all of it's exposing the point, we find guilt delightful, don't we?

Not in ourselves, but in others. And so this is maybe a ridiculous illustration, but guilt is like a cold garden hose. It's very unpleasant if it's aimed at you, but it's actually quite enjoyable if you're pointing it at someone else.

And that's definitely what you see in the world around us today. And this is part of what Paul is actually getting at in these chapters. Romans 1 to 3, the middle of Romans 1 through to the middle of Romans 3 is a wee bit of a hard passage to read because it can be hard to follow Paul's argument, but I want to pick up some of the main things as we move towards the end.

[19:42] Basically, end of Romans 1, Paul is exposing the sin of the Gentiles, and he highlights all these things that the Gentiles, the non-Jews, are doing. And he's recognizing that they're worshipping the creature instead of the creator.

These people are getting it wrong in so many ways. But the Jews were very quick to judge them and to think, absolutely, look at them.

And Paul, as he goes into chapter 2, says, not so fast. Look at you. You who think you are judging, you're passing judgment on all them, you practice the very same things yourselves.

And this is where it's interesting to see that this kind of highlighting of guilt that we see, that Paul recognized between the Jews and the Gentiles in Rome, and that we see in the world around us, it's actually a part of natural theology.

We could call it natural theology with a misfire, because the fact that people are ready to expose the guilt in others is part of natural theology. So right now, supposing one of our politicians, and this happens quite frequently, but supposing one of our politicians was found to have done something corrupt, everybody would say, that's wrong, and we would expose that guilt.

[21:04] That's natural theology. We're recognizing that that is wrong, that there's a category of truth and righteousness and justice that they should conform to, and when they don't, they are guilty.

And so we are exercising natural theology when we say that, but there's a misfire, because we think that judgment is right and real, and so we want to judge them.

But the misfire is that the ultimate judge is not us. the ultimate judge is God.

And that's where Paul's pushing us in his argument. And so guilt is denied, guilt is delightful in a sort of corrupt way. I should really have inverted commas over delightful.

But last of all, guilt is devastating, and the clock is also devastating, so I will tie and finish this as quickly as I can. Paul is building up a big argument across Romans 1, 2, and 3, and we didn't have time to read it all, and it is a little bit of a complicated argument to follow.

[22:15] I'm going to just summarize it very quickly so you can see the gist of what he's saying. Basically what he's trying to do is to say, look, Gentiles have done lots of things that are wrong, their guilt is exposed, but Jews, you've done exactly the same thing.

And so his big argument is not to say Gentiles bad, Jews good. His big argument is that you say Gentiles, Jews actually doesn't matter. All of us are guilty before God.

And he kind of splits humanity into repeated categories in his argument. And so I'm just going to put it on the screen and I'm going to run through it. So I can't show you the verses just now because we'll be here for too long, but this is just to summarize.

These are the questions that Paul is asking as he makes his argument. He's basically saying to his writers, to us, are you ultimately the judge or are you going to be judged, A or B? Answers B.

He then goes on to say, okay, if you're going to be judged, have you always done good or have you not always done good? Answers B. Okay, are you apart from the law and therefore excused as if to say, well, look, the law doesn't apply to you, so you're actually fine, or are you actually under the law and accountable to the law?

[23:24] Answers B. And he says, look, the Jews, you've got the law written on tablets of stone, Gentiles, it's written on your conscience, on your heart. And because of that, if we're under the law and accountable, are you able to boast and rely on your own obedience and say, well, actually,

yeah, I'm under the law, but I've never done anything wrong, or are you actually guilty of disobeying one or more aspect of the law?

Answers B. And that culminates in the final question, are you excused or are you condemned? The answer is B. Key point here in terms of the argument is that it's always B.

The answer is always B. For Jew, for Gentile, for us, it's all B, B, B, B, B. And Paul's argument is this devastating pronouncement of guilt for everyone.

And so you go into chapter three, I'll put it on the screen, you say, now we're better off? No. We've all sinned. None's righteous, not one. All are guilty. All are guilty.

I've fallen short of God's glory, you see the same emphasis in 18 to 19, is it there? 19 to 20, that we're left speechless before God.

[24 : 39] Every mouth is stopped. The whole world is held accountable to God. And so there's just this devastating argument from Paul. This is the devastating effect that sin has caused.

It's evidenced all around us in natural theology. It's confirmed in Scripture. It's a watertight argument. We're all left without excuse. So in Romans 1.20, you can see that we're left without excuse.

In Romans 3.19, we are left with nothing to say. We are accountable and condemned. The guilt is devastating. So this argument is hard to hear.

It's a hard truth from Scripture. And it's pointing us to the fact that our comparison point is never with the person beside us.

We can always find somebody who's messed up more than we have, or who's more irritable than we are, or whose life is in a worse state than ours. The comparison point is never with the person beside us.

[25 : 44] The comparison point is with the perfection of God's moral standards, and we do not match up. The guilt is devastating.

And so what happens next? Well, Paul, from Romans 1.18 through to Romans 3.20, is just absolutely pounding humanity with this argument that culminates in the devastating conclusion that implicates the whole of humanity as guilty before God.

That's Romans 3.20, which is there. And what's the next word? But. And we should shed tears of joy and thanksgiving that the next word after Romans 3.20 is but.

But now, the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the law and the prophets bear witness to it. The righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.

For there's no distinction. For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and are justified by his grace as a gift through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

[27 : 15] The whole gospel rests on the fact that God has said but now in Romans 3.21. And in it, it's revealing that God has provided a way of salvation for people who are utterly helpless because because we're not actually saved by the law.

We're saved by grace as a gift. And this takes us back to our diagram that if we just have natural theology, if we just have glory, goodness, guilt, it's a cycle of doom for us because yes, we can see God's glory and yes, we can enjoy his goodness but when we compare our lives to his standards, we're guilty and that just confirms his glory because it shows his standards are perfect and we want to enjoy his goodness but we just confirms our guilt and so the cycle goes on and the only solution is grace.

A message of grace that triumphs over guilt. A message that is the greatest demonstration of the goodness of God. A message that confirms why God gets the glory now and forever.

And that's why the amazing message of the gospel is not make sure you're not guilty because that's never what God expects of us.

The message of the gospel is trust in me and I will forgive you and I'll pour my grace into your life. Glory, goodness and guilt are all triumphed over by the amazing grace revealed in Jesus.

[28 : 54] Amen. Amen.