

## TASTE & TRUTH: How We Know it's OK to Devour French Fries but Not French People

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Theme: We live in an age of deception where we have reduced truth and morality to personal taste or choice. Whereas the Christian worldview claims that there is a transcendent truth and morality rooted in the absolute of a holy and righteous God.

Text: Romans 1:18-23

In this fifth message in our series on worldview, let me come right out of chute with the thesis I want to develop. We live in an age of deception where we have reduced truth and morality to personal taste. This is in diametric opposition to the Christian worldview that claims there is a transcendent truth and morality rooted in the absolute of a holy and righteous God.

Yet before I get into the more sinister side of "truth reduced to personal taste", let me gladly affirm that there is a benign form of this relativism that comes under the heading of *"live and let live."* It was Rodney King who made famous the line, *"Can't we all get along"*. We live in a democracy grounded in the freedoms of speech, press, and religion that calls us to respect each other's points of view and way of life. Rightly there are appeals for tolerance and civility when the shriek level gets too high. To a limited extent I am a fan of news talk shows on radio and television until there ceases to be an intelligent exchange of ideas. When the parties on television are simply shouting down each other by shouting over each other, I turn it off. I can't stand the cacophony. As Christians we would want to promote a public conversation and level of intercourse that does not talk past one another, but truly honors the varied perspectives and convictions that people hold. We can affirm this, can't we?

After all, the alternative to free expression of ideas is some form of totalitarianism. We can't imagine a nation with one television station, one newspaper, one political party, with one dominant personage on every billboard.

Yet, it is easy to draw the wrong conclusion from the valued gift of freedom. We can easily buy into the deception that there is no such thing as truth or morality with a capital T. I would argue that the fraudulent "spirit" that has captured our society is a belief that all truths or beliefs are equal. You have your truth and I have my truth. It is all about what works for me. I am the measure of all things. Sometimes you find the spirit of our age summed up in cartoons. Though the comic strip *Calvin and Hobbes* no longer appears in the daily newspaper I am a collector of many of Bill Watterson's witticism.

Calvin, the precocious kid, is talking with his imaginary tiger, a playmate named Hobbes. Hobbes asks Calvin, *"How are you doing on your New Year's resolutions?"* Calvin says, *"I didn't make any. See in order to improve oneself,*

## TASTE & TRUTH: How We Know it's OK to Devour French Fries but Not French People

---

one must have some idea of what's 'good'. That implies certain values. But as we all know, values are relative. Every system of belief is equally valid and we need to tolerate diversity. Virtue isn't 'better' than vice. It is just different." Hobbes, the rational one, replies, "I don't know if I can tolerate than much tolerance." Calvin carries on the theme of our culture, "I refuse to be victimized by notions of virtuous behavior." One standard is no better than another, so goes the today's common wisdom.

Relativism worships the god of Maximum Choice. To experience the wrath of this god, all you have to do is just suggest that one's choices should be limited, that perhaps all options are *not* equal or right.

What form does this wrath take? I have experienced it first hand. It is to receive the worse epithet possible—to be accused of being intolerant. A number of years ago when I was serving as a Presbyterian pastor in the Los Angeles area. There was a church in our Presbytery that was an openly gay, made up essentially of an all male congregation. The time came to present the pastoral candidate for this church to the Presbytery, the approving body. The denomination did not then, nor does it does now, allow avowed, practicing homosexuals to be ordained and installed as pastors or elders in a local congregation. So it seemed to me appropriate when the pastoral candidate was presented to stand before the Presbytery to publicly inquire as to whether this candidate met the approved standards of the denomination. I asked, "Has Rev. Smith been examined as to his personal sexual orientation and practice, and his position on the ordination of avowed, practicing homosexuals?" The chair of the committee responded with a general statement about having followed all the procedures required. Not hearing any specific response to my question, I continued to stand before the Presbytery, saying that I was seeking a specific answer to my specific question. Before the chairman of the committee could reply, I heard this chorus from the members of Presbytery calling me being judgmental, intolerant, narrow-minded and bigoted. "What right do you have to judge?" "We are all sinners in need of grace."

The wrath of the god of Maximum Choice was unleashed upon me. Now, I will be the first to admit that I can be all those things that I was accused of. My wife tells me that this sharp edge shows itself, at times, in a not too attractive fashion, and therefore a spirit of graciousness is something I have constantly asked the Lord for. But because I may not apply truth in a way that does reflect the gracious heart of Jesus, does that mean that we should abandon categories of truth and right by reducing them to matters of personal taste, and slink away because we might be intimidated by the accusation of intolerance. A gift we as Christians give to our culture is a belief in a transcendent truth and morality, which is true whether one believes it or not.

# TASTE & TRUTH: How We Know it's OK to Devour French Fries but Not French People

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## Read Romans 1:18-23

### I. The Trauma of a Holy God (Romans 1:18)

A generation ago Francis Schaeffer wrote a book entitled, *The God Who is There*. By that he meant that there is a Being outside of ourselves to whom we are accountable. In our relativistic age, we think we create God in our own image. I hear people say all the time, "Well, I like to think of God as..." This phrase is usually completed by a picture of a fairly tame and domesticated God who sets a pretty low bar. This god of our making is usually a fairly permissive being who will be as easy on us as we are on ourselves.

In a relativistic age we start with ourselves as the reference point, whereas the apostle Paul has a entirely different starting point. His starting point is that there is a God who has revealed Himself us on His terms. What we believe about God is of little consequence. We cannot create our own reality by projecting characteristics of our liking upon God. It is our responsibility to adjust our reality to the picture of the way God has revealed Himself to us.

The apostle Paul apparently never read the book "*the user friendly gospel*." He didn't go to the Dale Carnegie School of Theology of how to win friends and influence people by sugar coating the truth. Paul writes, "*The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness...*" (Romans 1:18)

If I had entitled this sermon, *The Wrath of God Is Revealed*, you might have found other things to do this morning. In our overemphasis on the love and grace of God in our therapeutic age focused on feeling good about ourselves, we might think that wrath is unbecoming of God. This is because our reference point for wrath and anger tends to be the destructive ways we have seen it expressed in ourselves, which frightens us, or perhaps we have been victims of another's rage. Yet when we speak of the *wrath of God* we must rid ourselves of the image of ranting, raving and flailing God. Biblically, the wrath of God is an expression of God's holiness or purity. It is God's personal divine revulsion and vigorous opposition to evil.

Unfortunately this opposition toward evil is focused on us, who in our sin and prior to being forgiven by Christ, are described as "*ungodly and wicked*". This is Paul's general summary of the state of humanity apart from God. *Ungodly* simply means those who are "*against God*". This is the untamed and undomesticated God so well pictured by C. S. Lewis as a Lion in the Narnia Chronicles. C. S. Lewis chose the image of a Lion because of its strength as the

## TASTE & TRUTH: How We Know it's OK to Devour French Fries but Not French People

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King of the Beasts. This is a God who should engender fear because of His purity and power.

In a particular scene in Lewis's first book in the series, *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe*, Mr. and Mrs. Beaver, two talking animals, prepare two of the children, Susan and Lucy for their first encounter with Aslan, the Lion, and the Christ figure in the story. When Susan finds out that Aslan is a lion she says, *"Ooh, I thought he was a man. Is he quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion."* Mrs. Beaver replies, *"That you will dearie. And make no mistake, if there's anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knee's knocking, they're either braver than most or else just silly."* Lucy continues, *"Then he isn't safe?"* Mr. Beaver says, *"Who said anything about being safe? Of course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the king, I tell you."*

What does Paul tell us about our psychological response to the trauma of holiness? *"The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the ungodliness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness..."* When we don't want to face something in ourselves, what do we do? We suppress, or try to hide from the truth. We refuse to look at it. The word *suppress* here means to hold down, press below the surface, push out of consciousness. It is our way of running from God. What was the response of the original couple, Adam and Eve, after rebelling against God by eating the forbidden fruit? *"Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God in the cool of the day, and they hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden" (Gen. 3:8)*. The first couple were fugitives from God. This passage could literally be translated that *"they hid from the face of God"*. They did not want to be looked at, make eye contact with the Lord, to come under God's gaze in their shame.

As unholy people, being in the presence of the holy is unnerving; being around "the standard" is unsettling. Let me illustrate this. Who is the most hated student in the classroom? The curve breaker, right? You take a test where you knew you did poorly. Then the teacher says that the test will be graded on a curve. You breathe a sign of relief. At least you may have done better than others. Perhaps your 60% will be a "B" instead of a "D" or "F" as it would be on an absolute scale. But there is "the brain", the "goody two-shoes" who scores a 100% on this impossible test. There is the standard. It wasn't impossible after all. How many times have you been in a class where you have risen to your feet and given the "curve-breaker" a standing ovation? Never. Why? Because curve breakers are a reminder of the gap between our score and perfection.

God is that perfection. He is the holy standard. In His presence we feel condemned by our own imperfection.

# TASTE & TRUTH: How We Know it's OK to Devour French Fries but Not French People

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Yet, as much as we might want to press the truth of our unholiness from our consciousness, there is a truth that is evident to all. What is the truth that we suppress? The truth we suppress is that there is a God to whom we are accountable and before whom we are in deep trouble.

## II. No Where to Hide (Romans 1:19, 20)

Paul tells us that ultimately there is no where to hide. Run as we might, everyone knows that there is a God. "...since what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it known 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" (Romans 1:19,20). What is Paul asserting here? Everyone knows there is a God from who we have come and to whom we are related. Intuitively there is an inner knowledge that there is a God who is the creator of all, including us. In other words, forget the intellectual smoke screens; never mind the bluster and bravado; the well reasoned arguments against the existence of God...everyone knows. How? "Because God has made it known to them."

What do we know and how do we know it? Paul tells us that through natural revelation (the revelation of nature or creation) comes the marvel of the created order and that there is must be an eternal power in the form of a divine being who is the author of it all. In other words, when you watch the sun drop below the horizon while standing on a Hawaiian beach, or peer into the vast expanse of the Grand Canyon, or celebrate the wonder of childbirth, we know that this could never be a colossal accident. In our beginning Philosophy classes in college where we studied the arguments for the existence of God, one of them was the argument from design. This is Paul's argument.

Yet Paul speaks of a knowing that is more than analyzing the data, or scientifically studying the wonder of the structure of creation. He is saying that there is a knowledge pressed upon our hearts that is a universal truth. We know in our inward beings that there is a Divine Being to whom we are accountable and for whom we were made. Sometimes this knowledge sneaks up on us when we are unawares. For those of the World War II generation among us, you might recall the name Whittaker Chambers. For 13 years in the 1920's and 30's he was a member of the communist party, and therefore a committed and vocal atheist. In 1938 he abruptly left the communist party. In His book *Witness* he says that genesis of this change occurred while watching his infant daughter in her high chair: "*She was the most miraculous thing that had ever happened in my life. I liked to watch her even when she smeared porridge on her face. My eye came to rest on the delicate convolutions of her ear--those intricate, perfect ears. The thought passed through my mind: 'No, those ears are not created by any chance*

## TASTE & TRUTH: How We Know it's OK to Devour French Fries but Not French People

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*coming together of atoms in nature (the Communist view). They could have been created only by immense design.' The thought was involuntary and unwanted. I crowded it out of my mind. But I never wholly forgot it or the occasion... I did not then know that, at that moment, the finger of God was first laid upon my forehead."* That is the knowing of which Paul speaks.

Some of us see the hand of God in creation, and others seem blind to God's presence all around us.

The poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning sarcastically captured this distinction in her well known verse,

*Earth's crammed with heaven,  
And every common bush afire with God,  
But only he who sees takes off his shoes,  
The rest sit around it and pluck blackberries.*

Yet Paul says that there is enough witness of the presence of God through creation that we are held accountable for what we know. **"So men are without excuse."** No one will be able to say when we stand before our Creator that we did not have enough evidence.

### III. Removing the Trauma of the Holy

How do we psychologically handle an unbearable truth of a Holy God? What do we do with a Holy God whose presence is a moral threat?

We do not cease to believe in God, we simply recreate a god who is not a threat. *"For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish minds 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" (Romans 1:21-23).*

Note, first, that Paul says that by abandoning the true God, we humans don't cease to be worshippers. Human beings are incurable worshippers. We will worship something. There will always be something that demands our ultimate devotion. We can't get away from worship. The question is—is it worthy of our devotion?

Secondly, Paul is saying something very controversial here. We may conclude that since humans are inveterate worshippers that this must be a sign of our hunger for the true God. In every place and every culture there are

## TASTE & TRUTH: How We Know it's OK to Devour French Fries but Not French People

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religious shrines and devotees. Look eternity is placed in the heart of man and therefore we are all true God seekers. Paul is saying, "Don't let that fool you." Worship in its many forms is not a sign of our longing for the true God, but our rebellion against Him. Eugene Peterson translates Romans 1:23 like this, *"They traded the glory of God who holds the whole world in his hands for cheap figurines you can buy at a roadside stand."*

This is our way of handling the trauma of the Holy. If you can't give glory to the true God, reduce Him to a size we can handle. Ray Stedman, the late pastor of Peninsula Bible Church, captured our desire for a scaled-down God like this, *"I would like to buy \$3.00 worth of God, please. Not enough to explode my soul or disturb my sleep, but just enough to equal a warm cup of milk or a snooze in the sunshine. I want ecstasy, not transformation. I want the warmth of a womb, not a new birth. I want a pound of the eternal in a paper sack. I would like to buy just \$3.00 worth of God, no more."*

C. S. Lewis puts it a little differently. He says that instead of a Father in heaven, we would rather have grandfather. A grandfather is a doting benefactor who likes to see young people enjoying themselves and whose plan for the universe is to say at the end of each day, *"A good time was had by all."*

Relativism is ultimately humanity's way of taming the Holy and thereby reducing its threat. Since we each are the brokers of our own truth--I have mine and you have yours--there is no truth out there to which to be accountable. Satan has pulled off the ultimate double deception. (1) Not only do I actually become the designer of my own reality, (2) there is no objective reality that I need to seek to know. There is no destination at which to arrive, we are told, but the one that satisfies ourselves. I have all the truth I need within me. I am the one who walks along the smorgasbord of the characteristics of god and adds to my plate what I choose. Ultimately that makes me the center of all things. We have overthrown the Power. The coup is complete.

Yet the Bible has another answer as to how we are to remove the trauma of the Holy. It is an answer that fully recognizes the awesome Holy God and yet allows us the relief from our psychological trauma through the forgiveness needed because we violated the standards of a holy God.

The same God who is Holy is the God who has demonstrated his love for us through self sacrifice. The Lion becomes the Lamb. Aslan, the one who induces terror, is the meek one who lays down his life for those who have sinned against Him. Paul later in this same book writes, *"But God demonstrates his love for us in while we were yet sinners Christ died for us" (Roman 5:8)*. While we were in a state of rebellion and before we showed any interest in Him, He came

## TASTE & TRUTH: How We Know it's OK to Devour French Fries but Not French People

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to us in love in the person of Jesus Christ. The Holy God fulfills his own demand for holiness by taking the guilt of our sin upon Himself and pays the price through the death of His own Son. He was the *sinbearer* so that by faith in him, the threat of punishment and condemnation has been removed. The unapproachable God of glory becomes the approachable God who has become one with us.

The Lord calls us out of hiding. To Adam and Eve hiding in the garden, the Lord God said, "Where are you?" This wasn't a question of judgment or condemnation, it was an invitation. Are you hiding in your shame? Are you afraid to face the true God? Is your way of dealing with guilt and shame to reduce the Lion to a pussycat? God's way of dealing with our guilt and shame is to bear it as a substitute, to take it upon Himself.

Darrell Johnson writes, *"On the cross God himself affects the final remedy for sin. We can take refuge from God's awesome holiness in the wounds of Jesus Christ—wounds that touch our very being with forgiveness and cleansing. God's holiness and his love are not in conflict. The love of God is God willing us to know him and then making it possible to remain in His presence. His very essence recoils at our sin, but he chooses for us to enter into a relationship with him in which we are granted the greatest privilege of the universe. Because of Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ we dare to approach the Holy Creator of the universe and address him as "Father."*

Even in our sin, the Lord has made it safe to come. The threat has been removed because God Himself in love fulfilled the demands of His holiness by paying for the guilt of our sin Himself and now calls us out of hiding in mercy.

Some of us have never experienced the true cleansing joy of forgiveness, and continue to experience that static gray of our guilt, because our way of dealing with it is to minimize it by minimizing God and our need. The irony is that it is only as we look full into the face of our holy God and see the horror of what we are capable, and then look into the face of Jesus and see the welcome embrace of his wounds—only then can we truly know the depth of God's love for us.

This is the truth I want to affirm this morning: O, Yes. We worship a fearsome Wonder who has reached all the way to where we are. There is no need to deceive ourselves. No need to tame God or run away from His holiness. There is no need to deceive ourselves. We can come to know God because this is a God whose heart is bigger than any than we could have dared to imagine.