

THE SECRETS OF MEN

by Ray C. Stedman

INTRODUCTION:

I suppose there is one word that Christians use about their experience with Christ which bothers people more than any other word, and that is the word "saved." Christians talk about "being saved."

A lady at a Bible Class said to me:

"Whenever I hear that word, it makes me wince inside, and I feel uncomfortable. I wish they wouldn't talk about 'being saved.'"

Just last week, a man said to me:

"Now, look: If you are going to talk to me about being a Christian, don't talk about 'being saved.' I don't need to be saved!"

Well, I know how they feel. In fact, sometimes I feel the same way. I think it is wise to be careful in the language we use among those who are sensitive in this way.

There are a lot of ways to talk about what happens when Christ comes into the heart without using the word "saved," and yet saying the same thing without offending, and I think we should be careful not to offend.

But, if it is really true that a man doesn't need to be saved, then it is also true that Jesus Christ has nothing to say to that man. There is nothing that he can do for him, because the Lord himself said, "I am come to seek and to save that which was lost" {Luke 19:10 KJV}. That is what he came for -- to save.

Perhaps it can best be explained in that little jingle which says:

Your best resolutions must wholly be waived,
Your highest ambitions be crossed;
You need never think you are going to be saved
Until you have learned you are lost.

That is what the opening chapters of Romans attempt to do. In Romans, we learn where we are in God's sight. We are answering the question posed in Romans 1 -- the first question God asked man when our Lord came into the Garden of Eden: "Where are you?" {Gen 3:9 RSV}. And not only are we learning where we are, but also why we are where we are! What makes us act the way we do, and think the way we do?

In Romans 1, Paul points out that the first hindrance which keeps men from God is man's reaction to the revelation of God. Paul puts it in these terms, "men suppress the truth" {Rom 1:18b RSV}. That is, they hold down, they restrain, they repress within their own hearts the truth about God that they know. This opening chapter of Romans is devoted largely to a recognition of a universal knowledge of God that men have everywhere. There is no such thing as an atheist.

Even the Communists -- who are making the biggest possible demonstration of pretending that there is no God -- continually reveal, in little things they say, that they too recognize God. When Khrushchev was over here, he used the name "God" on frequent occasions; and even Stalin one time, when news came to him of a battle that was won, cried, "Thank God!"

As G. K. Chesterton points out, it is impossible to swear properly without reference to God. Imagine ripping

off a round oath in the name of natural selection, for instance.

So, you see, there is a knowledge of God. And there is enough knowledge of God in the conscience of man, and in nature around, to induce a spirit of reverent worship if it is followed. But men refuse to recognize this knowledge, and this is the basic human sickness that grips our race. They suppress and smother the truth they know by permitting wrong actions and wrong attitudes in their lives.

I shouldn't say, "they," I should say, "we." We do this, don't we? Even Christians do it!

Now, any psychologist can tell you that truth which is suppressed or smothered -- refused recognition -- always creates serious tensions and complexes in the life. Men become ridden with guilt, they become restless, they become dissatisfied, and torn with inner tensions. This is why we see the continuing phenomenon in human life of men all over the world continually being beset by the same problems -- troubled with guilt complexes -- with restless, unsatisfied spirits. Man's reaction to this is to run even further from God, to crowd him out of his life, to reason him away (if possible).

As we saw last week, the most violent rejection of God is almost always done in the name of education, of reason, or of philosophy. We try to crowd God out of our lives, though we don't actually wish to completely eliminate him. There are very few people who are willing to shake their fists into the heavens, and say: "There is no God." Or, "We don't want God!" Usually what we do is to put him way down on the list -- until after our second heart attack -- then we are ready for God!

And the result of that is predictable. When man is without the restraint of love for God, or fear of God, then he goes the limit in his reactions. The awful list that we have at the close of Chapter 1 is the record of the possibilities of evil that lie hidden in every human heart. These are now becoming more and more visible, I think, as this nation gradually drifts from its moorings and uses up the capital of our forefathers' spiritual heritage.

THE SECRETS OF MEN:

Chapter 2 presents another reason why men do not readily find God today. Paul points it out right at the beginning: That is, our tendency to point the finger at someone else -- the amazing ability to find someone whom we consider worse than we are, and to ask God to concentrate on him and leave us alone.

You'll notice this in Verse 1 of Chapter 2:

Therefore you have no excuse, O man, whoever you are, when you judge another; for in passing judgment on him you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things, {Rom 2:1 RSV}

All of us know someone whom we consider a little bit lower on the ethical scale than we are, and what a comfort they are to our hearts! Every time our conscience gives us a little stab, we immediately remember these people, and we take courage, and feel a lot better. If we analyze our thoughts, we find that we secretly feel God has no right to bother us while these people are around. Let him concentrate on them! They are the ones who need it!

Have you ever noticed how frequently this attitude is encountered? When you are stopped by a traffic cop, and he comes up beside your car, you say to him, "Officer, what are you bothering me for? Why don't you go out and catch some of the teen-age speedsters, and leave us law-abiding citizens alone?" I haven't checked on this, but I am sure that, if you asked a traffic cop, he would tell you this is the most frequent excuse he receives. We all want a lightning rod that will divert the stroke of divine wrath from us, and channel it off to someone we consider a little more worthy of it.

Now, Paul's answer to this is to show us the way God deals with men; and, in a most remarkable passage, he sets forth five principles of God's judgment in the first sixteen verses of this chapter. Let's look at these principles:

According to Truth:

The first one is that God judges according to truth, Verses 2-5:

We know that the judgment of God rightly falls [or, literally, "is according to truth"] upon those who do such things. Do you suppose, O man, that when you judge those who do such things and yet do them yourself, you will escape the judgment of God? Or do you presume upon the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience? Do you not know that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? But by your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day when God's righteous judgment will be revealed. {Rom 2:2-5 RSV}

Psychologists say that we all have a mental image of ourselves, and it is usually quite a nice image. Others, of course, have a mental image of us which ordinarily is quite different from the one we have. Now, which is right? Well, probably neither one, because, what man really is, is what he is before God. It is God who sees man as he really is. God is an utter realist. He doesn't confuse the issue, he doesn't cloud the matter with a lot of semantic obscurity. God sees us exactly as we are. This is why Scripture is so invaluable to us, because here -- in this God-given, God-breathed book -- we see ourselves as God sees us.

This is the answer to Robert Burns famous request:

O, wad some Power the giftie gie us
To see ourselves as ithers see us!

And here is where we can do it. When we read the Scriptures we see God's divine image in man twisted and distorted. We see the way we prostitute his gifts, and we hurt the ones we love. We see how we wreck our own chances. We destroy our own dreams. We see ourselves as we are. And the saddest and most damning fact of all, is that we know we will find this in the Scriptures -- that here is a mirror held up before us to help us see what we are like -- and we don't want to look at it! The truth is that we don't want to know the truth. We would rather go on living in our dream world of fantasy and illusion about ourselves. Often it is only as we are driven by despairing circumstances, or by some grievous calamity, that there comes the moment of truth when we see ourselves as we really are. And the most wonderful place to see it and to find out the truth about ourselves is in the Word of God.

As it says here, God patiently waits to help us see through these delusions. He is patient with us; he is forbearing. He doesn't beat us over the head, and demand that we face the truth. He patiently waits and gently leads, and put us in circumstances where we see these things if we are willing to face the facts. Because he waits so patiently, we fondly imagine that we can go on living in our castle in the clouds forever. But all bubbles burst eventually, and, sooner or later, we discover that all along we were not fooling God one bit -- he sees us for exactly what we are.

God's judgment is according to truth, according to things as they really are.

According to Works:

The second principle is brought out next. Paul says that God judges according to works, Verses 6-8:

For he will render to every man according to his works; to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; but for those who are factious and do not obey the truth, but obey wickedness, there will be wrath and fury. {Rom 2:6-8 RSV}

I think perhaps this passage is one of the places where a man finds some basis for the idea of a great balance sheet. Almost everyone has the idea, even if they have never become acquainted with the Scriptures, that God is conducting a moral weighing maneuver -- that he puts all our good deeds on one side and all our bad deeds

on the other side -- and if the good deeds outweigh the bad, we get into heaven; if the bad outweigh the good, we go the other direction.

I was interested, during the recent breakfast meetings for businessmen, to hear how many of the men said this was their idea of how God worked, and therefore the whole purpose of human life was to try to get in as many good things as possible, and thus outweigh some of the bad things that we really can't help doing, or are driven to do for various reasons. They hoped that the good would outweigh the bad. Perhaps it is from this passage in Romans that the idea comes.

At first glance, it sounds that way, doesn't it?

Let's read it again. God says he "will render to every man according to his works; to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; but for those who are factious and do not obey the truth, but obey wickedness, there will be wrath and fury." But Paul is really only pointing out that the deed reveals the heart. God will judge according to the result of obedience to the truth, or lack of obedience, that is in the life.

Putting it another way, what makes a man do good? It is because he has obeyed some truth, that is the only reason why men do good!

Well, what makes a man do evil? You have it right here: They obey not the truth but obey wickedness. This is why they do evil. This is going back of the deed, into the heart, into the belief. It is simply true that men are what they believe.

Now, I believe there is truth short of the knowledge of Christ that makes a man do good. It is not only Christians who do good. Does that startle you? I think it is true. I think that lack of understanding of this fact is why our young people, coming from Christian homes and a Christian church, sometimes are shocked, staggered, swept off their feet when they get out into the world. They have grown up with the conviction that only Christians are good people, and they discover, when they get out into the world, that there are many good people who are not Christians. There are many people with fine moral lives, men on whose consciences you could ring a gold coin, men honest as the day is long -- but who are opposed to the Christian faith. This shocks young people -- they don't know what to make of it. Perhaps this is because they fail to grasp the fact stated here -- when men obey truth, they do good, even though they do not yet know Christ.

Will God Save Those Who Never Hear?

But here also is the answer to the question often asked: "Will God save a man who lives a good life but never hears of Christ?" No single question about Christianity is asked more frequently than this. And the answer is, in the light of this statement in Romans: "It is impossible to live a truly good life and never hear of Jesus Christ!" Paul states clearly here that if anyone seeks to do good, and is looking for the truth, God "will give him eternal life."

Now, "eternal life" is but a synonym for "Jesus Christ." Christ is eternal life. As John says, "This is the record, that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son," {1 Jn 5:11 KJV}. A little farther on in this same letter to the Romans, we read, "the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life ..." How? "... through Jesus Christ" {Rom 6:23 KJV}, his Son. Therefore, if God gives anyone eternal life, it is only by the knowledge of Christ, his Son. But truth obeyed leads to the knowledge of greater truth, until it leads at last to Christ.

God's Responsibility:

So, what Paul is saying here is that it is God's responsibility to bring those who are seeking good to the knowledge of Christ. And this he does -- we have accounts of it in Scripture:

Cornelius was one like this. As we read in the tenth chapter of Acts, this Roman centurion was a good man -- he was devout, but a pagan nevertheless -- seeking to know the true God. An angel was sent to tell him to send

men to a nearby town and follow their noses to the house of a certain tanner. There they would find a man named Peter, who would come and tell him the gospel.

In the Old Testament, you have Rahab, the harlot {see Josh 2:1 ff}, and others.

There is also the example of the Ethiopian eunuch, in the eighth chapter of Acts {Acts 8:27-39}.

These were eagerly obeying the truth that they had. And, you see, the test of whether a man is really obeying the truth and doing good is to offer him Christ. If that man is good, in the sense that God recognizes, then he will eagerly receive Christ. If he is only a respectable sinner, trying to appear good, he will reject the offer of grace.

"I don't Want this Jesus!"

I remember a Bible Class we had several years ago in the home of a lady who was not a Christian. Through the early sessions of the class she took great pains to let us know how good she was -- how much she did for charity, how kind her attitude was, how tolerant she was, and so on. She never missed an opportunity to let us know how good she was. But, as the classes continued, she began to see every revelation of Scripture focusing upon the person of Jesus Christ. She saw at last that Jesus Christ is the crisis of human history, and that God ultimately weighs everyone in relationship to him. She became more and more withdrawn and cold. Finally, she just burst out in class: "I don't believe this stuff. I don't want this Jesus!" You see, the truth of the gospel drove her to the recognition that she was not good. This is the test -- and she obeyed not the truth.

Without Partiality:

This is not all. Paul says, as the third principle, that God judges without partiality, Verses 9-11:

There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, but glory and honor and peace for every one who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. For God shows no partiality. {Rom 2:9-11 RSV}

That's hard to believe, isn't it?

Really, we don't believe it, but it is true.

God is unmoved by any offers of vicuna coats, refrigerators, or luxury homes -- you can't buy him off. You cannot buy his influence at all; you cannot influence him in any way.

Somebody was telling me about a traffic policeman who pulled a motorist over to the side of a road, and asked to see his license. When he showed his license to him, the cop said, "This license says you have to wear glasses while you are driving. Where are your glasses?" The man said, "I have contacts." The cop said, "I don't care who you know, you are going to get a ticket anyway."

There are many of us who think that if we have contacts in the right places, this will buy off the judgment we deserve, but this doesn't work with God. There is nobody in 'the right place' who can influence him so he will go easy on us. God is without partiality. He is not impressed by breeding, or by ancestry. He doesn't care whether your ancestors came over on the Mayflower, or whether they met it when it arrived -- it makes no difference to him. It makes no difference whether your sins are notorious sins or respectable sins -- he will treat them alike in his sight.

Do you remember Revelation, Chapter 3, where Christ is speaking to three of the seven churches, and he calls one of them "lukewarm" (Verses 15-17)? He says,

"I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were cold or hot! So, because you are neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of my mouth. For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing; not knowing that you are wretched,

pitiable, poor, blind, and naked." {Rev 3:15-17 RSV}

Now, these portrayed here are religious sinners.

I was reading in a thesaurus some time ago the synonyms of this word "lukewarm." One synonym is, "to be indifferent," another is, "to be respectable." That is "lukewarm." What is it to be lukewarm? It is to say, "I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing." This is what it is to be respectable -- to think that you have no needs.

The man who thinks he has need of nothing is the one by far the worst off, for, as God sees him, God says, "You do not know that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked." And God treats the respectable sinner just as he does the notorious one.

According to Opportunity:

There is another principle, the fourth, brought out next. In Verses 12-15 we see that God judges according to opportunity:

All who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law. For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified. When the Gentiles who have not the law do by nature what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness and their conflicting thoughts accuse or perhaps excuse them... {Rom 2:12-15 RSV}

Now, men are continually charging God with injustice because, they say, he condemns men to hell who have never heard of Jesus Christ. This is the most frequently voiced charge against the Christian gospel. We are always hearing somebody say, "Well, what about the heathen who never hear about Christ? How can a just God condemn them to hell without their hearing about Christ?" But, you see, God never condemns anybody on that basis. As we are told right here, "All who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law." That is, if you disobey the truth that you have, even though you have never heard of Moses or of Christ, you perish, not because you didn't hear of Moses or of Christ, but because you have disobeyed truth that you already know -- that is the whole point. If you know of Moses and of Christ, and you still disobey the truth, you perish also, because your condemnation is even greater -- because of the greater light involved. But, as it says here, even pagans have a form of basic law written on their hearts, and this is the basis of God's just condemnation of man. It is because they are not what they themselves know they ought to be. In other words, God judges you, not by some artificial standard of his, but by your own standard.

By your own Yardstick:

Recently, I was down in Newport Beach, teaching a Bible Class in a home. Quite a number of non-Christians were there, and one of them was a man from just across the street. He was a very charming individual, but he had made it known in the neighborhood already that he had no use for Christianity.

As he came in the door, the first thing he said was, "I have come to be the Devil's advocate. I think the Devil needs a representative here tonight." We welcomed him, and told him to curl his tail around a chair, and sit down.

As I began to speak on the opening chapter of Genesis, dealing with God's word to man, I could see in his face that this man had let down his guard. I don't think he was aware of how much he was revealing, but in that man's eyes I saw hunger written like I had never seen it before. At the question time, he, of course, came up with the usual question: "How about those that God condemns who never hear about Christ?"

I answered (to all in the room), "Let me ask you this: Which of you has lived up to your own ideals? --

because God won't judge you on the basis of something that you have never heard, but on the basis of what you already know. Now tell me: Who of you has lived up to his own ideals? Which of you has never deliberately done wrong? Which of you can say that you measure up to your own standard of what you ought to be?"

You could just hear the silence in that room! You see, it is not by some artificial standard that we stand condemned before God; it is because of what we know in our hearts about ourselves. This indicates that God measures us by our own yardstick.

According to the Secrets of Men:

This is confirmed in Verse 16, where we read that God judges according to the secrets of men (the fifth principle):

... on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus. {Rom 2:16 RSV}

Christ will be the judge, we are told. The gospel will be the prosecuting attorney. The charge will be the secrets of the heart that no one knows about but you -- and God.

Samuel Johnson once said, "Every man knows thoughts of himself that he would not tell to his dearest friend." That is true, isn't it? And you know it is not so much the thoughts that come to our mind, because these are often temptations we are powerless to stop, but it is the reception we give them. We sometimes open the door and welcome them, don't we? Instead of driving these thoughts away when they come, we usher them into our living room, and set them down, and ask them to be comfortable and stay with us, and we invite them back again and again; we allow them to dwell there. These are the secret things that we don't want to tell anybody about -- even our dearest friend.

Secrets of My Own Heart:

Let me tell you part of the secrets of my own heart, if I may. I catch myself, every now and then (and I have for years), trying to figure out a way to perform a certain sin (which is particularly alluring to me) without paying the consequences.

Don't look so shocked, because you do the same thing!

I have worked out many ingenious ways by which I can make it "look good" to men, so nobody will blame me if I do this. It is amazing, the variety of ways that a matter can be approached to make it look acceptable to others. But the thing that stops me dead in my tracks is that, though I know I can make it look good to others, God knows my evil heart. And, someday, the thing that I can make look good to men will be seen in all its filth and depravity in his sight, and I will have to acknowledge that this is what it was all the time. Because I know that God knows the secrets of my heart, I am continually checked on this thing.

Now, this the ministry of the Spirit in our lives. Jesus spoke of the day when that which is uttered in secret shall be shouted from the housetops {cf, Luke 8:17} -- and God knows our hearts now, but he will judge them then.

Noah and the Ark:

I was in a class last week talking about Noah and the flood. What a wonderful story that is! What a remarkable man Noah was! And, really, the only difference between Noah and the others of his day was that Noah made room in his life for God. That is all.

It's wonderful to notice that. This man walked with God, and talked with God about everything in his life -- all the little things and all the big things. And, for 120 years, as the ark was being built, God talked to him about the details of that ark as they went over the blueprints together. God would tell him where to put the window,

and the door, and so on, as they worked and walked together.

Now, we read that Noah was a righteous man, but he didn't make himself righteous and then go looking for God. He just let God in, and God made him righteous. That is the whole secret.

But then the flood came. Suddenly the delicate balance of nature was tipped by the evil of man, and the violence that was in the earth. The flood began to form. "The windows of heaven were opened," {Gen 7:11 KJV}, "the fountains of the great deep" were opened; the waters began to rise. Calamity came upon the world of Noah's day, but Noah was safe in the ark -- where God had shut him in.

And I said to the people of the class, "This is exactly what everyone in the room faces!" And this is true for all of us.

Every one of us lives in exactly the same relationship in which the people of Noah's day lived. There is a great calamity coming, that we cannot escape, that will sweep away everything we have. It is as certain and sure as tomorrow morning's sun. It is what we call "death." When it strikes, it will be too late to build an ark. But God is talking to us; God is trying to reach us; God is dealing with us. God is trying to break into our lives in order that we might begin building our ark now.

It was really God who built Noah's Ark, not Noah. Noah just obeyed what God told him. God built the ark, and, in the moment of disaster, it was a place of safety for Noah.

CONCLUSION:

Now, this is what our Lord is telling us he doing today. Why does God tell you this that is recorded here in Romans 2?

Is it because he wants you to despair?

Is it because he wants you to realize that, when you stand before him, there is no chance? Obviously that is true, isn't it? We have no chance of standing in God's sight on our own merits.

Is anyone prepared to stand up, and say, "If God is going to deal with me on this basis, I am prepared to meet him on these terms"? Of course not, all of us know we don't have a ghost of a chance.

But does God tell us this to torment us? Of course not! He tells us this in order that we might give serious considerations to the gospel of his Son, Jesus Christ, because, in that gospel, God has made a way by which he can offer us righteousness which is perfectly acceptable in his sight -- a righteousness that we have nothing to do with ourselves, but which has been obtained for us by the work of another. In the gospel there is a way by which we may stand before God -- perfectly acceptable to him, without any doubt, without any possibility of failure.

Now, that is why God tells us the truth about ourselves.

I watched the faces of the men during those recent breakfast meetings and saw them listening to men like themselves tell how they became aware of the great, empty vacuum in their lives, and how Christ came in and filled their lives. Some of these were men who had not given serious consideration to the claims of Jesus Christ perhaps for years. I saw them grow sober, quiet, reverent, respectful, as they realized that this was what God wanted them to hear.

This is God's message, you see. He tells us how hopeless is our condition in order that we might see how hopeful is the condition in Jesus Christ -- and here he has once for all revealed the utter folly of attempting any other approach. He wants us to see the wonderful completeness of the approach that God himself offers us in Jesus Christ. This is why he brings us to this place, because, here in the gospel of the Son of God, we have the perfect answer to all that God tells us we need.

Prayer:

Our Father, what folly to try to come in any other way! How foolish we would be -- we poor, mortal men -- to try stand in that august judgment day and know that you are dealing with us on the terms outlined here, when our own heart condemns us, when our own life, our own conscience, writes the word "guilty" against us! Lord, how dare we stand on any other basis than that which is in Jesus Christ -- righteousness made without any works of our own, without any merit of ours, but freely offered to us in him! As we come to Christ just as sinners, needing him, we can be saved. Lord, we thank Thee for this. May this be the day of the beginning of life to many who are yet without Christ. May some speak that word of invitation which says, "Lord Jesus, here is my life, here is my heart, I give it to you. Come and enter and save me, for your name's sake." We pray in his name, Amen.

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