

God's Wrath: The Symptoms

Text: [ROMANS 2:17-3:8](#)

Pastor Andrew B. Pigott

[Chinese Christian Church of New Jersey](#)

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Before we consider today's scripture reading, I would like to respond to some of the feedback I received after I preached last week's sermon. There are two points that I would like to clarify.

First, I would like to explain that there is a very important distinction that must be made between obedience and works. Last week I stated that faith and obedience are one and they are the same. Therefore, to say that a certain person lacks obedience is the same thing as saying that person lacks faith. We contradict ourselves when we say that we believe a certain truth and then refuse to obey that truth.

Now the thing that causes confusion in the minds of many people is [EPHESIANS 2:8-9](#). EPHESIANS 2:8-9 says, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast."

When I first heard the gospel, that verse became one of my favorite verses. I used to believe that I could receive God's grace by works. I prayed through the rosary every day. I went to mass more than once a week. Almost every Saturday I would go and confess my sins to a priest. I depended on these kinds of activities and other similar kinds of works to get me the grace I needed to get to heaven. Now when I heard the gospel in college, I was led to believe that the grace I needed to get to heaven could only be received through faith. We are saved by grace through faith. Isn't that what EPHESIANS 2:8-9 teaches?

So it is at this point that confusion enters the picture. People become confused because they equate the "works" mentioned in EPHESIANS 2:8-9 with acts of obedience. And, indeed, the two things appear to be so similar on the surface. But there is a difference between the two. Works are things we do to appease God so that we can gain for ourselves some kind of benefit, even the benefit of going to heaven. Obedience, on the other hand, is an act of worship. We do not obey in order to gain anything. We obey truth because we love the One who has revealed the truth to us.

King Saul is an example of a person who failed to understand this difference between works and obedience. He got the two confused in his mind. Remember the time when Saul decided to do something that appeared to be a good thing on the surface when, in reality, it was an act of disobedience. While waiting for Samuel at a place called Gilgal, Saul offered up a burnt offering to God ([1 SAMUEL 13](#)). That offering was made in an attempt to gain a benefit. He wanted to calm his troops and increase his chances for a victory in battle. However, what he did was not an act of obedience. Later on Saul made a very similar mistake. After winning a battle, he brought back booty that he had planned to use as an offering to God. But just like before, what the King did was not an act of obedience even though it might have appeared to be something good on the surface. Listen carefully to the words of rebuke that Samuel spoke to Saul in [1 SAMUEL 15:22](#). "Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the Lord? To obey is better than sacrifice and to heed is better than the fat of rams." In other words, God wants our obedience. He does not want our works.

The other point I need to clarify from last week's message has to do with the interaction between grace and wrath that goes on in each of our lives. By now you know that I strongly believe wrath is something that every person who suppresses truth will experience in the present regardless of whether or not that person professes to be Christian. And last week we learned from Romans 2 that people who know a lot of truth by virtue of the special revelation they have received are likely to suppress even more truth than the average pagan. That is a scary thought, and it is easy to then conclude that the more truth a certain person possesses, the more wrath that person will experience. And the more wrath that a person experiences, the further away from God he will grow until eventually he will experience the ultimate in judgment, which is eternity in hell.

But, to take the argument that far is utter nonsense. If I am only obeying 60% of the truth that I know, it is true that I am probably suppressing more truth than the average person who does not have special revelation. It stands to reason that the 40% of truth

I possess and choose to suppress is a lot more truth than the average pagan will ever suppress.

However, the wrath I experience when I suppress truth is offset by the grace I experience when I obey truth. The wrath is not canceled, but there is a counterbalance that takes place. So the person I am is the sum total of both the wrath plus the grace that are actively present in my life. We have a tendency to only look at the grace we have received and ignore the wrath or pretend it is not there. But we need to be aware of its presence, and our awareness should cause us to be humbled. That is the main point of application I tried to get across last week. It is so important that I am constantly aware of my failure to obey, because if I lose sight of the wrath that abides in me, then the 40% of truth that I am now suppressing will easily become 45% and then the 45% will become 50%. And then if I continue this downward digression, the net total of who I am becomes negative.

Please remember that I am talking about God's universal principles of judgment and not mathematical axioms. There is no way for you to calculate the exact amount of wrath and grace present in your life. There is no way for us to keep an exact account of the sum total of things just so we can be assured of squeaking into heaven after we die. We can't plan our lives the same way we plan our personal finances. It is extremely dangerous and foolish for us to treat these universal principles in that way. The fact that the wrath of God is an ever-present force in our lives should cause us to make every effort possible to reduce the amount of truth we are suppressing.

I hope that this brief response to some of your feedback from last week's message will help make things a bit clearer. These are deep truths. And for that reason relatively few people take time to think about them. I am so thankful that some of you are thinking about them for the first time. And I am thankful for those who took time to respond to my message by asking me questions.

Now today we will continue on with the theme of God's wrath, so there will be even more for us to think about. Two weeks ago we considered the universal principles of God's wrath as they apply to people without the special revelation of God's truth. At the end of Romans 1 there is a list of things that most of us would categorize as perverted behavior. And it is perverted behavior, but it is also a revelation of what people have become as a result of choices they have made. It is a revelation of God's wrath. People do

terrible things without realizing what they are doing is terrible. But that does not make them innocent. For every person who commits a sin without realizing what he is doing is wrong there was a time when he did realize what he was doing was wrong; nevertheless, he chose to suppress the truth he knew.

Now, in Romans 2 we see that the same principles of universal judgment also apply to people like us who do possess a lot of special revelation. We are the privileged keepers of the Oracles of God. We did not choose this status any more than the pagan chose to be in a place where he would never be exposed to the Holy Scriptures. God chose us to have this privileged status.

As privileged people, we have made our choices. All of us have chosen to obey some amount of Biblical truth that we know, and all of us have chosen to suppress some amount of Biblical truth that we know. Perhaps there are those who would never admit that they have suppressed Biblical truth, but that does not change the fact that they have. It only makes it harder for them to experience the personal renewal that they so desperately need. [ROMANS 2:1](#) begins with these words: "You, therefore, have no excuse." Those words apply to all of us who are privileged to possess Biblical truth.

So given the fact that we have all suppressed some amount of Biblical truth. And given the fact that some amount of wrath abides in all of us, we now have to stop and consider how that wrath is expressed. We need to understand the symptoms of our disease. Just as physical diseases have their physical symptoms, spiritual diseases also have their spiritual symptoms. At the end of Romans 1 we read how God's wrath revealed itself in the lives of people who only had the general revelation of truth through creation. Today we are going to look at how God's wrath reveals itself in the lives of people who have specific revelation of truth through the Holy Scriptures.

That are the symptoms that rise to the surface when people like us suppress truth? Let's try to find the answer to that question in today's scripture reading. Please follow along with me as I read [ROMANS 2:17-3:8](#).

¹⁷Now you, if you call yourself a Jew; if you rely on the law and brag about your relationship to God; ¹⁸if you know his will and approve of what is superior because you are instructed by the law; ¹⁹if you are

convinced that you are a guide for the blind, a light for those who are in the dark, ²⁰an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of infants, because you have in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth—²¹you, then, who teach others, do you not teach yourself? You who preach against stealing, do you steal? ²²You who say that people should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? ²³You who brag about the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? ²⁴As it is written: “God’s name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.”

²⁵Circumcision has value if you observe the law, but if you break the law, you have become as though you had not been circumcised. ²⁶If those who are not circumcised keep the law’s requirements, will they not be regarded as though they were circumcised? ²⁷The one who is not circumcised physically and yet obeys the law will condemn you who, even though you have the written code and circumcision, are a lawbreaker.

²⁸A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. ²⁹No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a man’s praise is not from men, but from God.

¹What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew, or what value is there in circumcision? ²Much in every way! First of all, they have been entrusted with the very words of God.

³What if some did not have faith? Will their lack of faith nullify God’s faithfulness? ⁴Not at all! Let God be true, and every man a liar. As it is written:

“So that you may be
proved right when
you speak
and prevail when
you judge.”

⁵But if our unrighteousness brings out God’s righteousness more clearly, what shall we say? That God is unjust in bringing his

wrath on us? (I am using a human argument.) ⁶Certainly not! If that were so, how could God judge the world? ⁷Someone might argue, “If my falsehood enhances God’s truthfulness and so increases his glory, why am I still condemned as a sinner?” ⁸Why not say—as we are being slanderously reported as saying and as some claim that we say—“Let us do evil that good may result”? Their condemnation is deserved.

The first symptom of truth suppression found in people like us who are keepers of the Oracles of God is the symptom of pride in the form of boasting. During the time the Apostle Paul wrote his letter to the Romans, the average Jew did have a feeling of superiority. And it was his relationship to the Law of Moses that made him feel superior. The exile had taught the Jew once for all that Jehovah would tolerate no rivals. What happened when the Jews returned from captivity was an over-attempt to make the Law of Moses practical in every phase of life. Leaders went to ridiculous extremes to set up and enforce rules that would protect the people from violating the Law of Moses. For instance, when Nehemiah returned to the Promised Land from exile, he found men from Judah who had married women from other nations. Their children did not even speak Hebrew. So Nehemiah rebuked them and called curses down on them and beat some of the men and pulled out their hair. He made them take an oath in God’s name and said: “You are not to give your daughters in marriage to their sons, nor are you to take their daughters in marriage for your sons or for yourselves.” The motive of these leaders was not bad, but as time passed the fences they built around the Law of Moses became so many and so high that it became virtually impossible for anyone on the other side of the fence to relate.

Their approach to evangelism became what I call the bullhorn approach. It’s where people pick up a bullhorn so that they can be heard without getting so close as to contaminate themselves. And then they proclaim their message that goes something like this, “Hey world you’re messed up real good. You are so far off the mark that it isn’t even funny. Your only hope is to enter into a personal relationship with God so you can become like us. We have a personal relationship with God. That is what makes us special. That is why we have our act together.”

Of course there is nothing wrong about telling people that they need to have a personal relationship with God, but we should never brag about our personal relationship with God in a way that makes us appear that we have discovered all the answers to life’s

difficult questions. The Jew was always ready with quick answers to difficult questions. His knowledge of the Holy Scriptures made him feel qualified to be a guide to the blind. The difference between right and wrong was well defined. Every act was categorized as acceptable or unacceptable without considering motives and circumstances. An aroused council of Jewish leaders was capable of arresting, questioning, chastising, and even killing those who dared resist the established order.

They did not realize it at the time, but what they had become was a revelation of God's wrath that comes to people who suppress truth. The outward expression of that wrath was bragging. And the same outward symptom is present today. Even today a personal relationship with God is still presented as a ticket to join an elite club with club rules and club traditions and club membership and club dues and even our own club radio stations. You don't have to look hard to find people boasting about their relationship with God in such a way that it makes them look like they really have their act together.

And this relates to another symptom of God's wrath when it is applied to people who have been chosen to receive special revelation. The symptom I am talking about is ignorance. It is an inability to see that we are guilty of suppressing the same truth that we accuse non-club members of committing. We touched on this problem last week. With too much emphasis on outward definition of sin, it is easy to overlook the problem that exists on the inside. Jesus taught us that a person does not have to actually have sex with another person to commit adultery. The sacred truth about man-woman relationships can be suppressed in a way that is not visible to the naked eye. And people can be involved in an act of stealing even while they are obeying the club rules and traditions. Jesus pronounced the merchandising that took place by the Jews in the temple courts as the actions of a "den of robbers."

People like us have a tendency to be blinded to our own suppression of truth. That is why I emphasized the need to work at being constantly aware of our own shortcomings.

The feeling that nothing is seriously wrong with us is a sure symptom of God's wrath in our lives.

A third symptom is revealed when non-club members mock God because of our negative testimony. I don't enjoy using the word "club" to describe the church. But when the people who call themselves Christians suppress enough truth, that is exactly what they

become—a club. And non-club members will react to club members by saying, "What a bunch of hypocrites! If that is what it means to be a Christian, then I want nothing of it. I am better off without God."

Do you know what a hypocrite is? I used to think that a hypocrite is a person who says one thing and does another. But I was wrong. If that is what a hypocrite is, then we are all guilty of hypocrisy. No, a hypocrite is someone who says that he is OK when he is anything but OK. Those who are outside of Christ are not attracted to a bunch of rules and regulations and people who boast that they have found a way to abide by all the rules and regulations. What people really want is honesty. They want to see Christians who will admit that they are also struggling. They want to hear us share the good news of how God's grace helps us in our struggle against sin. That kind of honesty will cause people to honor God's Name.

When Jesus was in the Garden of Gethsemane, He told Peter that those who live by the sword will die by the sword. I believe there is a sense in which the same thing can be said about people who go around wielding the sword of truth. When we hold the sword of truth in our hands and inflict wounds on people whom we feel are violating our club rules, then it is only a matter of time before someone will accuse us of hypocrisy. It is only a matter of time before people will say what I have heard said time and time again, "The reason why I decided not to become a Christian is because I know those people who call themselves Christians. I know what kind of people they really are." It is better for us to admit to others who we really are right from the start, rather than pretending that we are someone else. The only thing we have to brag about is the grace of God that helps us in our struggle against sin. Unfortunately, Christians who become nothing more than club members fail to emphasize their own struggle and how God's grace helps them to overcome in their personal fight against sin. So this is another symptom of God's wrath that people like us experience, and it comes to the surface when people blaspheme God's Name on account of us.

So far we have considered the symptoms of pride and ignorance and the negative testimony that causes people outside of our circles to reject God. Related to all of these symptoms is the symptom of overemphasis on traditions and ceremonies and outward appearance. Such an overemphasis is exactly what makes us look like a club. Many Jews understood their circumcision to be the very thing that set them apart as being special. But circumcision cannot sanctify a lawbreaker any more than baptism can sanctify a Christian who

suppresses truth. The obedient pagan who is not circumcised is more acceptable to God than the disobedient Jew. And the obedient person who is not baptized is also more acceptable to God than the disobedient person who is baptized. Being the people of God is an inward matter. It was in the past, and it still is in the present.

So now we come to the last symptom revealed in our scripture lesson. People with special revelation who suppress truth become self-centered, and they tend to ask questions that reveal their self-centered nature. In Romans 3 the Apostle Paul reveals questions that the average Jew under the influence of God's wrath would have probably asked as a response to his teaching. 'Paul, if all these ceremonies and traditions and rules don't really matter that much—if obedience and faith are the things that really matter—then what advantage is there to being a Jew? What's in it for us?'

If they had not been so clouded in their thinking, they would have asked another question. Instead of asking, "What advantage is there to being a Jew?" they would have asked, "given the great privilege we have as custodians of the Holy Scriptures, what are our responsibilities?" The Biblical answer to that question is inspiring. As custodians of the Holy Scriptures, the main responsibility of the people of God is to share the special revelation with other people, especially those who don't have it.

Asking the right questions inspires us to do great things. Asking the wrong questions bogs us down and delays the process of renewal that needs to take place in our lives.

The questions recorded in [ROMANS 3:3](#) also reveal thinking that is self-centered and clouded. "What if someone did not have faith? Will their lack of faith nullify God's faithfulness?" The concern revealed in these questions is all about identity that is based on pretense. A self-centered identity is one that brings God down to our own level. And the reasoning goes like this: *If there is something wrong with us, then there must be something wrong with God. And, of course, if there is nothing wrong with God, then there must be nothing wrong with us.*

You see, the Apostle Paul had just been using one argument after another to convince his readers that there is a great deal wrong with them, and they need to admit it. He has been trying to convince them that they lack faith and obedience. But he knows them all too well. He knows what their rebuttal will be. He knows that they are afraid of a double loss of identity

if they admit to the reality of who they are. They feared losing their own identity as being a holy people and they feared God would lose His identity of being a holy God.

Had they been thinking more clearly, they would have known that it is impossible for God to lose His identity. Even if all men are proven to be liars (and all men are), God remains true. We can be honest about ourselves without bringing God down. Our identity must be based on truth, truth about God and truth about ourselves. It must never be based on who we pretend to be.

There was a moment in King David's life when his own mind became clouded. During that time he started to base his identity on the King he pretended to be rather than the truth about himself. And the truth about David was that he had lied, committed adultery, and schemed a murder to cover it up. Finally Nathan the prophet convinced David to stop pretending. And as soon as he stopped pretending, his thinking became clear again. With a clear mind, he penned the words of [PSALM 51](#). In verse 4 he wrote, "Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge."

The final question found in our scripture reading is nothing more than one final, desperate attempt to argue one's way out of a jam. The Apostle Paul had anticipated all the rebuttals of his fellow countrymen. If King David had not been brave enough to admit to the reality of who he was, even he may have reached out in desperation for this one final argument to excuse his sin rather than face it head on. Only a person who has been suppressing truth can logically conclude that we can make good happen by doing evil. We cannot bring God down with our actions, nor can we elevate God to a higher position with our actions. Who God is does not depend on who we are one way or the other.

All these questions reveal a symptom of God's wrath. They reveal the self-centered nature of people who are unwilling to face the truth about themselves and about God. Many churches spend many committee meeting hours trying to figure out how they can portray a good image of themselves to people. They waste time trying to answer questions that God never intended them to ask. They leave Jesus holding out His arms in love while they try to find ways to cover up who they really are.

God's wrath is revealed against all those who suppress truth. When the pagan suppresses the

general revelation of truth he has received, God's wrath is revealed in ways that most of us recognize as vile behavior. The vile behavior is the spiritual symptom of a spiritual problem. And when the person who has a lot of Biblical knowledge suppresses truth, he also displays spiritual symptoms. Although his symptoms may be socially acceptable, they are nonetheless terrible. The symptoms are pride and ignorance and a testimony that causes people to blaspheme God's Name. The symptoms also include an overemphasis on outward traditions and ceremonies and an attempt to cover up the problem with twisted logic that will whitewash the sin.

Step by step the Book of Romans is taking us to the place where we must admit that everyone needs the gospel. In the same way physical symptoms should

drive us to see a doctor so the disease can be cured. These spiritual symptoms are meant to drive us to find a spiritual cure. And the gospel is the cure.

Have you thought about the passion of our Lord Jesus Christ? Do you really understand what took place on the cross? Next week I want to take some time to look carefully at that story, because it is the cross that makes the cure possible. But before we come to the cross to find a cure, we must first realize our need for a cure. Look for the symptoms described in today's scripture lesson. See if you can recognize them in your own life and in the life of our church. And if you don't recognize them, ask for God to help you, because they are there. They are always there. And they are meant to drive us to the cross.