

The Slippery Slope of Self-love (or) Don't Ignore the Apps! Romans 1:20-32

I am constantly amazed at the power and intelligence they keep stuffing into these "smart phones." Did you know that my phone has an app that when I point it at the night sky, identifies all the stars by name, shows me the constellations, and the movement of the moon and all the planets. I can even point it down at the ground and it shows me the stars that are on the other side of the earth. How does it do that?

And I have another app that gives me a complete live action radar map of the current weather everywhere, around the entire globe. I can zoom in to check on Bedford or watch entire weather patterns swirl across the Atlantic and Pacific at the same time. All I have to do is touch any location to get the local temperature, weather, winds, and five-day forecast. This is just amazing.

In fact anything and more that you can do on your home computer probably has an app for the same thing on your smart phone. But the problem is that most people don't know what half the apps on their phone do. And so they stumble around ignorant of the power that their phones have to easily help and guide them.

Like that Oregon couple who got lost on a day hike in the Cascade Mountains. The 911 call from their new smart phone quickly brought a rescue party right to them, because the phone also automatically sent out their GPS coordinates. So when the rescuers arrived, before walking the couple back to their car, they showed them how to use the mapping feature on their phone that could trace their route back home from anywhere they cared to wander. That was a vital but costly lesson to learn—especially when they received the bill for dispatching a rescue team.

Now when you think about such amazing applications that we have built into our technology which can help us live better lives, from Fitbit watches to voice activated whole home systems, realize that this is not a new idea. What we have recently accomplished on the technological level, God has always been doing on a planetary scale; building into His creation helpful applications to better the lives of all His creatures.

For instance, though scientists can still only guess at how such things work, it appears that there is a built in compass and landmark mapping system that helps homing pigeons fly back home from wherever they may be released. And similar learned maps help winter birds fly south. Mature Salmon, five years later, navigate back to their birth stream to breed. But even more amazing is the inherited internal map that brings every 4th or 5th generation Eastern Monarch butterfly back to overwinter in the mountains of central Mexico! You see Monarch Butterflies normally live for only two to six weeks. So,

as Spring arrives, the first batch of Mexican Monarchs hatch and begin to fly north. But they only get so far north in their short lifespan before they breed and die. Then the next generation does the same thing getting a bit farther north. And the third or fourth generation repeats this northerly parade, until late summer when the fourth or fifth generation hatches somewhere in New England or Canada. But with the onset of Autumn, this generation like all Fall generation monarchs living everywhere in the eastern United States, hears an inborn signal to head south. And surprisingly, this particular generation won't live for just a few weeks, they will live to make the entire migration back to the same mountains in Mexico where they will then live the entire winter (five to six months) until Spring comes and they can lay their eggs in Mexico—starting the cycle all over again. So how do these fifth generation Monarchs that were born far in the north access and then follow a map which then leads them back to their great, great, great, grandparents' home in Mexico? Isn't God amazing!?!

But here's the 20 million dollar question. If God has built all these wonderful apps into all His other creatures, what apps might He have built into us humans who were created in God's own image?

We humans like to think that we were born "tabula rasa" (as a blank slate) and that everything we then become is the result of our own learning, our own interactions with the environment. We like to think that we are self-made persons, free to be whatever we want to be; at least that's the line that modern culture repeatedly advertises. But ask any psychologist, any medical doctor, and they will tell you that we were never that blank slate. Biologically, mentally, physically, temperamentally we are more like our parents than we might care to admit. We are shaped more by our DNA than we realize. We have been hardwired in more ways than we could possibly imagine. The famous Minnesota twin studies indicate that everything from a smile, to preferred colors, to our sense of humor, to even our political leanings might be more biologically rather than environmentally based. As a lifelong amateur anthropologist, I currently figure that who we become as adults is about 85% nature and only 15% nurture. Even the scientists will reluctantly agree that we are not the free agents we pretend to be.

All of this is no surprise to the Bible. It teaches that indeed we were born with many God built in features, which were designed to help us live in and care for God's creation. The problem is that being made in God's image apparently means that we can also choose to ignore those apps that God has built into us. Unlike the Monarch butterfly when we get some impulse to fly south, we can choose instead to vacation in Europe.

Now, I am making light of this reality of our "built in apps," because I realize that you and I have all been raised to believe otherwise. We have been programmed, propagandized, by a culture that no longer wants to admit any dependence on God. That is why the slogan "*one nation under God*" has lately become so controversial. These days neither educators nor anyone of political status will admit that we were

anything other than the masters of our own fate. This is our most prominent cultural myth: that of the **western enlightened mind** as so aptly described by the Victorian poet WILLIAM ERNEST HENLEY (1849–1903)

"Invictus" (*Latin for unconquerable or undefeated*)

Out of the night that covers me,
 Black as the pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
 For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance
 I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeonings of chance
 My head is bloody, but unbowed.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears
 Looms but the Horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
 Finds and shall find me unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate,
 How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate,
 I am the captain of my soul.

Fortunately none of this is true. Whether we acknowledge God or not, most of our life has been designed and orchestrated by Him to guide us back to Himself—in this, we are more like the Monarch butterfly than we may be willing to admit.

Speaking on Mars Hill, the Apostle Paul described our knowing or unknowing relationship with God this way.

God who made the world and everything in it ... from one ancestor made all the nations (people) to inhabit the whole earth, and He allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and... and find him though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For "In him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:24-28)

And this is also what this first section in Romans is all about: that we were designed by God to know Him, to seek him, and to intrinsically know right from wrong, moral from immoral. We have these God built in apps, like the homing pigeon's map and compass, that keep pointing us back to God, back to what is moral Whether you believe this or reject this, this is what the Bible teaches. And if you search your own heart--this you will know to be true.

Regardless of how hard the evolutionist protests or tries to explain it away, humanity's universal quest for God is in itself proof for the existence of God. He built that instinct into us. This is the conflict we enlightened scientific westerners now face, if we listen to our inner voice, and admit that we know of our creator God, we must also admit to His rightful authority over our life; and therein lies the human problem. As aptly put by the Book of Romans

for though we knew God,
we did not honor Him as God
or give thanks to Him,
but became futile in our thinking,
and our senseless minds were darkened.

Romans 1:21- personalized

Friends, the solution for our human condition does not get any clearer than this: our path back towards God must always begin with acknowledging His existence and right of rule over our lives. As the Bible teaches ...

Without faith it is impossible to please God,
for whoever would approach him
must believe that He exists and
that he rewards those who seek him.

Hebrews 11.6:

And the problems of our human condition are then spawned when we reject--our Bible says "suppress"--this truth. When we refuse to acknowledge God as God, then we are ignoring our internal map. And Like that lost mountain couple, we wander helplessly through the wilderness though still holding everything we need to find our way home

And without the map, soon our internal moral compass also begins to drift. Having no direction by which to orient our lives our moral compass spins aimlessly.

Without this homeward map or moral compass we become lost indeed the Bible describes this complete lostness as having a "debased mind:" not knowing God, not knowing ourselves, not knowing right from wrong or good from bad. Look again at how Romans describes the downward spiral which begins with our refusal to honor God as God. The Ten Commandments begin with ...

I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt,

(21) because we did not honor God as God ...
we became futile in our thinking and
our senseless minds were darkened

You shall not make for yourself an idol

(25) [because] we exchanged the truth about God for a lie
worshipping the creature rather than the Creator,
(26) God gave us up
To the lusts of our heart, to impurity,
to degrading passions (immorality).

You Shall have no other gods before Me

(28) since we did not see fit to acknowledge God,
God gave us up to a debased mind
and to do things that should not be done

You shall not murder, commit adultery, Steal, bear false witness.

we were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice,
envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, gossips, slanderers,

Honor your father and your mother

God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil,
rebellious towards parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.

We know God's decree, that

those who practice such things deserve to die
yet we not only do them
but even applaud others who practice them.

Romans 1:31-32 - personalized

There you see it--the downward spiral--that results every time we choose to suppress our knowledge of God and the moral compass which He has built into each one of us. Ignoring these apps will leave us lost indeed. Debased!

Now perhaps you may also have noticed as Paul was describing our spiral away from God, that I was indicating these departures were also a rejection of **God's Ten Commandments**. This is because Paul was making the same connection; that as we turn away from God we also discard God's moral guidance from our lives. When we toss the map we also lose the compass. Why would we do that?

Here is a novel thought for you to mull over. As we find them written out in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy five, the 10 Commandments which God gave to Moses to read, and which the people vowed to follow, and which still serve as the basic moral guideline for all humanity, were not just written on stone tablets, but were in reality a repetition of the same laws that God had already written into our minds. **Yes I am saying that the 10 commandments are just an external record of the internal moral compass that God has planted within each of us.**

The clue to this connection between the external commandments and our internal compass comes in Romans chapter two, when Paul notes that those not having been privileged to learn God's Ten Commandments nevertheless still seem to instinctively know them and to either excuse or condemn themselves based on this same internal moral code.

When people, who do not possess the law, do instinctively what the law requires, these, though not having the law, are a law to themselves. **They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, to which their own conscience also bears witness;** and their conflicting thoughts will accuse or perhaps excuse them on the day when, according to my gospel, God, through Jesus Christ, will judge the secret thoughts of all. Romans 2:14-16

This is a big clue as to why our secularizing society can now no longer stand to see these same commandments gracing our courthouse walls and city squares. These commands that we once honored as the basis of a civilized Christian society—now also serve as a painful reminder of our national rejection of God. We can't take the commandments out of our hearts—so we now remove them from our walls. But, out of sight will not take these commands out of mind. They, along with the knowledge of God, are His fingerprint in our lives that we can never erase but only—at our grave personal loss—attempt to suppress.

That's what Paul would have you learn from this first chapter of his letter to the Romans. The problem of the human condition is that as we refuse to acknowledge the God that we know, that also causes the failure of our inbuilt moral compass and this quickly leads us down to a debased mind where we both do and applaud the wrong that we know kills us. Why does Paul want you to acknowledge this pattern?

The reason is that before we, like the prodigal son, can come to our senses and turn for home we each need to admit our willful sin, change our mind about who can save us, and then turn around to seek the savior we've always known.

Chapter two goes a bit further taking us "good people" to task about our double standard for goodness. It's important that we realize that we are just like the bad people we condemn; all having a debased mind, all needing a savior. Then in chapter three we are ready to hear and accept the good news, that while we can't save ourselves, God can and will do so through the gift of forgiveness offered us by his Son. I can't wait to share that chapter with you.

But for now let us pray.