

August 18, 2019

“The Unselfing of America: Unself-Righteous”

Psalm 14, Romans 3:9-24

In addition to being a humble and gracious person Eugene Peterson has gifted us with *The Message* translation of the Bible (which I highly recommend for those who want to hear God’s Word in a fresh way). He has also written several books. *Where Your Treasure Is: Psalms That Summon You From Self to Community* is what we are using this summer to take us through 11 more nationally-focused and less familiar Psalms aimed at helping us become the kinds of citizens that add value and bring transformation to our country – instead of people who add to the mess. Peterson always wrote for the American Church and its pastors, for those claiming to be believers. He is prophetic in that he tells the truth to God’s people. Peterson is not as interested in pointing a finger at those who do not profess faith in Christ, as he is in commenting on our culture (trying to tell the truth about the way things really are) and urging those who claim Christ as Lord (and the scriptures as authoritative) to embody what we say we believe in the midst of our particular country and its self-centeredness.

He titles chapter one “The Unselfing of America” but it might be more accurate to say he is calling for The Unselfing of the Church. Chapter 8 is a call to be Unself-Righteous, and it is based on Psalm 14.

While I was speaking at our former Presbytery camp a few weeks back, one of the counselors shared in our morning debriefs that her girls were really struggling with faith. These were girls she had been counseling since they were 6th graders. They had embraced faith in Christ years ago; they were excited and engaged and growing. And now they were going into their senior year. This was her first summer NOT on staff, or counseling as a high school lead camper. She got a job over in Seattle, but these girls begged her to counsel them one more time.

And here she was, surprised by the struggles they were sharing. Some of them were really wrestling with questions about God and suffering. How could a good God allow this? Some of them were wondering if they could keep believing in the God of their childhood. They were starting to develop objections to what they had believed so deeply when they were younger. Some of them were wondering if they might be atheists.

Do you know any atheists? Maybe you consider yourself to be one. “There is no God.”

Peterson talks about 3 types of atheism in this chapter. There’s Intellectual Atheism in which people outgrow the faith of their childhood or reject some silly picture of God they once bought into. He writes, “Pastors encounter this kind of atheism fairly often. My response is to probe further. I ask, ‘Tell me about this God that you don’t believe in. What is he like?’ After listening to what follows, I usually can agree: ‘I don’t believe in that God either. Given the material as you present it, I also am an atheist.’ I usually have a partner in conversation by this

time.” We can find ways to listen to and converse with people who are struggling with this kind of atheism, and admit it if we are too.

Another form of atheism he calls Protest Atheism. This can result when people ask the hard questions about how a good God can allow cancer and child abuse, why it is that Christians are so hypocritical, and a myriad of objections about suffering of all kinds – without getting adequate resolution. Peterson says we need to relax about this kind of atheism as well. In fact, he says both of “These kinds of atheism can be treated with appreciation and respect. The passionately protesting atheist, sensitive to suffering, can be welcomed as a partner in a spiritual and moral struggle against evil The intellectually discriminating atheist can be accepted as an ally in skeptically rejecting all the popular, half-baked stupidities named “god” that abound in our time and invited into conversations that explore what the best minds thought, and think, about God.” (Where Your Treasure Is, p.116)

And then there is Heart Atheism. “Fools say in their hearts, ‘There is no God.’” (Psalm 14:1) The danger in this pervasive form of atheism is that it’s unspoken, and often unconscious . . . and alive and well in the Church. Remember, Peterson is always writing to the Church. How is it that you and I might be ‘inwardly/in our hearts’ saying “There is no God”?

He says, “We are all trying either to get along without God or to use God for our own purposes. In either case it is atheism: reducing God to nongod status so that I as my own god can either ignore Him or command Him to help me get what I want.” (*Where Your Treasure Is*, p.123) We might not say it out loud, but in our hearts we say, “I’m my own god. I’m in charge. God answers to me.” If I’m honest there are practical areas of my life that I haven’t invited God into or fully turned over to Him; or as Peterson says, “I allow for His deity but restrict His jurisdiction to matters that don’t impinge on my own sovereignty.” (*Where Your Treasure Is*, p.123) What does this look like in real time?

We welcome God’s help when there is a family crisis, but never consult Him for something related to our business. We are hospitable and friendly, because we want to be known as kind and generous, but in our day-to-day lives we have a death grip on our money, as if God won’t open up His hands for us. We are committed to reading the Bible and praying more often but we don’t actually believe God can change our understanding/practice of sex and intimacy, or heal and transform the dysfunctions in our families, or free us from the addictions that enslave. Heart atheism. We don’t say it out loud, but our actions speak louder than our words. We kind of live as if God is not around much at all.

And this doesn’t just happen with individuals. It can happen with groups of people; even church leaders. In the fall of 2016 I was started to communicate to our leaders that, after 12 years, it was time to rearticulate our Mission/Main Thing. About that same time, after enough people I trusted had mentioned Ruth Haley Barton’s *Pursuing God’s Will Together*, we discovered there was another way to lead and listen to God, especially when making big decisions. I was sold on

it and wanted our elders to read through the book together as we moved forward. They agreed to do so over the next few months. But I was also a few months into pushing us to work on our Mission/Main Thing. So after our elders said they wanted to digest Barton's book, I asked if they also wanted to get after our Mission/Main Thing work. One of them asked, "If this book is about how to make big decisions together and rearticulating our Mission/Main Thing is a big decision, shouldn't we read the book first?" Another elder agreed immediately. And it became so clear to me. Of course! Many of you know the difference it has made in how we listen to God and each other, how non-anxious and patient we have become, and how we have incorporated silence and listening prayer into our leadership.

I tell you about all that, in light of what Peterson says about heart atheism, to say that I've actually been pastoring, and our Writing Team and elders and staff (and some others that joined the conversation) have actually been living, acting, and making decisions as if there IS a God to listen to, and rely on, and wait for in silence . . . believing that He just might speak.

Heart atheism is subtle . . . and wrong on so many fronts:

It denies the human condition. "The Lord looks down from heaven on humankind to see if there are any who are wise, who seek after God. They have all gone astray, they are all alike perverse; there is no one who does good, no, not one." (Psalm 14:2-3) Paul turns it up a notch and pulls from Psalm 14 and several others. "There is no one who is righteous, not even one; there is no one who has understanding, there is no one who seeks God. All have turned aside . . . there is no one who shows kindness . . . since ALL have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." (Romans 3:10-12, 23) Does Paul mean NOBODY, EVER? Doesn't he seek after God? Is there nothing "good?"

I think this is where the doctrine of Total Depravity gets a little dicey. In essence, Paul is saying that – on our own and apart from God – we are lost, always bending and turning away from God, missing the mark of God's plan and purpose for our lives, doing more damage than we know. We are Self-Centered instead of God-Centered.

By the way, you don't have to use this 'totally depraved' assessment of the human condition to run people into the ground. This isn't meant to be ammunition we use to shame people into self-loathing. In fact, it's better if you're willing to point out how true this assessment of the human condition is in your own life – which is what Paul is willing to do a bit later in Romans. In Romans 7 he gets real and talks about his inability to do what he knows he should do and refrain from what he knows he shouldn't be doing. After going on and on about just how foolish he is, he cries out, "Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?" (Romans 7:24) He doesn't give specifics about his struggle – and maybe it's best that he keeps it generic so as NOT to give us the possibility of missing his main point, which is: **left to ourselves we are lost; on our own we cannot live righteous lives; if we're honest, we want to move God out of the center and run our own lives . . .** and a few other's lives while we're at it. That's what being Self-Righteous really looks like.

But it's hard to be Self-Righteous if you have a true assessment of the human (and your own) condition. The Psalmist asks, "Have they no knowledge?" (Psalm 14:4a) Heart atheism is ignorant of the human condition.

It affects how we treat people. "Have they no knowledge? All the evildoers who eat up my people as if they are eating bread." (Psalm 14:4)

In The Message the Psalmist asks, "Don't they know anything . . . treating people like a fast-food meal over which they're too busy to pray?" Heart atheists not only push God away but people as well. Here's what Peterson writes: "Heart-atheism becomes social oppression. If the self makes its own rules and satisfies its own compulsions, the social result is that the people around me become food – material that I can use to fulfill my needs." (Where Your Treasure Is, p.118)

It makes us miserable. Going through the church motions and proclaiming faith in God while practically living as if there is no God is exhausting and confusing and terrifying. The beginning of verse 5 says, "There they shall be in great terror." (Psalm 14:5a in NRSV) Another translation says, "There they are, overwhelmed with dread."(NIV) In The Message Peterson translates it like this: "Night is coming for them, and nightmares." (The Message)

"Fools say in their hearts, 'There is no God.' " (Psalm 14:1) Intellectual and Protest Atheists are welcome here at FPC and should be welcomed in to our lives wherever we bump into them. But Heart Atheism should be rooted out of our lives and churches. **WE** can sing all the right songs and do the church thing better than most, and still slip into this very dangerous kind of atheism which: Denies the human condition, Affects how we treat people, and Makes us (and others) miserable. Praying Psalm 14 is a great reminder that we never want to go down this road, as individuals and citizens of this country.

Although Psalm 14 isn't what you would call a warm, fuzzy prayer full of positivity, but a sobering indictment on the human condition . . . it does end on a hopeful note. "O that deliverance for Israel would come from Zion! **When** (not IF) the Lord restores the fortunes of His people, Jacob will rejoice; Israel will be glad." (Psalm 14:7) How and when God would deliver His people is not articulated, nor was it known. How could they have known?

Like much of Psalm 14, Romans 3 also gives a dismal picture of humanity; "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." (Romans 3:23) We saw that Paul gets dismal about himself in Romans 7. "What a wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?"

But both sections of his letter end on a high note with a clear answer about what "deliverance from Zion" actually meant and looked like. "And [all] are justified freely by His grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus." (Romans 3:24) "But thanks be to God – through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (Romans 7:25) When the Psalmist says "God is with the company of the righteous" (Psalm 14:5) he didn't yet know of the One who would come and BE OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS. But we do . . . and we can . . . be in the company of Jesus.