

The fool says there is no God

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Preacher: Dick Lucas

[0 : 01] Well, it's a great, great pleasure to be back here and to meet many who've become friends. Last night I felt like the Queen of Sheba. I know that I don't look like the Queen of Sheba, but I felt like her. I was given a tour of the halls and the amazing difference from last year.

So, I've got a new insight into your minister. I hadn't realized what an expert he is in interior decoration.

I wish I'd known that when he was in London because there are a lot of rooms in my house that badly need a lick of paint and I should have made use of him more properly than I did.

Anyhow, I do congratulate you and especially on this lovely hall. I can't think why you ever want to leave it, really. It is so lovely. However, let's get down to this great psalm that we've already read and therefore I won't read it again.

But I'd ask you to start with me at verse 1 to keep it open because we want to hear God's Word from it. And that is what I seek to do through this sermon this morning.

[1 : 13] Verse 1, or rather just 1a. Firstly, the fool says in his heart, there is no God. Or quite shortly, the fool says, there is no God.

Well, that seems to me to be an important contemporary text since in our particular society today, there are an increasing number of celebrity fools.

There's the fellow Dawkins whose books are bestsellers on the bookstall. I never know quite what the publishers do. I think they put bestseller on the book before it's even sold.

But I believe, in fact, his books do sell by the hundreds and the thousands. So there is the fool Dawkins. Then there is the man Philip Pullman, who has set out in his books for children to reverse what C.S. Lewis did for children in a previous generation.

Lewis sought to bring people to a knowledge of God, and Pullman to destroy that. Then there is the ineffable fool David Starkey, the great TV history guru.

[2 : 26] These are the public fools that we hear on our telly and that we read in best-selling books. Of course, they're not fools in the normal sense in which we use that word, are they?

None of us would want to say that they lack intelligence. They are very clever men. They were never in the back room of the lower fourth as witless boys.

They were never dunces. Certainly not. But in the biblical sense, as you know, they are fools. In the NIV, I notice there's rather a nice little definition of a fool, according to the Bible, in the margin.

The margin in the NIV to verse 1 says, the Bible fool is not mentally deficient, but morally deficient. Now, this is not just a matter of celebrities in the public square.

I heard recently that in America, we look on America as a church-going country, that the number of atheists is improving rapidly.

[3 : 33] It's not improving, I'm sorry. That's the wrong word, isn't it? Please scratch that out. Increasing to about 9% of the population, which is rather frightening, isn't it?

And here, too, in the United Kingdom, I guess, there's a steady growth of intellectual atheists and practical atheists.

And I suppose that by adding in his heart, we're meant to think not only of the intellectual who denies it, but also of the man in the street who lives as though God doesn't exist.

Now, as we consider this fool this morning, we may be wise to think not only in terms of individuals, but corporately. A whole society becomes gripped by this folly, and our society is moving in that direction.

And the word we generally use for that, of course, is the word secular. And it does seem, doesn't it, as though our government is becoming increasingly secular, and our media, increasingly secular, and our state education.

[4 : 45] And in this case, we're not saying that God is intellectually denied, but he is practically ignored. So that's our theme this morning as we turn to this psalm.

And I'm hoping that the scriptures will throw light on this very contemporary issue of fools in the public arena of our life, making their voices very strongly heard, and also about the foolish unbelief in our secular government and establishment.

Now, will you look, first of all, at the simple structure of the psalm in front of you? You'll see that it's very short, and it's made up of two halves, and then a final verse.

And the two halves are exactly equal, as far as I can see, verses 1 to 3, and verses 4 to 6.

And then verse 7 seems to be the response of the believer, and I hope we shall be able to come to that just a little later. That's where you come in, and that's where I come in.

[5 : 54] First then, let's look at what God has to say in part 1, verses 1 to 3. And I've called this the cause of atheism, the cause of secular attitudes, the cause of unbelief in society and amongst individuals.

So let me read those three verses again, and in particular, I want to join verse 1, that stunning sentence that was my text. I want to join that with the rest of those three verses, part 1, not to separate it.

The fool says in his heart, there is no God. They are corrupt, they don't vomit of all deeds, there is none who does good. The Lord looks down from heaven on the children of man to see if there are any who understand, who seek after God.

They've all turned aside, together they have become corrupt. There is none who does good, not even one. Now, as I say, I've found in my own study, it's important to take that remarkable statement of the beginning, which we started with, and to tie it in with the other verses in part 1.

Those other verses, as you know, verses 2 and 3, and part of verse 1, are quoted by the Apostle Paul in that famous third chapter of Romans.

[7 : 17] We're not going to look that up, but if you do want to look it up, it's Romans 3, 10 to 12, a straight quotation from Psalm 14. And in that, Paul is exposing and expounding human depravity.

And by the way, if it seems a bit gloomy this morning, as we look at human depravity, this evening we're going to look at human dignity, and that'll set the balance straight, and I hope that you'll come for both. Psalm 8, that will be this evening.

Now consider those three verses together. Look at them, if you will, as I speak. They could mean that the corruption of verses 2 and 3 follows on the text that I gave you in verse 1a, and that therefore corruption in society is a result of atheism.

And undeniably that is a fact. It's not a Christian fancy. It's not something with a sermon. It's historical and real, and you can see it happening. In other words, the consequence of unbelief always is depravity in some form or other.

But I don't think that's the right way to read it. I've come to the conclusion that a more natural reading is to take the three together and to realize that atheism is just part of what we call practical godlessness.

[8 : 38] That is, it's just part of our human fallenness. It's not the root of it. It's part of the whole. It's part, it's an ingredient within it all.

So that fallen men and women naturally, before God's grace is operative in their lives, we see that in part two, when they become the righteous, the people of God, fallen men and women naturally have a bent towards unbelief.

Society without the evidence and power of the gospel will go in a secular direction, inevitably. So that is what God's word says as we read verse two, for example.

You see, verse two is not going off at a tangent. It's really saying the same thing as verse one. The Lord looks down from heaven on the children of men to see if there are any who understand and seek after God and know.

He finds that they've all turned aside. So what God finds is that those who have rebelled against him have not sought him, they've turned aside, and they are without understanding.

[9 : 47] It's a very strong thing, isn't it? So he's saying that the atheist is without understanding. Does Dawkins understand? The answer, according to the Bible, is no.

He is a brilliant man. It's not a particularly intelligent book, but he is a brilliant man. And when he comes to talk about the things of God, you feel that a Sunday school child knows more about it. Does Pullman seek after God?

Although the very clear answer is no. Doesn't even claim to. Does Starkey say there is no God and understand what he will?

Of course he doesn't. I was talking to an architect friend of mine only a week or two ago. He'd been to a meeting addressed by David Starkey. He always gives the impression, doesn't he, David Starkey on television, of a rather bumptious sixth former who's just put the form master completely right and shown that he alone knows the truth.

And apparently Starkey got up at the beginning and said, I'm an atheist and therefore I think. Which greatly irritated my friend. We're not impugning, are we, the sincerity of these three men?

[10:55] If one of them was here and was angry with me because of what I say or heard what I had to say, I want to say straight away that we're not impugning your sincerity. We know that you believe your unbelief.

But as Derek Kidner puts it, and if you don't know Derek Kidner's commentaries on the Psalms and you claim to be a Bible student, you should straight away go and buy them. He writes this, The assertion that there is no God is treated in Scripture not as a sincere but misguided conviction, but as an irresponsible gesture of defiance.

They think they're sincere but they are actually irresponsible and misguided. Now I have to say that as I studied Psalm 14, at first I was rather not attracted to it.

In my retirement I'm trying to study all the Psalms. I'm not making a great deal of progress. I feel that by the time I depart this life I shall not have finished, but perhaps I shall hear the angels expanding them far better in heaven.

But I have to say that I came to Psalm 14 and when I first looked at it I thought it was rather unattractive. And I put off studying it. But the more I've studied it the greater impression it's made on me.

[12:18] Because it seems to me to get to the heart of our modern world and our modern troubles. If the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom the arrogant dismissal of God is the beginning of folly.

And only the beginning. It's a symptom of corruption at the heart of society at the heart of government at the heart of the media and these things impinge on every one of us.

Of course we never see ourselves do we as others see us. But it's likely that if there are future generations they will look back on us in the early 21st century as amazingly foolish people.

That is I hope not of the living church but of the vast majority as they went about their business and as they talked and as they wrote. They would see a society with more knowledge and information than ever before.

but a society without understanding. How could how could they have thought and lived in that way? Well we have as a nation turned aside haven't we?

[13:36] We've gone our way every one to his own way as our 53.6 I don't need to tell you that we prayed about it earlier in the service we're all aware of it we're aware of the corruption of our own hearts apart from the grace of God we thank God for that grace and we'll come back to that in a moment but the corruption of society is the corruption of the human heart and you'll notice I think what is very striking in verse 2 and 3 and I only recently saw this that it covers not only doing verse 3 do you see that?

None who does good but it covers our thinking in verse 2 none who understand I always think of Paul's amazing cheek don't you as he stands in front of that Athenian gathering of intellectuals and he finishes his sermons by saying you ought not to think like that your idols show that you have no understanding it's marvelously powerful isn't it?

Here is this Christian preacher probably very vulnerable in front of these men not at all sure what their reaction will be and saying the trouble with you intellectuals is that your thinking is all wrong it's not just that we Christians say that sinful things are those that we do but sinful things are those that we think well that's the cause of atheism of secular life according to this psalm it's that the Lord looks down to see if there's any understanding we seek after God and find that there is none and the symptom of that is atheism either intellectual or practical it doesn't really matter which and I suppose in most cases it's practical living in God's world as though he doesn't exist and that goes for the vast majority of the inhabitants of Glasgow and of London now let's try to see what are the consequences of this atheism this foolishness and I think we find the real consequences in part two and I would suggest to you that you may as you go out today be able to think of a large number of consequences and probably quite rightly things that I'm not going to say now but as usual the Bible tends to go to the nub the heart of it and it mentions here only one consequence a major

consequence a really important consequence of a secular state and unbelieving people and that is hostility towards God's people the living church obviously hostility towards God verses one to three will lead to hostility against those who believe in him the living church in our country and elsewhere so let me read four, five and six have they no knowledge all the evildoers who eat up my people as they eat bread and do not call upon the Lord they are in great terror that's a slightly strange sentence and it's hard to know exactly what the psalmist is referring to he may be referring to matters in the

Old Testament that's very likely of course when God came to the rescue of his people as for example when the army of Sennacherib came up against Jerusalem and was destroyed and the enemies of God went away in great terror there may be some historical allusion in that however let's read it as it is there they are in great terror for God is with the generation of the righteous you would shame the plans of the poor but the Lord is his refuge that was put rather well I thought in the hymn that we sang at the beginning now notice what is said about the secular state when that is dominant in a society when unbelief rules it says they eat up my people and I think I prefer the word in the NIV they devour my people and when you think of someone like Stalin in Russia or Mao in China only a generation ago we ought never to forget it what did they do they devoured the people of God they sought to eat them up so there's nothing left there are those little phrases in verse five and six that may be elusive what it shows however is that though God's people are in danger of being devoured by dictators who are atheistical they nevertheless survive because God is with them and that again we saw marvelously didn't have seen marvelously in China you know

I get a little tired in St. Helens in the city of London that were always being told by city papers about the great growth of China economically how very soon China will be richer than the United States well yes I'm sure that's true and very interesting we never hear that the cause of God in China is getting stronger and stronger and that will soon put us to shame surely that's more interesting to us isn't it but at the moment what I want to point out to you you see from part two is that atheism does not spell apathy or indifference to the church but inevitably in the end oppression I'll tell you why because the church is not apathetic the church wants to say these things from God we want to witness to Christ we want to get into our society and say what is the truth and of course a secular society is very uncomfortable with that indeed it must respond it must repress it not and I don't want to be alarmist this morning

[19:28] I don't want to exaggerate we don't live in Stalin's Russia fortunately in the United Kingdom or anything like it our Christian culture that we've inherited and thank God for it is pretty tough we're not yet in a police state there's something quite ludicrous isn't it when you read that in this last year the police visited the Bishop of Chester because of something he said about moral perversity and also called upon a Roman Catholic Archbishop in Scotland for the same reason there's something ludicrous about that isn't there no I'd want to say to the police when they knocked on my door what do you think you're doing are you mad incidentally if there are any police informers here welcome to the service hope it'll do you good no you see a secular state will be bound to work against a Christian culture it'll be embarrassed by a Christian culture let me just give you two examples well I'm not going to give you examples

I'll just mention them for your own thinking as though I'm just giving you notes what about the commandments of the Bible well you see the commandments of the Bible are embarrassing to secular thinking the Ten Commandments the Sermon on the Mount and yet a secular state can't live without rules and laws of course you can't so you have to replace the laws of God you're going to have a society that's at all stable and we're beginning to see that aren't we we're beginning to see the laws of God about marriage being replaced and that comes about of course because the secular state cannot hear the voice of God but it has to go by some standards so who does it listen to if it doesn't listen to the voice of God it listens to the voice of man of course you don't listen to what comes from above you listen to what comes from below and of course what comes from below will be he who shouts loudest it'll be the pressure of pressure groups won't it so what we're going to see in the next 20 or 30 years is secular states working out new commandments by which we're to live and you get the beginning of that don't you in political correctness you see it's a way of impressing you that you mustn't talk in a different way from what the state has laid down I have incidentally great great hope in a living church you see because it's in the early chapters of Acts that we read about freedom of speech I hope you know that it's men like Peter who weren't particularly educated men who stood up and said we must obey God rather than man immense

courage they showed didn't they they didn't give way to what was spiritually correct or politically correct in Jerusalem I don't think that anybody but the church in the end is going to say boo then what about Christian claims well just to mention one the great claim about Christ to be the only saviour of the world that's absolutely indispensable to our proclamation of the gospel there is only one name by which we must be saved well obviously a secular state is going to say Christian instruction of that sort must be put on the margin so we must now talk about all the religions and religious study must take the place of Christian education you know that I don't need to say it so where there is no voice of God you will only listen to the voice of sinful people and those who are able to make their voices heard above the crowd thankfully our Christian culture is still strong I was very interested in the complete change in the this has nothing to do with right or left politically but you notice that David Cameron started to talk about marriage as though it was the best thing for children I just happen to know an enormous amount of pressure has been put on him by Christian men in recent weeks and months and you notice that when that evidently was something the country wanted to hear that Gordon Brown immediately changed his tune you notice that and said the very opposite of what he's been saying for a year namely that Christian marriage and a man and a woman together are the best basis for a family it's remarkable that change take courage from it however step by step however gradually part one of Psalm 14 leads to part two make no mistake about it instead of the gracious hallmarks of a Christian culture there will come into our society the ugly hallmarks of a pagan culture now I've spared you from a lot of cross references so I'm going to finish by reading you one let me read to you the ugly hallmarks of a pagan culture at the end of Romans chapter three don't bother to turn to it though if you want to turn to it according to your

Bibles it's page 941 now I'm not saying that this blueprint so to speak will be true absolutely in Glasgow or London tomorrow or the day after what I am saying is that these ugly hallmarks are the hallmarks of a society that has said no to God and has been handed over by God to sin and evil verse 28 I say Romans 3 well that just shows that I'm getting old you have to acknowledge that your oldest sometimes make mistakes and have senior moments of course I meant Romans 1 though how I could make that mistake I have no idea verse 28 of Romans 1 and since they did not see fit to acknowledge God you see there's Psalm 14 1 isn't it they may in their heart of hearts know there is a

[25 : 35] God and in fact I think that all men do know that but they did not see fit to acknowledge him and therefore God gave them up to a debased mind notice that the thinking went wrong first to do what ought not to be done they were filled with all manner of unrighteousness verse 29 evil covetousness that's very much a mark of our society malice full of envy murder in many of our states today in London strife deceit that's true of our governments in recent years lying maliciousness gossip slanderers haters of God insolent haughty boastful inventors of evil if that were possible disobedient to parents foolish interesting that word comes there faithless heartless ruthless well that's what your grandchildren will inherit my friends the media will report it all the public will wring their hands over it the government will legislate afresh with new things and they will say again and again that they're going to tackle crime and the causes of crime but of course they don't know what the causes of crime are unless what well as I finish let me tell you what verse 7 means back to

Psalm 14 please and verse 7 is so important that is unless God restores in our country his people to the place which they should have as a light on the hill as a light in the darkness oh that salvation for Israel would come out of Zion when the Lord restores the fortunes of his people let Jacob rejoice let Israel speak there now isn't that interesting what is the answer what is the answer to atheism and unbelief in the individual to the Dawkinses the Pullmans the Starkes what is the answer to a secular government that threatens to take us down that route of godlessness notice that he doesn't pray that the unbeliever will come to faith he doesn't pray for the government though I'm sure we ought he has only one thing to long for one thing to hope for one thing to expect that God will restore his church to a power in the land that happened my friends in the 18th century when our country was corrupt in its government it happened in the early 19th century when our government was corrupt why shouldn't it happened in the 21st century you see what the Bible does in verse 7 and I think it's so delightful it goes right to the heart of the matter there is only one way in which we can turn the tide and of course the multitudes out there in the streets and the people important people in government have no idea that a living church would turn the tide but if you're a believer you know

that and you can only cry to

God for fresh grace and power to come from him upon his weak church by the way the poor often means here not just the poor in money but the weak the weak people who look on the situation and weep over it who see this unbelief who see this secular power like a tide coming into the country and what do they do they say Lord restore your people that's our country's only hope otherwise your grandchildren are going to have a very tough time indeed let's pray Lord we want to thank you that you are restoring your church we're full of gratitude for that everywhere in our country we see fresh shoots of life we see men in positions of authority in every walk of life turning back to you we see that the company of the righteous is increasing we thank you that the poor and the weak know where to turn and we go on and we go on praying as all your saints in this country are praying that you will restore your people that you will lift up our Lord

Jesus Christ as Lord of all that your commandments and your law may become our delight and that the claim of Christ to be the only Lord and Savior may be acknowledged by men and women and young people everywhere restore your cause heavenly father for our good but above all for your glory we ask it through Jesus Christ our Lord Amen