

### III. The Wrath of God

September 29/30 & October 1, 2015

Romans 1:18-32

**Aim:** To recognize that fallen man has been given natural revelation of the existence and attributes of God; therefore, as he descends further and further into sin, he is without excuse.

Paul implicitly acknowledges that 1:18-3:20 is an interruption in his exposition of the righteousness of God by reprising 1:17 in 3:21 – ‘But now the righteousness of God has been manifested ...’ Why this interruption? What is the purpose of this step-by-step indictment of humanity? We must consider 1:18-3:20 as a preparation for, rather than as part of, Paul’s exposition of the gospel of God’s righteousness. But it is a necessary preparation if what Paul wants to emphasize about this righteousness is to be accepted by the Romans. For only if sin is seen to be the dominating, ruling force that Paul presents it to be in this section will it become clear why God’s righteousness can be experienced only by humbly receiving it as a gift – in a word, by faith. This dual focus of 1:18-3:20 is succinctly stated in 3:9 – ‘all people, both Jews and Gentiles, are under the power of sin.’ So absolute is sin’s power over people that only God’s power, available in the gospel, can rescue them. And so universal is sin’s power that it has gained sway even over God’s chosen people, the Jews.

The argument of 1:18-2:29 is best viewed as a series of concentric circles, proceeding from the general to the particular. Verse 18, the outermost circle, begins with a universal indictment: *all* people stand condemned under the wrath of God. Romans 1:19-32, likewise, includes in its scope all people, but it looks at them from the standpoint of their responsibility to God apart from special revelation. This qualification, even though not removing Jews in principle from the focus, means that Paul is not speaking directly about them. He is still speaking *to* them, however, since he uses this section to set up the indictment of the Jews that follows. The focus in 2:1-11 becomes more specific as Paul indicts the ‘moral person,’ but implicitly, as we will see, the Jew. Romans 2:17-29 finally targets Jews explicitly, accusing them on the basis of the clearest revelation of God available: the law of Moses.

In 1:18, Paul begins explaining why all people need a Savior. He explains the need for salvation first as it applies to Gentiles (1:18-2:16), then as it applies to Jews (2:17-3:8), then as it applies to all humanity, Jew and Gentile alike (3:9-20). To the Gentile (the person without the Bible) who asks, ‘Why do I need salvation?’ Paul says, with finality (v. 18): ‘You are under the wrath of God—that is why you need salvation.’ We need a real salvation because we are guilty. Paul will go to great lengths—from 1:18 to 3:20—to explain to the Greeks and Romans, and then to the Jews, and then to mankind in general that they are under God’s wrath and need to be saved; then he will take just a few verses to tell them how to be saved (3:21-30). After a person knows he needs a Savior, it doesn’t take many words to tell him that there *is* a Savior. The problem is for fallen humans, each at the center of his or her own universe, to acknowledge that they need a Savior.

Paul begins with God’s case against the ‘Greeks’ (cp. 1:16), that is, the Gentiles, for whom he is Christ’s apostle. References to idolatry and ‘uncleanness’ show that he is speaking in this passage about Gentiles and not Jews. Gentiles may now be the larger group among the Christians in Rome; they need to be reminded of God’s grievance against the members of their race.

## Romans – Lesson 3

In this passage, Paul says more than that all people experienced the consequences of an original turning away from God, or even that all people shared such an original turning away. He insists that those who turned were also those who knew better, and who are consequently deserving of God's wrath. This, coupled with the obviously universal thrust of vv. 18 and 32, make clear that this foolish and culpable rejection of the knowledge of God is repeated in every generation, by every individual. *Every person* is 'without excuse' because every person – whether a first-century pagan or a twentieth-century materialist – has been given a knowledge of God and has spured that knowledge in favor of idolatry, in all its varied manifestations. All therefore stand under the awful reality of the wrath of God, and all are in desperate need of the justifying power of the gospel of Christ. We will never come to grips with the importance of the gospel, or be motivated as we should be to proclaim it, until this sad truth has been fully integrated into our worldview.

### A. The Revelation of Wrath (Romans 1:18-20)

The idea of a wrathful God goes against the wishful thinking of fallen human nature and is even a stumbling block to man Christians. Much contemporary evangelism talks only about abundant life in Christ, the joy and blessings of salvation, and the peace with God that faith in Christ brings. All of those benefits do result from true faith, but they are not the whole picture of God's plan of salvation. The corollary truth of God's judgment against sin and those who participate in it must also be heard.

For Paul, fear of eternal condemnation was the first motivation he offered for coming to Christ, the first pressure he applied to evil men. He was determined that they understand the reality of being under God's wrath before he offered them the way of escape from it. That approach makes both logical and theological sense. A person cannot appreciate the wonder of God's grace until he knows about the perfect demands of God's law, and he cannot appreciate the fullness of God's love for him until he knows something about the fierceness of God's anger against his sinful failure to perfectly obey the law. He cannot appreciate God's forgiveness until he knows about the eternal consequences of the sins that require a penalty and need forgiving.

The apostle introduces the wrath of God at this point because no one can fully appreciate the good news as good except against the backdrop of our guilt before God. The good news is an announcement to people who universally are under the indictment of God and exposed to His wrath. If people were sensitive to the manifestation of God's anger toward them, they would be so moved by enlightened self-interest that they would flee as fast as they could to hear the gospel, but their necks have become so hardened, their hearts so calcified, that they have no fear of God. People do not believe in God's wrath; they think He is incapable of it. They listen to preachers everywhere tell them that God loves them unconditionally, and when they hear that, they see no reason to fear His wrath.

#### 1. The Wrath of God (1:18)

##### a) *God's Wrath (1:18a)*

<sup>18</sup>*For the wrath of God...*

In light of the stark contrast between the 'revelation of the righteousness of God' (v. 17) and 'the revelation of the wrath of God,' we would expect v. 18 to begin with a strong adversative – 'but' or 'however.' Instead, v. 18 is linked to the preceding verses with the word 'for, which normally

### Romans – Lesson 3

introduces a reason or explanation for a previous statement. It is best to view ‘for’ as introducing the answer to a question implicit in what Paul has just said: Why has God manifested His righteousness and why can it be appropriated only through faith? Viewed in this light, this conjunction introduces the entire argument of 1:19-3:20 – which, indeed, is encapsulated in v. 18.

*Orgē* (‘wrath’) refers to a settled, determined indignation, not the momentary, emotional, and often uncontrollable anger (*thumos*) to which human beings are prone. This wrath is ‘of God’; it is divine. It is therefore unlike anything we know of in the present world. ‘Wrath’ is the negative judgment of God, His just and true condemnation, on those who reject Him. God’s wrath is not like human anger, which is always tainted by sin. God’s wrath is always and completely righteous. God’s wrath is all the more awesome in being dispassionate. He never loses His temper. His anger is not capricious, irrational rage but is the only response that a holy God could have toward evil. God could not be holy and not be angry at evil. Holiness cannot tolerate unholiness.

Since the time of certain Greek philosophers, the idea that God would inflict wrath on people has been rejected as incompatible with an enlightened understanding of the deity. In the Bible wrath is an aspect of God’s person. God’s wrath is necessary to the biblical conception of God. The OT regularly pictures God as responding to sin with wrath; but, particularly in the prophets, the wrath of God is associated with the Day of the Lord as a cosmic, climactic outbreak of judgment. Although Paul works with the same conception of God’s wrath, he stresses the working and effects of God’s wrath. Paul speaks of wrath as a present reality under which people outside Christ stand, and often, following the OT prophets, predicts the outpouring of God’s wrath on the future day of judgment. It is perfectly appropriate for a holy and righteous God to be moved to anger against evil. A judge with no distaste for evil would not be a good judge.

#### *b) Revealed from Heaven (1:18b)*

*...is revealed from heaven...*

A better rendering would be ‘constantly revealed.’ God’s wrath is continually being revealed, perpetually being manifested. *Apokaluptō* (‘revealed’) has the basic meaning of uncovering, bringing to light, or making known. Thus there are *two* revelations of God at present before the Last Day, the wrath of God seen in human wickedness but, more particularly, His mercy through the gospel.

If ‘reveal’ indicates the actual inflicting of God’s wrath, when, and how, does it take place. It is this judgment of the world that the present infliction of God’s wrath is intended to reveal. For the present experience of God’s wrath is merely a foretaste of what will come on the day of judgment. Paul’s mention of the fact that God’s wrath is being revealed ‘from’ heaven adds weight to what Paul is saying.

God’s wrath is rendered ‘from heaven.’ Despite Satan’s present power as prince of the air and of this world, the earth is ultimately dominated by heaven, the throne of God, from which His wrath is constantly and dynamically manifested in the world of men. Heaven reveals God’s wrath in two ways, through His moral order and through His personal intervention. When God made the world, He built in certain moral as well as physical laws that have since governed its operation. Just as a person falls to the ground when he jumps from a high building, so does he fall into God’s judgment when he deviates from God’s moral law. That is built-in wrath. When a person sins, there is a built-in consequence that inexorably works. In this sense God is not specifically

## Romans – Lesson 3

intervening, but is letting the law of moral cause and effect work. The second way in which God reveals His wrath is through His direct and personal intervention. He is not an impersonal cosmic force that set the universe in motion to run its own course. God's wrath is executed exactly according to His divine will.

### c) *Man's Sinfulness (1:18c)*

*...against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men...*

God's wrath is universal, being discharge 'against all' who deserve it. No amount of goodwill, giving to the poor, helpfulness to others, or even service to God can exclude a person from the 'all' that Paul mentions here.

Paul specifies two objects of God's wrath: 'ungodliness' and 'unrighteousness.' Some distinguish the two words, arguing that the former refers to sins of a religious nature and the latter to sins of a moral nature. Paul would then be following a sequence similar to that of the Decalogue, which focuses on a person's duty to God in the first four commandments and on one's duty to others in the second six. Although this interpretation is attractive and theologically sound, it does not have sufficient basis in the meaning of the words Paul uses.

The key words in this passage are 'godlessness' and 'wickedness.' The former word (*asebeia*) means a refusal to recognize, worship, and serve the Creator. The latter word (*adikia*) is a consequence of the former. Because Gentiles refuse to worship and serve God, their sexual and social behavior is wicked. The Gentiles' failure is only secondarily ethical. Primarily, this failure is the willful refusal to acknowledge the Creator.

*Asebia* ('ungodliness') and *adikia* ('unrighteousness') are synonyms, the first stressing a faulting personal relationship to God. 'Ungodliness' refers to lack of reverence for, devotion to, and worship of the true God, a failure that inevitably leads to some form of false worship. 'Unrighteousness' encompasses the idea of ungodliness, but focuses on its result. Sin first attacks God's majesty and then His law. Men do not act righteously because they are not rightly related to God, who is the only measure and source of righteousness. 'Ungodliness' unavoidably leads to 'unrighteousness.' Because men's relation to God is wrong, their relation to their fellow men is wrong. Men treat other men the way they do because they treat God the way they do. Man's enmity with his fellow man originates with his being at enmity with God.

We tend to think of ungodliness as a particularly religious transgression, such as blasphemy or irreverence, and unrighteousness as an immoral activity or behavioral pattern. We might look at this text, therefore, and deduce that God is mad at two things: He is angry at us for being irreverent, and He is angry at us for being immoral. That is not the force of the text, however, because Paul uses a grammatical structure that we find sporadically throughout the Bible called a *hendiadys*, which literally means, 'two for one,' two distinct things taken together to point to just one thing. It is proper to understand Paul as saying that God is angry—furious—with a particular sin. When we examine that sin, it is seen to be both ungodly or irreverent and unrighteous or immoral – suppressing the truth.

### d) *Truth Suppressed (1:18d)*

*...who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.*

Paul has in view one particular sin. It is a universal sin, one committed by every human being. It is the sin that most clearly expresses our Adamic nature, our corruption and fallenness in the flesh. The single sin that provokes God's wrath against the whole human race is the sin of

## Romans – Lesson 3

suppressing truth. The root of the Greek word translated ‘suppress’ is *katacin*, which can also be translated as ‘to hinder,’ ‘to stifle,’ ‘to incarcerate,’ ‘to put in detention,’ ‘to obscure,’ or ‘to repress.’

Because of his sinful disposition, every person is naturally inclined to follow sin and resist God. Unrighteousness is so much a part of man’s nature that *every* person has a built-in, natural, compelling desire to ‘suppress’ and oppose God’s ‘truth.’

“Truth’ in the NT is not simply something to which one must give mental assent; it is something to be done, to be obeyed. When people act sinfully, rebelling against God’s just rule, they fail to embrace the truth and so suppress it.

### 2. The Knowledge of God (1:19-20)

#### a) Revealed by God (1:19)

<sup>19</sup>*For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them.*

Verses 19-20 have two purposes. On the one hand, Paul justifies his assertion that people ‘suppress’ the truth (v. 18b). On the other hand, he wants to show that people who sin and are correspondingly subject to God’s wrath are responsible for their situation. They are ‘without excuse’ (v. 20b). He accomplishes both purposes by asserting that people have been given a knowledge of God. For Jews, as Paul will acknowledge later (2:18, 20), this knowledge of God comes above all through the law of Moses. Here, however, he is interested in the knowledge of God available to all people through the nature of the world itself. Therefore, what Paul says in the following verses, though not limited to Gentiles (since Jews, too, have knowledge of God through nature), has particular relevance to them. Only by an act of revelation from above – God ‘making it known’ – can people understand God as He is.

The truth that every human being suppresses is the truth of God, what God reveals of Himself in nature to the whole human race. This is not the truth of God that we learn through the Bible. We suppress that too, but here Paul is writing of a truth that is known about God apart from the Bible, a knowledge of God that God makes manifest. The Greek word is *phonerōs*, which means ‘to show plainly.’ We use the term *phenomenon*, which is derived from that Greek word. The Latin text translates it as *manifestum*. The knowledge God gives of Himself is not obscure. The truth God gives of Himself is manifest. It is clear—so plain that everybody gets it.

That which is known of God is obvious, even to the person without the Bible—for God has shown it to them. He has shown it, first of all, through their conscience, as Paul explains later in 2:15. Paul is dealing with the individual man or woman standing before him in the Roman world, or with the individual man or woman reading his words in the twenty-first century. And he says to that person, ‘You ask why you are under God’s wrath, but look at you! Don’t you have a conscience? Don’t you know very well that you are not the person you should be?’

The Lord testifies through Paul that His outward, visible manifestation of Himself is universally known by man. It ‘is evident within them’ as well as without them. All men have evidence of God, and what their physical senses can perceive of Him their inner senses can understand to some extent. All men know something and understand something of the reality and truth of God. They are responsible for a proper response to that revelation. Any wrong response is ‘inexcusable.’ Paul’s point is that which is capable of being ‘known about God’ apart from

## Romans – Lesson 3

special revelation is indeed known by fallen mankind. The characteristics that are reflected in His creation give unmistakable testimony to Him (cp. Acts 17:23-28).

Why should God's wrath be directed towards human *asebeia*? As verse 19 explains, it is because 'the knowledge of God' is evident, in two respects. First, it is evident in them, that is, in their moral sense, reflected in the Gentiles' ethical values and virtues. Second, it is evident to them, in the creation, as Paul explains in verse 20.

### b) *Perceived by Man (1:20)*

<sup>20</sup>*For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.*

Not only does the non-believer have a conscience, he should know there is a God simply by observing the amazing creation all around him. Even those who do not have the Bible should be able to conclude from creation that there is a God. The Psalmist declares in Psalm 19:1-3 that the creation reveals *knowledge* of God. There is one voice that is heard wherever humans live, with or without the Bible. It is the voice of creation. Paul is challenging nonbelievers, not just on the basis of the creation's witness as a past event, but also on the basis of the witness of a creation that bathes them with sun and bathes their fields with rain and dew.

Paul's words, 'from the creation of the world,' take us back to the early chapters of Genesis and point to God's initial *act* of creation. Equally, however, Paul's words in verses 21-2 also refer back to the beginning, when Adam rebelled against God. That *act* of rebellion continues as an *attitude* of rebellion by the peoples of the world today, including us today.

God has made His self-revelation conspicuous to everyone since the creation of the world. Every human being knows of God and clearly perceives God but rejects that knowledge. For that, every person is exposed to the wrath of God. The only possible way someone can be rescued from that wrath is through the Savior. Paul is setting the foundation for the urgency of the gospel.

This revelation does not give us all the specific details about the character and nature of God, but it certainly gives us knowledge of God in general. This revelation includes God's eternal power, God's self-existent, eternal being has been revealed in every leaf, every page, every raindrop, and every inch of the cosmos since the beginning of time. God's eternal power and His inherent attributes—immutability, omniscience, omnipresence, and all that fits deity—are made clear through nature. God is also revealed by His moral perfection, holiness, righteousness, and sovereign right to impose obligations upon His creatures.

Paul has asserted that what can be known of God is visible among people generally and that this is so only because God has acted to disclose Himself. Now he explains how it is that God has made this disclosure. What is denoted is that God is powerful and that He possesses those properties normally associated with deity. These properties of God that cannot be 'seen' (*aorata*) are 'seen' (*katoratai*) – an example of the literary device called oxymoron, in which a rhetorical effect is achieved by asserting something that is apparently contradictory. God in His essence is hidden from human sight, yet much of Him and much about Him can be seen through the things He has made. Paul is thinking primarily of the world as the product of God's creation (e.g., see Ps. 8), though the acts of God in history may also be included.

## Romans – Lesson 3

Next Paul specifies the content of the revelation of Himself that God makes known to all mankind. The particular attributes that man can perceive in part through his natural senses are God's 'eternal power' and His 'divine nature.' God's 'eternal power' refers to His never-failing omnipotence, which is reflected in the awesome creation which that power both brought into being and sustains. God's 'divine nature' of kindness and graciousness is reflected, as Paul told the Lystrans, in the 'rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness' (Acts 14:17).

In the last clause, Paul makes clear that 'natural revelation,' in and of itself, leads to a negative result. That Paul, teaches the reality of a revelation of God in nature to all people, this text makes clear. But it is equally obvious that this revelation is universally rejected, as people turn from knowledge of God to gods of their own making (cp. vv. 22ff.). Why this is so, Paul will explain elsewhere (cp. Rom. 5:12-21). But it is vital if we are to understand Paul's gospel and his urgency in preaching it to realize that natural revelation leads not to salvation but to the demonstration that God's condemnation is just: people are 'without excuse.'

God continues to tell humankind of His existence and power by the evidence in them and around them. It is a limited revelation (God only reveals His threefold personhood in the gospel). But it is a revelation sufficient to arouse man's desire to search for and find God. It is also sufficient to condemn Gentile man's failure to do that so that both now and on the Last Day he will be 'without defense' (*anapologētos*).

### B. The Descent into Sin (1:21-32)

#### 1. The Sin of Idolatry (1:21-25)

##### a) Ingratitude (1:21)

<sup>21</sup>*For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.*

The refusal of people to acknowledge and worship God explains why the revelation of God in nature (v. 20a) leads to their being 'without excuse' (v. 20b). Paul accentuates the accountability of people by claiming that their failure to 'glorify' and 'give thanks to' God took place 'even though they knew God.' This limited knowledge of God falls far short of what is necessary to establish a relationship with Him. Knowledge must lead to reverence and gratitude. This it has failed to do. Instead of acknowledging God 'as God,' by glorifying Him and thanking Him, human beings perverted their knowledge and sank into idolatry. It is in the 'reasonings' of people that this futility has taken place, showing that, whatever their initial knowledge of God might be, their natural capacity to reason accurately about God is quickly and permanently harmed. Parallel to, and descriptive of, this futility in thinking is the darkening of the 'un-understanding heart.' At the very center of every person, where the knowledge of God, if it is to have any positive effects, must be embraced, there has settled a darkness – a darkness that only the light of the gospel can penetrate.

God is also justified in His wrath and judgment because of man's willful rejection of Him. Although man is innately conscious of God's existence and power, he is just as innately and wickedly inclined to reject that knowledge. In verse 21, Paul mentions four ways in which men exhibit their rejection of God: by dishonoring Him, by being thankless to Him, by being futile in their speculations concerning Him, and by being darkened in their hearts about Him.

## Romans – Lesson 3

First, man fails to honor God as God. This is the basic expression of the root sin of pride which is at the core of man's fallenness. *Doxazō* ('honor') is probably better translated here as *glory*, as it is in numerous versions. The worst deed committed in the universe is failure to give God honor, or glory. Above everything else God is to be glorified. To glorify God is to exalt Him, to recognize Him as supremely worthy of honor, and to acknowledge His divine attributes (cp. WCF 1).

Second, because man in his pride fails to honor and glorify God as Creator, he also fails to 'give thanks' to Him for His gracious provision. His unbelief is made still worse by his ingratitude. Although God is the source of every good thing that men possess, the natural man fails to thank Him because he fails even to acknowledge His existence.

Third, as a consequence of their failing to honor and thank God, fallen men have become 'futile in their speculations.' To reject God is to reject the greatest reality in the universe, the reality which gives the only true meaning, purpose, and understanding to everything else. Refusing to recognize God and to have His truth guide their minds, sinful men are doomed to futile quests for wisdom through various human speculations that lead only to falsehood and therefore to still greater unbelief and wickedness. The term 'speculation' embraces all man's godless reasonings.

An empty mind and soul is like a vacuum. It will not long remain empty but will draw in falsehood and darkness to replace the truth and light it has rejected. The history of fallen mankind is devolutionary, not evolutionary. The 'foolish heart' that rejects and dishonors God does not become enlightened and freed, as sophisticated unbelievers like to claim, but rather becomes spiritually 'darkened' and further enslaved to sin.

### b) Foolishness (1:22)

<sup>22</sup>*Claiming to be wise, they became fools...*

The degeneration in people's understanding of God, asserted in v. 21, is characterized further in v. 22 by a contrast between illusion and reality. In refusing to pay homage to God when His works are recognized, people claim to be acquiring wisdom. In reality, however, it is the opposite: they are 'becoming foolish.' From v. 23, it is clear that this foolishness involves not only refusing to worship the true God but also embracing false gods. This contrast, in which what people think is wisdom God considers foolishness, and vice versa, is elaborated in 1 Cor. 1-4.

The natural man cannot think perfectly about anything. But his thinking is perverted most severely in the spiritual and divine realm, because that is where his sinful rebellion is centered. These things are also beyond his human perception and since he rejects revelation, he has no hope of coming to truth in himself. His foolish speculations therefore go the furthest astray when he philosophizes about his origin, purpose, and destiny and about the origin and meaning of the universe in which he lives.

These dominating worldly speculations often infect the church. In the name of theistic evolution or progressive creationism, they not only compromise scientific integrity but also, and infinitely more disastrously, compromise God's revelation. They accept the unfounded foolishness of unregenerate men above the flawless truth of God's Word. Institution after institution that once firmly stood on God's Word has progressively accommodated itself to the intellectual foolishness of the world system. In the name of man's wisdom they come to reflect the foolishness, and inevitably the godlessness, of the world system of Satan. The greatest fool in all

## Romans – Lesson 3

the world is the person who exchanges God's wisdom of truth and light for man's wisdom of deceit and darkness.

### *c) Exchanged the Glory (1:23)*

...<sup>23</sup> and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

The heart of the Gentiles' sin is expressed in their acts of 'holding down' (or 'suppressing' the truth (v. 18) and in 'exchanging' (vv. 23, 25).

Verse 23 graphically portrays the folly of idolatry that lies at the heart of all religions that are not based on a reverent response to the revelation of the one true God. Paul pictures the fall into idolatry as an 'exchange' (*metallasso*) of the glory of God for the images of human beings and beasts. 'Glory' signifies the splendor and majesty that belong intrinsically to the one true God. Paul's description of the fall into idolatry is reminiscent of several OT texts (e.g., Ps. 106:20; Jer. 2:11). Paul wishes his readers to see how foolish it is to substitute for direct contact with God's awesome presence the indirect, shadowy relationship found in idolatry.

Although fallen man is not naturally godly, he is very much naturally religious. The clear testimony of Scripture is that human religion of every sort, whether simple or highly sophisticate, is a downward movement away from God, away from truth, and away from righteousness. Contrary to much thinking, men's religions do not reflect their highest endeavors but their lowest depravity. The natural trend of religion throughout history has not been upward but downward.

A profound emphasis is found in the word 'image.' Having been made in the image of God (Gen. 1:26), men and women rebel and, wanting to be the center of their universe, they deliberately reverse the process and make God into their image. Because they have refused to acknowledge themselves as creatures, they have found it necessary to make God in their own image.

The first creature man substitutes for God is himself, 'an image in the form of corruptible man.' Instead of glorifying and worshiping God, he attempts to deify himself. An even more ludicrous form of idolatry noted by Paul is the worship of 'birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures.' Lest we think that contemporary, sophisticated man has risen above such crude foolishness, we have only to consider the monumental increase in astrology and other occultic practices during the last few decades in the United States and western Europe. There have always been people who worship the idols of wealth, health, pleasure, prestige, sex, sports, education, entertainment, celebrity, success, and power. And at no time in history have those forms of idolatry been more pervasive and corrupting than in our own day.

Paul's words remain true for the present sophisticated world. Despite the rightful concerns to preserve the creation (the so-called 'environment'), there is no evidence that such focused interest moves the heart of modern man to 'glorify or thank' God, the Creator of all things.

This tragic process of human 'god-making' continues apace in our own day, and Paul's words have as much relevance for people who have made money or sex or fame their gods as for those who carved idols out of wood and stone. Thus, as vv. 24-31 show, the whole dreadful panoply of sins that plague humanity has its roots in the soil of this idolatry.

## Romans – Lesson 3

### d) Given Up (1:24)

<sup>24</sup>Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves...

The ‘therefore’ at the beginning of this verse shows that God’s ‘handing over’ of human beings is His response to their culpable rejection of the knowledge of Himself that He has made generally available (vv. 21-23). Paul’s use of the verb ‘hand over’ to describe this retribution has its roots in the OT, where it is regularly used in the stereotyped formula according to which God ‘hands over’ Israel’s enemies so that they may be defeated in battle. Paul here alleges that God has ‘handed over’ people to ‘uncleanness.’ What does Paul mean by this? Clearly, he cannot be saying that God impelled people to sin. Paul’s purpose is to highlight the divine side of the cycle of sin; but it must be balanced with the human side, presented in Eph. 4:19, where Paul says that Gentiles ‘gave themselves up’ to licentiousness, leading to all kinds of ‘uncleanness.’

‘Therefore’ refers back to the reasons Paul has just set forth in verses 18-23. Although God revealed Himself to man (vv. 19-20), man rejected God (v. 21) and then rationalized his rejection (v. 22; cp. v. 18b) and created substitute gods of his own making (v. 23). And because man abandoned God, God abandoned men—He ‘gave them over.’ It is that divine abandonment and its consequences that Paul develops in verses 24-32, the most sobering and fearful passage in the entire epistle.

How is God revealing His wrath now, ahead of the Final Day? Because of their *asebia* (‘godlessness’) God hands them over to *adikia* (‘wickedness’). Three times Paul says that ‘God handed them over’ (vv. 24, 2. 28). The first and the second relate to ‘their bodies’ (that is, sexual deviance – vv. 24-27), and the third to ‘their minds’ (as expressed in fractured social relationships – vv. 28-32). God gave mankind up, and they followed their desires into all sorts of immoral behavior. All sins and all human problems flow from our choice not to put God at the center of the universe.

*Paradidōmi* (‘gave...over’) is an intense verb. God’s giving over sinful mankind has a dual sense. First, in an *indirect* sense God ‘gave them over’ simply by withdrawing His restraining and protective hand, allowing the consequences of sin to take their inevitable, destructive course. Sin degrades man, debases the image of God in which he is made, and strips him of dignity, peace of mind, and a clear conscience. Sin destroys personal relationships, marriages, families, cities, and nations. It also destroys churches. In a second, *direct* sense God ‘gave...over’ rebellious mankind by specific acts of judgment. The Bible is replete with accounts of divine wrath being directly and supernaturally poured out on sinful men. The flood of Noah’s day and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, for example, were not indirect natural consequences of sin but were overt supernatural expressions of God’s judgment on gross and unrepentant sin.

Chrysostom interprets this handing over in a passive sense: by withdrawing His influence over these disobedient idolaters, God permits them to continue in, and indeed to plunge more deeply into, the sin they had already chosen. As Godet puts it: ‘God ceased to hold the boat as it was dragged by the current of the river.’ No doubt such a withdrawal of divine influence would produce this result. But the meaning of ‘hand over’ demands that we give God a more active role as the initiator of the process. God does not simply let the goat go – he gives it a push downstream. Like a judge who hands over a prisoner to the punishment his crime has earned, God hands over the sinner to the terrible cycle of ever-increasing sin.

## Romans – Lesson 3

Men reject God because their preferences, their ‘lusts,’ are for their own way rather than God’s. ‘Lusts’ translates *epithumia*, which can refer to any desire but was most often used of carnal desire for that which was sinful or forbidden. *Akatharsia* (‘impurity’) was a general term for uncleanness and was often used of decaying matter, especially the contents of a grave, which were considered by Jews to be both physically and ceremonially unclean. As a moral term, it usually referred to or was closely associated with sexual immorality.

The effect of men’s rebellious, self-willed impurity was ‘that their bodies might be dishonored.’ When men seek to glorify their own ways, and to satisfy their bodies through shameful indulgence in sexual and other sins, their bodies, along with their souls, are instead dishonored. What man seeks to elevate himself for his own purposes and by his own standards, he inevitably does the opposite. The way of fallen mankind is always downward, never upward. The more he exalts himself, the more he declines. The more he magnifies himself the more he diminishes. The more he honors himself, the more he becomes dishonored. The body that indulges in sexual impurity is itself dishonored; it is debased, disgraced, and degraded.

Three times in this section we read about human beings being given up by God. They are given up to their vile passions, the lust of the flesh, and their reprobate minds. When God judges people according to the standards of His righteousness, He is declaring that He will not strive with mankind forever. There is a limit to God’s mercy. There is a limit to His grace, and He is determined not to pour out His mercy on impenitent people forever. There is a time, as the Old Testament repeatedly reports, particularly in the book of the prophet Jeremiah, that God stops being gracious with people, and He gives them over to their sin. The worst thing that can happen to sinners is to be allowed to go on sinning with any divined restraints. God gives people over to what they want. He abandons them to their sinful impulses and removes his restraints, saying in essence, ‘If you want to sin, go ahead and sin.’ This is what theologians call ‘judicial abandonment.’ God, in dispensing His just judgment, abandons the impenitent sinner forever.

Throughout Christian history there has been a function that mirrors that very predicament, the discipline of excommunication. To be excommunicated from the body of Christ is the only thing worse than being sent to hell in the final judgment. There are many sins that can begin the process of church discipline, yet there is only one sin for which a person is to be excommunicated—impenitence. Here in Romans, God is, for a season at least, excommunicating the whole human race. He pronounces His judicial abandonment on all mankind for their refusal to respond to His clear revelation of Himself. Since by nature we repress that truth, God delivers us to our sin.

### *e) Exchanged the Truth (1:25)*

...<sup>25</sup>*because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.*

If in v. 23 Paul accuses people of exchanging the glory of God for idols, so here he claims that they have ‘exchanged the truth of God for a lie.’ ‘The truth of God’ is not the truth God has made known and belongs to Him, but the reality, the fact of God as He has revealed Himself.

The two verbs of ‘worshiped’ and ‘served’ are mutually interpreting and together sum up all that is involved in the veneration of idols. The basic truth that fallen man suppresses is that of God’s very existence and therefore His right and demand to be honored and glorified as sovereign (see vv. 19-21).

## Romans – Lesson 3

Mankind has ‘changed the truth of God into a lie.’ In so doing he lost not only the truth about God’s existence, but also the truth about the universe and about himself. Mankind doesn’t know who he is. The truth is gone. Not only does he question the existence of God, he questions his own existence as well, and everything that flows from the existence of God. When people throw away the God of truth, all truth is gone. All that is left are sets of opinions, and personal gods, and pleasures.

Perhaps unable to continue discussing such vile things without ‘coming up for air,’ as it were, Paul inserts a common Jewish doxology about the true God, ‘the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.’ Paul could not resist adding that refreshing thought in the sea of filth he was describing. The world of praise to the Lord served, by utter contrast, to magnify the wickedness of idolatry and all other ungodliness.

Paul outlines the dreadful consequences that fall on a race of people who live by refusing to acknowledge what they know to be true about the character of God. The result is a futile mind, a blackened heart, and a life of radical corruption. People are exposed to God’s displeasure so that their only hope is the gospel of His dear Son. This portion of Paul’s letter is preparatory; it is the groundwork. If he had stopped here, we would be without hope, lost forever in our guilt and sin.

### 2. The Sin of Homosexuality (1:26-27)

#### a) Dishonorable Passions (1:26a)

<sup>26</sup>*For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions.*

As in vv. 23-24, people’s ‘exchange’ of the one true God for idols (v.25) is the cause of God’s retributive ‘handing them over.’ And that to which they are handed over, ‘dishonorable passions,’ here corresponds to the ‘uncleanness’ of v. 24. Paul’s use of the word ‘passions,’ combined with what he says in vv. 26b-27, makes clear that he refers to illicit sexual passions.

For the second time (see v. 24) the apostle mentions God’s abandonment of sinful mankind. He abandoned them not only to idolatry, the ultimate sexual expression of man’s spiritual degeneracy, but also to ‘degrading passions,’ which he identifies in vv. 26-27 as homosexuality, the ultimate expression of man’s moral degeneracy.

#### b) Exchanged Natural Relations (1:26b-27a)

*For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; <sup>27</sup>and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men...*

When the apostle Paul describes the radical corruption of the human race, he sees the sin of homosexual behavior as the sin most representative of the radical nature of our fall. It is seen here not simply as a sin, nor even as a serious sin or a gross sin, but as the clearest expression of the depths of our perversity. When Paul introduces the sin of homosexual behavior, he first mentions females. Throughout human history man has been the gender that seems more brutish, most without conscience and godliness. The woman has been understood as the fairer sex, but when Paul wants to describe the depth of the fall of the human race, he says that even the women exchange the natural use for what is against nature, not simply against culture, or societal convention. All the debates today about whether homosexual behavior is acquired or inherently genetic can be answered here in this text. The Word of God says that such behavior is not natural. It is against nature as God has created it.

## Romans – Lesson 3

The sexual sin that Paul singles out is homosexuality. The verb ‘exchange,’ which has been used twice to depict the fall into idolatry (vv. 23, 25), is now used to characterize this tragic reversal in sexual practice. The ‘natural use’ has been replaced with one that is ‘against nature.’ In labeling the turning from the ‘natural use’ to ‘that which is against nature’ an ‘exchange,’ Paul associates homosexuality with the perversion of true knowledge of God already depicted in vv. 23 and 25. In addition, we must remember that the clause in question is a description of ‘sinful passions,’ a phrase plainly connoting activities that are contrary to God’s will. When these factors are considered, it is clear that Paul depicts homosexual activity as a violation of God’s created order, another indication of the departure from true knowledge and worship of God.

Perversion is the illicit and twisted expression of that which is God-given and natural. Homosexuality, on the other hands, is inversion, the expression of that which is neither God-given nor natural. Paul does not use *gunē*, the usual term for ‘women,’ but rather *thēleia*, which simply means female. In most cultures women have been more reluctant than men to become involved either in sexual promiscuity or homosexuality. Perhaps Paul mentions women first because their practice of homosexuality is especially shocking and dismaying. *Chrēsis* (‘function’) was commonly used of sexual intercourse, and in this context the term could refer to nothing other than intimate sexual relations. ‘And in the same way also the men,’ Paul says, again using a Greek term that simply denotes gender, in this case, male. The usual Greek terms for women and men, like corresponding terms in most languages, imply a certain dignity, and Paul refused to ascribe even an implied dignity to those who degenerate into homosexuality.

Paul shows that the same ‘sinful passions’ that lead women to engage in unnatural homosexual acts are also operative among men, with similar effect. With a realism we see throughout the Bible, Paul uses strong language to characterize male homosexuality. Religious people don’t always like to deal with the reality of such things, but the Bible never covers up reality.

### *c) Due Penalty (1:27b)*

*...and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error.*

In calling the homosexual activity that brings about this penalty an ‘error,’ Paul does not diminish the seriousness of the offense, for this word often denotes sins of unbelievers in the NT. In claiming that this penalty for homosexual practice is received ‘in themselves,’ Paul may suggest that the sexual perversion itself is the punishment. On the other hand, this could be a vivid way of saying that those who engage in such activities will suffer eternal punishment; they will receive ‘in their own persons’ God’s penalty for violation of His will.

When men and women engage in this kind of behavior, there are necessary, divinely appointed consequences. A price must be paid when people go that far to defy the law of God. When people so act against God’s law and the law of nature, He gives them their due.

God so abhors homosexuality that He determined that the disgraceful, shameful acts that women commit with women and men commit with men would result in their ‘receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error.’ They would be judged by the self-destructiveness of their sin. The appalling physical consequences of homosexuality are visible evidence of God’s righteous condemnation. Unnatural vice brings its own perverted reward. AIDS is frightening evidence of that fatal promise.

In both testaments God’s Word condemns homosexuality in the strongest terms. Under the Old Covenant it was punishable by death. Paul declares unequivocally that, although homosexuality

## Romans – Lesson 3

can be forgiven and cleansed just as any other sin, no unrepentant homosexual will enter heaven, just as will no unrepentant fornicator idolater, adulterer, effeminate person, thief, covetous person, drunkard, reviler, or swindler (1 Cor. 6:9-11; cp. Gal. 5:19-21; Eph. 5:3-5; 1 Tim. 1:9-10). All people are born in sin, and individuals have varying tendencies and temptations toward certain sins. But no one is born a homosexual, any more than anyone is born a thief or a murderer. A person who becomes a habitual and unrepentant thief, murderer, adulterer, or homosexual does so of his own choice. Any attempt at all to justify homosexuality is both futile and wicked, but to attempt to justify it on biblical grounds, as do many misguided church leaders, is even more futile and vile.

### 3. The Sins of Inhumanity (1:28-31)

In vv. 22-24 and 25-27 Paul has shown how the sexual immorality that pervades humanity has its roots in the rejection of the true God in favor of gods of their own making. In this third and final portrayal of this sin-retribution sequence (vv. 28-32), he traces sins of inhumanity, of man's hatred of his fellow man in all its terrible manifestations, to this same root sin of idolatry.

#### a) *A Debased Mind (1:28)*

<sup>28</sup>*And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done.*

Even as people did not retain knowledge of God, God handed them over to a worthless mind. This correlative relationship underlines the close correspondence in this verse between sin and retribution, a relationship Paul enhances with a wordplay in Greek between 'see fit' (*εδοχίμασαν, edochimasan*) and 'worthless' (*αδοχίμων, adochimon*).

For the third time Paul describes God's response to people's spurning of Him with the words 'God handed them over' (cp. vv. 24, 26). Whereas in the previous instances it was to immoral acts that God consigned people, in this case it is to a 'worthless mind.' People who have refused to acknowledge God end up with minds that are 'disqualified' from being able to understand and acknowledge the will of God. The result, of course, is that they do things that are 'not proper.'

God 'gave them over' in still another way, in this case 'to a depraved mind.' The basic meaning of *adokimos* ('depraved') is that of not standing the test, and the term was commonly used of metals that were rejected by refiners because of their impurities. The impure metals were discarded, and *adokimos* therefore came to include the ideas of worthlessness and uselessness. In relation to God, the rejecting mind becomes a rejected mind and thereby becomes spiritually depraved, worthless, and useless.

Because they did not elect to acknowledge God in the realm of knowledge, God gave them over to a 'reprobate' mind—a mind void of judgment—in every realm of life. As soon as you turn away from the living God and put something else in the center of the universe, you immediately throw the door open to a mind void of judgment in every area of life. Because of it he looks at everything differently. Morality looks different. Marriage looks different. The parent-child relationship looks different. No area of life has been untouched by this mind void of judgment.

Homosexuality is just one sin that Paul describes in this passage. If we can make it through Paul's entire list without feeling pangs of conscience, we are psychopaths. A debased mind is one in which the thoughts are filled with impurities, the desires of the flesh, lust, jealousy, and hatred against people. Such a mind is in love with the lie and flees from the truth.

## Romans – Lesson 3

### b) *An Unholy Catalogue (1:29-31)*

<sup>29</sup>*They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, <sup>30</sup>slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, <sup>31</sup>foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.*

If we ask people whether they believe man is basically good, the majority will answer yes. Due to the impact of humanism on our culture, people believe that man is basically good and simply makes mistakes on occasion. Such thinking leads people to believe they do not need Jesus. However, there is nothing we need more than Jesus.

Paul now gives twenty-one examples of this ‘dis-located’ (or ‘un-fitted’) social behavior. Such a listing of sins is called a ‘vice list,’ a literary form widespread in secular moral writings as well as in the NT. As is typical of such lists, this one exhibits no rigid logical arrangement, since rhetorical concerns play a role in the ordering of the list. Nor it is possible to give each term in the list a meaning distinct from every other term – some are virtually synonymous, and a considerable degree of overlap in meaning occurs.

The catalog of sins Paul proceeds to mention in Romans 1:29-31 is not exhaustive, but it is representative of the virtually endless number of vices with which the natural man is ‘filled.’

Structurally, the list falls into three parts, and a general logical sequence matches this structure. The first four nouns are rather general in their focus, the next five revolve around envy and its consequences, while the last twelve begin with two words depicting slander, move on to four that focus on arrogance, and conclude with six less closely related. Throughout the list, Paul focuses on social ills, leaving out sins related to sexual conduct, and, for the most part, sins against God directly. The purpose of this recital, which is the longest of its kind in the NT, is to show the general scope of social evils produced by the ‘unqualified mind’ to which God has handed sinners over. The harm done by people to other people is thus added to idolatry and sexual perversion to complete Paul’s sketch of the world outside Christ.

Despite the scope of Paul’s list, it is only partial. It is merely representative of our corruption. If Paul had enumerated all the sins that the Bible spells out, he could have filled the entire epistle and then some. He gives a representative list that should be enough to stop every mouth and convict every conscience. Surely there is something on the list that we recognize as part of our own experience.

Paul is not saying that all people, at all times, in all places behave like this in every detail. Nor is Paul denying that men and women can and do act nobly. Rather, he is commenting ‘broad brush’ that observable behavior in Gentile society has departed from the Creator’s intention for ordered and decent human relationships. If we look at the items on this list and think about their *opposites* we catch a glimpse of how God intends men and women to behave toward one another in society. For example:

And just as they saw fit to acknowledge God in all things, God *gave them up* to a sound mind, to do those things which are proper, being filled with all righteousness, goodness, generosity, kindness; full of selflessness, life, healing, openness, kindness; they are gentle in speech, always building others up, lovers of God, respectful, humble, self-effacing, inventors of good, obedient to parents, understanding, trustworthy, loving, merciful... (from Kent R. Hughes).

## Romans – Lesson 3

### 4. Sin and the Sinner (1:32)

<sup>32</sup>*Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.*

The worst indictment is not found in the list of heinous crimes against God. It is found in this concluding verse of the chapter: ‘those who practice such things are deserving of death.’ Paul says that fallen human beings not only do these things, but they know better. God has planted in the mind of every creature made in His image a conscience that can discern the difference between good and evil. But it gets worse. Those who do those things ‘also approve of those who practice them.’ There is honor among thieves. Misery loves company. If we can entice others to join us in our sin, we can get rid of the taboos rather than repent of the guilt. We seek to establish a new ethic.

The function of this concluding verse is to bring out even more fully the willful rebellion against God that pervades humanity. Toward this end, Paul notes that those who engage in the activities he has listed know that what they are doing is wrong. They act ‘knowing the righteous decree of God, that those who do such things are worthy of death.’ But this knowledge is both limited and impure; it is confined to those basic attributes of God that may be discerned in nature (v. 20) and is so mixed with false perceptions that it is almost immediately perverted. If the passion of Paul’s gospel is to be correctly appreciated and the argument of this section correctly understood, it is vitally important to see that the knowledge of God that people possess outside special revelation is woefully inadequate, of itself, to save. Paul makes clear that, rather than being a help to people in their search for God, the evidence of nature and conscience (cp. 2:14-16) serves only to render them ‘without excuse’ before the wrathful God. That this is the result of natural revelation follows from the sinfulness of human beings, who without grace are unable to respond appropriately to whatever knowledge of God they may possess. Paul, then, teaches a natural revelation, but at least in this passage, the purpose and effect of that revelation are wholly negative.

The absolute pit of wickedness is reached, Paul says, when those who are themselves involved in evils ‘also give hearty approval to’ others ‘who practice them.’ To justify one’s own sin is wicked enough, but to approve and encourage others to sin is immeasurably worse. A society that openly condones and defends such evils as sexual promiscuity, homosexuality, and the rest has reached the deepest level of corruption. Many of the most socially advanced societies of our own day are in that category. Sexually promiscuous celebrities are glamorized and the rights of homosexuals are ardently defended. These acts of sin are in direct contradiction to the revealed will of God.

Thanks be to God that Romans does not end here. The gospel, the good news, is coming.

For next time: Read Romans 2:1-16.