



The Letter to the Romans

Good News for All People

5. WITHOUT EXCUSE

Romans 1:18-32

INTRODUCTION

Verses 16-17 transition us from the introduction to the body of the letter. Paul explained his eagerness to preach the gospel in terms of the gospel revealing God's righteousness and God's power unto salvation. He reiterated two themes that run throughout the letter. He wrote that salvation is by faith, and salvation is to all who believe, Jews and Gentiles alike.

The first large section of the letter runs from 1:18 to 3:20. The overall message of this section is the natural unrighteousness of all men. Paul's argument develops in three main steps: 1) The unrighteousness of the Gentiles (1:18-32), 2) The unrighteousness of the Jews (2:1-3:8), and 3) God's judgment of all sinners (3:9-20). Paul thoroughly establishes the natural human condition of Jews and Gentiles alike, revealing the universal need for the gospel of Jesus Christ and salvation from God's wrath.

Today, we are looking at verses 18-32 in chapter 1. These verses form the first step of Paul's argument and focus on the immorality of the Gentile world. Paul begins with God's wrath, which he will vindicate throughout this section. He describes a downward spiral of the natural man. This descent begins with denial of God and willful disobedience, proceeds to idolatry and the worship of not-God, resulting in further progressing immorality, and ends with giving glory and honor to sin rather than God. He establishes the righteousness of God's wrath with the unrighteousness of men, showing that man's unrighteousness is actively pursued.

Outline

1. Verses 18-20 God's Wrath Against Sin
2. Verses 21-32 Human Guilt

VERSES 18-20 GOD'S WRATH AGAINST SIN

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness;

- Romans 1:18

The word for revealed is in the present indicative tense. This means that God's wrath is being revealed as a continuing action, or a constant action. What is God's wrath? Though it includes God's anger, it is not an emotional outburst reaction, nor is it a mood swing response. God's wrath is a deliberate response to sin and it is a determined and willful action on God's part to judge sin (Psalm 2:4-5; 50:16-22).

People often pit God's wrath against his goodness or his love, as though they were contradictory. This view of God's wrath fails to understand God's holiness, from which his love and wrath both flow. Paul refers to the continual revelation of God's wrath against sin throughout history and leading to the ultimate, final revelation of wrath in the future judgment. Paul later refers to God giving people over to their sins as God's wrath being revealed presently.

The term ungodliness refers to a lack of reverence toward God. It is not merely neglect, but active opposition. Unrighteousness refers to all manner of immoral thoughts, desires, and actions. The word for hold means to hold down, or to suppress. Paul goes on to explain the truth is what is being suppressed. It is a willful act of defiance and disobedience.

Because that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God hath shewed it unto them.

- Romans 1:19

Paul writes that the knowledge of God is evident within them, within all people. Paul is referring, as he shows here and in the next chapter, to the human faculties of reason and conscience. Mankind has an innate sense of right and wrong. Human beings have the ability to reason. Human faculties have been corrupted by sin, so they don't work perfectly, but there are still present.

For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse:

- Romans 1:20

The immaterial attributes of God are clearly seen in the material creation. Paul refers to the eternal power and Godhead. He means God's power as Creator, which means God must exist before and apart from all created things. Verses 18-20 show that Paul is dealing with the whole history of human sin. Verse 18 refers to all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men. Verse 20 shows that is from the creation of the world.

Paul doesn't yet mention Adam, but he is talking about Adam's race. He is laying the groundwork to speak of the guilt of the Jews later, because they are not only the children of Abraham but also of Adam.

Paul is referring to what we sometimes call natural revelation. He writes that such natural revelation is sufficient so that all men are without excuse before God. This means without excuse from God's wrath.

VERSES 21-32 HUMAN GUILT

Because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened.

- Romans 1:21

Paul has already established every person has some knowledge of God through natural revelation. He states that despite that knowledge, they did not acknowledge God as Creator. To do so would bring them under obligation to the Creator, and so this is willful disobedience. They were not thankful to the Creator, which means they refused to acknowledge the good gifts that come from God.

The word for vain conveys the idea of futility and meaninglessness. Their hearts being darkened points to being obscured. The natural man searches for meaning, fulfillment, and joy, but he refuses to acknowledge God. Rather than finding what he seeks, he gets farther from it. Solomon wrote of the futile pursuit of silver with silver as the ultimate goal in Ecclesiastes 5:10. He concluded it was a search that always comes up empty no matter how much silver is gained.

Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools,

- Romans 1:22

Sinful man uses his God-given reason to erase God from heaven and earth. He believes in himself he has achieved a great victory, or attained to enlightened wisdom. Paul writes they have rather become fools. They deny God's existence and being (Psalm 14:1). They are like the fools in Proverbs who go away from the only way that leads to life as they go toward death.

And changed the glory of the uncorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and fourfooted beasts, and creeping things.

- Romans 1:23

This verse begins a pattern of exchanges that degrades toward worsening conditions. Man begins denying God and descends to idolatry. They exchange the God of creation for some

image of the creation. The worship, which rightly belongs to God alone, is directed to anything that is not-God. This part of the letter focuses on Gentiles, but it ultimately points to the entire human race. This means Israel is included in this indictment (Psalm 106:19-22).

Wherefore God also gave them up to uncleanness through the lusts of their own hearts, to dishonor their own bodies between themselves:

- Romans 1:24

Paul shows how God's wrath is revealed. It is revealed in giving up, or giving over, idolaters. This refers to God abandoning men to pursue their sins. They pursue their own courses and inherit the consequences. The words uncleanness and lusts refer to sexual immorality. This is further described in the verse as dishonoring their bodies, or the natural creation. Paul will move from the general terms to more specific ones in the following verses.

Who changed the truth of God into a lie, and worshiped and served the creature more than the Creator, who is blessed for ever. Amen.

- Romans 1:25

Paul mentions the second exchange. They rejected the truth of God, which refers to the natural revelation and what may be known of God through the creation. Worshiping and serving the created things means ascribing to a created thing the glory only belonging to the Creator. This is the lie they chose.

For this cause God gave them up unto vile affections: for even their women did change the natural use into that which is against nature:

- Romans 1:26

Paul begins to get more specific of how God gave up the idolaters to their sins. The phrase vile affections means disgraceful passions. Verse 27 makes clear Paul specifically means homosexual activity. The phrases "natural use" and "against nature" refer to creation purpose. This describes rebellion against the Creator through the self-evident creation mandate of one man to one woman marriage.

And likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust one toward another; men with men working that which is unseemly, and receiving in themselves that recompense of their error which was meet.

- Romans 1:27

Paul explains how men also sinned in the same manner of the women in the previous verse. He continues to refer to natural use as the created order. Paul's choice of specific example sins doesn't mean these are the only sins. The places where he generalizes shows that is not the case. This specific example corresponds to the disobedience to God in natural revelation, which is how he began this section.

Being given over to this sin means inheriting the consequences, which range from physical

and psychological problems to diseases, and ultimately to the death of a society, or nation. The created order reveals design that a man and woman marry and produce children. Deviations from that creation model are always destructive and accompanied by all manner of unrighteousness.

And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a reprobate mind, to do those things which are not convenient;

- Romans 1:28

God leaving such to their sins, or giving them over to their sins, is a revelation of God's wrath. Paul refers to how they continue to pursue more and more sin, becoming more and more debauched. They become more hardened and darkened in their thinking. This is the way we arrive at completely upside down thinking we see pervading our culture today.

Being filled with all unrighteousness, fornication, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; full of envy, murder, debate, deceit, malignity; whisperers, backbiters, haters of God, despiteful, proud, boasters, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents, without understanding, covenantbreakers, without natural affection, implacable, unmerciful:

- Romans 1:29-31

These verses give three listings of sins, including general and specific sins. Paul's point is to cover all sins as a manifestation of rebellion against God. It doesn't mean this or that sin is worse or better. It doesn't mean if some particular sin isn't found on this list that it is excused from God's wrath. Paul's point is that all are guilty and God is just, or righteous, in revealing his wrath against all sin and ungodliness.

Who knowing the judgment of God, that they which commit such things are worthy of death, not only do the same, but have pleasure in them that do them.

- Romans 1:32

Paul here refers again to knowledge held by human beings, like the way he started. He most likely refers to human faculties mentioned earlier and the evident truths of God from natural revelation. He particularly refers to the conscience, which he will speak to more in Romans 2:14-16. The conscience refers to the sense of right and wrong, with the perceived need to restrain and punish wrong.

CONCLUSION

Paul has shown human guilt in terms of willful disobedience to God, resulting in worsening sins and consequences. Paul will later state how none are righteous of themselves before God. Paul here shows good reason to preach the gospel to every person. He also shows us how to understand the human world and evangelize that world.

ABOUT THIS SERIES

This series is a verse by verse expository study of the Letter to the Romans. Each sermon typically covers one paragraph of the text of the letter. This PDF is provided freely for personal study. Each sermon has been prepared and preached by Jeff Short, the pastor of Harmony Baptist Church.

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