

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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THE BAD NEWS OF THE GOSPEL

Romans 1:18-32

In our journey on the Romans road, we come today to the most unpleasant part of the journey, as Paul lays out the case against all of humankind, Jews and non-Jews, religious and irreligious alike, beginning in 1:18 and continuing through 3:20.

In his book *What Does the Bible Really Teach about Homosexuality?* (a book the elders have read and discussed, and a book I recommend highly to you), Kevin DeYoung titles his chapter on the verses we read this morning (1:18-32) “The Romans Road in the Wrong Direction” (DeYoung, *What Does the Bible Really Teach about Homosexuality*, 49). In these verses Paul describes not the road to salvation but the road to condemnation. Not the way of reconciliation and peace with God, but the way of separation from God. Not the way to freedom from sin but the downward spiral of rejecting God and His truth that leads to folly in the guise of wisdom, darkened hearts, sexual confusion, and slavery to sin itself – a kind of bondage to whatever we put in the place of God.

After telling us in verses 16 and 17 that the gospel is “the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes” and that “in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed,” a righteousness based on faith not performance, a righteousness that is received not earned, Paul now goes on to say that God’s righteousness is also revealed in His wrath. There is no contradiction in this, no conflict between the righteousness of God and the wrath of God. The wrath of God is one dimension of God’s righteousness. God’s anger is always righteous anger. *Our* anger is not always righteous. More often than not, it is *not* righteous. But God’s wrath is always righteous. His anger is always holy anger. John Stott describes the wrath of God as God’s “holy hostility to evil, His refusal to condone it . . . , His just judgment of it” (Stott, *The Message of Romans*, 72). Stuart Briscoe speaks of the wrath of God as “a holy response to the unholy, a just reaction to the unjust, a pure rejection to the impure” (Briscoe, *Romans: The Communicator’s Commentary*, 40).

This is what Paul is talking about when he says in verse 18 that “the wrath of God” – His holy hostility to evil – “is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness.”

What Jonathan Edwards preached in his famous sermon nearly 300 years ago, that we are “sinners in the hands of an angry God,” is true. As it says in Hebrews 10:31, it really is “a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (ESV). That is absolutely true, if you are living in rebellion against God, if you have turned away from God and rejected the salvation He has provided for you in the gospel. It is “a fearful thing.” But, as Edwards himself knew and preached, the anger of God is not the whole truth. There is more, much more, to the gospel than the announcement of God’s wrath against sin and evil and godlessness. And you don’t need to live in mortal fear of the wrath of God.

The message of God's righteous wrath and the reason for it, which is the fact of universal human sinfulness and guilt before God, is, in essence, the bad news of the gospel. Chuck Swindoll says this whole section in Romans, from 1:18 to 3:20, constitutes "an indictment against humanity" (Swindoll, *Insights from Romans*, 36). Another Bible teacher, Ray Stedman, stated that these verses tell us why we need the gospel (Stedman, *From Guilt to Glory, Vol. 1*, 26). Exactly.

If righteousness, as we said two weeks ago, means to be "in the right" in our relationship with God, the plain, unvarnished truth is that apart from Jesus and His saving work for us, we are all "in the wrong" with God and justly deserve His displeasure. Paul's aim in these verses, says F. F. Bruce, is to demonstrate that "the whole of humanity is morally bankrupt, unable to claim a favorable verdict at the judgment bar of God, [and] desperately in need of His mercy and pardon" (Bruce, *Romans*, 77). Paul lays out before us the bad news of the gospel, because unless we "get" it – unless we accept the fact of our sinfulness and the consequences of it, unless we come to terms with the gravity of our depravity – we will never grasp just how good the good news of the gospel really is. We will never appreciate the greatness – the amazingness – of the grace God has given us in the salvation He has provided for us in Christ. Unless you see how bad the bad news of the gospel is, you won't be able to fully appreciate how good the good news of the gospel is.

I want you to hear this passage in the colorful language of Eugene Peterson's paraphrase in *The Message*. He writes:

But God's angry displeasure erupts as acts of human mistrust and wrongdoing and lying accumulate, as people try to put a shroud over truth. But the basic reality is plain enough. Open your eyes and there it is! By taking a long and thoughtful look at what God has created, people have always been able to see what their eyes as such can't see: [God's] eternal power, for instance, and the mystery of His divine being. So nobody has a good excuse. What happened was this: People knew God perfectly well, but when they didn't treat Him like God, refusing to worship Him, they trivialized themselves into silliness and confusion so that there was neither sense nor direction left in their lives. They pretended to know it all, but were illiterate regarding life. They traded the glory of God who holds the whole world in His hands for cheap figurines you can buy at any roadside stand.

So God said, in effect, "If that's what you want, that's what you get." It wasn't long before they were living in a [moral] pigpen, smeared with filth, filthy inside and out. And all this because they traded the true God for a fake God, and worshiped the god they made instead of the God who made them – the God we bless, the God who blesses *us*. Oh, yes!

Worse followed. Refusing to know God, they soon didn't know how to be human either – women didn't know how to be women, men didn't know how to be men. Sexually confused, they abused and defiled one another, women with women, men with men – all lust, no love. And then they paid for it, oh, how they paid for it – emptied of God and love, godless and loveless

Since they didn't bother to acknowledge God, God quit bothering them and let them run loose. And then all hell broke loose: rampant evil, grabbing and grasping, vicious backstabbing. They made life hell on earth with their envy, wanton killing, bickering, and cheating. Look at them: mean-spirited, venomous, fork-tongued God-bashers. Bullies, swaggerers, insufferable windbags! They keep inventing new ways of wrecking lives. They ditch their parents when they get in the way. Stupid, slimy, cruel, cold-blooded. And it's not as if they don't know better. They know perfectly well they're spitting in God's face. And they don't care – worse, they hand out prizes to those who do the worst things best!

It is a paraphrase, not a word-for-word translation. But in its colorful language, I think it gives us a flavor of what Paul is saying and the passion with which he says it.

“God’s angry displeasure” is His righteous wrath against the godlessness and evil of men who suppress the truth or “try to put a shroud over (it)” (1:18). Verse 19 says that no one is innocent before God because no one is completely ignorant. As Kevin DeYoung puts it, “From the natural world and from the law written on our own hearts, we know the truth about God, or at least enough of the truth to leave us without excuse. The wrath of God *is* revealed – in the handing over to greater iniquity” that Paul describes in verses 24, 26, and 28, where three times he says: “God gave them over” – and the wrath of God “*will be* revealed on the day of judgment [yet to come] because the peoples of the world suppress the truth about God and do not worship Him as He desires and as He deserves” (DeYoung, 50).

C. S. Lewis famously said: “There are two kinds of people: Those who say to God, ‘Your will be done,’ and those to whom God says, ‘All right, then, have it your own way.’” Yes, there is a future aspect to the righteous wrath of God against all who reject God and His grace. But there is a present aspect as well, as God gives sinful humanity over to the consequences of our choices to live apart from God.

Paul’s point in verses 18-20 is that we are all without excuse. All of humankind is without excuse for our failure to embrace the truth about God and to properly honor Him as God because of God’s revelation of Himself in creation, which is His handiwork. Theologians call this “general revelation.” It is God’s revelation of Himself in and through what He has made, in His rule over and care and provision for the world He has made. “General revelation” is distinguished from what is called “special revelation,” in that “special revelation” is the making known of the gospel of the saving power, love, and work of Jesus Christ on behalf of spiritually lost and helpless sinners like us.

So, the truth about God – some truth about God, at least – *can* be known from the natural world. But the natural bent of sinful men and women is to suppress the truth about God, to hide it or bury it and replace it with a world view of our own devising. Paul shows what happens. Perhaps it doesn’t happen to the same degree or as blatantly in every generation, but Paul saw it clearly in the Greco-Roman culture of his generation, and it is impossible to miss in ours.

He describes what happens in terms of three exchanges. The first exchange is in verses 21-23 where sinful human beings, in their rejection of God and His rule in their lives, exchange the

glory of the one true God for “the foolishness of idolatry. Instead of giving thanks [and worship and honor and praise] to the God of heaven, the nations of the world worship images resembling human beings, birds, animals, and creeping things, (as well as) our sometimes less visible, but not less insidious idols of power, money, and approval [which] are no better” (DeYoung, 51). What happens when people reject God is that their thinking becomes futile and their hearts become foolish (verses 21-22). As a result, Paul says in verse 24, “God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity.”

Human beings are innately religious. We are natural-born worshippers. If we do not worship God, we will worship someone or something else. Whatever we put in the place of God is an idol. What do many Americans worship today? In addition to money, possessions, and power, in addition to physical beauty and athletic prowess, in addition to sports, our culture promotes the worship of pleasure, autonomy – the freedom to do whatever we want with whomever we want whenever we want – and sex. It is self-evident. It is everywhere around us. Ours, apparently, is not the first generation or culture for whom this is the case. Paul saw it in his own day. What Paul says is that idolatry – the worship of false gods, whatever they may be – leads to immorality. Specifically, to sexual immorality in its various forms as a culture casts off moral restraints and glorifies the pursuit of sexual fulfillment. Idolatry leads inevitably to immorality.

Second, as it says in verse 25, they exchange the truth of God for a lie. They trade “the true God for a fake god” (*MSG*). Which is to say what is true of so many people today, that they prefer a god or gods of their own making to the God who made them and everything else. Or, as the Gospel of John says of the reaction to the coming of Jesus into the world: “This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil” (John 3:19).

As a result, verse 26 says, “God gave them over” – the same expression Paul uses in verse 24 – “to shameful lusts” which Paul describes as giving up natural sexual relations with members of the opposite sex for relations with persons of the same sex (1:26-27). This is the third exchange. Both women and men exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural (same-sex) ones. Kevin DeYoung accurately summarizes the point Paul is making here when he writes that “same-sex sexual intimacy is an especially clear illustration of the idolatrous human impulse to turn away from God’s order and design” (DeYoung, 52).

No doubt we could spend a lot of time and a lot of words talking further about this. But I think the point is clear. This passage in Romans 1 is one of the most important in all of Scripture as it relates to the biblical teaching on homosexuality. The Bible clearly and consistently teaches that homosexual behavior, whether it is between women or between men, is always a sin because, as DeYoung says, “(the) act itself, as a truth-suppressing exchange, is contrary to God’s good design” (DeYoung, 53). It is sinful because it violates God’s original design and intent for men and women. There is no honest way to read the Bible and come to a different conclusion. (This is not to say that we should not be loving and compassionate toward people who experience same-sex attraction or who are caught in a web of homosexual practice. We should love them with the same love with which Jesus loves us, because Jesus

loves homosexuals, bisexuals, and transgendered people just as much as He loves any other kind of sinner, including you and me.)

Is same-sex sexual intimacy the only illustration of the impulse to turn away from God's good design and plan for humankind? Of course not. Look no further than verses 28-32. For the third time, in verse 28, Paul uses the expression, "God gave them over." He gave them over to a spiritually darkened and morally evil way of thinking, which leads to "every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity" (1:29), to sins of all kinds – sins that characterize the lives of people who not only say "No" to God as He has made Himself known but actively oppose God and His ways.

The result, Paul says in verse 32, is that "although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them." We see this most clearly in our society's embrace of homosexuality, pre-marital and extra-marital sexual relations, pornography, gender-bending, and special laws giving protected status to people who identify as other than heterosexual. But we see it in the words and actions of politicians we may support as well, and in the way the media sometimes report news stories, which has the effect of applauding and congratulating those who speak and act in ways contrary to the Word and will of God.

It is important to understand that Paul is not claiming that everyone is guilty of every sin mentioned in Romans 1 or verses 28-32 in particular. What he is saying in that *everyone* is guilty of sins such as these and is thus in need of a Savior. His point, to go back to verse 20, is that we are all without excuse and justly deserve God's displeasure – His wrath – because of our sins. We miss the point if we think we can point the finger of guilt at a certain group of sinners and avoid our own guilt before God. It is not just *them*. It is *us*.

The bad news of the gospel is that we are all sinners in the sight of God who justly deserve His displeasure, and we have no hope of salvation except in His sovereign love and mercy. The really good news of the gospel is that God Himself has done what was necessary to cancel His righteous wrath, His holy anger, against us because of our sin. He has done for us what we could never do for ourselves in a million billion gazillion years. Jesus took the guilt and punishment for our sins upon Himself, so that everyone who believes in Him and receives Him as Savior and Lord is credited with His righteousness and is no longer "in the wrong" but "in the right" with God as His beloved son or daughter for all time and eternity. This is the good news that changes everything.

Lord, let it be so in us, to the glory of Your name. Amen.