

## Why We Need the Gospel Romans 1:18-32

A few years ago, an Inter-Varsity ministry group, in one of the larger universities in England, was seeking to reach their fellow students with the gospel. So they printed out the words of Romans 1:18-32 – only in a contemporary format. They didn't give the verse numbers. They didn't specify the source. It was written as if it were written in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Soon after the document was distributed, the leaders were called to go before the university authorities.

The students were told in no uncertain terms that they would be censored them for their offensiveness. And the authorities demanded that the students produce the author of this offensive piece of writing! A few observations:

1. Very intelligent people can know nothing about the Scriptures.
2. This passage is very clear.
  - To be sure, there are some difficult aspects of it, but the general sense is clear: *People are accountable to a holy God for their sin!*
3. This passage is offensive to many people today. (ht: Ferguson)
  - It would be hard to find a more unpopular passage to preach!
  - We're talking about *atheism, idolatry, homosexuality, God's wrath*, people are called *fools*, and then we have a *vice* list to finish! **My email is nate@idcraleigh.com**

Paul is not trying to give us a nice little back rub here!...

### He Is Thundering Away at the Proud in 1:18-3:20

He is trying to shut our proud mouths. *None are righteous.*

#### 1:18-32: (Mainly) Gentiles in Mind

#### 2:1-29: Jews

- Critical Moralist (2:1-16)
- Religious Guide (2:17-29)

#### 3:1-20: The Whole Human Race

After what Paul said in verse 16-17, you might expect him to *explain how the righteousness of God comes to us*.... But we don't get there until **3:21!**

**Instead**, we read of our great need for the righteousness of Jesus.

Before Paul gets to the **good News** in 3:21ff, he gives us this **bad news**.

- Why? **You need to know why you need the gospel.**
  - The smug, self-righteous person will not feel his desperate need for salvation.
  - The wild, hedonist doesn't take God's holiness seriously enough.
  - So Paul wakes everyone up!

Jesus, "I did not come to call the [self] righteous, but sinners."

- He came for **those who are willing to admit they need him.**
- **We will not embrace the gospel until we see our need for the gospel.**

Some try to argue with the doctor's diagnosis.

- Some try to do that with Paul.
- But others, by grace, embrace what Paul says and flee to Christ for refuge.

## A Few Comments about the Structure of 1:18-32

**Verse 18 – is the heading over the whole section – and actually over 1:18-3:20.**

**All people outside of Christ stand condemned under the righteous wrath of God.**

- In 1:18-32, notice the little word **“For”**: 19, 20, 21, 24 [Therefore], v. 26 (twice)....
  - This section is **a unity**, and the subject material is tied together...
    - **Paul shows us God’s wrath against sin (18), and the basis for it (19-32).**
- Notice the **“exchanges”** in the text – verse 22-23, 25; 26, 28 (implied)
  - **We make bad trades!**
    - **You ever make a bad trade?** These are worse.
- Notice **God’s response to idolatrous/immoral exchanges**: **“God gave them up”** (3x: 24, 26, 28)
  - **Cycles of sin and judgment throughout the text...**

So in verse 18, he explains why we need the gospel: there is such a thing as **GOD’S WRATH!** Then in the remaining verses (19-32) he tells us the basis for this wrath.

**To put it simply, God’s wrath is due to IDOLATRY and the immorality that follows it.**

- Sin is a falling short of the glory of God. (3:23)
- It involves “trading” God’s glory for substitute gods.
- When you get the wrong god, you live the wrong life.
- You see this clearly in the **“exchanges”** but also with the emphasis on the **“heart”** throughout the passage. (eg, **21, 24, 26/27, 30**)
- God’s wrath is rightly executed on all whose hearts go after other things.

### #1: The Reason We Need the Gospel: God’s Wrath (1:18)

- Last week I said that you could **summarize Romans** with **one word**.
- **Do you kids remember it?**
- The key that unlocks the whole book is **“righteousness.”**
- Note the connection between **16-17 and 18...** Notice **“righteousness”** and **“unrighteousness.”**
- **We need the gospel because we are unrighteous**, and consequently are under his wrath.
- **But Romans will tell us how we can be counted as righteous.**

**“Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne” (89:14)**

**The logic of Romans is clear:**

- God possess perfect righteousness.
- God demands perfect righteousness.
- We do not possess perfect righteousness.
- Therefore, we need someone else’s righteousness! An external righteousness.
- Might God provide a righteousness for us? Yes. That’s what the gospel is about (**1:17**)

## Wrath

**Many have a hard time with the concept of God’s wrath.**

- This is God’s settled, determined indignation against sin – not an emotional outburst.
- God is “slow to anger” but He doesn’t wink at sin.
- God’s wrath is a righteous wrath.
- The only truly innocent person to ever live was Jesus! And he actually took wrath for us!

God's anger is a **holy anger**. Two mistakes we must avoid:

- (1) Liking God's wrath because we ourselves are "angry people;"
- (2) Avoiding God's wrath because we want to be "nice people."

We should **tremble** as we think about God's wrath, and **we should be thankful for the Savior**.

- "Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled. Blessed are all who take refuge in him." (Ps 2:12)

We must not explain it away.

- **Many want to treat attributes of God like a buffet: "I'll have some love, but leave the wrath."**

And we should also be thankful that we have **a righteous and just God** who will have the last word. God's wrath is an important aspect of his **character**.

### **Being Revealed**

Usually when we think about God's wrath, we think about the **past** or the **future** (2:5).

- **Past Examples:** The Flood, Sodom and Gomorrah, Pharaoh and his army, Ananias and Sapphira
- **Future:** The book of Revelation! **Rev. 6:15-17; 19:11-16.**

While both are realities, Paul here is speaking about a **"present"** reality.

- God's wrath is **being revealed**.

Although God will inflict his wrath on the last day, once and for all, **there is an anticipatory working of God's wrath in the events of history (Moo).**

- Notice verses **24-28** – three times, **"he handed them over."**
- **God hands people over to their sin and its consequences; this judgment is a foretaste of ultimate judgment to come.**
- Sin leads to **misery** not **fulfillment**, **and it's a foretaste of eternal misery.**
- Paul's verb for "hand over" has its **roots in the OT.**
  - God handed over Israel's enemies so that they would be defeated.
  - God at other times handed over Israel to their enemies as an act of judgment.
- **"Like a judge who hands over a prisoner to the punishment his crime as earned, God hands over the sinner to the terrible cycle of ever-increasing sin." (Moo)**
- **C.S. Lewis – Two kinds of people, those who say to God, "Thy will be done," and those to whom God says, "Thy will be done."**

For some, this experience may lead to an awakening, a prodigal son experience, but sadly, some never turn.

### **Wrath is being revealed against ungodliness and unrighteousness.**

- These are not to be understood as two separate causes for his wrath, but to ideas that speak of the same problem; that is, **"an attack on the majesty of God."**
- **Sin is the de-godding of God.**

### **God's wrath is being revealed from heaven.**

- He emphasizes God's majesty and his all-seeing eye.
- **All that is not under heaven, and not in Christ, is under God's wrath.**

## In their unrighteousness, they suppress the truth

- Truth – they fail to respond to God’s revelation.
- This is a transition into the next section...

## #2: The Reason for God’s Wrath: Idolatry (1:19-32)

The most important question you have to answer is who is your god?  
We all worship; the question is what or whom do you worship?

Paul says that the whole array of sins that characterize humanity has its roots in the soil of idolatry.

- Idolatry leads to immorality.
- Sin problems are worship problems.
- If you have a behavior problem, you have a worship problem.
- But if you love Jesus deeply, it will change your behavior dramatically.

### A. The Movement to Idolatry (19-21)

In verse 19, he supports to the claim that everyone has “suppressed the truth.”

- The Jews had special revelation of God in the law.
- But here, Paul says the whole world has natural revelation of God.

“How can you know there is a god?” That’s a big question.

Notice three points Paul makes:

#### i. A Revelation of God’s Character Around You (19-20)

### V. 19: God’s existence is plain in creation – throughout history.

- In *Making Sense of God*, Keller points out that religion is not “dying out” as some like to project, and there are many reasons for this. He says that people are not getting less religious in the world; they’re getting more religious. This is clear from the numbers. But this shouldn’t surprise us according to Romans 1. Freud said that man is “incurably religious.” People have some sense of the transcendent. But many do not want to acknowledge Him, submit to Him, seek Him...

### V. 20: he says that God’s power and invisible attributes have been revealed in creation.

- People have a sense of God as they observe His creation and his works in history.
- **Everything has a stamp on it, “Made by God.”**
- **Psalm 19**
- **Tory: “What blows your mind?” Fingerprints, sunsets, baseball... “Who made the trees? Who made the birds?”**

20: They are without excuse.” Paul says consequently everyone is accountable to God.

- They have understood something about God, but by rejecting him, are without excuse.

### App: This is why we must take the gospel to the nations!

- People who have never heard the gospel are in need of **specific revelation!**
- You can’t get from the sunsets to substitutionary atonement without specific explanation of the gospel.

- **Acts 10-11:** They may be like **Cornelius**, who was responsive to what he knew, generally seeking, but was still lost apart from Peter explaining the gospel to him.
- **Acts 17:** Paul spoke to the people in Athens, observing that they were “**very religious,**” but they were **not acceptable to God**; but were under the judgment of God. So Paul made the real God known to them through his preaching.

ii. **An Awareness of the Presence of God that Invades You (19)**

- “plain **to them**” can be translated “**in them**” or “**among them.**”
- **The knowledge is plain “to them” because it is “plain in them.”**
- The revelation produces this result.
- **There is a sense of God in the conscious of an image bearer of God.**
- Augustine, “**You have made us for yourself... Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in God.**”
- One famous atheist was asked about his atheism, and he said, “**Yes, I am an atheist, but there’s more than that: I hate Him.**” It’s the old, “**There is no god and I hate Him.**”

iii. **A Knowledge of God Suppressed by You (21)**

Paul builds on verse 19. What do we do the unrighteous do with the revelation of God?  
**Suppress it. Hold it down. Reject it.**

**V. 21:** Although they “**knew God**” they did not “**honor him**” or “**give thanks to him**”

- They don’t honor him.
  - Verses **23, 25, 28**, build on this.
  - They exchange the knowledge of God and worship of God for idols.
- “There is not one blade of grass; there is no color in this world that is not intended to make us rejoice [in God]” (Calvin)**
- But we have fallen short of the glory of God. We turn inward.
  - Proud people honor God; they don’t say thanks.

Instead of responding positively to the light, sinners “**thinking**” and “**foolish hearts**” were “**darkened.**”

- Heart denotes center of the person.
- Paul highlights the **intellectual futility** and **spiritual darkness** of the person who suppresses the truth.
- **They need the light of the gospel to overcome this darkness**
- “**Men love darkness rather than light**” Jesus said.
- We need a new heart!

**B. The Madness of Idolatry (22-23)**

**22:** Arrogantly, they claim to be “**wise**” but in our in reality “**fools**”

**Images of Mortal Man, Birds, Animals, Creeping Things (22-23)**

**Their foolishness is displayed by not just refusing to give thanks to God, but actually worshipping pitiful substitutes.**

- **Psalm 106:20.** “They exchanged the glory of God for the image of an ox that **eats grass.**”
- **You want to worship something that eats grass?**

- Wilcock says, “When people abandon the God of Scripture, it is astonishing what foolish alternatives people choose.”
- Chesterton: “When Man ceases to worship God he does not worship nothing but worships everything.”

**Application:** You say, “I don’t have that temptation.”

- Well, Scripture teaches us that idolatry isn’t merely about **carved images**, but about **the heart**.
- **Our hearts are idol factories**, as Calvin said.
- We can worship all manner of things.
- **Anything you look to give you what only God can give, is an idol.**

### C. The Misery of Idolatry (24-25)

**24:** “God gave them up in the lust of their **hearts** to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves”

- Here’s the first instance of being “**handed over**”
- God leaves the idolater with his acts of **impurity and dishonor**.
- **It doesn’t bring satisfaction but misery. It leaves you restless.**

**25:** They have exchanged the **truth of God for a lie**, and worshiped the **creature**, rather than the **Creator**.

- That’s what **sin involves**.
- **The opposite is what **conversion** involves:** For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God.” (1 Thess 1:9)
- To underline the folly exchanging the glory of God for idols, Paul adds this blessing formula, “**who is blessed forever Amen!**”
- **This also underscores the misery of idolatry.**
- **You are turning from that which will ultimately satisfy you; namely, the Creator and Redeemer who is blessed forever!**
- **Jeremiah 2:12-13** – Sin is turning from a fountain and sticking your head in the dirt.
- God hands you over to it if you don’t want to drink and be satisfied.

### D. The Moral Rebellion that Follows Idolatry (26-32)

#### i. Exchanging Natural Sexual Relations for Unnatural (26-27)

**Verse 26b-27:** In many Jewish writings gross **sexual behavior among the Gentiles was traced directly to idolatry (Moo)**.

- **Sexually immoral acts were often part of the pagan cults.**
- Paul **singles out homosexuality**, first with women, then men.

#### **26: Women**

- Some try to defend this behavior by saying Paul really means “**usually**” when he says “**natural**.”
- But Paul makes clearly that these actions are sinful and “**shameful**” in verse 27.
- What he means by “**natural**” is just that, natural; that is, it’s **contrary to natural law**.
- **In other words, homosexuality is contrary to God’s divine design.**
- **To go against nature, is to therefore to go against God.**

- And, it's **a good design**.
- Notice this is not a **cultural matter that is changing**; but is **creation matter that's unchanging**. It's timeless.

God is **infinitely good and wise, and his designs are best and for our good, for our flourishing**.

- **Homosexual activity is contrary to Gods' will, it's a violation of the created order, and it's another example in this text that shows a departure from a true knowledge of God and worship of God.**

## 27: Men

- For men to pursue other men sexually is a **departure from nature**.
- Paul uses **strong language** to characterize it: "**consumed with passion for one another**."
  - They "burned." And it is "**shameful**."
- Such activity necessitates the **judgment of God**, "the due penalty of their error."
- **And a judgment that is already occurring ...**
  - **This individual is restless and discontent because they are not finding their rest in God.**
  - **They face all manner of consequences for going their own rebellious, self-centered way.**
- **A judgment that will eventually come in the future unless the individual repents and trusts in Christ.**

**Application:** How should we view/talk about this subject? Three categories: (a) sin, (b) the gospel, and (c) the church.

### ➤ **View it in light of the doctrine of sin**

- **These acts are sinful.**
- **But while it is sin, notice that God is opposed to all sin.**
- **God does NOT have a special anger reserved for gays and lesbians.**
- **But God is against sin – and it is sin.**
- **In 1 Cor 6:9-10, Paul includes homosexuality in a list of sins, but he does NOT make it the pinnacle of sinful behavior, but rather, as another way humans sin against God.**

<sup>9</sup>Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, <sup>10</sup>nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.

- **The reasons for such homosexual attraction are complex, and include biology and biography as well as spiritual brokenness, but Paul is really plain that acting on those desires is offensive to God.**
- **To someone who is a believer, with same sex attraction, know that this is a sin you must fight, just like the following sins in verses 28-32 must be fought by other believers.**
- **It will be a hard fight, and one that will require a lot of grace, and a lot of love and support and prayers from the Christian community; but that's how we all fight temptation.**
- **And that's discipleship – denying self, taking up a cross and following Jesus.**
- **One of the best evangelical preachers in the UK, Von Roberts, author of a great book, *God's Big Picture*, confesses to struggle with same sex attraction yet still has a vibrant and faithful ministry (Bird).**
- **Sam Allberry is another example...**

### ➤ **View it in light of the hope of the Gospel**

- Do you believe that someone who is attracted to the same sex might by God's power be able to change? Or to remain celibate and godly and content for a lifetime?
- God created the world, parted the seas, raised Christ from the dead. Don't doubt his power!
- Romans 1:26-27, places homosexuality in the category of sin, but **we offer men and women who have same sex attraction the hope laid out in the rest of Romans**: Christ saves us from the **penalty** of sin, is gradually saving us from the **power** of sin, and will one day save us from the very **presence** of sin.
- Don't forget there were people in the early church that were former practicing homosexuals; and they had experienced the power of the gospel!

### 1 Corinthians 6:9-11

<sup>9</sup>Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, <sup>10</sup> nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. <sup>11</sup> And such **were some of you**. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

### ➤ View it in light of the Church's Mission to Blend Truth with Love

As a church, we must blend **truth and love**.

- We must **not cave in and change our position**.
- We must not alienate people with **a lack of compassion**.

I think Rus Moore is right that this sexual revolution will leave people empty, and the church must be ready to receive them – but we won't if we don't have anything different to offer them, or if we aren't loving enough to receive them.

- We must be a people that welcome the broken.
- We must be a transparent people; where people feel safe to talk about this.
  - Keller: "Churches should feel more like the waiting room for a doctor and less like a waiting room for a job interview." In the latter, we like to look competent and impressive. But in a waiting room we assume that everyone there is sick and need help. This is much closer to the reality of what's going on in the church (Allberry)
- We must honor singleness.
  - Jesus was single and never had sex and never sinned, and was the most fully human and complete person to ever live.
- We must deal with manhood and womanhood biblically and avoid cultural stereotypes.
  - We should not imply that all men should be into fixing cars, or playing sports.
    - Some guys are more aesthetic than athletic. Amen. We don't need a world filled with jocks!
  - Not all ladies like to do "crafts" or "talk about everything."
  - These kinds of stereotypes put unnecessary pressure on people to measure up to expected cultural norms that are not found in the Bible.

### Rosaria Butterfield Story:

Here's a great example of how a Christian blended truth and love:

In 1999, Rosaria Butterfield was a tenured English professor at Syracuse University, a skeptic of all things Christianity, and in a committed lesbian relationship. Her academic specialty was Queer Theory, a postmodern form of gay and lesbian studies.

Today she's a mother of four, and wife of a wonderful evangelical pastor named Kent in Durham.

She was brought to faith through an ordinary pastor, who invited her into share meals, and through



her own diligent reading of the Bible. She said:

“I tried to toss the Bible and all of its teachings in the trash — I really tried. But I kept reading it, reading it not just for pleasure, but reading it because I was engaged in a research program trying to refute the religious right from a lesbian feminist perspective.... After my second or third, maybe fourth, pass through the entire Bible something started to happen. The Bible got to be bigger inside me than I. And it absolutely overflowed into my world. I really fought against it. And then one Sunday morning, no different from any other Sunday morning, I rose from the bed of my lesbian lover, and an hour later I sat in a pew at the Syracuse Reformed Presbyterian Church. I went there very conspicuous of the fact that I didn't fit in. But I really had to confront this God.

And she did.

In embracing the biblical Jesus, she found herself “a single ex-lesbian with a now defunct PhD,” as she says in her book, *The Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert: An English Professor's Journey Into Christian Faith* (26).

“This was my conversion in a nutshell: I lost everything but the dog” (63).

**What a wonderful testimony of the power of the gospel, and a church ministering to her with truth and grace.**

## **ii. Exchanging the Knowledge of God for a Debased Man and Disobedient Behavior (28-32)**

**28:** Fallen people on their own do not rightly acknowledge God, so Paul says that God hands them over to a “debased mind.”

- The previous “handing over” was a handing over to sexual sin; here, they are handed over to a “worthless mind.”

What everyone needs is what we will read about in **Romans 12:2 – a renewed mind.**

- Only a **work of the Spirit can overcome our blindness and twisted thinking.**
- Praise God we who were given to a worthless mind have been transformed, and are being renewed daily through the Word by the Spirit.

## **29-31: A Vice List**

- This is a long list of sins that were common in Paul's day among philosophers, and such lists appear throughout the NT.
- **We may put them in four groups.**
  - Unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice
  - Envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness.
  - Gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents,
  - Foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless
- What is observable is that these sins have a real **social emphasis and a heart emphasis.**
- Paul shows how **a worthless mind, produces all kinds of social evils.**
- **It's another example of how the sins in the heart affects others.**

**32a:** Paul notes that those who engage in such activity **know what they're doing is wrong.**

- People in general have some awareness of wrongdoing and that they are deserve judgment.

**32b:** Paul adds that they are “**doubly accountable**” by the fact that they not only do such things, but applaud others who do it.

- They call light darkness, and darkness light.
- This surely comes from an **unsettled conscious**.
- **When your conscious is killing you, in order to silence you seek to justify your actions; and one way to do that is by applauding the action and recruiting others to participate.**
- **They think there is safety in numbers.**

### **Full Circle: We Need the Gospel!**

**God deals with everyone with either deserved judgment or undeserved grace.**

How can you be dealt with by grace?

Look to Jesus. Flee the wrath of God and take refuge in Jesus.

**Good News! There is a massive gospel for massive sinners!**

**Good News! There is more mercy in Christ than sin in us!**

**Good News! By faith in Jesus God makes unrighteous people righteous.**

How? We'll let me remind you of another exchange!

**Our gross exchanges can be overcome by a most glorious exchange!**

It's what Luther called “**the Great Exchange.**”

2 Cor 5:21

That is, Christ in our place.

**Romans 8:32** – There is another “handing up” or “giving up”

Judgment fell on Jesus instead of us.

If you will look to Jesus to save you from idolatry and immorality, **he will have you!**

He who comes to him he will never cast out...

**Romans 1:18-32 is preparing us for Romans 3:21-26.**

<sup>21</sup> But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— <sup>22</sup> the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: <sup>23</sup> for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, <sup>24</sup> and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, <sup>25</sup> whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. <sup>26</sup> It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

**God demands righteousness from us.**

**God has provided righteousness for us in Jesus.**

**You can be united to Him through repentance and faith.**

**Matt Boswell and Matt Papa have a new hymn, inspired by a line from a letter by John Newton:**

### ***His Mercy Is More***

What love could remember no wrongs we have done  
Omniscient, all knowing, he counts not their sum

Thrown into a sea without bottom or shore  
Our sins they are many, his mercy is more

What patience would wait as we constantly roam  
What father, so tender, is calling us home  
He welcomes the weakest, the vilest, the poor  
Our sins they are many, his mercy is more

What riches of kindness he lavished on us  
His blood was the payment, his life was the cost  
We stood 'neath a debt we could never afford  
Our sins they are many, his mercy is more

Praise the Lord  
His mercy is more  
Stronger than darkness, new every morn  
Our sins they are many, his mercy is more