

Ted Kirnbauer
Romans 1:18-32 (10/31/14)

I. CONDEMNATION - THE WRATH OF GOD REVEALED (1:18-3:20)

Question: Is the world lost?

Answer: All the world is guilty before God (3:19)

A. The Heathen Condemned (1:18-32)

Before Paul elaborates on how the righteousness of God is revealed in the gospel, he gives the reason why such righteousness is so urgently needed. As things stand, men are in rebellion against God and are therefore objects of His wrath. When left to themselves, without divine intervention, they move from bad to worse. Three times in this passage Paul declares that "God gave them up" (Ro. 1: 24, 26, 28).

The entire passage (1:18-3:20) is a logical progression that leads to the conclusion that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Ro. 3:23). "There is none righteous, no not one" (Ro. 3:10) so "every mouth is stopped and the whole world is accountable to God" (Ro. 3:19).

Paul begins by describing the condition of the unbelieving and why they are deserving of the wrath of God.

1. Wrath revealed (1:18)

Romans 1:18-23 describes what is true of all people who have not come under the power of the gospel. They perceive truth about God from creation but their natural inclinations are so strong against this truth that they suppress it (v. 18). People who love sin hate the light and will not come to the light lest their deeds should be exposed (John 3:20). But the light of God's truth goes on shining in the gospel of Jesus Christ (II Corinthians 4:4-6); and it shines, for those outside the gospel, in the work of creation. (Sermon by John Piper, Ro 1:18, Sept 13, 1998 - © Desiring God. Website: desiringGod.org)

1:18 For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness,

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Two things tie verses 17 and 18 together. (1) First, verse 18 begins with "for" (*gar* - γάρ) which explains why it is necessary for the righteousness of God to be revealed in the gospel (Ro. 1:17). (2) Secondly, Paul uses the word "unrighteousness" twice in verse 18; God's wrath is being revealed against "unrighteousness" and the truth is being held down in "unrighteousness." Surely Paul means for us to see the contrast and connection between the righteousness of verse 17 and unrighteousness in verse 18.

God's wrath demonstrates that men are in need of righteousness. We know this because just as the gospel is "being revealed" (a Greek present passive verb), so the wrath of God is "being revealed" (a Greek present passive verb).

Wrath is the "holy revulsion of God's being against that which is the contradiction of His holiness" (Murray, 35). It is the response of God's holiness to sin. The wrath of God is revealed in at least three ways; 1) it is revealed in the Bible (Jn. 3:36), 2) it is revealed in the cross where sin was judged, and 3) it is revealed in the natural world. It is the third means of revelation that Paul addresses in Romans 1.

The object of God's wrath is sinful men who are described as ungodly (i.e. lacking reverence for God and aligning themselves against Him in their minds) and unrighteous (i.e. ignoring and disobeying the will of God in their conduct toward others). The unrighteous man lives as if God had no standard of right and wrong (cf. Ro. 1:26-32), the ungodly man lives as if He doesn't exist (Ro. 1:20-25). Men need the gospel because God's wrath is presently being poured out on the whole world.

Though the truth about God (Ro. 1:25) wells up within man, he actively suppresses it. Just as pressure needs to be continuously applied to keep a spring down, so men must continually hold down truth about God in order to suppress it. They do this through their actions (unrighteousness). "Some drown its voice by rushing into their immoralities, others strangle the disturbing voice by argument and by denial" (Lenski, *Romans*). "Suppression of the truth implies knowledge of the truth, and what this involves is explained in the sequel" (Harrison, EBC, 23).

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2. Wrath deserved (1:19-23)

1:19 because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them.

1:20 For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse.

1:21 For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God, or give thanks; but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened.

1:22 Professing to be wise, they became fools,

1:23 and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures.

The general flow of these verses is as follows:

Wrath is deserved because people suppress the truth (v. 18).

How do we know that people suppress the truth?

"Because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them" (v. 19).

In what way is this knowledge of God evident?

It is evident in creation (v.20a); in creation men can see God's eternal power and divine nature. As a result they are without excuse (v. 20b).

God's wrath is deserved:

1. "because what can be known about God is plain" to all men (1:19) and
2. "because although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God" (1:21).

1. **God's wrath is deserved "because what can be known about God is plain" to all men (1:19):** Verses 19 and 20 demonstrate that creation is a witness of the existence of God. Five points should be noted:

- (1) The revelation of God in creation is not veiled but "plain" (i.e., visible, clearly seen, evident, manifest) to all (1:19).
- (2) The revelation of God is "known" (1:19). Not only is it visible, it is intelligible. No one can claim total ignorance of the existence of God. Creation provides enough evidence that men can avoid the error of mistaking creation for the Creator.
- (3) The revelation of God is constant. It began "since the creation of the world" (1:20) and has continued ever since. Psalm 19 says the heavens display the majesty and power of God moment by moment, day after day, and night after night (Ps. 19:1-2). His glory is seen by all men everywhere at all times, regardless of where they live or of the language they speak (Ps. 19:4).
- (4) The revelation of God is limited. Evidence of God in creation is insufficient to save, but it is sufficient for man to know that a powerful, divine being exists (1:20) and stimulates a search to know Him. The psalmist in Psalm 19 also says that the glory and wisdom of God are evident in the splendor and vastness of the heavens (Ps. 19:1-2).
- (5) The revelation of God leaves men "without excuse" (1:20). All men have access to the same truth found in creation. When man fails to reason from creation to Creator, it is not because he cannot see, but because in his unrighteousness, he is holding the truth down. This, however, is not ample grounds to acquit man of his guilt.

2. God's wrath is deserved "because (for) although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God" (1:21) [it is also possible that the "for" of verse 21 is the explanation of why men are without excuse]. The knowledge of God spoken of here is not the same knowledge that the saved possess, rather, it is the general knowledge about God that is available to all men in creation (1:19-20). What Paul is saying is that even though men could see something of the nature and existence of God in creation, they failed to act upon it. In fact, they turned in the opposite direction and worshipped creation instead (1:25).

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"Man is a religious being, and if he refuses to let God have the place of preeminence that is rightfully His, then he will put something or someone in God's place" (Harrison, EBC, 23). With the rejection of God, man has nowhere to go but down.

There are seven steps in the process of men's degradation.

1. First, men refused to honor Him (1:21). God revealed His glory in creation but people refused to ascribe to Him the glory that He deserves.
2. Secondly, they did not give thanks for His goodness (1:21).
3. Therefore, they became futile in their thinking (1:21). "The suggestion that emerges from this statement is that mythology and idolatry grew out of man's insistent need to recognize some power in the universe greater than himself, coupled with his refusal to give God the place of supremacy. He had to make a substitution" (Harrison, EBC, 23).
4. Next, their hearts were darkened (1:21). Once man turns from the truth he opens the door to darkness. Man's mind is never a vacuum. Whenever truth is absent, falsehood fills its place.
5. They thought they were wise (1:22). Verse 22 is not saying that they thought they were wise when in reality they were fools, but that by believing they were wise they became fools (Murray, 42).
6. They became fools (1:22). In the OT, foolishness was not the lack of intelligence but was associated with moral darkness (Bruce, 84).
7. They exchanged the worship of the immortal God for finite creation (1:23). Verse 23 describes the religious monstrosity that resulted once the knowledge of God was rejected. Not only did man worship and serve the creature rather than the Creator, he *preferred* the likeness of corruptible things over the glory of God (Isa. 44:12-15). "The glory of God, that admirable and effulgent representation of Himself which glowed in all that He had made, this they changed in the likeness of an image . . ." (Stifler, 32). A complete exchange of man's affections had taken place.

"The reason the human heart hates the truth that creation teaches is because it is too humbling . . . God is the Maker of all that is, and we are

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utterly dependent on his absolutely free choices to create and sustain our life or not, and we should therefore glorify him and not ourselves and give thanks to him and not take credit for ourselves. *But proud people don't say thanks.*" (Sermon by John Piper, Ro 1:16-23, Nov. 20, 1983 - © Desiring God. Website: desiringGod.org)

3. Wrath inflicted (1:24-32)

1:24 Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, that their bodies might be dishonored among them.

1:25 For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.

1:26 For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions; for their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural,

1:27 and in the same way also the men abandoned the natural function of the woman and burned in their desire toward one another, men with men committing indecent acts and receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error.

1:28 And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do those things which are not proper,

1:29 being filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, evil; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice; they are gossips,

1:30 slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents,

1:31 without understanding, untrustworthy, unloving, unmerciful;

1:32 and, although they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them.

If God is inflicting wrath, what does it look like? How are men experiencing His wrath? Although God's judgment can come through the human instrumentality of war, famine, or "natural" disasters, Paul says that man's punishment is also experienced by God abandoning them to the desires of their own hearts. Paul says, "God gave them over" (1:24; 26, 28; cf. Acts 7:42), that is, God simply took His hands off and let willful rejection

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produce its ugly results (cf. Prov. 1:29-31). He does not impel or encourage men to do evil. He ceases to restrain it. C.S. Lewis says it well, "the lost enjoy forever the horrible freedom they have demanded, and are therefore self-enslaved" (*The Problem of Pain*, 115). "This should dispose of the naïve notion that religion as such is necessarily a beneficial thing for mankind. On the contrary, it is in many cases a means of keeping people so occupied that they never arrive at a confrontation with the true God." (Harrison, EBC, 24).

God first gave men up "in the lusts of their hearts to impurity" (1:24). The giving up to uncleanness presupposes the existence of uncleanness in the heart. "Uncleanness" in the writings of Paul often refers to sexual aberration (II Cor. 12:21; Gal. 5:19; Eph. 5:3; Col. 3:5; I Thess. 4:7). As a result of rejecting God, God removed His restraining grace and did nothing to prevent people from sinking deeper in sin. With their animal passions unchained, they immediately began to dishonor their bodies. "Sin follows sin as an avenger" (Hodge, 40).

A second time Paul repeats that God gave them up (1:26). "For this reason" connects verse 26 to 25. That is, because men exchanged the truth of God for the lie (1:25) God gave them up to vile passions (1:26). When men turn from that which is spiritual, they naturally sink into the sensual. If there is a distinction between the word "lust" (1:24) and "passion" (1:26) in Greek, it is that passion is a stronger word. Lust can be a single evil desire, while passion is an unquenchable craving. Passion overwhelms all constraint and controls man completely (Lenski, 112). Unchecked, man's sexual desires have no limitations and will pursue anything to find satisfaction. Paul illustrates ("for" - *gar* - γάρ) how they were even willing to violate nature to satisfy their cravings (1:26). Both men and women turned from their natural attraction for one another and burned in desire for the same sex (1:26-27). In I Corinthians 7:9 Paul also speaks of the burning of the natural sexual impulse, and commends marriage as the legitimate means of satisfaction. "But here it is the burning of an insatiable lust that has no natural or legitimate desire of which the lust is a perversion or distortion. It is lust directed to something that is essentially and under all circumstances illegitimate" (Murray, 48).

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Here, in a nutshell, is the great, lasting principle which underlies Paul's distinction between 'natural' and 'homosexual' sexual behavior.

"In Romans 1, Paul's theme is *God's creation scheme*. His aim is to show how mankind has made a bad exchange, both spiritually and morally, from the Creator's plan for human life. The word 'exchange' holds his argument together in the second half of the article. Men and women were created to glorify God, he writes, but they '*exchange the glory of the immortal God for images They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshipped and served created things rather than the Creator*' (verses 19-25). And that bad spiritual exchange was matched morally, as '*their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another*' (verses 26-27).

In writing about 'natural relations' within the context of God's creation scheme, Paul is not referring to individual men and women as they were and are. By 'unnatural', he does not mean 'what seems unnatural to me as a homosexual or heterosexual person'. His canvas is much broader than that. He is taking the argument back, far more radically, to man and woman as the Creator made them. And when we follow his lead and look back to what we are told about the beginnings of human sexuality in the Book of *Genesis*, we find that sexual intercourse was intended to be the seal on a faithful, loving, exclusive *heterosexual* relationship. As God created man and woman together in his image, 'becoming one flesh' in heterosexual intercourse is not just a union but a reunion - and a homosexual relationship is in effect a denial of that awesome divine arrangement.

Putting it all together, Paul is arguing that homosexual behavior is as much the outcome of mankind's rebellion against God as idolatry - or (as he goes on to say) greed, envy and gossip. The bad 'exchange' he highlights is not just the capricious sex-swapping of a heterosexual person searching for a fresh physical stimulus but the divergence all homosexual behavior represents from God's creation scheme. When seen in the light of that lasting principle, every homosexual act is 'unnatural'. (David Field)

As Albert Mohler says,

"As Romans 1 makes absolutely clear, homosexuality is fundamentally an act of unbelief. As Paul writes, the wrath of God is revealed against all those "who suppress the truth in unrighteousness." God the Creator has implanted in all humanity a knowledge of Himself, and all are without excuse. This is the context of Paul's explicit statements on homosexuality.

Homosexual acts and homosexual desire, states Paul, are a rebellion against God's sovereign intention in creation and a gross perversion of God's good and

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perfect plan for His created order. Paul makes clear that homosexuality--among both males and females--is a dramatic sign of rebellion against God and His intention in creation. Those about whom Paul writes have worshipped the creature rather than the Creator. Thus, men and women have forfeited the natural complementarity of God's intention for heterosexual marriage and have turned to members of their own sex, burning with an illicit desire which is in itself both degrading and dishonorable.

This is a very strong and clear message. The logical progression in Romans 1 is undeniable. Paul shifts immediately from his description of rebellion against God as Creator to an identification of homosexuality--among both men and women--as the first and most evident sign of a society upon which God has turned His judgment. Essential to understanding this reality in theological perspective is a recognition of homosexuality as an assault upon the integrity of creation and God's intention in creating human beings in two distinct and complementary genders." (Albert Mohler)

The concluding part of verse 27 reminds us of the thought expressed in verses 24, 25, 26, namely, that the abandonment to immorality was the judicial consequence of sin. "Here, however, a new element is interjected - the abandonment is said to be 'the recompense which was due.' Arbitrariness never characterizes the divine judgment" (Murray, 48). The penalty they receive is the proper "payment" corresponding to their sin (also note in Eph. 4:17-19 that Paul says the unbeliever gives himself over to sensuality. In the human choice of sin God's judgment takes place). God not only prevents the sinner's lust from being satisfied but also allows the physical and moral consequences associated with sexual sin to run their course.

"Throughout the passage man is represented as active - seeing, thinking, doing. He is not represented as victimized, as taken captive against his will, as the dupe of evil influences from outside himself." (Harrison, EBC, 25-26). Humanity is a lost race, plunging ever deeper into sin by its own desire.

Lastly, God gave them up "to a debased mind" (1:28). "With moral perversion comes mental perversion" (Phillips, 33). The cause of the mental perversion stems from the fact that "they did not see fit to acknowledge God." Again, there is a correspondence between the sin and the penalty.

In Greek, "debased" means to fail a test and refers to a mind that was tested and found to be no good (McClain. 68). Man's mind failed, for it

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did not consider *God* worthy of its thought. Therefore, *God* gave him up to do those things which his mind planned and approved, that is, "to do those things which are unfitting" (1:28).

The sins that follow define what Paul means by "unfitting" (in *Greek* the terms are appositional to "those things" in verse 28). The final item in the indictment (1:32) is climatic and is prefaced with the reminder that men possess sufficient knowledge of *God*. Although they know *God's* righteous judgment, that sin deserves punishment, they are undeterred in their pursuit of wickedness and applaud others who do the same. To sin in the heat of passion is evil but the lowest stage in human depravity is to take pleasure in, support, and encourage others to continue in their rebellion against *God*.

To summarize, Romans 1:17-32 is the author's argument as to why the unbelieving are under the wrath of *God*. Men have knowledge of *God* in creation but they refuse to accept it. They refuse to give *God* glory. They refuse to give thanks. They choose to worship creation over the Creator. Their condemnation is deserved. *God's* displeasure with man is evidenced by His wrath expressed in allowing man to go his own way. Because the unbelieving are devoid of righteousness, they are in desperate need of the righteousness of the gospel.