

## ROMANS 1:18-32 – The Unrighteousness of Gentiles

### 1) How does this passage fit within the broader argument of Romans?

- In 1:18-3:20, Paul shows that God's wrath is being righteously revealed against all people, both Gentiles and Jews. Paul first demonstrates that the Gentiles are guilty of sin and under God's wrath (1:18-32). He then proceeds to show how the Jews are likewise deserving of God's wrath (2:1-3:8). Romans 1:18 functions as the summary verse indicting all people.
- In 1:18-3:20, Paul demonstrates the universality of human sin. He does so in order to establish humanity's need for the gospel, regardless of whether one is a Jew or Gentile. So absolute is sin's power over people that only God's power, available in the gospel, can rescue us. Salvation can be experienced only by humbly receiving it as a gift. In other words, we do not obtain God's righteousness through our works but through faith alone in Jesus Christ. As it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith." (cf. 1:17).
- The section 1:18-3:20 shows that everyone needs the gospel, because all have sinned and fall short of God's glory (cf. 3:9, 20, 23).

### 2) Read through 1:18-32. What is the flow of the argument of this passage? What are its main points?

- First, Paul argues that God's wrath is righteously revealed because people suppress the truth about the one true God and turn to idolatry (vv. 18-23).
- Second, Paul specifies the consequences of idolatry in terms of the moral disintegration of human society (vv. 24-32).
- Main points:
  - Human sinfulness brings God's wrath
  - Sin is a universal problem
  - We are without excuse because creation displays the glory of God
  - Sin is fundamentally idolatry; a failure to worship God and give thanks to him
  - The worsening of human sinfulness is the result of God's judgment

### Rejecting God (1:18-23)

### 3) According to v. 18, why do we need the gospel? Why is it so crucial for us to understand this?

- It is because "the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men" (v. 17).
- We are guilty sinners who face God's judgment against us (cf. John 3:36).
- When we understand this, we will grasp the fact that Jesus Christ came to save sinners from God's wrath. The gospel is not a man-centred message that merely meets the "felt needs" of people by making them happy, solving their problems, or giving them purpose. The gospel is good news because it tells us how we can be saved from God's judgment. It is a God-centred message about how God is glorified through the display of

his righteousness, grace, mercy and love in the person and work of his Son, Jesus Christ. It is in the gospel that God reveals his righteousness in both punishing sin and forgiving sinners. The cross of Christ, where God's wrath and mercy meet, is the supreme display of God's righteousness (cf. Rom. 3:26).

**4) According to v. 18, what do the ungodly and unrighteous do? What does "the truth" refer to in this verse?**

- The ungodly and unrighteous "suppress the truth in unrighteousness".
- The reference to "truth" in v. 25 provides a clue as does the subsequent context in vv. 21-23. The truth that people have unrighteously suppressed and rejected is that the one true God should be honored and worshiped and esteemed as God. Human unrighteousness most fundamentally consists in a refusal to worship God and a desire to worship that which is in the created order. Unrighteousness involves the refusal to give God his proper sovereignty in one's life.

**5) How does Paul justify his assertion that people "suppress" the truth? Why are people "without excuse"?**

- Paul can say that people suppress the truth because God has plainly revealed himself through creation (vv. 19-20; cf. Ps. 19:1-6). The created world displays his eternal power and divine nature. No one can give the excuse that they do not know God.
- People are "without excuse" because they have turned away from the knowledge of God to gods of their own making.
- God's wrath is expressed for good reason since his power and divine nature are clearly revealed through the world he has made, and yet he is rejected by all people. These verses show that salvation does not come through "general revelation" (what is known about God through the natural world) since Paul emphasizes the universality of sin and concludes that "no one seeks for God" (3:11). The entire natural world bears witness to God through its beauty, complexity, design, and usefulness. No one should complain that God has left insufficient evidence of his existence and character; the fault is with those who reject the evidence.

**6) According to vv. 21-23, what is the fundamental sin that lies at the heart of our rejection of God?**

- The fundamental sin is the failure to glorify God and give him thanks. Instead of acknowledging God "as God", by glorifying him and thanking him, human beings perverted their knowledge and sank into idolatry (v. 23).
- Failing to glorify God is the root sin. Sin does not consist first and foremost in acts that transgress God's law, although vv. 24-32 indicate that sin is the transgression of the law. These particular acts are all rooted in a rejection of God as God, a failure to give him honor and glory.

**7) How has sin corrupted human reasoning and understanding? What does this reveal about the extent of our sinfulness?**

- Corruption of human reasoning:

- Futile in their thinking (v. 21)
- Foolish hearts darkened (v. 21)
- Became fools (v. 22)
- Sin is not merely external conduct. Our hearts and minds are also fallen and corrupted by sin. We need God to give us new hearts!

### 8) According vv. 18-23, how should we understand sin and God's wrath?

- Sin:
  - It is fundamentally a failure to glorify God and give him thanks. Sin is idolatry because we worship created things instead of the true God.
  - Sin is not merely the breaking of an impersonal law. It is rebellion against a personal God who has made himself known to us through his creation.
  - Sin has corrupted our reasoning and understanding.
- God's wrath:
  - God's wrath is not the result of an impersonal universal law of cause-and-effect. It is to be understood in personal terms. Yet, God's wrath is not arbitrary or capricious. It is God's holy and righteous response to those who do not worship and esteem him as God.
  - In v. 18, Paul states that God's wrath is *presently* being revealed. How is this happening? As vv. 24-28 suggest, the wrath of God is now visible in how he "gives human beings up" to their chosen way of sin and all its consequences. The moral desolation of human society from the beginning of the world (v. 20) and continuing up to the present day is a manifestation of God's wrath.

#### ***Digging Deeper: God's Wrath***

- The Old Testament regularly pictures God as responding to sin with wrath (Exod. 4:14; 15:7; 32:10-12; Num. 11:1; Jer. 21:3-7)
- In the OT prophets particularly, the wrath of God is associated with the Day of the Lord as a cosmic, climactic outbreak of judgment (eg. Zeph. 1:15-18).
- Although the apostle Paul works with this 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 (Rom. 3:5; 4:15; 9:22; Eph. 2:3).
- Paul often also predicts the outpouring of God's wrath on the future day of judgment (Rom. 2:5, 8; 5:9; Col. 3:6; 1 Thess. 1:10).
- The book of Revelation frequently mentions God's wrath (Rev. 6:16, 17; 11:18; 14:10, 19; 15:1, 7; 16:1, 19; 19:15).

### **The Consequences of Rejecting God (1:24-32)**

#### 9) According to vv. 24-27, what is a consequence of rejecting God?

- Because people exchanged the truth about God for a lie (v. 25), God gave them up to sexual sin. Such sexual impurity includes homosexual relations (v. 26-27).
- The sexual immorality that pervades humanity has its roots in the rejection of the true God in favor of gods of their own making.

#### **10) Why does Paul focus on homosexual relations?**

- Probably because it functions as the best illustration of that which is unnatural in the sexual sphere. Idolatry is “unnatural in the sense that it is contrary to God’s intention for human beings. To worship corruptible animals and human beings instead of the incorruptible God is to turn the created order upside down. In the sexual sphere the mirror image of this “unnatural” choice of idolatry is homosexuality. Human beings were intended to have sexual relations with those of the opposite sex. Just as idolatry is a violation and perversion of what God intended, so too homosexual relations are contrary to what God planned when he created man and woman (Gen. 1:26-28; 2:20-25).
- We should speak with great care about homosexuality, being constantly aware of the pain as well as the evil of these desires. We need to make it clear that all homosexual desire is an example of disordered desire; that this is but one terrible result of the fundamental human sin of idolatry; that an individual who experiences these desires is no more exceptionally evil than is someone born blind; and to point those mastered by these terrible desires to the rescue of God offered to all in Christ.

#### **11) According to vv. 28-32, what is a consequence of rejecting God? What kind of sins do these verses focus on? How is this significant?**

- God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done (v. 28). This leads to a whole host of sins (vv. 29-31).
- Throughout the list, Paul focuses on social ills, leaving out sins relating to sexual conduct and, for the most part, sins against God directly. The purpose is to show the general scope of social evils produced by the “debased mind” to which God has handed sinners over. The sins that we commit in our human relationships are the consequence of our idolatry against God. The breaking of the vertical relationship between God and us leads to the brokenness of our horizontal human relationships.
- Our minds are renewed through the gospel (Rom. 12:1-2)
- We need to address our sin of idolatry first before we can fruitfully tackle the sins that we commit against others.

#### **12) According to Romans 1:18-32, what is our plight? Why do we need the gospel?**

**QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION**

1) How do we fail to glorify God and give him thanks?

2) Our idols might not be physical ones, but they exist in our hearts. What are the idols of our hearts? How do our idols affect our thoughts, attitudes, words, actions and relationships?

Expose our heart idols by asking these questions:

- What do we devote our time, money, energy and affections to?
- What or who gives us our identity, security, joy and contentment?
- What or who, if taken away from us, would make our life intolerable?

3) Why is sin so sinful? How does a biblical understanding of sin impact how we live?

4) How does this passage deepen our understanding of the gospel?

5) How does this passage grow our love for and gratitude to Jesus Christ?

6) How does this passage help us to cultivate humility and compassion in our relationships with others?

## **OUTLINE OF ROMANS**

### **I. Introduction (1:1-17)**

- A. Salutation (1:1-7)
- B. Thanksgiving (1:8-15)
- C. Statement of theme (1:16-17)

### **II. The Heart of the Gospel: Justification by Faith (1:18-4:25)**

- A. The universal reign of sin (1:18-3:20)
- B. Justification by faith (3:21-4:25)

### **III. The Assurance Provided by the Gospel: The Hope of Salvation (5:1-8:39)**

- A. The hope of glory (5:1-21)
- B. Freedom from bondage to sin (6:1-23)
- C. Freedom from bondage to the law (7:1-25)
- D. Assurance of eternal life in the Spirit (8:1-30)
- E. The believer's security celebrated (8:31-39)

### **IV. The Defense of the Gospel: The Problem of Israel (9:1-11:36)**

- A. Introduction: The tension between God's promises and Israel's plight (9:1-5)
- B. Defining the promise: (1) God's sovereign election (9:6-29)
- C. Understanding Israel's plight: Christ as the climax of salvation history (9:30-10:21)
- D. Summary: Israel, the "elect", and the "hardened" (11:1-10)
- E. Defining the promise (2): The future of Israel (11:11-32)
- F. Conclusion: Praise to God in light of his awesome plan (11:33-36)

### **V. The Transforming Power of the Gospel: Christian Conduct (12:1-15:13)**

- A. The heart of the matter: Total transformation (12:1-2)
- B. Humility and mutual service (12:3-8)
- C. Love and its manifestations (12:9-21)
- D. The Christian and secular rulers (13:1-7)
- E. Love and the law (13:8-10)
- F. Living in light of the day (13:11-14)
- G. A plea for unity (14:1-15:13)

### **VI. The Letter Closing (15:14-16:27)**

- A. Paul's ministry and travel plans (15:14-33)
- B. Greetings (16:1-23)
- C. Concluding doxology (16:25-27)