



Let's do a little poll. How many of you like to hear good news first and then the bad news? How many of you like bad news first and then the good news? Personally, I am a bad-news-first kind of guy. Well, this is going to be one of those sermons that I'm going to tell you the bad news first. If it wasn't for communion, there wouldn't be much good news to talk about!

For the past three weeks in the book of Romans, we have celebrated the really great news of the gospel. The gospel is the life changing message of Jesus Christ. And all throughout Romans we'll learn more about that reality. As Tim Keller has said, "The gospel is not the ABC's of Christianity, it's A to Z. It's not just the elementary and introductory truths. The gospel is what drives everything that we do." Last week we were encouraged by Mark at the UNITE service to not be ashamed of the gospel because of its power to save. So, the gospel isn't merely a message; it is a power, centered on a person, which means it can change you. But today and the next three Sundays Apostle Paul will hammer away at the bad news. This week it's bad news for irreligious people. The following two weeks it's bad news for religious people. Paul will finally come back around to the good news again later. Why does he do that? Because once we understand at our core the bad news, we'll appreciate the good news of the gospel even more.

Just so you know, I don't really enjoy preaching passages like this. At CPC we preach expositionally through books of the Bible. That means we don't skip tough verses. This passage is going to be hard today. It might even be offensive. I wouldn't be surprised if someone walks out. Although it might sting and make you uncomfortable, I want you to know it's hard for me too. But, it's important to hear the bad news because without it, the incredible grace of God simply doesn't make sense.

So what's the bad news Paul gives us? Let me give it to you early and give it to you straight: we are worse than we think. Let me personalize it: you are much worse than you think. Doesn't that make you feel good and inspired today? Probably not. But, it's the truth. Theologian C.K. Chesterton after seeing a series of articles called, "What's Wrong with the World?" sent a short letter to the editor. He writes, "Dear Sir: Regarding your article 'What's Wrong with the World?' I am. Yours truly, GK Chesterton." Have you ever asked yourself, what's wrong with the world? Have you ever wondered why the world doesn't seem to be working right? Have you ever been overwhelmed with the evil we see today?

Most importantly, have you ever identified yourself as being part of those problems?

In these 15 verses we are looking at this morning, I want you to know that they are talking not just about the most evil people in the world, they are talking about us; they are speaking about me. What Paul is trying to do in the second half of chapter 1 and all of chapter 2 is answer the question, Why is the gospel necessary? Paul's answer can be hard to swallow. The gospel is necessary because of the wrath of God. The gospel is necessary because of sin and sinners. And in this passage Paul will explain God's wrath and answer why it is being revealed and how it is being revealed. Let's start by reading verse 18.

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness...

God's Wrath is Being Revealed

Paul begins this section explaining that the wrath of God is a present and a future reality—it is being revealed from heaven. People today don't like to talk much about God's wrath. I hear it all the time from Christians and non-Christians, "My God is a God of love, not a God of wrath." The Presbyterian Church (USA), a mainline denomination, recently went so far as to remove the great hymn *In Christ Alone* from their hymnal because of the line about God's wrath. But, if we strip away the justice of God he is no longer loving. We are still stuck in our sins with no solution or hope. If we strip away the love of God, then he is no longer just. If God is holy, then he can't tolerate sin. If he is loving, then he must provide a solution to the problem of sin and evil. The cross is proof that God is both loving and just.

Paul's assumption here is that apart from the gospel, all humanity is under God's wrath. God doesn't grade on a curve. We all failed. God's wrath, unlike human anger and rage, is his "settled, fair, and righteous anger." God's wrath is his "holy hostility against evil, his refusal to condone it or come to terms with it, and his just judgment upon it" (Stott). God's wrath and his anger are directed at both sin and the sinner. It's being revealed both literally and continually in various degrees on earth. We might add that scripture tells us God's wrath will also be revealed in its fullness in the last days, when Jesus returns and makes all things right again.

Paul continues to give us more reasons why God's wrath is being revealed. He says it's directly in response to "all the godlessness and wickedness of people." Sin and sinners are the objects of

God's wrath. In the original language, the idea of godlessness is an aggressive, in-your-face, stand-up-to, shake-your-fists-at-God type of non-reverence. Wickedness is the willful violation of God's perfect holy law. So, it's "godlessness and wickedness of people" that draw God's anger.

One scholar makes a connection to the Great Commandment on this point. The Great Commandment says to love God and love our neighbor. There is a vertical love of God and a horizontal love of neighbor. Godlessness is a destruction of our vertical relationship with God. Godlessness is the attempt to get rid of God, and since that is impossible, it's the determination to live as if God doesn't exist. Wickedness is a destruction of our horizontal relationship with others. Instead of loving our neighbor, we use and destroy them. This godlessness and wickedness is not just a violation of rules, it's an utter rejection of God himself.

So, how does God respond to people rejecting him? Does he turn a blind eye? Does he ignore it? No, he reveals his wrath. Paul then moves on to explain with even more detail **why** God's wrath is being revealed. Look with me at verses 18–23,

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.

For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles.

Why is God's Wrath Being Revealed?

Paul gives us three reasons why the wrath of God is being revealed, three reasons why God's wrath is earned:

- People suppress the truth
- People deny what is in plain sight
- People are delusional

First, people suppress the truth. People today think the opposite is true. They think Christianity is a suppression of truth. They say we are held back by our blind faith in an imaginary God. But, according to Paul, the opposite is true. We are the ones who suppress the truth by what we say and how we live. We only know God, the world, ourselves, and our purpose by first acknowledging him, who is the truth. It isn't just that people are wrong about God and their condition, it's that they know better and still sin. Paul says it's "plain to them." It's as if man has this built-in natural desire to suppress and oppose God's truth. I have a three-year-old, I see this every day!

Take morality for example. If there is no God, then who has the right to say what is right and what is wrong? Without God, how can we find any moral absolutes. Today, morality is mostly determined by the majority. So we've seen a dramatic paradigm in culture when it comes to sexuality. But, if morality is defined by the majority and not God, then slavery was not wrong 300 years ago. But, it was wrong! Young men today think it's no longer morally wrong to sleep with your girlfriend, but God's design for the best sex is in marriage. Culture cannot define morality nor can you legislate it. Morality must be defined by a moral absolute, by God. But that truth is being suppressed.

Why is God's wrath being revealed? Secondly because people deny what is in plain sight. Paul says that all one has to do is look at creation and something about God can be seen. Just go see the Grand Canyon and isn't there something inside you that inspires awe at the Creator? The Psalmist writes, "**The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands**" (Psalm 19:1). Creation is calling out, there is something greater in this world. Later Paul will talk about our own conscience as another indicator directing us to God. Here, Paul points to the evidence of a Creator through creation itself. Through creation, God's invisible qualities, his eternal power, can be clearly seen. Theologians call this idea "General Revelation" which means "the knowledge of God as well as the knowledge of right and wrong that can be obtained through nature." Special Revelation is our knowledge of God that comes primarily from the Bible. For anyone to come to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ, we need both.

The third reason Paul gives for why the wrath of God is being revealed is because we are delusional. He says that their thinking became futile and their hearts darkened. Like in *The Lord of the Rings*, when Smeagol puts on the ring, "My precious," he turns more evil. Likewise, all humanity has put the ring on and are darkened. The idea of darkened implies even an outside demonic influence and control. The idea is almost past any hope. A state that can't be changed without a mighty movement of God within. So claiming to be wise, to have the ring, they became fools. I choose the word "delusional" because it means to stick to a false belief or opinion that defies logic, reason and evidence. It's as if smart people become dumb. People who have eyes to see go blind.

Notice there's an exchange happening all throughout this passage. Because we were created to worship God and because everyone worships something, Paul says they exchanged the worship of God for the worship of idols. The object of our worship is this world and created things, not the Creator. Through our idolatry of success, money, power, security and comfort, we have suppressed the truth, denied what is in plain sight, and become delusional. Feeling good about yourself yet? Well, we are not done! Look with me at verses 24–32,

Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of

their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen.

Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed shameful acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their error.

Furthermore, just as they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, so God gave them over to a depraved mind, so that they do what ought not to be done. They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they have no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy. 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.

How is God's Wrath Being Revealed?

In these verses we move from the **why** to the **how**. **How** is God's wrath being revealed? Three times it says, "*God gave them over*" and each time we see more movement down the slippery slope of depravity. There's a progression we see—God gave them over to sexual impurity; God gave them over to shameful lusts; God gave them over to a depraved mind. The original phrase for "gave them over" is intense. It means an active decision, not passive neglect. So this giving over is not to be viewed like we humans are on some kind of leash and God simply releases his grip on the leash, allowing us to run headlong into traffic. That is a small part of it. But, God is not passive. He lovingly gives them over to what they want. God says, "I will release you to go after all you think will ultimately satisfy you." So God withdraws his hand of protection, allowing the consequences of sin to take their destructive course. Paul for sure highlights sexual sins here, but as we will soon see, we all make this list.

In verse 25 Paul says, "*They exchanged the truth for a lie.*" There is not only a suppression of the truth but an exchange of the truth. What people know and what people do are two very different things. Even though they know something about God from creation, they deliberately exchange that truth for the lie of self actualization and idolatry. They say, "There is no God so do as you please. You are god. If it makes you happy, then who am I to judge?" I'm personally convinced that most people are not searching for truth today anyway. We are living in a postmodern world where truth has been replaced with tolerance. "Anything goes, so long as you are sincere and non-judgmental." Instead of truth people are asking themselves, "Is this interesting?" and "Is this helpful" not always, "Is this true?" We are living in a different world. Some of you might be thinking, "Hey, what's wrong with

that?" but the fact remains, God is truth. I believe now more than ever, the church and the people of God have something powerful to say to a hurting world.

How else is God's wrath being revealed? Paul says, "*We exchanged natural for unnatural.*" As you can see, this is one of the more controversial passages in Scripture and the longest passage in the Bible on homosexuality. It's even more heated today in light of the recent Supreme Court ruling that requires every state in the Union to license a marriage between two people of the same sex. You should know that we have a Position Paper on our website entitled, "Same Sex Marriage." It's been there for close to 10 years, but we've recently updated it. I'd encourage every single one of you to read it if you haven't done so already. If you do not have access to a computer, we printed a few copies for you to take home.

In this sermon, I simply don't have the time to treat this subject with the thought and care it deserves. However, as I have studied this passage, I can't see at all how this can be interpreted as anything other than another example of sinful behavior with its consequences. Sexual sin here refers to **any** sexual activity outside of the beautiful marriage relationship. Sex outside of marriage is exchanging the truth of God for a lie, the lie of sexual freedom and fulfillment outside the marriage covenant. Sexuality in general, homosexuality in particular, and a whole list of 21 other vices are listed here by Paul. As a whole, Paul is making the case that the wrath of God is being revealed both because of these sins and as a result of people going their own way. It's important to understand that while homosexuality is a sin, it's not to be put in a category of the worst sin. All sexual immorality is sinful. If you are a follower of Christ who is sleeping with a person who is not your spouse, Paul lumps you into the same category as someone living an active LGBT lifestyle. And Paul lists out 21 other sinful behaviors that he calls wickedness including gossip, envy and disobedience just to name three. Every vice listed in verses 18-32 should be seen as equally worthy of God's wrath. Paul's point is we all deserve God's wrath, we all make this list. Me included!

You need to know that there are some interpreters who see this passage very differently than we do. They say Paul is referring to abusive homosexuality as the sinful behavior, not the kind of behavior that happens between two who consent into a monogamous homosexual relationship. But, these verses clearly speak of relationships between mutually consenting men and women. This is generic homosexuality Paul is speaking of as unnatural. There are some who say Paul is only condemning men and women who give up "natural" sexual relations for "unnatural" ones as a warning to "stay true" to your personal sexual identity. In other words, if you consider your sexual identity as heterosexual, then engaging in a same-sex relationship is unnatural for you and therefore a sin. And if my personal sexual nature/

identity is to be homosexual, then it would be unnatural for me to engage in a heterosexual relationship.

Does that sound like what Paul is saying here? No. The word "natural" doesn't refer to someone's personal nature or identity, it refers to God's created design. In Paul's understanding those two things are exactly the same thing. Natural refers to how it was to be from the beginning when God created male and female in his image. Sexuality is a God-given beautiful gift meant to be enjoyed in the marriage of one man and one woman for a lifetime. To seek sexual satisfaction in any way apart from what God created is not worshipping God. It's worshipping creation. It's idolatry. Furthermore, nowhere in the Bible is there any example of good homosexuality. Paul could have found it in Greek and Roman literature, but not in God's Word.

In Paul's thinking homosexuality is bowing down to an idol of "sexual freedom." It's looking outside of God to find deep inner satisfaction. For one to stay actively practicing homosexuality in an unrepentant pattern of behavior is indicative of a rejection of Jesus' lordship. I'm reading a great book, *Jesus Outside the Lines*, that deals with many of the hot button issues today—politics, the unborn, and sexuality. The author Scott Sauls who is a pastor shares a story about a close friend who came out as a gay man. One day they met for lunch. And at lunch the gay man was heartbroken that Scott would not celebrate the fact that he had found the love of his life. Scott, with tears in his eyes said very lovingly, "For me to affirm the love of your life would mean me denying the love of mine."

At CPC we believe in both grace and truth. Grace says we are all sinners in need of a Savior. Gay or straight. Truth says, "Go and leave your life of sin, whatever that may be." As Christians, our identity is rooted in who we are in Christ, not in anything else. We at CPC want to be a place where anyone struggling with same-sex attraction or identifying with the LGBT community can find a place of faith, hope and love, a place of community. We believe it's our job to preach the Gospel, to love people and it's God's job to judge and change people from the inside out. Please read our Position Paper where we go into much greater depth about this heated topic.

The last reason Paul gives for how the wrath of God is being revealed is that ***"We exchanged a fit mind for an unfit mind."*** People not only do these things, but their minds are so affected that what was good is now bad, and what was bad is now good. And not only that, they support those who practice these things. Theologians call this the "doctrine of total depravity." It means that while not everything we do is completely sinful, nothing we do is completely untouched by sin. I want you to notice that

this passage doesn't say they are unhappy. The fact that they are happy in their sin just makes Paul's point even stronger that "God gave them over." Paul says that these people even "invent ways of doing evil." With modern technology we see this every day. From the Ashley Madison website where you can find someone to have an affair, to the App Tinder that helps you find someone to hook up with nearby. We are constantly exchanging the truth for a lie, the natural for the unnatural, and a fit mind for an unfit one.

Before we come to the Good News at the Communion table let me summarize Paul's argument in verses 18-32:

- God's wrath is being revealed because people suppress the truth.
- God's wrath is being revealed by letting people go their own way.
- When people go their own way, they fall into sexual impurity and a bunch of other sins.

So the question remains, Why do we need God to give us his righteousness in the gospel? Because we are all under God's wrath. We are worse than we think. Just because you come to church most Sundays and you've never been attracted to someone of the same gender, you're not off the hook. We are all worse than we think.

Just this week we all heard about another tragic shooting at a community college in Oregon where 9 people died and 10 were injured. Supposedly the shooter asked each victim if they were a Christian or not. If they said yes, they got a bullet in the head. If they said no, they got a bullet in the leg. How could something this terrible happen? We are worse than we think. And Paul's day wasn't any better. It was very common in the Roman world to throw out baby girls like trash in favor of baby boys and for men to abuse young boys in the name of sexual freedom. We've always been worse than we think.

Does evil like this need to be punished? Yes. But how? The gospel. It's in the gospel we learn how Jesus was punished for all evil once and for all. That Jesus fully bore the brunt of God's wrath for you. The wrath of God we deserved was poured out on Jesus instead of us as he was murdered on the cross. He lived a perfect life and died in our place and for our sins satisfying God's wrath. He then was raised in power on the third day. Paul writes a bit later in Romans, ***"Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him!"*** (Romans 5:9). We don't need to fear God's wrath because we have received his righteousness. Yes, you are worse than you think but, you are more loved and cherished than you ever dared to imagine.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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