

Romans 1:18-23

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[0 : 00] Good morning, I do hope you have a copy of God's Word with you this day, and that you will join me in Romans chapter 1. We're doing it, and we're in Romans today.

Now, two weeks ago, we began our study of these six verses, Romans 1, 18-23. But time prevented us from finishing, so I'm eager to progress through them with you this morning. I really don't like it when our studies get disjointed like they have been over these past months. But, I trust and hope that you trust in God's providential reign over even the smallest details of our church's life.

So, here we are. Let's begin by reading our text, and then I'll try to remind you what we have learned so far before we proceed together. So, Romans chapter 1, verse 18-23.

Before I read it, let me remind you, beloved, that this is God's Word to us. It was written for His glory and our good. So, we would all do well to listen to it in order to believe its promises and to obey its commands.

[1 : 20] For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.

For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For His invisible attributes, namely His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived ever since the creation of the world in the things that have been made.

So, they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks to Him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

So, in verses 16 and 17 of this chapter, Paul states that the gospel is the power of God for salvation.

[2 : 28] For in it, the righteousness of God, so the righteousness that comes from God, is revealed from faith for faith. As it is written, the righteous shall live by faith.

These two verses, I have told you repeatedly, are the thesis for the entirety of this letter. Paul tells us the specific case that he is going to make, and then in verse 18, he zooms back and begins his explanation.

In verse 18, he tells us why anyone would care that the gospel is the power of God. Why does it matter that it's the power of God for salvation?

He begins telling us why we need the righteousness of God that comes through faith. And the reason he tells us is, the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness.

He's going to spend a bunch of time making the case that every single person has been ungodly and unrighteous.

[3 : 41] And therefore, apart from the power of God for salvation, we will experience now and forever the wrath of God. We thought some together about the wrath of God two weeks ago from texts like Jeremiah chapter 7 and verse 20, where Jeremiah records, Thus says the Lord God, Behold, my anger and my wrath will be poured out on this place upon man and beast, upon the trees of the field and the fruit of the ground.

It will burn and not be quenched. And in the New Testament, Colossians chapter 3, verse 5 and 6, Paul says there, Put to death, therefore, what is earthly in you, sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.

So he says in verse 5, Put away the ungodliness and unrighteousness. And then in verse 6, he says of Colossians 3, On account of these, the wrath of God is coming.

God's wrath is a settled reality against sin. He is a just God, and he justly does and will punish sin. We thought a bit about how we want this to be true. We want the world to be set right. We noted that God's wrath does not discriminate as it is revealed against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men.

[5 : 15] I told you that these two words, ungodliness and unrighteousness, are very similar in the Greek language. They're almost synonyms. The first stresses a severed relationship with God.

The second focuses on the activity that proceeds from that severed relationship. So both who we are in our sin and then what happens out of who we are.

The one on whom God's wrath is revealed is not living as an image bearer of God, but in contradiction to that created purpose.

And in so doing, suppresses the truth. Lives in contradiction to the truth. We then considered verse 19, which says, for what can be known about God is plain to them because God has shown it to them.

The four here is referring to the suppression of the truth. This truth of who God is. Sinful man denies or rejects the truth that God has revealed to them.

[6 : 27] And this is why, verse 20 says, they are without excuse. This is not an issue of what cannot be known, but rather one of what will not be known.

Truth right there for the taking that is refused to be taken up and understood. Verse 20 says, his invisible attributes, namely his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived ever since the creation of the world in the things that have been made.

So two weeks ago, with a long quotation from a commentary, we considered the two things that can be clearly observed in the natural world. First, that there is a creator God.

And secondly, that he is eternally powerful. And so, mankind is without excuse.

This suppressed knowledge is enough to damn a person. But it is not enough to save them. They are without excuse.

[7 : 39] But this is not saving knowledge. This is why Paul is so eager to preach the gospel. This is why he wants his original audience and you and I to understand that salvation comes by grace alone, through faith alone, in the personal work of Jesus Christ alone.

This is why he is not ashamed of the gospel. For it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes. To the Jew first, and also to the Greek.

Right? It's a gospel that can save. It's powerful to save. Because mankind, in our fallen state, suppresses the truth.

The gospel is the powerful thing that's employed by the Spirit to break through our darkened hearts, our foolish minds, and bring us back to God.

It is why he will press at the church in chapter 10, where he says, How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in Him of whom they have never heard?

[8 : 48] And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent, as it is written, how beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news?

And let me tell you, beloved, that the preaching he's talking about here includes what we do on Sunday mornings from the stage. It includes that, but it is not only that, it is also your gospel proclamation in the world in which you live and where you go as you share the good news.

Now, I think this sufficiently brings us to the last three verses of this text. That felt real fast. But I will read them one more time to get our minds moving toward the truth contained therein.

Verse 21 and following. Four, although they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks to Him, but they became futile in their thinking and their foolish hearts were darkened.

Claiming to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

[9 : 58] There is in our text today a lesson concerning the thinking of mankind, the thinking faculty of man.

We've seen knowledge, language throughout it. Look back up in verse 18, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.

And verse 19, for what can be known about God is plain to them. And then in verse 20, having been clearly perceived.

And now, verse 21, they knew God. They became futile in their thinking. And then verse 22, claiming to be wise, faculty of the mind, they became fools.

There's a lot of thinking language in this text. Now, remember, Paul is zooming back and telling us why we ought to care that the gospel is the power of God for salvation.

[11:04] So, don't miss this. Paul is talking about mankind in this text. He is speaking in past tense about a problem that began in the garden.

It is a problem that began with Adam and Eve rejecting the truth, acting on a lie, and learning things that they could not unlearn. Paul is referring to the state of mankind ever since, of which we are numbered apart from God's intervening grace in our lives.

Paul is teaching that without God's intervention, the way of man is a digression away from the truth, and sound reasoning not toward it.

Now, mankind is not altogether left without the power to reason. God in His common grace to mankind has allowed us, mankind, to think, to order our societies, and discover truth in creation. And don't we as a people do this with mixed success? Sometimes we are improving upon our societies and discovering amazing things, and sometimes we move in the opposite direction.

[12:25] Part of our image-bearing quality as humans is our ability to reason, albeit imperfectly. So we still carry around the ability to, in some measure, be image-bearers of God.

Now, the study of how we reason is called epistemology. That may be your one big word for the day. And represented in this room right now is a mix of epistemological standpoints.

So, we have amongst us, and probably embedded in all of us, a little bit of the modernist.

Modernism is where we get, comes out of the Enlightenment, where we get things like the scientific method, measurable stuff.

We want to be able to have an idea and test to see if it's true or if it's not. This, of course, has some strengths and it has some weaknesses. Beyond the modernists, or the very cleverly called post-modernists, most defines my generation.

We think of things, phrases like, well, you have your truth and I have my truth. This is a post-modern way of thinking. You can imagine an example for a moment.

[13:47] Some of us were standing on a sidewalk and having a conversation and a car accident happened just out on the street. We would all have a different experience of that car accident. Some of us may have been facing it and seen what happened.

Some of us might have been particularly attuned to the noise that it made as it wasn't in our sight. Some might have really smelled the accident, the screeching of tires, things like this.

And we'd all have something to share of our experience. Yet, objectively, there was a car accident and something real happened in that accident.

The post-modernist tends to take up that truth and make it the truth. What I saw in that car accident was the thing that absolutely happened and becomes dismissive of other experiences.

And now, even more cleverly, we find ourselves, and really, they're going to rename these at some point, I'm sure, the epistemological standpoint of many particularly young people, but we are not, as older people, immune to this, is called, ready for it, post-post-modernism.

[14:56] It's got to stop at some point. We can't have post-post-post-modernism, I don't think. Many people today do not believe that the truth can be arrived at.

Just pick an issue and get on the internet. There's a lot of swirling facts out there. It's difficult to arrive at the truth. And because this is so unsettling, and really is a result of post-modernity, so unsettling, people who are functioning in this post-post-modern way will define the truth by their feelings.

If it makes me feel good, it must be good. If it makes me feel bad, then it must be bad. As I said, we are all a mix of these epistemological viewpoints.

And we must be careful because their ultimate end, although they have some value, their ultimate end is a digression from the saving truth of the gospel.

Their ultimate end of any of these ways of thinking moves away from God and not toward Him. We must recognize that we will not reason our way to heaven.

[16:11] It will not happen. We need the revelation of God to be saved. We need Him to speak the truth to us. We will not arrive at it on our own.

We need the intervening grace of God worked in us by the power of the Spirit in the illumination of His Word. Now in Romans 12, beginning of verse 2, as Paul turns his letter to practical application, he says, Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind.

So if we have been saved by the intervening grace of God, then we are categorically different than the description being given here. We are not those who the wrath of God is being revealed to, but we are yet to be fully sanctified.

We are not arriving. We don't have perfect reasoning yet. This side of glory, we still carry around the baggage of the curse.

Last Sunday, I was sick. I tried to push through. I actually came to the building at 8 o'clock. I could just barely lift my arms. And so, I went home. I still have this body of death.

[17 : 33] I'm still carrying the burden of sin. And it doesn't just affect my body, it also affects my mind. Which is why Paul says in Romans 12, to be transformed by the renewal of your mind.

A thing that must be pursued to reason properly as God reveals Himself to us in His Word. But what does this renewing work look like?

If you look at verse 21, the first part of it says, for although they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks to Him.

So, Paul here states in the negative that a renewing mind will honor God and will give thanks to Him.

The person who has been saved by Christ will not live the way these people live, will give thanks to Him. Do you find in yourself a mind that is bent toward the praise of God as He has revealed Himself in the Bible?

[18 : 48] Do you thank Him in all circumstances, trusting Him in joy and in sorrow? Beloved, we ought to be growing in these matters, these matters of honor and thanksgiving.

It ought to be an increasing reality in our lives if we find ourselves in Christ. I think that the Westminster Larger Catechism will help us at this point.

I certainly hope that it will. I always, with some trepidation, read long things, so I hope this will serve us well this morning. Certainly, we find in our text, particularly in verse 23, a breaking of the Second Commandment.

But I want to draw our attention this morning to the First Commandment. In the Westminster Larger Catechism in the form of Catechesis, question 103 says, what is the First Commandment?

And the answer is, the First Commandment is, Thou shalt have no other gods before me. This is Exodus chapter 20. Thou shalt have no other gods before me.

[19 : 57] So think in these terms as Paul here is talking about. In the negative, he's saying, if people are redeemed by Christ, we will honor God. And we will give thanks to God.

So the Westminster Larger Catechism follows question 103 with question 104, which says, what are the duties required in the First Commandment?

So just listen to these carefully and think, is this the bent? Is this the way my heart tends toward?

The answer, the Westminster Divines wrote, the duties required in the First Commandment are the knowing and acknowledging of God to be the only true God and our God and to worship and glorify Him accordingly by thinking, meditating, remembering, highly esteeming, honoring, adoring, choosing, loving, desiring, fearing, believing, trusting, hoping, delighting, rejoicing in Him, being zealous for Him, calling upon Him, giving all praise and thanks, and yielding all obedience and submission to Him, with the whole man, being careful in all things to please Him, and sorrowful when in anything

He has offended, and walking humbly with Him. And I know that you can't see it, but there's a footnote for every single one of those words where they have seen this in the Scripture.

These are the duties required in the first commandment, right? To have no other God before God.

God, if you do not find in yourself a mind that is bent in this way, then it is possible that you may be counted among those who are futile in their thinking and have foolish, darkened hearts.

[22 : 10] Westminster Larger Catechism, question 105. What are the sins forbidden in the first commandment?

The answer, the sins forbidden in the first commandment are atheism in denying or not having a God, idolatry in having or worshipping more gods than one, or instead of the true God, the not having and vouching Him for God and our God, the omission or neglect of anything due to Him, required in His commandment, ignorance, forgetfulness, misapprehensions, false opinions, unworthy and wicked thoughts of Him, bold and curious searching into His secrets, all profaneness, hatred of God, self-love, self-seeking, and all other inordinate and immoderate setting of our mind, will, or affections upon other things and taking them off from Him in whole or in part, vain credulity,

unbelief, heresy, misbelief, distrust, despair, incorrigibility, and insensibility under judgments, hardness of heart, pride, presumption, carnal security, tempting of God, using unlawful means and trusting in lawful, sorry, using of unlawful means and trusting in lawful means, carnal delights and joys, corrupt, blind, and indiscreet zeal, lukewarmness and deadness in the things of God, estranging ourselves and apostatizing from God, praying or giving any religious worship to saints, angels, or any other creatures, all compacts and consulting with the devil and hearkening to his suggestions, making men the lords of our faith and conscience, sliding and despising God and his commands, resisting and grieving of a spirit, discontent and impatience at his dispensations, charging him foolishly for the evil he inflicts on us, and ascribing the praise of any good we either are, have, or can do to fortune, idols, ourselves, or any other creature.

Again, a scripture reference for every single one of those phrases or words. Did you know there was so much packed into that first commandment?

You see, if you find that you are a transgressor of the first commandment, my plea with you this day is that you would repent of your unrighteousness, an unrighteousness that suppresses the truth, an unrighteousness on which the wrath of God is being revealed, and that you would throw yourself on the mercy of intervening grace.

[25 : 04] The offer of the gospel is made to you this day. Having already found yourself in Christ, praise be to God, we are counted as righteous before him, justified before him, and now being sanctified, we get to repent and believe afresh again and again and again.

The righteous shall live by faith. Renewing our faith, renewing our faith, renewing our faith. Finding yourself this day outside the grace of God? The gospel is powerful to save.

The gospel can save you if you would just believe that it will. So we see this digression of mankind, a digression that we have all once been or possibly are this morning guilty of.

Verse 22 says, claiming to be wise, they became fools. God's declaration in this inspired text written by Paul is that the people who think they're wise in this world are fools.

Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 1 and verse 18, for the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing. But to us who are being saved, it is the power of God.

[26 : 32] And in Philippians 3, verse 18 and following, for many of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears walk as enemies of the cross of Christ.

Their end is destruction, their God is their belly, and they glory in their shame with minds set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Claiming to be wise, right, glorying in their shame, they become fools. words. In this past week, I feel like I was just bombarded with the foolishness of the world trying to be framed as wisdom.

we do a program on Fridays with some boys from our church and in partnership with Grace Community Church. We call it Corum Deo, which is Latin for before the face of God.

And we've got 10 11-13 year olds and when we begin the morning we ask if they have any prayer requests. And I will tell you that young boys ask for prayer the way many old men do because they have twisted ankles and people they know who are sick.

[27 : 52] And I often try to add something of more eternal substance to our praying. And this past Friday I just couldn't open my mouth because everything that was going to come out of it was going to be terribly depressing to 11-13 year olds.

And so as we prayed with them and for them for toes and ankles and parents with sniffles I said come Lord Jesus this world is just falling apart.

And Paul here is not teaching us that there's this progression that we're experiencing that progression but that it has been this way since the fall. Adam and Eve in the garden verse 22 claiming to be wise they acted and they became fools and all of mankind ever since.

Verse 23 says and exchange the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

Turned from the praise of God to idolatry. and we will talk at length about this in the text that will conclude chapter 1 Lord willing next week.

[29 : 20] Beloved we ought not to be surprised when the world rejects the ways of our God. I see so many Christians so shocked when the world acts in contradiction to our God.

This text makes it clear why they do. Their ungodliness and unrighteousness suppress the truth. It is the natural way of the fallen man to bend away from God and his ways.

Now it is good for us to reason in the marketplace so don't hear me asking you to disengage from the world in which we live. By all means reason with people.

By common grace the world has reasoning faculty. We want to labor for an equitable society. But what this world needs most is the intervening grace of God found in the powerful gospel of Jesus Christ.

Paul doesn't go on his missionary journeys into cities and have political dialogue with people in that city. What does he do? He goes to the synagogue a place where people would have come for the worship of God and he reasons with them from the scripture that Jesus is the Christ.

[30 : 42] This should be the primary thrust of what we do. Knowing that we cannot reason people politically into heaven.

It's not going to happen. God is going to make this world new one day and we as the church are meant to be about making disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ.

It ought to be the central thing that we do in everything that we do. So I pray that as the world assails us with its warped thinking we will respond with the truth that we were once like them.

That we have been saved by a loving kind God and that we will extend the saving offer of the gospel to them. And I pray that we would not just be theological heads but transformed people.

So in closing let me just read the entirety of Romans 12 2 for our benefit. Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind that by testing you may discern what is the will of God what is good and acceptable and perfect.

[32 : 06] Let's pray together. Let's pray together. here.