

Humanity at Its Worst

Romans 1:18-32

Such a great contrast this morning. Last week the emphasis was righteousness, God-righteousness. We studied the righteousness of God that is revealed in the gospel, the good news. It is a righteousness which is credited to us, imputed to us, put into our account. And received by faith.

v.17 “For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, “The just shall live by faith.”

But this morning, the contrast. Those who believe in God, those who believe in Jesus, shall be saved. The gospel is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes. But what about those who don't believe? Unbelievers. What will become of them? What will become of you, if you do not believe in the Lord Jesus for your eternal salvation?

Ultimately, the answer to that question is the wrath of God, and the emphasis of our text this morning with the rest this first chapter of Romans is the extent to which unbelievers deserve that wrath and justice of God as the due consequence of their sin. So we will be looking at humanity at its worst.

It's not hard to comprehend that situation. A murderous rampage in a grocery store in Boulder, CO. Ten people murdered. Eight people killed in association with massage parlors in the Atlanta suburbs. Both of those events with a week of each other. Senseless, evil, wicked murder. Humanity at its worst. And so we read,

v.18

Let me start there with a very important point. A very important idea. This point will answer a lot of the difficult

questions that people often have with regard to Christianity, namely why God would love and save some people, but not everyone. And it gets at the point of why God would save anyone, because the reality is that,

I. UNBELIEVERS SUPPRESS THE TRUTH OF GOD.

I want to teach you something that you might never learn if you get a college degree in psychology or sociology. You could get a medical degree and never learn this. And I'm not mocking those professions, as such, for they provide valuable services. It is valuable for us to learn how to define and describe human behavior in an individual, as a psychologist does. It is valuable to be able to define and describe human behavior as a society, as a sociologist does. Certainly, the medical field provides valuable service in caring for the medical needs of our bodies.

But it is possible to gain an exhaustive education in those fields which study human behavior and miss the most basic truth about mankind. And so, I'll teach you something that will make you wiser than the most educated non-Christian sociologist or physician. I'll teach you something that will make you wiser than almost every politician in Washington, and wiser than most administrators and even teachers in our schools. We'll learn an incredible insight into mankind. And it's not hard to understand. Listen carefully. These aren't big words. The most profound thing that you will ever learn about mankind is this, that every person knows God, by nature, and because of their wicked unbelief, they suppress that knowledge. As it says in verse 18, they “suppress the truth in unrighteousness.” Everyone has a knowledge of God, an awareness of God, but they refuse to acknowledge it.

So there is no one who can actually, truthfully say, “I don't know if God exists.” There is no one who can rightly proclaim that God doesn't exist. Many people do say those things, of course,

but the point is, that there is an underlying problem in their mind, in their will. In their soul. Specifically, they are suppressing the truth that is evident in the world in which we live. This is sometimes called natural revelation. And Paul's point here is that,

A. God has abundantly made himself known to all mankind.

He has revealed himself. To everyone. How? What is the proof of that rather strong statement?

v.19

Manifest means evident. Obvious. Plain to see. And God has made himself plain to see. God has revealed himself plainly. Obviously. Abundantly. He has shown himself to all mankind, everyone. Again the question is, How? How has God revealed himself to all mankind? How has God made himself known? How has God been made manifest to everyone?

v.20

These two verses are among the most important verses in the whole Bible when it comes to understanding human nature. Because they demonstrate God's own self-revelation in creation. God's "invisible attributes are clearly seen" in his work of creation. God himself is invisible. He does not have a body like we do. He is a spirit, infinite, eternal and unchangeable.

1 Tim. 6:6 "[He] alone has immortality, dwelling in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see, to whom be honor and everlasting power."

But we can see what he has done. He has created the world. It's obvious. Just look around. Study the solar system, the heat of the sun, the distance between planets. Study the perfection of the ecosystems in which we live, the perfection of the human body. Study the miracle of life. All of those things cry out that there is a

creator. And all men know it. They instinctually know that there is a creator, and that he is somehow divine. They know, just from observation, that there wasn't a big explosion that brought this whole universe into existence. They know that chaos never organizes itself, that matter someone, over time, becomes more orderly. That never happens. We know that. Just the opposite is true. Everything in this world actually moves away from order to chaos. Decomposition, decay. Unless it is acted on by an outside power.

And everyone who looks at this created world can reasonably, rationally, intellectually and honestly arrive at only one answer. There is a creature who designed and built everything. That's the only possible explanation. So what are the invisible attributes of God which are so abundantly revealed? "His eternal power and Godhead." Godhead simply means deity, or divine nature.

Ps. 19:1 "The heavens declare the glory of God; And the firmament shows His handiwork. 2 Day unto day utters speech, And night unto night reveals knowledge. 3 There is no speech nor language Where their voice is not heard. 4 Their line has gone out through all the earth, And their words to the end of the world. In them He has set a tabernacle for the sun, 5 Which is like a bridegroom coming out of his chamber, And rejoices like a strong man to run its race. 6 Its rising is from one end of heaven, And its circuit to the other end; And there is nothing hidden from its heat."

You can go out at night and look at the sunset, and see God's invisible quality of beauty and order. You can wait for the precise time of the sunrise in the morning and see God's invisible quality of power. Will the sun rise tomorrow? Of course it will, and every unbeliever knows that just as well as I do. And we know it because God's invisible qualities and divine power have been revealed.

But wait a minute. All of that is not that clear to many people. Many people deny the very thing I am emphasizing. And the point here is Romans 1, the point that you have to fully grasp in order to engage with all the unbelievers in this world is simply this,

B. Unbelievers suppress the truth in their rebellion against God.

Anyone who looks at this created world and denies the power and existence of God is suppressing the truth that is evident right before their eyes. As an act of the will, as a determination of the mind, they refuse to accept and believe what is abundantly obvious. And there is a reason they do that. It is called rebellion. Rebellion against God. They suppress the truth of God's existence because they do not wish to submit to the power and authority of God. They suppress the truth of God's existence because they do not want to serve him nor worship him.

Therefore, they come up with a substitute. An alternative. Instead of worshiping God, the one true and living God who created the world out of nothing, unbelievers worship created things. They offer their worship to created things rather than to God. And that is the ultimate definition of idolatry.

C. Unbelievers foolishly replace God with created beings as the object of their worship and devotion.

Notice how much Paul emphasizes this, and shows how willful it is, how intentional it is, and how foolish it is. How stupid it is!

v.21-23

The climactic statement is in,
v.25

That's the nature of unbelievers, that is the mind of unbelievers. They think themselves wise, they judge themselves

to be intelligent. But they show themselves to be fools, because they look at the glorious creation which God has made, and choosing to ignore the creator, they exalt and glorify the creature. And that is why they are without excuse. That is why God is just in his condemnation of them.

v.20. "...so that they are without excuse."

D. Unbelievers are without excuse before God.

Ignorance is no defense, because they are not ignorant! It is no defense to say that they have never heard the gospel, because they will be judged and condemned for their willful rebellion.

v.21

They would not glorify God! That's the root of sinful rebellion. They would not give him thanks. That's the evidence of sinful rebellion. And notice what happens when sinful men suppress the truth.

v.21b. "...[They] became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened."

The outcome isn't surprising, and it's a pattern imitated all too frequently today. Men who suppress the truth eventually lose the ability to think, their minds become futile, senseless, foolish. Their hearts become darkened. And they imagine God to exist in their own image. They worship created things rather than the creator. That is the consistent, universal, timeless habit of sinful men! We exchange the truth which God has revealed to us for a lie, something we craft in the rebellious imaginations of our own mind.

Sometimes, those false gods take the form of wooden idols, or brass or gold. Sometimes live animals are worshipped as god. Sometimes the earth as a whole is a god. Sometimes human

ideas become god, or human beings themselves. Sometimes human pleasure, particularly sexual pleasure, becomes a god. Sometimes the creations of human hands become a god--through covetousness and greed, and the materialism of our day is certainly a modern day false god.

Sinful men worship images of God they have created in their own mind from their own experiences, and they fail to worship the creator who has revealed his glory in the pages of Holy Scripture. People in every age, including our own, exchange the truth of God for a lie. They worship creation instead of the creator. They suppress the truth. And they will be judged.

II. UNBELIEVERS SHALL EXPERIENCE THE WRATH OF GOD.

v.18

I want you to notice something particularly important in this declaration of the wrath of God. Notice what God does, in his judgment and condemnation upon believers.

A. God removes his restraints from unbelievers.

v.24

He gave them up! He withdrew his restraining power. It might be said rightly that no one is as bad as he could possibly be, but that is entirely due to God's common grace, his restraint. Unbelievers can be good neighbors, even good friends. They can be trustworthy and helpful. At times, they can be more kind than many Christians. But that is not because of their own innate, natural goodness. Rather, it is because of common grace of God to restrain human wickedness.

And it is a judgment of God to remove that restraint, to give

them up. To give them over.

v.26

Finally, to use that same expression a third time, we read,

v.28

There is clear reference there to sexual sin, not that that is the only sin of mankind or even necessarily the most heinous, but it is one of the most obvious. It is a clear, outward evidence of what happens when God judges unbelievers for their foolish rebellion of him by removing his restraints. They "dishonor their bodies among themselves," verse 24. They do what is unnatural, verse 26, denying the obvious way in which God has made mankind, male and female.

I won't be descriptive here, but I will be plain. God made us male and female. He made us to reproduce, sexually, through the distinctive physical male identity and the distinctive female identity. He gave us bodies that are male and female, and in an obvious way, he made those bodies to be joined together in the glory and holiness of marital intimacy and intercourse. And the evidence of God's judgment is in the flagrant abuse of our human sexuality.

The grievous consequence of that is evident and obvious as well.

B. Unbelievers are increasingly given over to their sin.

The emphasis here is upon the degree, the heinous degree, to which our human sinfulness descends. Not just a rejection of God, nor even mere rebellion against God. But increasingly abhorrent expressions of that rebellion.

v.26-27

Men and women exchange natural relations for unnatural ones. And Paul leaves no doubt about what he means. Men were inflamed with lust for other men. Women were inflamed with lust for other women. There is no clearer and more indisputable definition that homosexuality is the evidence of a rebellious heart given over to sin by God.

And notice,
v.32

No longer is sin just something in which you indulge or excuse. They actually give approval, calling good that which God calls evil. Paul expresses it this way to the Philippians,

Phil. 3:18 “For many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, that they are the enemies of the cross of Christ: 19 whose end is destruction, whose god is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame—who set their mind on earthly things.”

Whose glory is in their shame! In other words, they boast, they glory in things for which they should be ashamed. So totally removed is any sense of guilt or remorse. Totally gone is any sense of shame, any sense of conscience. I don’t think I need to emphasize just how much verse 32 applies to the current culture and society in which we live today. That is a description of what happens when God removes his restraints upon those who foolishly suppress the truth in their rebellion against God.

With one final step in this terrible progression of sin.

C. Unbelievers are ultimately enslaved by their own evil passions.

It is not a pretty picture at all, but it is a perspective that we need to acknowledge. It is the reality that we must confront in the

world in which we now live, with numerous obvious examples raging all around us today. The progression of increasing intensity and offensiveness of sin is unmistakable. Both in our own culture and in the description of mankind which Paul gives to the Romans.

v.28-32

What a horrible, horrible list. Humanity at its worst, with every kind of unrighteousness, unrighteousness that is so explicitly defined. Words that describe the condition of the heart in rebellion against God. Words that describe the condition of heart where the truth of God has been suppressed. And it’s too depressing just to go through that whole list.

Let me end, though, with a few specific thoughts and applications. First, when you read through this list, recognize your own sin. This list is a description of unbelievers, those who are given over to the depths of their sin, but nonetheless, each one of us still struggles with the flesh, the old man. As Christians, our lives are not characterized by these things, or should not be, yet, at points, we should still sense our guilt.

Confess that guilt and ask God to cleanse you. Don’t read through this list with a satisfied sense of self-righteousness. Instead, appreciate anew that in Christ, God will ultimately save you from the judgment of being given over to your sin, and learn to hate the sin that continues.

Secondly, related to that, recognize that if God in his grace hadn’t come to you and saved you, then this list would describe your life. Ultimately, if God hadn’t saved you, he would eventually give you over in the sinful desires of your heart, too. So when you read a list like this, learn to say with all sincerity and with all sober genuineness, “but for the grace of God, there am I.”

And thirdly, when you read a list like this, let God stir your zeal to proclaim the gospel to unbelievers, the gospel which rescues people from the slavery to sin which is described here. The gospel frees people from the wrath of God that is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness.

Rom. 1:16 “For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes.”