

Righteous Wrath Revealed: *The Great Exchange* – Part 1

Romans 1:18-23

*For the **wrath of God** is revealed from heaven **against** all ungodliness and unrighteousness...*

Introduction: *Have you ever made a really bad trade? Have you ever exchanged something that was working great, only to find that the ‘new’ one was full of problems?* When we were shopping for a new washer and dryer a few years back we were encouraged to NOT go with the newest or advanced versions since they broke down more than the older ones. I was thinking of bad exchanges this week, and one of the things Erin and I like to do when we go away is watch game shows --- old or new --- if we can find the Game Show Network. We’ve watched several episodes of “The Wall”, where people can choose between a known amount of money, usually between tens of thousands to hundreds of thousands, in exchange for what *could* be left on the Wall after the game. Most times I’ve watched, I comment to the screen, “*take the money*”, but inevitably there are some who risk more money than they’ve ever had for the possibility of millions, which often ends up with nothing at the end.

Exchange defines the human condition. Mankind has made a **great exchange** from the beginning, and that has not only shaped our existence and future, but has **revealed** the nature of God. If you go back in your mind to the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve were created in the image of God in order to fill the earth, multiply, and have dominion over it (Gen. 1:26-28). Everything they did would bring glory to God, from working and caring for the Garden (2:15) to enjoying the good things God created (2:9). God withheld NOTHING from them except for a simple command NOT to eat of one tree. The obvious comparison between the two was monumental: Have everything you could want to enjoy in light of a relationship with God OR *eat a piece of fruit from a forbidden tree!* Was there no fruit on any other tree?!!?? That was not the issue. We know that though the temptation was a *physical thing*, the real temptation was **questioning God’s truth and goodness** (“Did God really say?”) and the hope that they too could become **like God** (3:5), possessing the same autonomy and authority that ONLY God claims. This exchange elicited a response from God, which brought out or revealed an aspect in Him they had never seen: *punishment and justice*. The word “wrath” was not recorded, but that is exactly what Adam and Eve experienced. They were shut out of the Garden, faced physical, spiritual, and eternal death, and no longer would walk in an intimate relationship with Him.

The exchange was **worship for wrath, rest for rebellion, intimacy for idolatry**. It is the same exchange that we choose today.

As we come back to Romans 1, it’s important to see the argument of thought Paul lays out. By training he was a lawyer, one who studied God’s Law and could argue and defend it in many different ways. We want to point out two larger context features before we explore the particulars of the present verses.

The outline of Romans 1:16-17 to 3:21-31

Take your Bibles and look again at 1:16-17. Here Paul explains the gospel, as a revealer of God’s righteousness, open to all who believe, and received by faith alone. Then, from 1:18-3:20, he explains the need FOR the gospel by explaining how everyone is under God’s wrath because of their sin and unrighteousness. If that seems hopeless, Paul brings the argument back by bookending the discussion in 3:21-24:

*But now **the righteousness of God** has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— 22 the **righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: 23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24 and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus***

Notice the same themes and content are here that are in 1:16-17: God's righteousness, the gospel is open to all, and faith in Jesus Christ as the only pathway. This will help us keep an eye on the beginning and end as we are in the midst of a potentially hopeless section in between.

The outline of 1:18-32 – Exchange and Giving Over

As we assess the world around us and ask the question: “*what is going on?!?*” “*Why are things so messed up?*”? The answer lies in 1:18-32. Just as Genesis 1-3 answers so many questions about our state in sin, the glory and attack on marriage, and the denigration of creation, this section in Romans answers the “why” question concerning our present culture. It concerns the wrath of God against sin, and that wrath is BOTH expressed as a future reality and present consequence. Look at a few verses:

EXCHANGES of mankind:

1:23 – “**exchanged the glory** of the immortal God **for images** resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things”

1:25 – “because **they exchanged the truth about God for a lie** and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator,”

1:26-27 – “For their women **exchanged** natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; ²⁷ and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another,”

This is a broad explanation of all of mankind, not just the people of Rome. This is a timeless principle and explains every culture, every people group, for all time. And just like sin in the Garden came with consequences, note the consequence of sin in a temporal sense is **God giving us over to our passions**. In other words, a consequence of sin is MORE SIN, and these sins not only proliferate but degrade, growing in frequency and depth:

1:24 – “Therefore **God gave them up** in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves”

1:26 – “For this reason **God gave them up** to dishonorable passions”

1:28 – “And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, **God gave them up** to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done”

Man's exchange led to the consequence under God's wrath of God giving us up to more sin. Why are things going from bad to worse? *God is giving people what they want!* When people eliminate God from life, what is left is our degrading passions that lead to insanity, a debased mind. But before we get to the “why” of God's wrath, let's review and finish the discussion on **Romans 1:16-17** from last week.

Gospel Driven Power & Boldness

Romans 1:16-17 *“For I am 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. 17 For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, ‘The righteous shall live by faith’.”*

The culmination of Paul’s introduction simultaneously gives the theme of the rest of the letter. He already gave the essence of the gospel in the first few verses, now he lays out the substance. There are **four distinct** aspects of the gospel that emboldened Paul in the gospel:

- 1) **He was not ashamed** – At first glance, this seems like a strange statement coming from Paul or any believer who has been transformed by the gospel. But given the fact that gospel ministry comes as a cost, it’s not a far walk to take that being *ashamed of the gospel* is a challenge even believers face.
- 2) **The Gospel IS the power of God for EVERYONE who believes** – Paul believed this, experienced this in his own life, and witnessed it in places like Corinth and Thessalonica. He saw people turn from idols to serve the living and true God (1 Thess. 1:9-10). He saw people who lived lifestyles of sexual immorality, adultery, homosexuality, thievery, and drunkenness who became washed, sanctified, and justified (1 Cor. 6:9-11) There is nothing more powerful or effective to change lives and redeem eternal destinies like the gospel. **Salvation** here means “spiritual deliverance”, and encompasses the present but especially the future. The language Paul uses is that of a courtroom where all will stand before a Judge and give an account (Rom. 2:6), where no excuses will stand (3:19), and where no human work of the law will be justified (3:20).

And notice that salvation is open to EVERYONE on the simple basis of belief. This means that the same status applies for anyone, whether rich, poor, man or woman, raised in the church or not, regardless of ethnicity, family heritage, or tradition. The gospel is the power to save, where God will declare one righteous. Paul believed that the gospel is what moves someone from **death to life, darkness to light, and from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of his beloved Son**. In this he had hope in success, boldness in the message, and trust that God will save whomever He called.

- 3) **The Gospel REVEALS the righteousness of God** – We will delve into the question more, but a central question of the universe is: **How does a righteous God save fallen, sinful humanity without compromising His righteousness?** But what is revealed about His righteousness?

The righteousness of God is his saving action whereby he brings people into a right relationship with Himself.¹ This absolutely comes out of His character, which is holy, pure, and righteous. David Peterson said, *“Righteousness is certainly an attribute of God, but the term is used to describe how God acts to establish justice for His people and put them right with Himself.”*²

And notice the fact that the **righteousness of God** is sandwiched between two concepts: the **power of God** and in verse 18, **the wrath of God**. Herein lies the reality. The gospel had to be effective in giving us a foreign righteousness to be made right with God because we were all under His **wrath**. This means that we are not simply *wounded, or mostly dead, or needing a push*. We are dead in our sin, cannot

¹ Colin Kruse, p. 71.

² David G Peterson, “Evangelical Biblical Theology Commentary”, p. 106

make ourselves alive, and need something or Someone to act on us. This is why the gospel of Jesus Christ is so amazing, because it is **His Work from beginning to the end, uncompromising and powerful**. It meant that God could save sinners AND uphold His righteousness distinctly and wholly through the work of Jesus Christ on the cross. His atoning work was the means by which we can be declared righteous. When Paul uses the phrase “*from faith for faith*”, it most likely means that faith is the conduit from beginning to end, with no works in between. That is further explained in the last part of the sentence:

- 4) **How is this salvation received?** The same way in the Old Testament as it is in the New, with the object being clarified in the New: “The just, or righteous, shall live by faith”. This is a quote from **Habakkuk 2:4** and also used in **Galatians 3:11** and **Hebrews 10:38**. The point for OT Israel and for us today is the same. We are not saved by our *faithfulness or moral achievement*. We are saved in placing our total trust, dependence, and life in the work of Jesus Christ alone and **His faithfulness to be the just and justifier of our life**. This is why we call people to believe, to repent, and to follow. This is both a message that brings life in a radical, transforming way, and brings out the vitriol of offense from people who are offended to learn they are sinners under God’s wrath.

Wrath Revealed

*“For the **wrath of God** is revealed from heaven **against** all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth”*

Every culture has a problem with the wrath of God, but our current iteration is particularly averse to the concept. “*God is love*” is quoted and sung about, but without Biblical understanding or full explanation. People believe that if you call someone a *sinner*, you may cause them to feel badly about themselves, cause emotional damage, and lower their self-esteem. We have exchanged the word “sin” for ‘messing up’, and often will reject the whole concept by replacing the truth of God with ‘my truth’. “*How can it be sin if I’m simply living out my truth!? Stop trying to shame me!*” If there is no sin, there is no wrath. If there is no wrath, there is no judgment, and if no judgment, I can do whatever I want. On the other side, churches and well-meaning believers can lay on the judgment side so thick that the gospel cannot be seen through the smoke-screen, and people are left without hope or joy.

But the point that Paul makes here is that the gospel both reveals God’s **righteousness AND His wrath**. Each are part of the same gospel. The wrath of God is “*the response of our holy and righteous God against sin and sinners that have not been covered by the atonement of Christ.*”³ (Robert Rothwell). His wrath is perfect, a response to the offense of sin. It is different thanr our anger because His is **impartial** (Rom. 2:11), consistent with His nature, and paired with His kindness, forbearance, and patience (Rom. 2:4-5). God’s wrath is consistent with His righteousness, and a lack of wrath would diminish His holiness and glory, making Him less than God. **D. A Carson** said, “**A wrath-less God does not make Him more attractive. It make him morally indifferent.**”⁴ It would be equivalent to a parent that never disciplined their child but claimed to love them, or a judge that let every criminal without punishment, free to continue their activity without thought of justice.

But is it right that God would be WRATHFUL over sin? Does it go against His nature? The answer is in the verse, where all of mankind is both **godless and wicked**, failing in our worship and giving glory to

³ <https://learn.ligonier.org/articles/what-is-the-wrath-of-god>

⁴ <https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/the-bible-often-mentions-gods-wrath-why-does-it-matter>

God, and sinning against Him and others. This godlessness and unrighteousness come directly as a result of our interaction with truth. Truth is THERE, it is real, and it is knowable, but it is **suppressed, hindered, and intentionally restrained**, controlled to keep it away from our own minds and hearts. This is why we live in an age of *information inundation*, where truth is obscured, so called experts apparently trump what the Bible says, and human intellect and letters after a name somehow carry some weight in our thinking. **Rebellion, idolatry, and immorality ultimately are a result of truth suppression**, which also means it is the answer to these issues in the heart and mind of men.

Excuses Rejected

*“For what can be known about God is **plain to them**, because **God has shown it to them**.²⁰ 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**.”*

Our world would say the truth is found IN us, but the reality is closer to the old “X Files” theme: “The Truth is out there”. God did not hide Himself from those He created. He declares Himself through the creation itself (Psalm 19:1). One only has to look at the sunset, observe the vastness of the ocean, or the intricate detail of the human body to realize that there is a God, that He is powerful, and we are not Him. **Psalm 19:2** says that the day pours out speech and the night reveals knowledge. Creation is its own witness to the nature of God Himself. Notice what Paul said in **Acts 14:15-17** as he and Barnabas were in Lystra, did a miracle, and the people thought they were **Zeus and Hermes**:

*“Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men, of like nature with you, and we bring you **good news**, that you should **turn from** these vain things **to a living God**, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them. ¹⁶ In past generations he allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways. ¹⁷ Yet he did not leave himself **without witness**, for he did good by giving you **rains** from heaven and **fruitful seasons**, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness.”*

In other words, God displays Himself to people by what He created, leaving a witness to His power AND benevolence and grace. This is what we call **general revelation**, a built in knowledge that every person from every culture and every ethnicity knows simply by experiencing life on this earth. General revelation leaves people **without excuse**, since it is plain. God also gives **special revelation** through His Word, which allows us to see and know the truth of Jesus Christ. But whenever we talk to ANYONE about the truth of God, we already know that they know something. But we also know that by nature we are **suppressers**, desperately keeping the truth bottled up, pushed down, and squeezed out so that we do not have to answer to that God. That is the mark of **true rebellion**, which Paul addresses next.

Rebellion Reveled

*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**. ²² Claiming to be **wise**, they became **fools**, ²³ and **exchanged** the **glory of the immortal God** for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things*

Deliberate ignorance gives no excuses. I can ignore the rattle in my car and hope it goes away, but a breakdown is coming. I can refuse to see a doctor when there is real pain, but left untreated, whatever is in me could lead to death. No one can plead ignorance before God since everyone knows there is a God. This means that **neutrality** is a myth, and there are ONLY two real paths in life: **glorifying God in a restored life through Jesus Christ**, which means to acknowledge and honor Him as He has revealed

Himself, or to exchange that knowledge for a foolish lie, settling for created things that can never satisfy. These are the **ONLY** choices, only paths, only outcomes.

Notice that in an act of defiance out of rebellion, mankind thinks they are acting **wisely**, reveling in their own intellect and knowledge. But truly all we can do, even the best of minds, is discover the order and intricacies of things that God has already created. No, defiance to God's truth is NOT wise but the epitome of foolishness, trading the God of this universe for things HE CREATED, thinking they are better for us. This leads every human to create God substitutes called **idols**, which are less about pieces of wood or carvings to bow down to and instead anything that we value more than glorifying God. This is NOT new. In fact, this is exactly what Israel struggled with according to **Psalms 106:19-21**:

*They made a **calf** in Horeb and **worshiped** a metal image.
They **exchanged** the glory of God for the image of an ox that eats grass.
They **forgot God**, their Savior, who had done great things in Egypt*

If you remember Exodus 32 as Israel felt like they could not wait for Moses any longer to get back from receiving the Law from Yahweh, so instead of trusting by faith, they had Aaron make a golden calf out of the jewelry that God supplied them coming out of Egypt! This was the epitome of the great exchange and idolatry, leading to God's wrath being poured out through a plague. Later in their history, Jeremiah records that Israel made two major sinful mistakes: 1) they forsook God, the fountain of living waters, and 2) exchanged Him for broken cisterns that could hold no water (Jer. 2:13). Idolatry is the source of immorality, and our hearts are idol factories.

Idolatry is foolish because it makes secondary or good things into ultimate things, putting God and His glory on a lower shelf in our lives. Idols are often acceptable things on their own, but how we treat them makes all the difference. Tim Keller, in his book *The Reason for God*, laid out a helpful way of remembering that idols only harm us, the idolater. If we idolize our spouse, we will become emotionally dependent, jealous, and controlling. If we idolize our family or kids, we will try to live vicariously through them until they resent us or have no self of their own. If we idolize our work or career, we will drive toward being a workaholic or be depressed if your career fails. If we idolize our money, possessions, or health, we will be eaten up by worry, jealousy, or self-trust that tries to control everything.

Idols do us harm, but they ultimately are an affront to the glory and holiness of God. The solution is NOT to deny if we have made idols out of things, it is to recognize to what degree we already have. Once we identify our idols, the next step is to **repent**, to confess our sin, ask for forgiveness, and turn from them. God does not compete. He will not abide by His people having **two masters, or worship two things**. Instead He offers Himself AS THE FOUNTAIN OF LIVING WATER, and gives us the righteousness of Christ in order to be reconciled to Him. For some, this means **repenting and believing for the first time**, coming to Christ and turning from your sin and offense of a holy God. For others that already believe, this is a call to turn from any idols in your heart and life.