

Romans Study Part 2: The Unrighteousness of Humanity (1:18-3:20)

Covenant Presbyterian Church

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“The first duty of a preacher of the Gospel is, through his revealing of the law and of sin, to rebuke and to turn into sin everything in life that does not have the Spirit and faith in Christ as its base.” – Martin Luther, Preface to Romans

- I. The Bad News: The Wrath of God is Revealed
 - A. The Gospel is the “good news” that God, in Christ, has secured salvation for sinners
 - 1. In order to understand this as decidedly *good* news we must first understand the *bad* news
 - B. In Romans 1:18-3:20 Paul lays out, in detail, the bad news:
 - 1. We are all sinners
 - 2. Because of our sin we justly deserve God’s wrath
 - 3. We are incapable of doing anything to assuage the wrath of God
 - C. Starts with Gentiles (1:18-32), moves to the Jewish people (2:1-3:8), then summarizes that no one is righteous (3:9-20)
 - D. The wrath of God is against *all* ungodliness and unrighteousness - wherever it is found
 - 1. His holiness demands perfection and abhors sin
 - 2. Wrath is the right and only response of God to sin, regardless of its context, scope, impact, or intent
- II. The Gentiles (1:18-32)
 - A. The Gentiles have rejected God and worshiped idols (v.23), their passions/lusts (vv.29-32), and themselves (v.25)
 - 1. Rejecting God does not lead us to not worship, but rather to worship something else - we are made to worship and we will always worship something
 - a) *Imago Dei* and the *Sensus Divinitatis*
 - b) “[R]eligious sentiment is the natural possession of man and performs its appropriate work in every atmosphere and under the tutelage of every faith. The fetish-worshiper, no less than the vested priest serving at some gorgeous altar at Rome or Moscow, possesses his religious nature, and may through it attain a high degree of religious development...What, after all, is peculiar to Christianity is not the religious sentiment and its working, but its message of salvation - in a word, its doctrine.”¹

¹ B.B. Warfield, “The Right of Systematic Theology” in *Selected Shorter Writings* vol. 2, p. 226 (Philippsburg: P&R, 2005)

- B. The Gentiles did not have the Scriptures like the Jews did, but that does not give them an excuse, for God has revealed himself in creation.
- C. General revelation
1. "Moreover, *we know God by two means, first, by the creation, preservation, and government of this whole world.* For it is before our eyes as a most beautiful Book in which *all creatures, from the least to the greatest, are as certain letters and marks through which the invisible things of God can be examined and understood,* certainly His eternal power and His divinity as the Apostle Paul says in Romans 1:20. *This knowledge is sufficient for convicting any given people and rendering them inexcusable.* But He also bears His very self to us, much more clearly and openly, in His holy and divine Word; indeed, as much as is expedient in this life for His glory and for the salvation of His own people." (Article 2, Belgic Confession)
 2. "Although *the light of nature, and the works of creation and providence do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God, as to leave men unexcusable;* yet are they not sufficient to give that knowledge of God, and of his will, which is necessary unto salvation. Therefore it pleased the Lord, at sundry times, and in divers manners, to reveal himself, and to declare that his will unto his church; and afterwards, for the better preserving and propagating of the truth, and for the more sure establishment and comfort of the church against the corruption of the flesh, and the malice of Satan and of the world, to commit the same wholly unto writing: which maketh the Holy Scripture to be most necessary; those former ways of God's revealing his will unto his people being now ceased." (WCF 1.1)
- D. Noetic effect of sin
1. "Noetic" = pertaining to the intellect, mind, perception
 2. The noetic effect of sin refers to the way that sin clouds our judgment and impedes our ability to think and understand rightly
 - a) Does not mean that we are incapable of thinking rationally or using reason/logic. It means that the unregenerate person's thinking/reasoning is "bent" toward sin and away from God.
 - (1) "...an innate antipathy to clear thinking and of a not very rare incapacity for truth - a sort of color-blindness to truth."²
 - (2) "Sin has dulled man's consciousness and blinded his perception of divine things: a special revelation of God to sinners, therefore, must needs include an imminent movement of God's Spirit on man's heart, restoring his capacity for the reception of divine knowledge."³

² Ibid, 229.

³ B.B. Warfield, "Christianity and Revelation," *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield vol 1*, (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2005), 28

- b) This is why it is impossible to reason a person into believing that Jesus is God - the Holy Spirit must first work within the unbeliever so that s/he can begin to see God, Christ, Scripture, sin, salvation, etc. rightly
- 3. Identified in Romans 1 as: Suppressing the truth (v.18); knowing God, but not honoring him as God (v. 21); becoming futile in their thinking (v.21); foolish hearts darkened (v.21); claiming to be wise, they become fools (v.22); exchanging the truth for a lie (v.25); not acknowledging God (v.28); a debased mind (v.28)

E. The Punishment

- 1. They are handed over to their sin (vv.24, 26, 28)
 - a) Sin is inherently destructive
 - b) Being caught in and confronted with you sin is a mercy
 - c) Being allowed to pursue sin to ever greater depths is a grave punishment
- 2. Sins carry built-in consequences which are their own punishment (v.27)

III. The Jewish People (2:1-3:8)

A. God's judgment is righteous (2:1-11)

- 1. The Jewish people look down on the Gentiles (v.1), but in doing so they bring judgment upon themselves, because they are guilty of many of the same sins (v.1-3)
 - a) Albeit the manifestations of those sins may be different
- 2. But God is not fooled. Nothing escapes his sight and he judges each according to their deeds (v.6).
- 3. This is true for both Jews and Gentiles (v.11)
 - a) Verse 11 serves as a hinge: just as there is a redemptive-historical priority of salvation for the Jews, so is there a redemptive-historical priority of judgement on the Jews

B. The Jewish people were given the law (vv.12-24) and the sign of circumcision (vv.25-29) — clearer revelation of God than is present in general revelation

- 1. So they are without excuse for their disobedience and sinfulness
- 2. In fact, their sin/disobedience is more egregious than the Gentiles, because they received clearer revelation
 - a) vv.14-24 makes this point in dramatic fashion with regard to the law
 - (1) The Gentiles follow certain aspects of God's law, even though they do not have the written law. This is because certain divine standards are so embedded in the fabric of life that they are inescapable, thanks to the *imago Dei* and general revelation more broadly (vv.14-15; hence reference to "hearts" and "conscience").

(2) Yet, the Jews, *who have the written law of God* and have been trained in the law of God (vv.17-20) do not follow these same standards in many cases (vv.21-23).

(3) The result is that "The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you." (v.24; c.f. Isa. 52:5)

b) Circumcision is a sign that a person belongs to the covenant community and has been entrusted with all the rights and privileges thereof. But their flagrant disregard for the law of God indicates that they do not belong to the covenant community. As such their circumcision is regarded as uncircumcision (v.25).

(1) They have the sign, but not the reality to which it points.

(2) The reality to which it points is more important, though.

They have missed this point entirely, and so have brought judgment upon themselves (vv.27-29)

C. Then what advantage does the Jewish person have?

1. Isn't it better to have less revelation, then? Doesn't that mean less culpability? What advantage is there in being Jewish if it comes with greater judgment for sin?

a) The advantage is that they were given the word of God, and so were given a greater opportunity to know God and, thus, to follow him (v.2)

b) The fact that they mishandled this blessing and did not follow God, does not diminish the blessing itself. (vv.3-4).

c) Ultimately, they are still culpable for their sins; it is not the fault of the revelation that was given to them, or of the one that gave it to them (vv.5-8).

IV. Summary: No One is Righteous (3:9-20)

A. All are under sin - Jew and Gentile alike (v.9)

B. We are sinful in deed ("none is righteous") and in motivation ("no one seeks God") (v.10)

1. vv.10-12 = Ps. 14:1-3; 53:1-3

2. v.13a = Ps. 5:9

3. v.13b = Ps. 140:3

4. v.14 = Ps. 10:7

5. vv.15-17 = Prov. 1:16; 3:15-17; Isa. 59:7-8

6. v.18 = Ps. 36:1

C. This side of the fall the law does not (indeed it cannot) justify, rather it condemns (vv.19-20)