

C. Transition to the Main Theme – The Gospel (1:16-17)

The theme of the book of Romans is the gospel, or the good news about Christ (1:1, 3–4, 16–17).

Paul desires to see the name of Christ glorified among the Gentiles (1:5). For this reason, he wants to visit the church in Rome and establish them in their faith (1:11). His hope is that through his ministry fruit would be produced in their lives (1:13). He intends to achieve this by preaching the gospel to them (1:15). In the broadest sense, gospel is both the proclamation of the message of salvation and the instruction that establishes Christians in the faith.

There is a progressive and unfolding logic. First, Paul tells us why he is ready to preach the gospel in Rome—for he is not ashamed of the gospel (1:16a). Then he tells us why he is not ashamed of it—for it is the power of God unto salvation (1:16b). And then, finally, he tells us why it is the power of God for salvation—because in it the righteousness of God is revealed (1:17).

1:16 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.

1. The Gospel is the power of God to salvation (1:16a).

Though the wise of the world hold the gospel in contempt (1 Cor. 1:18, 23–25), Paul isn't ashamed of it because it is the power of God for salvation. In 1 Corinthians 1:18 Paul said, "For the word of the cross (the gospel) is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." The gospel displays God's power for it results in sinners being delivered from both the power and penalty of sin. The gospel does what no human can ever devise or achieve. It is power from God.

Paul was not ashamed of the gospel because he pondered its power to save sinners. As Piper said, "We do not avoid feelings of shame by altering the gospel to make it popular and inoffensive (1 Cor. 1:18). We avoid feelings of shame by remembering that the gospel is going to be vindicated in the end. We remind ourselves that the gospel alone brings forgiven sinners to final, everlasting joy." (Piper, Sermon on Ro. 1:16).

2. The Gospel is to everyone who believes (1:16b).

The gospel's power is *not* operative universally and does not come irrespective of faith. It is applied only to those who believe. When there is faith there is "no discrimination arising from race or culture and there is no obstacle arising from the degradations of sin" (Murray, *Romans*, 29). The gospel is for everyone.

If the gospel is for everyone, in what sense is it "to the Jew *first*"? Why do they have priority? Some suggest that Paul is only speaking of the historical circumstance; that is, historically, the gospel was preached first to the Jews and then to the Gentiles. But this is a theological context (Moo, 69), so it's doubtful that this comment is just incidental. Paul is more likely pointing out that the gospel has special relevance to the Jewish people (Moo, 69). The gospel is the climax of the OT promises to Israel and was intended for them. In Romans 11:28–29, Paul says, "From the standpoint of the gospel they [the Jews] are enemies for your sake [you Gentiles], but from the standpoint of [election, or] God's choice, they are beloved for the sake of the fathers; for the

gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.” This does not detract from the universal nature of the gospel, but it does point out the special relationship of the Jew to it. Paul will explain this in greater detail in chapters 9–11.

3. The Gospel is a revelation of God’s righteousness (1:17).

1:17 For in it the righteousness of God is being revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, "But the righteous man shall live by faith."

V. 17 gives the reason why the gospel is the power of God; namely, because God’s righteousness is revealed in it. In Greek, the verb “is being revealed” emphasizes that the righteousness of God is continually revealed by God in the gospel as it is preached throughout history.

See note 1 below for the two major views on the meaning of “the righteousness of God”.

“From faith to faith” tells how the righteousness of God is applied to the individual. The gospel saves when the righteousness of God is joined with faith; faith is at the start of salvation and continues throughout the person’s life; as it is written, “the righteous man shall live by faith.” (Hab. 2:4). As Romans 1:16 says, “the gospel . . . is the power of God for salvation *to everyone who believes.*” Thus, “from faith to faith” highlights the centrality of faith in relationship to God’s righteousness. Humans experience righteousness by faith.

CONDEMNATION – THE WRATH OF GOD REVEALED (1:18-3:20)

A. The Unrighteousness of the Gentiles Condemned (1:18-32)

Verses 18–32 give the reason why the righteousness of God is so urgently needed. As things stand, men are in rebellion against God and are therefore objects of His wrath. When left to themselves, without divine intervention, they move from bad to worse (Ro. 1:24, 26, 28).

Romans 1:18–3:20 is a logical progression that leads to the conclusion that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Ro. 3:23), that “there is none righteous, not even one” (Ro. 3:10), and that in the end “every mouth is stopped and the whole world is accountable to God” (Ro. 3:19).

Paul begins by describing the condition of the unbelieving, and why they are deserving of the wrath of God.

1. Their Rejection of God (1:18-23)

1:18 For the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness,

1:19 because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them.

1:20 For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse.

1:21 For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God, or give thanks; but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened.
1:22 Professing to be wise, they became fools,
1:23 and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures.

The general flow of these verses is as follows:

God's righteousness is revealed in the gospel (v. 17b).

Why do men need the righteousness in the gospel?

. . . because they are unrighteous, resulting in God's wrath being revealed against them (v. 18a)

What do men do to deserve His wrath?

. . . they suppress the truth about God (v. 18)

How do we know that they suppress the truth?

. . . because that which is known about God is evident within them (v. 19a)

How do we know it is evident within them?

. . . because God made it evident (v. 19b)

How did God make such knowledge evident?

. . . through creation . . . God's eternal power and divine nature are evident in creation; they are "understood through what has been made" (v. 20a)

As a result, men have no excuse for suppressing the truth (v. 20b)

Why does the revelation of God in creation leave men without excuse?

. . . for through the testimony of creation men know God but they do not honor Him as God, or give thanks (v. 21)

. . . instead they become fools (21c-22)

. . . they stop worshipping God and worship idols (v. 23) . . . therefore, they are without excuse and deserve judgment

Vv. 17 and 18 are tied together in two ways: (1) first, they are connected by the theme of "righteousness"; in v. 18 God's wrath is being revealed against "unrighteousness" and the truth is being held down in "unrighteousness." This is clearly intended to contrast the righteousness found in the gospel (1:17). (2) Secondly, the "for" in v. 18 tells us that the verses are connected; v. 18 explains that without the righteousness of the gospel all men stand under God's wrath.

Wrath is not an attribute of God. It is the response of God's holiness to sin. It is the "holy revulsion of God's being against that which is the contradiction of His holiness" (Murray, 35). Mention of God's wrath demonstrates that men need salvation; they need the gospel.

The wrath of God is revealed in a number of ways. People tend to think of God's wrath exclusively in terms of the future, final judgment. But the wrath spoken of here is happening now. Just as the gospel is *presently* "being revealed" (a Greek present passive verb), so the wrath of God is *presently* "being revealed" (a Greek present passive verb). God's wrath is seen in v. 24 and following when He abandons sinners over to their own sinful desires; instead of intervening and saving them, God allows them to move toward their own destruction.

Sinful men are the objects of God's wrath. The unrighteous man lives as if God had no standard of right and wrong (cf. Ro. 1:26–32); the ungodly man lives as if God doesn't exist (Ro. 1:20–25). Unrighteousness is life orientation that goes with ungodliness. These terms explain why men suppress the truth about God. When people love sin, they cannot love the truth.

V. 18 also tells why men deserve wrath; namely, because they suppress the truth about God (1:18). Though the truth about God (Ro. 1:25) wells up within each individual (1:19a), people actively suppress it (1:19b). The present tense verb "suppress" means that constant effort is needed to hold the truth down. Just as pressure needs to be applied constantly to a spring to keep it from popping up, so men must continually hold down the truth about God to prevent it from rising. People "deliberately stifle any truth that challenges their self-centeredness" (Stott, 72). "Some drown its voice by rushing into their immoralities, others strangle the disturbing voice by argument and by denial" (Lanski, *Romans*).

Suppression of the truth implies knowledge of the truth. What specific truth are men suppressing? Verse 20 tells us they are suppressing the witness of creation to the existence of God. Paul says that God's eternal power and divine nature "have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made." Psalm 19:1 says, "The heavens are telling of the glory of God; And their expanse is declaring the work of His hands" and in Acts 14:17 Paul said that God "did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good and gave you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness."

For those who by the grace of God do not suppress the revelation of God in creation, creation itself becomes a gateway to seeing the glory of an infinitely marvelous, eternally powerful Being who made the world. Creation causes us to recognize our finitude and dependence upon Him as the One who gives to all men life and breath and all things (Acts 17:25). Every time we think that we are given rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, it generates thankfulness for God's goodness and provision and causes our hearts to be flooded with joy (Acts 14:17). When we see creation as the work of His hands, we say, "I am His creation. He owns me. My life, my breath, and everything I have is a gift. I will thank Him. I will cherish His glory."

Five points should be noted:

- (1) The revelation of God in creation is not veiled but "plain" (i.e., visible, clearly seen, evident, manifest) to all (1:19). The reason it is plain is because God made it plain (v. 20).
- (2) Something of God can be "known" in creation (1:19). Not only is God's revelation of Himself in creation visible, *it is intelligible*. Although the knowledge of God in creation is severely limited (see 4 below), it is real knowledge nonetheless. Therefore, no one can claim total ignorance of the existence of God. Creation provides enough evidence that men can avoid the error of

mistaking creation for the Creator. “In other words, the God who in Himself is invisible and unknowable has made Himself both visible and knowable through what He has made. The creation is a visible disclosure of the invisible God, and intelligible disclosure of the otherwise unknown God” (Stott, 73).

- (3) The revelation of God is constant. It has been around “since the creation of the world” (1:20) and has continued ever since. Psalm 19 says the heavens display the majesty and power of God moment by moment, day after day, and night after night (Ps. 19:1–2). His glory is seen by all men everywhere at all times, regardless of where they live or of the language they speak (Ps. 19:4). Furthermore, God’s goodness in giving gifts like rain, crops, and food to men also testifies of His existence (Acts 14:17).
- (4) The revelation of God in creation is limited. Creation reveals God’s eternal power and divine nature. The psalmist in Psalm 19 also says that the glory and wisdom of God are evident in the splendor and vastness of the heavens (Ps. 19:1–2). But creation alone is insufficient to save anyone. Nevertheless, “. . . everyone does in fact have some knowledge not simply of a god, but of the true God of the Bible. As Paul told the Athenians, God makes himself known as creator, sustainer, and ruler of history (Acts 17:24–27) so that they and all people ‘should seek God . . . though He is not far from each one of us’ . . . The fact that all people are aware of God through general revelation serves the task of evangelism” (Saucy, Scripture, 40, 41).
- (5) The revelation of God *leaves men “without excuse”* (1:20). “God’s power, skill and goodness are displayed in the beauty and balance, intricacy and intelligibility of the universe” (Stott, 73–74), and all men have access to this. When man fails to reason from creation to Creator, it is not because he cannot see, but because in his unrighteousness he is holding the truth down. This, however, is not ample grounds to acquit man of his guilt.

This leads us to the next step in Paul’s logic. God’s wrath is deserved because “although they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks” (1:21).

[It is also possible that the “for” of verse 21 is the explanation of why men are without excuse; that is, they are without excuse “because (for) although they knew God, they did not honor Him as God”].

The knowledge of God spoken of in verse 21 is not the knowledge that the saved possess; rather, it is the general knowledge about God in creation that Paul just alluded to in vv. 19–20. What Paul is saying is that even though men could see something of God in creation (it is “evident within them”), they failed to act upon it. In fact, they turned in the opposite direction and worshipped creation instead (1:25).

“Man is a religious being, and if he refuses to let God have the place of preeminence that is rightfully His, then he will put something or someone in God’s place” (Harrison, EBC, 23). With the rejection of God, man has nowhere to go but down.

There are seven steps down in the process of men's degradation.

- (1) First, men refuse to honor God. God reveals His glory in creation but instead of this knowledge leading to worship, people refuse to ascribe to Him the glory that He deserves (1:21).
- (2) Secondly, they don't give thanks for His goodness (1:21).
- (3) As a result, they become futile in their thinking (1:21). Futile here means empty, vain, useless.
- (4) Next, their hearts are darkened (1:21). Once man turns from the truth he opens the door to darkness. Man's mind is never a vacuum. Whenever truth is absent, falsehood fills its place.
- (5) They think they are wise (1:22).
- (6) They become fools (1:22). In the OT, foolishness was not the lack of intelligence but was associated with moral darkness (Bruce, 84). Men think that they were wise by denying what is "plain" and "evident in them" and believing in an "alternative reality." This abandonment of truth testifies of their foolishness.
- (7) They then exchange the worship of the immortal God for finite creation (1:23). V. 23 describes the religious monstrosity that results once the knowledge of God is rejected. Not only do men worship and serve the creature rather than the Creator, they *prefer* the likeness of corruptible things over the glory of God (Isa. 44:12–15). "The glory of God, that admirable and effulgent representation of Himself which glowed in all that He had made, this they changed in the likeness of an image . . ." (Stifler, 32). A complete exchange of man's affections has taken place. "The suggestion that emerges from this statement is that mythology and idolatry grew out of man's insistent need to recognize some power in the universe greater than himself, coupled with his refusal to give God the place of supremacy. He had to make a substitution" (Harrison, EBC, 23).

In conclusion, Romans 1:18–23 describes what is true of all people who have not come under the power of the gospel. They perceive truth about God from creation, but their natural inclinations are so strong against this truth that they suppress it (v. 18). People who love sin hate the light and will not come to the light lest their deeds should be exposed (Jn. 3:20). But the light of God's truth goes on shining in the gospel of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 4:4–6), and it shines for those outside the gospel in the work of creation (Piper, Sermon Ro 1:18, Sept 13, 1998). The only possible outcome from heading in this direction is wrath.

Realizing that we are under the wrath of God is essential for us to grasp, for if we were not under God's wrath we would not need the gospel. The wrath of God points to our human condition without grace. It tells us of our need of redemption, and what God did in Christ to save us. The backdrop of sin and wrath are the foundation of the celebration of the glory of the gospel.

NOTE 1

VIEW 1: The righteousness of God is *the gift of righteousness from God* (θεοῦ is a genitive of source) that places people in a right standing before God, making them acceptable to Him.

Since “righteousness” basically means “to make right” or “to conform to a standard or a norm,” “the righteousness of God” is referring to God giving a “right status” to the sinner when he believes. In other words, the gospel reveals how the sinner can be made right before God. This fits well with the connection of righteousness to faith at the end of the verse. Through the gospel God proclaims that sinners are “right” before Him; they are innocent in the court of divine justice.

VIEW 2: It is also possible that “the righteousness of God” is used more broadly of God’s saving power (θεοῦ is a subjective genitive). This does not deny that righteous status is given (VIEW 1) but emphasizes that more than a righteous status is in view.

First, the verb “reveal” speaks of God’s activity of invading history. This fits well with the idea that God’s saving activity is in view. In Romans 3:21 it also says, “the righteousness of God has been manifested;” this is almost certainly a reference to God’s saving action.

Secondly, the parallel between vv. 17 and 18 support this thesis. The verb “is being revealed” is repeated in v. 18, only the subject of the verb is God’s wrath. “Just as ‘wrath of God’ describes a divine activity, the ‘righteousness of God’ also refers to an activity of God. Both are genitives of source depicting the revelation of God’s actions in history” (Schreiner, 65).

Third, in v. 16 the gospel is called the saving power of God: “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for *it is the power of God for salvation* to everyone who believes.” Since vv. 16 and 17 are connected by “for” (γάρ), we can conclude that saving power is intertwined with righteousness (Schreiner, 66).

Fourth, view 2 is aligned with the OT use of the word righteousness. Psalm 98:2 states, “The LORD has made known His salvation; He has revealed His righteousness in the sight of the nations.” The parallelism between “making salvation known” and “revealing righteousness” is obvious. Many similar OT examples exist. Isaiah 46:13 says, “I bring near my righteousness; . . . and my salvation will not delay.” Isaiah 51:8 also says, “My righteousness will be forever, and My salvation to all generations” (also see Psa. 31:1; 40:10; 69:27–29; 119:123; Isa. 45:8, 13; 51:5–8; Mic. 6:5; 7:9). In other words, God’s righteousness is His saving intervention on behalf of His people (Moo, 81).

Thus, to paraphrase Romans 1:17: “in the gospel, God’s righteousness (His saving power in making things right) is revealed”.

Deciding which Paul meant isn’t easy. Although more reasons were given in support of view 2, both views have equally weighty arguments. Whichever Paul was emphasizing, Scripture teaches that the gospel both reveals God’s activity in making things in the world right, and provides righteousness for the sinner.

[For additional study on “the righteousness of God” see Moo, *NICNT, Romans*, pp. 79–90; Schreiner, *BECNT, Romans*, 63–67]