

The Essential Bad News

Romans 1:18-32

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ July 19, 2026 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

✕ ✕ ✕ ✕ ✕ ✕ ✕

¹⁸ For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth. ¹⁹ For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. ²⁰ Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse; ²¹ for though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened. ²² Claiming to be wise, they became fools; ²³ and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles.

²⁴ Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves, ²⁵ because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed for ever! Amen.

²⁶ For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, ²⁷ and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameful acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error.

²⁸ And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind and to things that should not be done. ²⁹ They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, ³⁰ slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious toward parents, ³¹ foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. ³² They know God's decree, that those who practice such things deserve to die—yet

they not only do them but even applaud others who practice them. (Romans 1:18-32, NRSV)

✕ ✕ ✕ ✕ ✕ ✕ ✕

If I tell you I've got both good news and bad news, which one do you want first? Sociologists tell us that the overwhelming majority of us – more than 75% – want the bad news first.¹ Let's just get the worst over with and then end on a high note. It's like the pilot who announces to the passengers, "The bad news is that we are lost, completely off course, and running low on fuel. The good news is that we are making record time!" End on a high note!

Interestingly, when asked what we want to *give* first to others, the majority of people say that they prefer to share good news first because it's easier to start on a high note. It's like the kid who comes home after borrowing his dad's car with good news and bad news. "The good news," he tells his dad, "is that the air bags in your car work perfectly!"

In all seriousness, if I've got bad news and good news to tell you, particularly good news that is an solution to some bad news, you've first got to hear and receive the bad news if you are going to be able to appreciate the good news. For example, the good news might be that there is a cure for the particular kind of cancer you have. But for you to hear, receive, and then act on that good news, you first have to receive the bad news that you have cancer. In fact, if your doctor has any compassion for you at all, she will do her level best to convince you of the bad news so you'll be ready, if not eager, to hear the good news.

When we looked at Paul's introduction to the letter of Romans last week, we learned that he has good news to share with us, what he calls the gospel of God.² But Paul, out of compassion, knows that for us to not only hear, but eagerly receive and act on, this good news, we have to first hear the bad news. So right off the gate he gives it to us straight: "**The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people...**"³ God's wrath is coming

¹ Cathy Newman, "Good News or Bad News: Which Do You Want First?", *National Geographic*, November 18, 2013. Read online at <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/article/131115-good-news-bad-news-diagnosis-doctors-psychology-science>

² See Romans 1:1

³ Unless otherwise noted, this and all other biblical citations are from the New International Version (NIV).

against people. That's bad news. And not for just some people. Not only for certain people. Paul says people, meaning *all* people. What we are reading here is directed to you and me. So let's avoid the temptation to make this all about other people.

To understand this bad news, let's start with God's wrath, something that the scriptures refer to much more often than some people would like.⁴ To be clear, the word *wrath* here does not describe an uncontrolled rage or cranky explosion of temper, the classic "lightning bolts from heaven" that come to mind when people think of God's wrath. That's how *we* get angry. Sure, occasionally you'll come across righteous indignation in people, but most anger we harbor is full of vanity, animosity, malice and revenge. But that's not what God's wrath is like. The word instead describes a settled, righteous opposition to that which does damage to his beloved and sacred creation. The opposite of wrath is not love, but indifference. Wrath is what occurs in you when that which you love is harmed. Since God loves his creation, he cannot remain indifferent when sin and evil corrupt it.

In fact, we *need* God to be a God of wrath. In fact, it's really only people who have never been the recipients of great injustice and oppression in this world who reject the idea of a wrathful God. Miroslav Volf, a Croatian theologian who has seen firsthand such injustice in the Balkans, writes,

If God were not angry at injustice and deception and did not make a final end to violence – that God would not be worthy of worship...My thesis that the practice of nonviolence requires a belief in divine vengeance will be unpopular with many Christians, especially theologians in the West...But it takes the quiet of a suburban home for the birth of the thesis that human non-violence [results from the belief in]

God's refusal to judge. In a sun-scorched land, soaked in the blood of the innocent, it will invariably die...with many other pleasant captivities of the liberal mind.⁵

Put simply, if we are to love our enemies as Jesus commanded us to do, and refrain from taking vengeance into our own hands, we *need* to be assured that God will bring justice in time. A God who turns a blind eye to sin and injustice is not worthy of worship.

And let's be clear. There is great and enduring injustice in the world. Paul sums all of it up with one word: "godlessness." That is the essence of human sin: the attempt to get rid of God. It's not just that we do wrong, but that we make a conscious, reasoned decision to live for ourselves rather than for God and for others, along with our stubborn refusal to acknowledge any truth which challenges our self-centered ambitions to do so. You see, God sets up the world and puts us in it to live by *his* terms. We refuse and insist instead on living life by our terms. You see this clearly at the beginning with Adam and Eve in the garden, and every one of us has followed right in step ever since. British theologian G.K. Chesterton once quipped, "Certain new theologians dispute original sin, which is the only part of Christian theology which can really be proved." We've got the whole of human history to back it up.

Paul summarizes what we have done in verse 21 when he says that we "**neither glorified [God] as God nor gave thanks to him,**" and then in verse 23 when he adds that we then "**exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and idols.**" You may remember from the creation story in Genesis that humanity, distinct from all other creation, was made in the image of God.⁶ As you know, the

That we should bring "down the powerful from their thrones" (Luke 1:51-52) seems responsible; that God should do the same, as the song of that revolutionary Virgin explicitly states, seems crude. And so violence thrives, secretly nourished by belief in a God who refuses to wield the sword.

My thesis that the practice of nonviolence requires a belief in divine vengeance will be unpopular with many Christians, especially theologians in the West. To the person who is inclined to dismiss it, I suggest imagining that you are delivering a lecture in a war zone (which is where a paper that underlies this chapter was originally delivered). Among your listeners are people whose cities and villages have been first plundered, then burned and leveled to the ground, whose daughters and sisters have been raped, whose fathers and brothers have had their throats slit. The topic of the lecture: a Christian attitude toward violence. The thesis: we should not retaliate since God is perfect non-coercive love. Soon you would discover that it takes the quiet of a suburban home for the birth of the thesis that human nonviolence corresponds to God's refusal to judge. In a scorched land, soaked in the blood of the innocent, it will invariably die. And as one watches it die, one will do well to reflect about many other pleasant captivities of the liberal mind.

⁶ "Then God said, **"Let us make humankind in our image, in our likeness..."**—Genesis 1:26

⁴ The word in reference to God occurs 36 times in the New Testament.

⁵ Cited by Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God* (Dutton, 2008), 74. Here's the full quote from his book *Exclusion & Embrace*:

One could object that it is not worthy of God to wield the sword. Is God not love, long-suffering and all-powerful love? A counter-question could go something like this: Is it not a bit too arrogant to presume that our contemporary sensibilities about what is compatible with God's love are so much healthier than those of the people of God throughout the whole history of Judaism and Christianity? Recalling my arguments about the self-immunization of the evildoers, one could further argue that in a world of violence it would not be worthy of God not to wield the sword; if God were not angry at injustice and deception and did not make the final end to violence God would not be worthy of our worship. Here, however, I am less interested in arguing that God's violence is not unworthy of God than in showing that it is beneficial to us. Atlan has rightly drawn our attention to the fact that in a world of violence we are faced with an inescapable alternative: either God's violence or human violence. Most people who insist on God's "nonviolence" cannot resist using violence themselves (or tacitly sanctioning its use by others). They deem the talk of God's judgment irreverent, but think nothing of entrusting judgment into human hands, persuaded presumably that this is less dangerous and more humane than to believe in a God who judges!

purpose of an image is to reflect the original. If I show you a photo of Yosemite Valley, the photo itself is not Yosemite Valley. It's only an image. But it's an image because it points to the glory of the real thing, even makes you wonder why you don't visit the real thing more often. Similarly, we were created to reflect what God is like, and in doing so to bring him glory. Yet in countless ways we fail to do so. Even worse, we so often refuse to give thanks. You may know that the root of the Greek word for thanksgiving is the word *grace*.⁷ In other words, you are thankful when you realize that what you have you did not earn or deserve. Everything we have is from God, our very lives. And yet, how often do we live with a blind sense of entitlement?

Paul says we traded glorifying our Creator with grateful hearts and lives for the worship of creation, what the Bible usually calls idols. In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word for *idol* literally means “worthless thing.”⁸ In Paul's day idols were often actual statues of stone or metal that people would worship. Though they take different forms, idols are just as common in our day and in our culture. What's the same is that our idol worship is also all about worshipping the creation rather than the Creator. To be clear, idols, in and of themselves, are generally good things, but good things which we make into ultimate things, good things like romantic love, family, money, vocation, children, health, and so on.⁹ God and God alone is meant to receive the ultimate affection and devotion your heart. You are to look ultimately to the Lord for identity, security, and meaning in life. When you look to something else – anything else! – instead of God for these things you have made a deadly and foolish exchange. And we've all done it. The Swiss reformer, John Calvin, once declared, “Man's nature, so to speak, is a perpetual factory of idols.”¹⁰ You may not know what idols your heart is manufacturing, but it undoubtedly is, and it would serve you well to know what they are.

Paul emphasizes that this is a very bad exchange. That word *exchange* shows up several times in this passage. It implies the sort of exchange where you get ripped off.¹¹ Think of a person who gives their life savings to purchase a priceless piece of art only to later discover that it's a counterfeit, barely worth the canvas it's painted on. Every single idol will always, in the end, prove to be a counterfeit. It's a terrible exchange to

seek from something else that which only God can deliver.

We should know better. That's a major emphasis in Paul's presentation of the bad news here. In verse 19 he declares that we are without excuse in all this because **“what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them.”** When he says “them,” he means *us*. Even if a person has never heard anything specific about God, that person should still be able to stand on a beach and watch a sunset, or witness the birth of a child, or ponder where music came from, or study in biology class all that goes on in just a single living cell, all the “beauty and balance, intricacy and intelligibility of the universe,”¹² and be left with *at least* the sense that there must be someone or something greater than us who made all this, somebody with power, and skill, and goodness who is worthy of our worship. Psalm 19 speaks clearly on this:

**The heavens declare the glory of God;
the skies proclaim the work of his hands.
Day after day they pour forth speech;
night after night they reveal knowledge.¹³**

This knowledge, which is made available to everybody through the natural world day after day, is not enough to save people, but it is enough to at least lead people on a humble pursuit to discover whatever God it is who made all this. Tragically, we don't allow it to. Paul declares here that we instead suppress this truth by our godlessness, our commitment to live life on our terms and our terms alone. The results are tragic, and constitute the essential bad news Paul is laying out here, concerning which there are at least four results.

The first result of us rejecting what should be obvious is that our hearts become darkened and we become fools. To quote Paul in verse 21, **“their [again, he means *our*] thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.”** He goes on to say that we claim wisdom but are really fools. Twice he calls us fools. Ouch! The word in Greek is *moros*.¹⁴ Guess what English word come from that word? Moron! Thanks, Paul. But to be clear, the word has nothing to do with intellectual deficiency. You can be a genius and a fool at the same time! The opposite of foolish is not smart, but wise. Foolishness is moral obstinacy. This is the person whose understanding of what is good and true has been dulled. Psalm 14:1 declares, **“The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God.’”** The more you keep

⁷ <https://biblehub.com/greek/2169.htm>

⁸ <https://biblehub.com/hebrew/457.htm>

⁹ I'm borrowing Tim Keller's definition of idols from his book *Counterfeit Gods* (Riverhead Books, 2009).

¹⁰ Source unknown. Even an atheist like Friedrich Nietzsche recognized this: “There are more idols in the world than there are realities.”

¹¹ <https://biblehub.com/greek/3337.htm>

¹² I'm borrowing this from John R.W. Stott, *The Message of Romans*, (InterVarsity Press, 1994), 73.

¹³ Psalm 19:1-2

¹⁴ <https://biblehub.com/greek/3474.htm>

denying what should be plainly obvious, turning your worship to created things rather than the Creator, the more you will lose the ability to even know what is good and true in the first place.

We see this playing out before us all the time. If you listen to a lie long enough you will come to believe the lie, in spite of the abundance of evidence pointing to the contrary. In our day social media uses algorithms to keep putting falsehoods or half-truths in front of people with such repetition that people can be made to believe almost anything. Think of all the conspiracy theories that even very smart people believe these days, including some who actually still believe that the earth is flat! But algorithms are only doing more effectively what has been happening all along. Simple example. We should all know by the abundance of evidence available to us that material wealth does not translate into deep and lasting joy. The lives of so many very dissatisfied rich people alone should tell us this. Also, sociologists tell us this with hard data.¹⁵ And yet we live immersed in a culture that keeps insisting that wealth is the key to satisfaction in life, and so most people, because they have heard the lie over and over and over again, swallow it whole and ultimately lose the ability to detect a lie that should be so easy to detect.

The result of darkened and foolish hearts which have lost the ability to see truth and goodness leads to the second result of our failure to see what should be obvious, which is that such people begin to violate the created order of God's world. Paul talks here about not only the worship of idols, but of sexual immorality of all kinds. These verses, especially verses 26-27 which speak of women having sexual relations with women, and men with men, are very controversial verses. In fact, people often lift these verses out of their context when they want to make a case for or against homosexuality. Either to your relief or dismay, I'm not going to dive too deeply into that conversation today, partly because in our day it's a very complex and nuanced conversation which requires more time than

we have today, but mostly because that's not the emphasis of this passage.

Let me show you what I mean. Have you ever read this passage and wondered why Paul, when he gets to the point of detailing the human sin that results from our rejection of the obvious truth, doesn't give us something like the Ten Commandments? He does give a longer list of vices in the following verses, but he spends most of his time talking about idol worship and sex. I so appreciate the insight given here by New Testament scholar, N.T. Wright, who points out that Paul doesn't list the Ten Commandments or other parts of God's explicit law in the Old Testament because that would be showing how humanity has violated laws which were given at a very specific time of history to a very specific group of people, Israel. No, Paul wants to go more basic than that. In his words, "[Paul] wants to trace the way in which humans have violated, not simply a 'law' given at some point in human history, but the very structure of the created order itself."¹⁶

Think of how the Bible describes the world God set up in Genesis 1-2. As I said earlier, humanity was created in the image of God, to both reflect God's glory, and to turn to him, and him alone, to find what we most need in life. That's a central part of God's created order. And yet we have, all of us, deliberately failed to do so. In Genesis we are told that humanity was created to "fill the earth and subdue it," ruling over what God has created on his behalf.¹⁷ Also a part of God's created order. But what have we done instead? Instead of ruling over creation, we have *worshipped* creation! Finally, in the creation accounts God gives sex and marriage as beautiful gifts to Adam and Eve for the full expression of human love, the birth and nurture of children, the well-being of society, and the ordering of family life.¹⁸ Once again, this was all ordered at the very beginning. And yet, when we opt for godlessness over God-centeredness in our lives, these beautiful gifts of sexuality and marriage, and their enjoyment according to the terms God has established, will always

¹⁵ In his brilliant book, *The Paradox of Choice*, sociologist Barry Schwartz reflects on studies that have tried to measure human happiness: "One of the things these surveys tell us is that, not surprisingly, people in rich countries are happier than people in poor countries. Obviously, money matters. But what these surveys also reveal is that money doesn't matter as much as you might think. Once a society's level of per capita wealth crosses a threshold from poverty to adequate subsistence, further increases in national wealth have almost no effect on happiness." (Harper, 2004), 106

¹⁶ N.T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone: Romans, Part 1* (Westminster John Knox, 2004), 21.

¹⁷ "God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.'" – Genesis 1:28

¹⁸ I'm borrowing words from our liturgy for weddings in *The Book of Common Worship*, what we call the Charge to the Congregation. It reminds those gathered about God's purpose for marriage. Here is the full text:

We have gathered in the presence of God to give thanks for the gift of marriage, to witness the joining together of this man and this woman, to surround them with our prayers, and to ask God's blessing upon them, so that they may be strengthened for their life together, and nurtured in their love for God.

God gave us marriage for the full expression of the love between a man and woman. In marriage a woman and a man belong to each other, and with affection and tenderness freely give themselves to each other.

God gave us marriage for the well-being of society, for the ordering of family life, and for the birth and nurture of children. God gave us marriage as a holy mystery in which a man and a woman are joined together, and become one, just as Christ is one with the church.

In marriage, husband and wife are called to a new way of life, created, ordered, and blessed by God. This way of life must not be entered into carelessly, or from selfish motives, but responsibly, and prayerfully. We rejoice that marriage is given by God, blessed by our Lord Jesus Christ, and sustained by the Holy Spirit. Therefore, let marriage be held in honor among all.

be corrupted. In all of this, in our rejection of the very structure of God's created order, we lose the very ability to be human.

Let me point out that so often these verses about sexuality are used to talk about "them," others instead of ourselves. I'd suggest we should first hold ourselves up to this mirror, even to Paul's teaching here on sexuality. Later on in Romans Paul writes that human sin left not only humanity, but *all of creation* in "bondage to decay."¹⁹ If *all of creation* is in a bondage to decay, doesn't that include sexuality, marriage, and gender, and not just these things in some of us, but these things in *all of us*. Have you handled God's beautiful gift of sexuality well in your life? Jesus himself answered the question for you in the Sermon on the Mount when he declared that if you have even looked at another person other than your spouse with sexual lust in your heart, viewed them as an object to be consumed rather than a sacred person made in God's image with inherent dignity, than you have committed adultery, no different than the person who cheats on his wife.²⁰

You see, these verses aren't about "them," whoever "they" are. The bad news for me is that they are about me. You'll have to decide whether they are bad news for you as well, but Paul wants to help you make your decision by listing in the last section no fewer than 21 vices, from greed to gossip to failing to show mercy. In doing so he is saying that the person who concludes that at the end of the day he or she is really, at the core of who they are, a pretty good person, even by the standards of heaven, has failed to do this, to hold up their lives honestly to scripture.

Remember that when Paul writes his second letter to Timothy he famously declares that the purpose of scripture, which is from God, is to be **"useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness."**²¹ God's Word is like a spiritual MRI which reveals the truth about what is inside us, truth which has become suppressed by us. Read the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7, Jesus' essential teaching on what a life looks like when somebody trusts and follows him, and see how you come out looking according to his standards. Or reflect on what Jesus

says are the two greatest commandments which sum up everything God wants from us in this life, to love him with all of ourselves in every aspect and every moment, and to love every other person as we love ourselves.²² How are you doing by those standards? I know how I'm doing. You'll have to answer that question for yourself.

Whether you agree with Paul's assessment of yourself or not, he declare that the third result of all this is death. He says plainly in verse 32 that **"those who do such things deserve death."** Sound harsh? Maybe so. But let's be clear that what Paul says here is no different than what Jesus himself said over and over again. In Matthew 5 Jesus says that those who persist in unrighteous anger towards others will be **"in danger of the fire of hell."**²³ In Matthew 13 Jesus says that at the end of time God's angels will throw everyone who causes sin and does evil **"into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."**²⁴ In Matthew 7 he warns that there is a crowded road in this world that **"leads to destruction, and many enter through it."**²⁵ In Luke 13:3 he warns, **"Unless you repent, you too will all perish."** His words, not mine. And I could give you many more examples.²⁶ Take issue with Paul if you like, but just know that in doing so you take issue with Jesus as well.

All this leads to the fourth result of all this, which is, as Paul puts it several times in this passage, that God "gives us all over" to these things. That phrase used in verses 24, 26 and 28 literally means "surrendered." It's as if God says to us, "Okay, if that's what you want, that's what you get."²⁷ Think of a parent – and some of us here can relate all too well – of a grown child who persists in self-destructive choices and behavior. It's one thing when your kid is 6 years old. But when he's 26 years old, there may come a point when it does no good to try and exert control, and you have to just let him go his way. You love him, but you hate what he is doing to himself, which is a good description of wrath.

There will come a day, at the end of days, when God's wrath comes all at once like a thunderbolt.²⁸ Scripture is clear about that. In the meantime, God's wrath looks more like God letting us go our own way, his anger

¹⁹ "For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God." – Romans 8:19-22. See Psalm 102:25-26 for an Old Testament affirmation of this truth.

²⁰ "But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart." –Matthew 5:28

²¹ "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." –2nd Timothy 3:16-17 John Calvin once wrote, "Thus the Law is a kind of mirror. As in a

mirror we discover any stains upon our face, so in the Law we behold, first, our impotence; then, in consequence of it, our iniquity; and, finally, the curse, as the consequence of both."

²² See Matthew 22:34-40

²³ Matthew 5:22

²⁴ Matthew 13:41-42

²⁵ Matthew 7:13-14

²⁶ See Mark 9:43-48, all of Matthew 25, Matthew 7:15-27, and others.

²⁷ This is the way the phrase is paraphrased in Eugene Peterson's *The Message*.

²⁸ Read Matthew 24

towards the sin he sees in those he loves going “quietly and invisibly”²⁹ to work in handing such sinners over to themselves, not by intervening but by *not* intervening, surrendering us to our stubborn commitment to godlessness.

Many people these days, even in the church, reject the idea of hell, refusing to believe that God is a God who throws people into eternal suffering even as they cry for mercy on the way down. It’s good that they refuse to believe this because that’s not how the Bible describes hell. Think carefully with me here. God is the source of all that is good, all life and joy and peace. I hope you believe that. If we choose godlessness, which is again the rejection of God, that means we chose to be cut off not only from God, but from life itself. Hell then is just the natural and eventual outcome of one who persists in godlessness, a freely-chosen identity apart from God and his life on a trajectory on into infinity.³⁰ C.S. Lewis called hell God’s great monument to human freedom. He wrote, “It’s not a question of God ‘sending us’ to hell. In each of us there is something growing, which will BE hell unless it is nipped in the bud.”³¹ Dallas Willard adds, “Hell isn’t an ‘oops’ or a slip. One does not miss heaven by a hair, but by a constant effort to avoid and escape God.”³² We insist on rejecting God and God in the end gives us what we want, which is hell.

Let me stop there. That’s a lot of bad news, probably enough bad news for one sitting. The wrath of God is coming against the godlessness of us all. We’ve made a terribly unwise exchange, the worship of creation instead of the worship of our Creator. We should know better. As a result, our hearts have become darkened, we’ve lost our humanity as we have violated the created order, and we deserve eternal death because of it. Tragically, we don’t just deserve hell, we actually choose hell!

This is the essential bad news, essential because if we are ever going to hear the good news we must not just hear, but come to believe the bad news is true. If there’s a life-saving cure for the cancer that fatally has infected your body, you’re never going to receive that good news of that cure until and unless you first come to see that your doomed without it.

Remember that when Jesus was here one of the reasons people hated him enough to kill him was because he hung around and made friends with godless people, the

kind of people God would never even associate with. Do you remember how he responded to this criticism? In Mark 2:17 he said, **“It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”** What he meant, of course, was that he didn’t come for the sick who believe they are healthy, but for the sick who know they are sick. So it begs the question: which are you? Are you the healthy or the sick, an overall pretty good person or a no-good sinner God has no business associating with because you have no desire to associate with him? The bad news is that you are sick. The good news, of course, is that Jesus came to heal you.

Paul doesn’t explicitly get to the good news in this passage, though he is headed there fast. At the risk of jumping ahead, and because I’m someone who wants to always end with good news, let me remind you that Jesus did come. And when he came he did what the rest of us failed to do, which was to fulfill his calling as a human made in God’s image, living life, all of life, to the absolute glory of God. And yet, at the end of his life, instead of receiving his well-deserved reward, his Father gave him up – he gave himself up! – instead to be the recipient of wrath, wrath intended for us, but instead poured out in all its fullness on him. The wonder of the cross is that at the very same time the love of God for us *and* the wrath of God towards us, were fully poured out.³³

Tim Keller summarizes all this beautifully when he writes, “The gospel is this: We are more sinful and flawed in ourselves than we ever dared believe, yet at the very same time we are more loved and accepted in Jesus Christ than we ever dared hope.”³⁴ If we lose the bad news, we lose the good news. We will get to the good news. Let’s make sure we first hear and accept the essential bad news, for it makes the good news all the better!

Amen.

✠ ✠ ✠ ✠ ✠ ✠ ✠

The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. When given the option, what do you like to hear first, good news or bad news? Why?

seriously and constantly desires joy will ever miss it. Those who seek find. Those who knock it is opened.”

²⁹ I’m borrowing again from John Stott, 75.

³⁰ I’m indebted here to Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God*, and his chapter entitled “How Can a Loving God Send People to Hell?”

³¹ Cited by Keller, 79. Lewis also famously said, “There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, ‘Thy will be done,’ and those to whom God says, in the end, ‘Thy will be done.’ All that are in Hell, choose it. Without that self-choice there could be no Hell. No soul that

³² Source unknown

³³ I’m paraphrasing something Tim Keller has said often.

³⁴ Timothy Keller, *The Prodigal God* (Riverhead Books, 2008).

2. Read the passage from Romans 1:18-32 again. There is a lot here. What stands out to you? How might you summarize Paul's message in this section of the letter?
3. Paul begins his extended presentation of the Christian gospel by saying, "The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness..." Why begin here? And what exactly is the wrath of God?
4. Though he never uses the word, Paul talks a lot here about idols. What are idols according to Paul's teaching here? What is an idol you have been tempted to worship in your life?
5. Is Paul right, are we without excuse? Should we be able to know about God simply by looking at the natural world around us? And if that's true, why doesn't everybody know about God?
6. Is hell a reality? Use the scriptures to support your answer either way. If it is a reality, is it right to say that God doesn't so much cast people into hell as he gives people up to go to hell if that is their choice to do so?
7. Is this passage about you? If so, which parts are about you? If not, which parts are not about you?
8. What is your response to the quote from Tim Keller that Jeff ended with: "The gospel [i.e. good news!] is this: We are more sinful and flawed in ourselves than we ever dared believe, yet at the very same time we are more loved and accepted in Jesus Christ than we ever dared hope." Is he right on both counts?

Table to Table: A Question for kids and adults to answer together.



Talk together about the first part of our worship service. What does the Call to Worship mean? Why do we sing songs? Why do we confess our sin every week? What are the Declaration of Forgiveness and the Passing of the Peace?