

## WHAT'S GOING ON HERE!?

Romans 1:18-23

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I don't know how many of you read our local newspaper, but I thought it would be interesting to track its headlines for the past week to illustrate why what the Bible has to say is so pertinent to our present-day lives. I have chosen just one headline from each paper that was published for the week beginning on Wednesday, April 26, 2017. Here are the five front page articles.

Wednesday, April 26: "Hearts with a Mission apologizes. Youth shelter says turning down proceeds from gay chorus was a mistake."

Thursday, April 27: "Cannabis crackdown? County asking voters about marijuana grow ban in rural residential areas."

Friday, April 28: "Trump warns of major, major conflict with North Korea."

Weekend, April 30: Trump at 100 days: Hits, misses, and unfinished business." Or, "County's Republican Party: No, no, and no on taxes. But some former leaders disagree with that stance."

Tuesday, May 1: "Portland May Day march turns into fiery riot."

As you hear those headlines, what goes through your mind? Are you wondering, "What is going on? How is it that a Christian organization is forced to apologize for not receiving funds from a gay chorus, which by its statements is totally against everything Hearts with a Mission stands for?"

Or, "How is it that we have been so casual in legalizing marijuana when we know it has such little oversight or control and it will only lead to the breakdown of society?"

For sure, if your grandparents or great-grandparents were suddenly resurrected after having been gone from the scene for many years and were reading the headlines with you, they would be shaking their heads, wondering, "What In the world has happened to our country?" They might even join you in asking,

“How did we get here?”

This morning’s passage of Scripture will give us a great deal of insight into the answer. If you haven’t already, I invite you to open your Bibles to **Romans 1:18**. While you are turning there, for the sake of those who may be guests and were not with us last week, allow me to bring you up to date as to what we are about to look at.

As we step back into our study of **Romans 1**, beginning at **verse 18**, I remind you that we are looking at the second half of a contrast between two revealed plans of God. In **verse 17**, Paul points to the revealed plan of the righteousness of God. This plan is good news. It tells us that out of His love for the lost and fallen human race, God has provided a way through the Gospel to redeem fallen humanity. It is God’s only plan to save and reconcile sinners to God.

In our passage for this morning, we return to God’s second revealed plan. This plan doesn’t sound like something we want any part of, but we do have a choice as to whether we want to accept God’s first plan or this second plan. Last time we were introduced to God’s second plan, which manifests His wrath against all humanity that rejects His first plan.

Let’s begin our study of this passage by reading once more the whole paragraph that explains God’s second plan, a plan of wrath, **Romans 1:18-23**.

**<sup>18</sup>For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, <sup>19</sup>because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. <sup>20</sup>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 [all of humanity] are without**

excuse. <sup>21</sup>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. <sup>22</sup>Professing to be wise, they became fools, <sup>23</sup>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.

Last time, we recognized that God's wrath is a very real attribute of God. It is equal in significance to all of God's other attributes, including the love of God. The tense of the verb "**revealed**" describes an ongoing, continuous revealing of God's wrath, something that is unmistakable to the human senses. It is a wrath that has been revealed down through the ages and continues to be revealed today. Later in the chapter, Paul will demonstrate how God's wrath has and is being revealed today.

One thing we covered last time was a definition of God's wrath. We said it is His necessary, just, and righteous retribution against sin. When Jesus came to die for our sins, He came because He loved us and wanted a relationship with us. But He also came knowing the righteousness of God could not overlook sin. Sin must be judged and paid for. Hence, His cross demonstrates the balance of the love of God with the reality of His wrath.

In the rest of **verses 18-23**, Paul points to two things that we humans are guilty of doing that have rightfully brought about God's wrath toward all of us.

The first is mentioned at the end of **verse 18** and is further explained in **verses 19-20**. Paul says that we are guilty of "**suppressing the truth**" about God in unrighteous behavior. Suppression of truth is not something that is passive or even accidental but deliberate on our parts. To "**suppress**" something is to stifle, hinder, incarcerate, hold down, or bury. The term suggests a deliberate, aggressive, and continual holding down of what we instinctively know as truth about God and how He has called us to live. We are all guilty of this. We

deliberately deny the truth, we ignore it, we water it down, and we turn our backs on it. Only when we are saved, and because God begins working on our hearts to transform our thinking, do we even begin to stop suppressing the truth. Christians are quite capable of suppressing the truth about God by giving an inaccurate picture of who God is by our very lifestyle as well as our words.

As part of fallen humanity we are in the constant process of holding down the truth about God, and if one does not know Christ, then that person is subject to God's wrath. If the person suppressing the truth about God is a Christian who is denying God's Word or is knowingly living in a manner contrary to the truth of God, that Christian will experience God's loving discipline. Later in the chapter, Paul will illustrate how humans have done this throughout history and are still doing it today.

Paul further explains the birth and growth of this “**suppression of truth**” with his use of two terms, “**ungodliness**” and “**unrighteousness**.”

What is “**ungodliness**?” At its root, ungodliness begins with an attitude of the heart that results in an action. To define it, ungodliness is an attitude of living as though God does not exist. It is a total disregard for God. It is what we mean by a secular point of view. It is an attitude that doesn't expect God to be active. In its maturity, it will boldly pronounce that “God is dead” or that “God never existed.”

“**Unrighteousness**,” on the other hand, is a selfish action against others and creation that grows out of an attitude of ungodliness. These selfish actions manifest themselves in hurtful acts toward others and unnecessary or unwarranted destruction of God's creation.

Notice the order in which Paul mentions these two terms, “**ungodliness**” and “**unrighteousness**.” It is purposeful on Paul's part. He is showing us that ungodliness gives birth to unrighteousness. The order is never reversed in scripture. It reflects the principle that how we treat others reveals what kind of vertical relationship we have with God. In contrast to this, as we will see when we get to **Romans 15**, godliness gives birth to true love shown to others.

There is a principle of life that needs to be recognized if we want to be a part

of positive change in our world: Since ungodliness begins in the heart of an individual, until the heart is changed, unrighteous acts toward others will not change. If I want to be a godly positive force in the world, then I need Jesus to continue His work of transforming my heart, so that I don't continue with unrighteous hurtful acts toward others. In addition, if I want to be a godly force in the world, I must be intentional and courageous in sharing Jesus with others.

Here's a practical case in point as it concerns this principle: I'm not against rising up and voting for moral laws, but let's be Biblically clear in our thinking. Making new laws prohibiting anything immoral will not stop immorality until the heart is changed. Likewise, producing more educational programs focused on changing people's thinking on ethics or morality will never change people's unrighteous behavior, unless the heart is changed. The only thing that can permanently change the heart of a person so that they will perform more righteous acts toward others rather than continuous unrighteous acts is the gospel, for it is the only **“power of God unto salvation.”**

So, just because your local public school initiates a new ethics or morality program that you agree with, I caution you about getting too excited or hopeful about its producing successful, long-lasting results. It will produce nothing that will be of eternal significance to that student or teacher until the student's or teacher's heart is changed.

Likewise, even if the government reversed the laws on abortion, nothing will change in the realm of moral action in this country until the heart of the country is changed. And the heart of the country can only be changed by the gospel's transforming the heart of one person at a time.

The historic proof of this is the history of Israel. The nation was birthed with clearly drawn out moral, civil, and ceremonial laws that were not complicated or hard to understand. God was very clear in His expression of the Law. But almost overnight, following God's presentation of His Law to Israel, ungodliness expressed itself in Israel.

Although I definitely vote on moral issues, this is the reason I don't get excited either way when moral legislation passes or fails. What must be changed is the heart of a person. And that is why Jesus came. He came,

willingly died, resurrected Himself, and ascended into heaven in order to give us a new heart that we might be born again, and to begin His transforming work in our hearts that we might live now and forevermore in a right relationship with God.

In **verse 19**, Paul answers a question he knows is going to be raised in someone's mind. The question is, "Is it possible that someone somewhere does not know the truth about God and therefore would be innocent of suppressing the truth? The answer is no. Paul tells us that the truth about God is "**evident**" to everyone ever born.

This term "**evident**" means something that is not secret or covert, but obvious to all. Furthermore, it is something that God has put within each person, within their conscience, and it is something that they cannot miss through deductive reasoning.

How has God made it evident to them? According to **verse 20**, He has made the truth about Him known through what they see throughout creation. Paul does not mean that every truth about God can be learned by observing the forest. He means that as we look around us, we see the evidence of a Creator. We see order in creation, not chaos. We see different human systems interacting with one another in a marvelous way in the human body.

The truth is that the evidence of God is so obvious, that those who suppress the truth must make it a concerted act of their will to deny the truth about God, which is evident all around them. They must work hard at denying that it is through His power that this world has been created and is still maintained. According to **verse 20**, Paul says that the truth about God is so obvious that no person is without excuse for not knowing God or is innocent of suppressing the truth about God.

Here's a question for you: According to our text, what is worse, an agnostic who says there isn't enough evidence to prove the existence of God, or an atheist who denies belief in God? An agnostic is worse than an atheist, because the agnostic doesn't just deny belief in God; he blames God for not making clear His existence. He claims that God is a liar. God says that He has revealed himself, but the agnostic denies it.

Our text says that God has made knowledge of Him so evident, so clear to all humans, that we are without excuse for suppressing the truth about God. No one will be able to avoid damnation by claiming, “If I only knew, I was ignorant, I had no idea, or I had no way of knowing who You were.” Hence on the last day, their defense for suppressing the truth, that the teacher, God, didn’t teach His students the truth, will be rejected. God has made sure that the truth about Him is clearly seen in His creation.

So, the suppression of the truth about God is one human action that incites God’s wrath. In **verses 21-23**, Paul gives us a second cause for stirring up the wrath of God. Without Christ, we have not only suppressed the truth, but the very truth we know about God we have deliberately perverted. Let’s reread these three verses. They say:

**For even though they know God, they did not honor Him as God, or give thanks; [notice the admission of knowing God, but still dishonoring Him] but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, 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.**

All humans know there is a supreme power or supreme being. But instead of worshipping Him for Who He is, we choose to pervert the truth about God by reducing Him to our own human or animal level through idolatry.

Another way that we dishonor God or pervert the truth about Him is rather than speak of God as the origin or creator of all things, we hear people use some sort of euphemism to refer to Him or His workings. They use such terms as nature, fate, karma, the force, destiny, the big bang, and so on. If there is any way they can avoid recognizing and honoring God for who He is or giving Him credit for what He has done, they will.

As a result of this behavior, their views on life are “**futile**,” vain, unstable, and non-productive. Their clever ideas, procedures, programs, and governmental legislation to save our society (things like rehabilitation programs in prisons or stopping starvation programs) fall apart and in the end come to nothing.

When Paul writes that their “**hearts have become darkened**,” it is just another way of saying they have been deceived by Satan. Their “**hearts**,” mental faculties, and abilities to reason or use moral judgement has suffered. For example, humanism, the central philosophy of our schools and society, teaches that man is above all else, that he alone is the center of meaning and life.

Although those who pervert the truth think themselves as wise and open minded, Paul tells us they are “**fools**.” To label them as such is not a simple disparaging comment like calling someone a jerk, but it is a moral condemnation of another. To say someone is a fool is to say that their mind has been so darkened that they have been damned to hell. That is why Jesus cautions us not to call people fools. If you don’t recall His instruction, He says in **Matthew 5:22**:

**But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever says to his brother, “You good-for-nothing,” shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever says, “You fool,” shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell.**

Notice there is a downward progression of serious judgment. The first two acts are guilty in a human court. But to call someone a “**fool**” is worthy of being damned oneself, because to say that about someone is to usurp God’s role as the final judge over the human race as to who enters heaven or hell. We are challenged by Jesus to evaluate ourselves and others, but never to act as the judge who condemns others to eternal damnation.

As we read those verses, did you notice the three downward spiraling steps involved in our perverting the truth? There is one in each verse.

In **verse 21**, mankind is guilty of ignoring God. We simply refuse to glorify God or give Him thanks. People apart from Christ will do all they can to push God away rather than to worship Him. This is the reason behind our fellow citizens proposing political legislation to ban public prayer or to prevent Christmas carols being sung in public school or to prohibit the putting up of nativity scenes in public places.

This leads to **verse 22** and the second downward step in perverting the truth. People apart from those in Christ pridefully profess themselves to be wise. They don't think they need God to get along. They have all the answers. They know what's best for them.

- “Marriage is a trap. Have multiple sexual partners.”
- “Who needs to wait or save sex until one is married.”
- “Marriage is all about true love; it matters not whether you are married to the same sex or not. It's love that counts.”
- “There's no such thing as true gender sexuality. You are the gender you think you are, not what you physically are.”

But in the end, what is God's assessment of these ideas and these people? They have become fools. The bottom line is, Paul is telling us that our perversion of the truth is not a matter of ignorance but a matter of arrogance.

The final turn in the downward spiral of perversion is the devolution of humans. We see it in **verse 23**. We go from perverting the truth that only God is to be worshipped to worshipping corruptible humans, and then to worshipping birds in the air, four-footed animals on the ground, and finally crawling creatures like snakes, as the snake in the Garden of Eden. In the perversion of the truth that we were created in the image of God, the wise persons of this world have lowered our level of worth to that of a crawling creature. Rather than worshipping God, we have become idolaters. The perversion of humans has led to worshipping the creation rather than the Creator.

To get the sense of the foolishness of this all and the reason for God's wrath, try to put yourself in the Almighty, Holy, Creator God's place for a moment. You have created people out of love and made them different from all other

creatures in heaven and earth. You have created them in your image. You have made them higher and more glorious than the angels. You have given them the unique privilege to have a personal and intimate relationship with you different than any relationship God has with the angels.

Then they ignore you, blatantly disobey you, and give glory to the sun, moon and the stars. Because of their rebellion and sin, you decide, for what reason I will never know, to rescue your relationship with them. You send your Son to die for their stupidity and rebellion, and they still ignore you rather than worship you. They deliberately suppress and pervert the truth about you and the righteousness of God and your plan of redemption, the Gospel.

How would you feel? Would you be angry? Sure you would! Want proof? How do you who have been parents and grandparents or spiritual mentors to other Christians respond when those you care about reject you, disobey you, and disrespect all that you have done for them? You are righteously angry! So, if you were God and your creation, which you don't need to be happy or fulfilled, rejects you. What would you do? But God, who is all knowing and knew this would happen, chose to set in place a plan to rescue His rebellious creatures. He gave them a chance to be forgiven and reconciled to God, to be affectionately embraced by the heavenly Father. Or, they can choose to experience the eternal wrath and rejection of God.

When we come back to our study of **Romans** in a few weeks, we will see more specifically what God's wrath does. But for now, let's understand that God loves us and still wants us to have a relationship with Him.

Recently, someone said that most Christians honor their bodies more than God. We make sure that we get up early enough in the morning to shower, but not to meet alone with Him. We love our technology more than God. We are so willing to watch TV, search the net for news, read emails, or check for text messages, but how often do we make time to sit quietly with our Bible and listen to God, sing to Him, and tell Him how much we adore Him and are grateful for what He has done?

It is important to Him that those of us who have entrusted our lives to Jesus worship Him in complete truth. To live in the light of Who He is and what He has done and how He has created and called us to live. That alone is

incredible, considering what we have done to Him. He is under no obligation to save one man or woman or child that has been created and rejected Him. He would still be totally loving and just if He smoked the entire human race, because we are the ones who have turned our backs on Him. Are we who have accepted His plan of redemption by putting our confidence in Jesus' finished work on the cross on our behalf blessed or what! Are we living as such?

How can we as believers expect to effectively call our world to worship and follow Jesus Christ if we don't do it ourselves on a daily basis?

My friends, have we been deceived into believing that daily ongoing personal worship is not important to God or something we need? Then it's best that we confess that we have been wrong, and that we have been party to suppressing and perverting the truth. It would be honoring to the Lord to change the way we think about Him and how we invest our time in daily devotion to Him. So, for those of us who claim to be loved by God, let's make time daily to adore Jesus.

Secondly, as a believer who has been forgiven by Jesus and granted a second chance and a guarantee to miss the wrath of God, do you think of those who right now are positioned to experience God's wrath? Do you take seriously their eternal destiny? If so, then do something different this week that demonstrates that. Be intentional about presenting the good news of Jesus to others. Make a list of your neighbors, co-workers, classmates, and teammates who don't know Jesus. Pray for an opportunity to tell them how much He means to you and why. Ask the Lord for the courage to reach out to a friend and invite them to church and lunch afterwards.

Prayer: We renounce the lie that we can live apart from making worship of you the primary act of our lives. We don't want to suppress the truth with an unthankful heart, so help us to live worshipfully and intentionally, bringing glory to You.

