

Life and Blessing, or Death and Cursing

Romans 1:16–32 | Part 4 of 4 in the Series *God Is Good*

Today we conclude the four-part series on human sexuality which we have done under the banner, *God is Good*. Romans 1 is a very weighty and sober passage that contains both the bad news of God's wrath, and the good news of salvation in Jesus. My goal is to help us see that his holiness requires that we submit to the goodness of God laid out in his design. If you are listening to this, after the fact, I encourage you to listen to the first three sermons in sequence, then follow up with this one. It's not necessary, but helpful in grasping the big picture. We do not have time to fully exegete this passage; that would take far more than one sermon. However, Pastor Steve is going to begin a comprehensive study of Romans in October, and he will take this apart at that time. I encourage you to be in Sunday School if you are out of high school. Now, let's ask for help. **PRAY** — God, Open our ears. Be Thou my wisdom. Transform our thinking.

Romans 1:16–32 — 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. ¹⁷ For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith.”

¹⁸ For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. ¹⁹ 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. ²¹ 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.

²⁴ Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring 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 forever! Amen.

²⁶ For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. 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, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error.

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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. ²⁹ They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, ³⁰ slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, ³¹ foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. ³² Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.

PRAY — Thank you for your word. Holy Spirit, please teach us what we do not know, and shape us into the image of Christ. For his eternal glory and praise.

In the first three sermons of this short series we observed God's goodness revealed in his work of creation, his word that governs creations, and his ways that reveal his plan and intent in creation. What he does, what he says, and what he purposes are the paths in which we experience life, blessing, and human flourishing. Goodness is an **attribute** of God — an attribute that, by and large, is not controversial. But the fundamental nature of God is that he is holy. He is without sin, even the shadow of sin, and in his moral perfection he is unchanging. He is, in and of himself, the standard of what is right and moral. This is suddenly extremely controversial and offensive to sinners who demand that **they** be deemed to be the standard of what is right and good,.

His holiness is the fount from which flow all his attributes, including goodness, righteousness, justice — and **wrath**, his wrath. Departure from his goodness is at the root departure from his holiness. It therefore demands punishment. Departure from his work, his word, and his ways are all offenses to his holiness, which is the unchanging perfect standard of what is right and good. Holy God will not allow us to act contrary to holiness forever. This is part and parcel of the Gospel. We must know his holiness to understand his wrath. We must know his wrath to understand and embrace his Gospel.

Our passage begins with the Gospel in v 16. I am going to end with the gospel, and begin with this issue of God's wrath when we rebel against his design. As I've already said, this is a 30,000 ft overview, so I encourage you to have your Bible open to see the entire passage at a glance.

Beginning then in **v 18**, note the reason God is revealing his wrath:

God reveals his wrath against the ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the **truth** by their unrighteousness. **Truth** deals with objective reality. Since God is the one who spoke all

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things into being, holds all things together, and ordains whatever comes to pass, let's use a working definition that **truth is what God created, what he says, and what he intends**. In other words, his work, word, and ways — these things define truth. Though I may not agree with these, it is I who must change to live in truth because his work, word, and ways are unchanging.

His wrath is revealed when people suppress the truth of his good work. Vv 19–20 indicate that what has been made, all of creation, reveals his *invisible attributes*, which we *clearly perceive*. That's an oxymoron, isn't it? It is invisible, yet we clearly perceive it. God revealed his power, authority, and his holy nature in what he made. We know that **God is** because **creation is**; nothing comes from nothing. We know this. Creation has no power to exist by itself. The second law of thermodynamics observes that everything is in decay — apart from intervention things get worse in the world, not better. There must be someone who does not decay— someone that has the power of being in himself. God exists; he is eternal, and this is necessary for there to be anything.

The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. We **see** that he is, we **know** that he is, but we **reject** that he is. V 21 says, they know God is, but rebel, refusing to worship him as he is worthy of. Rebellion against God is not an intellectual problem; it is a moral problem. It is rooted in my personal rebellion against the rule and reign of holy God.

It's not that I can't believe, but that I won't believe. Atheism and unbelief are choices to reject the knowledge of God. When we reject the knowledge of God, we reject truth. We lose the standard of truth which leaves us in a state of moral insanity — we lose capacity to discern moral goodness. That is what the Apostle is getting at the end of v 21 — their foolish hearts were darkened. That is a moral judgment that God makes against them personally. Foolish hearts refers to the lust for sinful things. The term “darkened” means they now lack capacity to see or discern truth and goodness. Because of their personal expressions of rebellion against good and holy God, rebels descend into personal destruction and death as they reject His goodness, life, and blessing.

Walking through what we've seen:

Personal rebellion (v 21b) produces intellectual denial (vv 19 & 21a), leading to moral insanity (v 21c), descending into personal destruction and death (v 23 ff).

Personal destruction and death is catalogued as we move into v 23 and following.

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- They exchange the glory of the immortal God... The glory of the *immortal* God, in whom is life. We are destroyed when we exchange God for what does not have life. That's death. God is the only source of life. When we reject him, we depart to death.

God gives them over to a darkening descent into destruction.

- v 24 — Their hearts desire what is impure. How many of you would drink a bottle of water that I handed to you if you knew it to be impure? What if you saw me fill it from a toilet? Would you drink it? You would only drink it if you somehow denied the truth of what your eyes saw, what you knew when I poured sewage in it. So it is with those who have suppressed God's truth.
- They dishonor their bodies. God's good design for our sexuality is good and honorable as we embrace male and female and contain sexual expression in marriage as he ordained it. Rejecting his truth and goodness physically dishonors our sexuality, and, since our sexuality is rooted in our bodies, it dishonors them.
- v 26 — They are given over to dishonorable passions. When we saw Eve given to Adam, we saw his good and honorable desire, his passion, for the woman God gave him. Physical desire is given by God and is honorable when contained within God's institution of marriage. Desire engaged apart from marriage is departure from what is honorable to what is dishonorable. So now we have both a physical and *affectional* dishonoring that is contrary to nature — contrary to God's good design for life and blessing. This dishonoring of the body and these dishonorable passions naturally end ultimately in homosexuality, which is 180° away from God's good design.
- V 27 — Sexual deviancy is itself a judgment God gives them to, but also produces further judgment. They receive in their bodies the due penalty for their error. Sexual expression as God created and defined it produces life and human flourishing. God's command for multiplication is fulfilled. Physical acts contrary to the natural design of the body not only don't produce flourishing, but don't produce life at all. Brokenness emotionally, and dysfunction physically are part of the personal descent into destruction.
- v 28 — ultimately, God's judgment gives them over to a debased mind. That is, they are not only incapable of understanding and pursuing what is good, they perceive that what brings death is actually good for them. Rather than rejecting the bottle of impure water, they grab it and chug it down, proclaiming how good it tastes and how much better it will help them to live. They have developed a taste for death.

This is a dreadful place. Is it any wonder the wrath of holy God is revealed against those who personally reject him? Wrath is his holiness punishing unholiness. It is not that God is throwing a

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tirade. It is his settled, inevitable response to sin. Without wrath, he would cease to be holy because holiness demands what is not Holy be ended. While we may find some measure of relief if we are not given over to the wickedness these sexual sins. But they are not the only unrighteous deeds against which God pours out wrath. All manner of unrighteousness heaps up wrath. Covetousness, malice, envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness, gossip, slander, hatred of God, insolence, pride, disobedience to parents, foolishness, faithlessness, heartlessness, and ruthlessness are all acts of personal rebellion against holy God. All have sinned. No one is righteous; no not one. His wrath is revealed against sinners. The reality of his wrath presently directed at rebels is my greatest problem as long as I remain in rebellion. I cannot withstand his holy wrath. I need a Savior. Now hear what Jesus does: he delivers from the wrath to come. (1 Thessalonians 1:10)

Look with me at the Good News of our Good God in v 16 — **¹⁶For 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. ¹⁷For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith.”**

Wrath is revealed from God in heaven against unrighteousness. How will can I attain righteousness and be delivered from God’s wrath? Righteousness *is* the standard of moral perfection that is part and parcel of holiness. Being found righteous is the only hope I have of being delivered from wrath.

We know what righteousness is at least on some level. We know that there are things that are right and just, and there are things that are not. The striking thing is that righteousness not rooted in my internal opinion of what is right, or in my niceness; it outside of me. Righteousness is revealed from heaven; it inheres in holy God. I must know this. Righteousness is not sourced from me or my ideas. A clever person will immediately grasp, then, that I deserve righteous punishment.

If we were to stop there, we might imagine, “Oh my! Everything I’ve imagined to be right based on my internal standard is completely in question.” And since I have no righteous inherent in me, I’d better get really busy figuring out what I need to do obtain righteousness. Otherwise I’m condemned as unrighteousness. That thinking will lead to either hopeless despair — because I am morally bankrupt and clearly without remedy — or it will lead to a deadly insane pride that imagines I can fix my unrighteousness. The truth we’ve seen today is that I do not have the resources to gain it. Not the labors of my hand can fulfill the Law’s demand.

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Here at last is the good news: the state of being righteous, morally clean before God, is not and cannot be worked up internally. It comes through faith — faith in the beginning, faith in the end, faith in everything in between. Faith? Faith in what? Not what, but who! Faith in the one — now get this — who does have righteousness in and of himself: the righteous Savior from heaven who has come not only to pay the price of the magnitude of our unrighteousness sins, but to extend his inherent righteousness to those who look away from themselves to him, believing him, putting their faith in him who is both just and the justifier of those who believe in him.

This is the Gospel message — the Lord Jesus has come to save sinners from their sin, and this message is the power of God to save Sinners. The Gospel reveals that righteousness is not in my nature; it exposes my unrighteousness which merits wrath from God. But righteousness is found in work and merit of another. I can be counted as righteous.

That is stunning, but it also extremely offensive because I don't like to be told I'm unrighteousness. I want to continue to hold on to my internal standard of righteousness that is nonexistent and reject external standard of righteousness that is from God. I actually want God to adjust to me, not me to him. This is the age-old rebellion against God that demands he submit to me on my terms, rather than me submitting to him as Lord. When we find ourselves in the fight over who is the boss, we are at the very place of suppressing the truth. We are worshiping ourselves rather than the Creator. We are rejecting God's word, work, and ways, and we choose *not* life, blessing, but death, cursing, and futility under the wrath of God.

And so this forces me to a decision. I must render a verdict. Either eternal holy God is the standard of righteousness that determines and governs how I live, or I am. Either his holiness demands that unrighteousness be punished as an expression of his wrath, or it doesn't and there is no standard of right apart from what I feel at any given moment — therefore I am god. Either we must have a Savior to deliver from the wrath to come, or there is nothing wrong with me and my Sterling character has no tincture of wrong to worry me. This message forces me to declare either that God is who he has revealed himself to be, or he is a liar and I am the center of the universe.

Closing Application

The new morality is establishing itself has been in direct opposition to biblical truth. How will believers live as we sail into hostile waters? Christians must both acknowledge that God's word is objectively

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true and live as people who are accountable to truth. We cannot live with “secret convictions.” We cannot go along with the world in order to get along. We are accountable to live and proclaim God’s truth. This is going to become increasingly difficult, and it may do so very quickly.

1. We must not think this is something extraordinary. God’s people have always been beautifully different from the world. Embracing God’s truth will continue to make us appear very different from the world. Even a casual reading of the New Testament will demonstrate that this was the plan and reality for believers from the beginning of the church. We are not unique.

2. We must not consider those who are hostile to us as enemies. They are residents of the dominion of darkness, just as you were before Christ opened your eyes and delivered you. They are the mission. Satan is the enemy. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. ¹³ Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day... (Ephesians 6:12–13). God has not left us defenseless.

3. Embrace truth. We must remind ourselves that God’s word not only reveals truth to which we are accountable in this present age, but also reveals the truth of the age to come. God is a debtor to no one. He will eternally repay whatever is suffered as loss here. Jesus is the Victor. In the 1st Century, with all of its hostility towards Christ and his Gospel, Rome collapsed. The church not only endured, but thrived. The secular West, with all of its hostility toward Christ, and his gospel will collapse. His church will endure and thrive.

High King of heaven, my victory won;

May I reach heaven’s joys, O bright Heaven’s Son.

A subpoint here is we must individually live in the light of eternal truth. If there are areas of our lives where we have given ourselves to sinful actions and thoughts, we turn from those, thinking rightly about what God has designed, what he has said in his word, and what his plans are for our lives. Turning from any departure from truth is necessary, is possible, and is part of God’s grace. His loving desire for us is our life, blessing, and flourishing. That is realized as we repent and walk in obedience.

4. Embrace the Church. As the church was treated, hostilely in the first century, and people lost their livelihoods, and even their lives, it was the communion and fellowship of the church that stand itself in

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the midst of the worst of times. Acts 4: They constantly prayed together. They had all things in common. When one person was shunned from the Roman market place, all the brothers and sisters had all things in common. No one did without. We have considered that as a beautiful, historical anecdote. It may not be so anecdotal in the day so ahead. As the church cares for it's self, the watching world sees yet again, the undeniability, that Jesus is Lord in this: See how they love each other. Though our tongue to be cut out, the gospel will be preached as we remain true to God's word, and live out the fullness of his sacrificial love. Hard times coming? Yes, the beauty of the gospel revealed in greater ways? Oh yes, far greater ways than we have seen.

PRAY