

ROMANS

GOD'S RIGHTEOUSNESS REVEALED

CONDEMNED BY GOD

Text: Romans 1:28-32

Main preaching point: God is active, not arbitrary, in His wrath.

INTRODUCTION:

The Bible describes **the wrath of God** in three theologically distinct categories: *cataclysmic wrath*, *eschatological wrath*, and *abandonment wrath*. Cataclysmic wrath was seen at the flood or the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Eschatological (end time) wrath is what will happen at the end of the age during the seven-year Tribulation period, culminating with the Second Coming of Christ (*Rev.6-19*). Abandonment wrath is the divine, active judgment of God—a built-in penalty for sin—where God withdraws His hand, delivering sinners over to their sin and its consequences. When this judgment occurs, man has no hope of recovery apart from the extraordinary, divine, miraculous intervention of God.

Romans 1:18-3:20 is the opening section of Paul's explanation of *how God makes sinners right with Himself through the Gospel of Jesus Christ*. However, before he gets to the good news, he must explain the bad news. Before salvation is offered, condemnation must be recognized. Before God's righteousness and grace are seen, God's wrath must be known. The argument of Chapter 1:18-32 shows that the rejection of divine light is the first step into a dark hurricane of divine judgment.

Man's life can be compared to a boat tied to a dock on the ocean. But when man loosens or unhooks the rope by the rejection of God's revelation, he doesn't just drift down the coast or out to sea. Rather, God imperceptibly shoves man with a strong current into the dark seas of judgment. Three times in this section, Paul declares that "*God gave them over*" (*vv.24, 26, 28*). The Greek verb *paradidomi* means to deliver someone over to another authority. It is a chilling word. It is used of God the Father delivering up His own Son to the religious and civil authorities to be crucified and condemned in our place (*Rom.4:25; 8:32*). Now it is used to describe the same God giving men over in judgment. It is not fire or lightning falling from heaven and striking man down. It is putting man in a mental, emotional, and spiritual prison where he cannot get out (*Acts 8:3; 12:4; 21:11; 27:1; 28:17*). It is locking a man or woman up in the chains of judgment to suffer condemnation.

When man takes the intentional, continual, deliberate step of rejecting what God has revealed of Himself in creation—the *truth made known by God and belonging to Him, the truth that God is, the reality of His being and glory*—then God straps, as it were, a bowling ball on man's back, cascading him down the slippery slope from thanklessness (*v.21*), to shamelessness (*vv.22-27*), to ruthlessness (*vv.28-31*), to worthlessness (*v.32*). Why does God do this? To show *His unchanging holiness and active judgment on sin*.

Paul's intention in this section is to show *the universal condemnation of fallen man under the judgment of God*.

The function is to draw out any self-righteous pride in us, any feeling of satisfaction that “they” are wicked and I am not like them. The most dangerous sin anyone could ever commit is *the rejection of the knowledge of God*. It is not only a dangerous thing to *reject* the knowledge of God, but it is also a dangerous thing to *have* the knowledge of God because we are held accountable for the knowledge that God has given to us.

TRANSITION:

On February 22, 2015, the man I consider arguably the greatest expositor in the world of the last half century, stepped into the pulpit and preached a message entitled: *God’s Societal Restraints: Four Restraints Against Evil*.

With plainness of style and biblical clarity, John MacArthur explained that the greatest evil in the world is *sin*, which resides in the heart of every human being. God’s Word makes it clear that all human beings are born into sin (*Rom.3:23*).

- Jesus said in **Matthew 15:18-20a**—But the things that proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and those defile the man. ¹⁹ For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders. ²⁰ These are the things which defile the man;

To protect against the wickedness of the human heart, God has given each human a personal restraint called conscience. The conscience allows every person to know right from wrong because God has written the law on the hearts of all people (*Rom.2:15*). Romans 1:18-23 explains how God is just for judging people for their thoughts and actions because each of them has a conscience that tells them there is a God and that there is right and wrong.

Humans are able to twist their God-given conscience in two ways. *They can create a new morality and convince themselves it is right.* We can clearly see this with the issue of abortion and sexuality. *The other way to twist the conscience is by rejecting God’s law that defines right and wrong.* This can be done by teaching people to ignore their conscience. This is why we hear our society proclaim that “guilt is bad” when guilt for sin is actually the result of a keen conscience. If someone has a twisted conscience, they have removed the restraint of their God-given conscience and feel free to commit all kinds of evil against themselves and others.

The second restraint against the human propensity toward evil is the family. One of the reasons God gave marriage to humanity was so people could be born into families where the father and mother would invest countless hours into training up the children so that they would have a keen conscience that would guide them for the rest of their lives. If a society begins to see the degeneration and failure of families, then that society will see the rise of wickedness because the restraint has been weakened.

The third restraint is civil authority or governmental authority (Rom.13). God has ordained governments to have authority on earth so that they will punish bad behavior and encourage good behavior (*1 Pet.2:14*). The main purpose of human institutions is to enforce moral behavior. The government as an entity is used by God to protect citizens from uncontrolled chaos and anarchy.

The fourth restraint is a spiritual restraint. It is the restraint that true biblical churches bring to the evil in society. These churches are a restraint against evil in society because they are filled with people who teach the truth. Pastors of these churches proclaim how people can be saved from their sin. These are the churches that the gates of hell cannot overcome because, through the gathering of believers and the preaching of God's Word, people are changed from sinners into saints (*Rom.10:9-10*).

When these restraints are *ignored, neglected, torn down, and run over* by human rebellion, the result is a moral breakdown and unraveling of society. This disintegration will be the precursor to a greater judgment by God when He permits the "man of lawlessness" or the "lawless one" to be revealed,

- **2 Thessalonians 2:9-12**—*that is*, the one whose coming is in accord with the activity of Satan, with all power and signs and false wonders,¹⁰ and with all the deception of wickedness for those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved.¹¹ For this reason God will send upon them a deluding influence so that they will believe what is false,¹² in order that they all may be judged who did not believe the truth, but took pleasure in wickedness.

To help us to see how man has come to be in this position, Paul began in verse 24 by connecting man's rejection to God's condemnation.

REVIEW:

A. THE CONNECTION (v.24a)—Therefore...

B. THE CONDEMNATION (v.24b)—God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them.

C. THE CLARIFICATION (v.25)—For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.

D. THE CONTINUATION (vv.26-27)—For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions; for their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural,²⁷ and in the same way also the men abandoned the natural function of the woman and burned in their desire toward one another, men with men committing indecent acts and receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error.

In these final verses, Paul wants to show that the cases are parallel; *as they deserted God, so God abandoned them*. This is not just about homosexuals and lesbians but applies to every sinner who rejects the knowledge of God. Verses 28-32 are unsettling because we all find ourselves here in one way or another.

This is not an exhaustive list of the outworking of idolatry—of refusing to retain the knowledge of God—but it is wide-ranging. Here we have an economic disorder ("greed," v.29), social disorder ("murder, strife, deceit, and malice," v.29), family breakdown ("disobedient to parents," v.30), relational breakdown ("senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless," v.31). This is what theologians call the doctrine of total depravity. While not everything we do is always completely sinful, nothing we do is completely untouched by sin.

E. THE CORRESPONDENCE (vv.28-32)

- ²⁸ And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer,

Who is the “they?” Who is this speaking of? Go back to verses 25, 21, and 19—“*They exchanged the truth of God for a lie...*” “*even though they knew God...*” “*God made it evident to them.*”

To “**not see fit to acknowledge God any longer**” means not merely that they refused to have God in their knowledge, *but they also thrust Him out of their circle of acquaintance*. Their ignorance of God was not due to a *lack of opportunity* to know Him but to their *deliberate refusal*. If you reject God, it sends you into a tailspin, a death spiral, if you will—mentally, morally, emotionally, and spiritually.

So, let no one say it was in my *genes* that I turned out this way or because my parents didn’t love or nurture me. Paul is saying that the one reason man stands condemned under the judgment of God is *he or she rejects the knowledge of God deliberately and continually*. In other words, you prefer other things to the knowledge of God. And so, the final “giving over” is seen. Look again at verse 28,

- God gave them over to a depraved mind to do those things which are not proper,

This is the third time Paul uses the phrase “God gave them over,” and the death spiral goes deeper. A **depraved mind** is a mind rendered incapable of rational thought. The mind is no longer fit for the purpose for which it was intentionally made.

In Greek, it originally meant “that which has not stood the test.” It was used of coins that were substandard. The choice of words is Paul’s shorthand way of saying they did not approve to know God and they came to have an unapproved mind—a mind unable to make trustworthy moral judgments. Unfit. Incapacitated. Dysfunctional. Maladjusted.

Paul launches into a detailed list of the sins he has in mind. There are other lists in Scripture (*Matt.15:19-20; Gal.5:19-21; Eph.4:17-19; Col.3:5; 2 Tim.3:1-5*), but this is the motherload. 21 vices are listed. The exclusion of God left room for nothing else. The opening words of verse 29, “*being filled with,*” indicate that there is no room for anything else. Pleroo is the same word used in Colossians of Christ as the fullness of God in bodily form (2:9) and the filling of the Holy Spirit in Ephesians 5:18. When you are filled with the Holy Spirit, you are being controlled by the Spirit’s Word. In this case, the opposite is true. When you reject God, and He gives you over to a depraved mind, you are controlled with:

- **All unrighteousness**—Do not think this is a half-heartedness about sin; rather, it is being given over to it, filled up with it. This is a complete failure to adhere to God’s commands, principles, and laws. They depart completely from the standard of God in attitude and action.
- **Wickedness**—This is the perverting of virtue and moral principles from their purpose to evil ends.
- **Greed**—This is the excessive and immoderate desire for more and more wealth. It is known as “avarice” among the ancients. It is the breaking of the 10th Commandment—thou shall not covet (*Ex.20:17*). Greed plagues the penny pincher and the prodigal alike. It is idolatry (*Col.3:5*). It dishonors God by saying that we don’t find God trustworthy to provide for us—or that it isn’t enough, so we will get it for ourselves. This is a total lack of contentment.
- **Evil**—This is a desire to injure others in order to fulfill your greed. This term is used to describe Satan Himself, “the Evil One.” (*Matt.13:19, 38; John 17:15*)

- **Full of envy**—This is to be controlled by spite and resentment or jealousy toward the success or possession of another.
- **Murder**—This is the unlawful killing of another human being physically. But in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus prohibits the kind of common anger and contempt or disposition that leads to killing, even if it never leads to action. (*Matt.5:21-22*)
- **Strife**—This is that bitter, heated conflict and quarreling, which often leads to violence.
- **Deceit**—This is shrewdness, craftiness, or guile demonstrated by being skilled in deception; proficient in creating decoys.
- **Malice**—This is malignant hatred; a character trait that feels a need to see others suffer.
- **Gossips**—This is a whisperer behind someone’s back and one spinning conspiracies; a secret slander.
- **Slanderers**—This is the defaming of others; one who attacks the reputation of another by falsehood or exaggeration.
- **Haters of God**—This is the hub of the wheel, characterized by an intense dislike of God.
- **Insolent**—This person is characterized by disrespectful acts or statements that are outrageously forward or bold. Hubris. Unconscionable arrogance against those who are not powerful enough to retaliate.
- **Arrogant**—This person is characterized by feelings of unwarranted importance out of a sense of overbearing pride.
- **Boastful**—This person has a self-exalting, self-absorbed conceit of their own superiority, especially one who believes that all achievements are of their own doing.
- **Inventors of evil**—This person plans and strategizes how to shed blood, commit sin, and get away with it; inventing evil that did not previously exist; concocting bloodletting.
- **Disobedient to parents**—This is the person with no regard for authority; a refusal to comply with those in authority.
- **Without understanding**—This means no intelligent thought, those lacking the ability to understand the meaning or importance of something.
- **Untrustworthy**—These are covenant breakers; their word no longer means anything; those characterized by double-dealing behavior.
- **Unloving**—These lack compassion and affection for others, especially family.
- **Unmerciful**—These are merciless, having no pity, sympathy, or regard for the good of others.

The culminating point is seen in verse 32, which sums up verse 18, and restates the judgment of God against all unrighteousness.

- ³² and although they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them.

How far man has fallen!

- He began glorifying God but ended exchanging that glory for idols.
- He began knowing God but ended refusing to keep the knowledge of God in his mind and heart.
- He began as the highest of God's creatures, made in the image of God, but he ended lower than the beasts and insects because he worshipped them as gods.

The verdict: death!

The **“death”** sinners are worthy of is *separation from God, both spiritually and eternally*. Paul concludes bluntly by saying, in essence: in our fallenness apart from the intervention of God, we are not only bent on damning ourselves, but we congratulate others in doing things that we know result in damnation.

Paul comes full circle to the thought that sinners do not act out of ignorance, they act out of willfulness. Granted, no one ever understands all the implications of the wrong they do, yet it still remains that we know enough to know that we are doing wrong. No more frightful words could ever be spoken to an individual, culture, nation, or world.

As we look over these verses, don't let it escape your notice that *knowledge of evil does not necessarily deter men from it*. Will you examine your own heart for signs of willful self-determination, self-deception, or self-destruction? What idols could be, or are already, jostling for position with my Creator in my heart and life? This passage prompts us to look for places where we are envious, slanderous, disloyal, lustful, and so on. If you find even the slightest evidence, repent of it by turning and worshipping the true Creator God through faith in Christ, and receive His cleansing.

This has been a hard section, but one that is true and salted with God's love, grace, and forgiveness. The Gospel is the power of God unto salvation (*Rom.1:16*). No sin is too big for God to forgive; no hurt is too deep for God to heal. His power looks for a place to be applied today. If your heart and life are in that place, receive His grace and power in Christ today.

CONCLUSION:

“Little children, keep yourselves from idols,” writes the aged Apostle John at the end of his first epistle (*1 John 5:21, ESV*). Years earlier, Paul exhorted the Colossians to *“put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry”* (*Col.3:5, ESV*). If the Old Testament prophets warned the people of God against idols of silver and gold forged in the kiln (*Is.37:19*), the New Testament writers alert us to idols of another kind: the idols of ideas and obsessions forged in the heart.

In recent years, the church has come to speak of this second kind of idols as *“idols of the heart.”* Is God the object of our hearts' deepest affections and longings, or is something else captivating us?

That *“something else”* need not be evil in itself. When Jesus says we must choose whether we will serve God or money, it is not because money is bad in itself; rather, as Paul says, it is *“the love of money”* that is the root of all kinds of evil (*Matt.6:21–24; 1 Tim.6:10*). Accordingly, our fallen hearts can take all kinds of good things—*money, achievement, romance, patriotism, family, even a noble cause*—and turn them into dangerous idols that lead us away from a pure devotion to the Lord and into spiritual adultery (with all the danger and misery that includes).

If you have an idol in your heart, you should not delay in dealing with it. But you must first know if it's there, and that requires spiritual diagnosis.

I want to suggest there are three symptoms that indicate the presence of an idol of the heart. If you find these three symptoms of idolatry present in your life, you need to take urgent action.

The first symptom of an idol is you continually find yourself thinking about it when you have nothing else to think about. It operates like an obsession in the back of your mind, calling for constant attention. You think obsessively about winning the next game, or getting married, or that pressing issue at work, or the state of your portfolio, or the details of your kids' lives, or what other people may be thinking or saying about you.

It would be entirely appropriate to give some of your attention to these things, and sometimes even significant attention to them. You would want to be prepared for tomorrow's presentation at work, attentive to your child's well-being, involved in the affairs of your nation, or committed to a good cause. But if you find that all of your thoughts have a way of funneling toward this central obsession, and have for some time, it signals the presence of something that has become an idol.

The second symptom of an idol is you find yourself taking unwise measures to attain it. You might date someone you know you shouldn't date or let a relationship cross boundaries you know it shouldn't cross. You might make an unwise investment with your money or choose not to tithe to fund your 401(k). You might lie on your résumé or skew "just a smidge" your quarterly report. You might pull away from otherwise precious and proven friendships because they won't get as exercised about your cause as you are. You might take too much time from your family to train for an endurance event or allow your child's sports schedule to take precedence over worship on the Lord's Day.

In one of many ways, that idol of the heart has led you not only to do something you would not have done in your wiser moments, but also to rationalize and excuse it. "This is the only way I'll have a chance to get married." "If this investment succeeds, I'll be able to give more money to the church later." "If I get these three hours to myself, I'll be a better parent the rest of this weekend." "If my child doesn't travel for all these tournaments, she'll let her teammates down, and wouldn't that hurt her witness?" When you find that your pursuit of a good thing has brought you to the point that you're taking unwise measures to attain it, that signals the presence of an idol of the heart.

The third symptom of an idol is you feel entitled to your bitterness about not having it. When someone lovingly suggests that you could have contentment and peace without this thing you most want, you're not hopeful that they might be right. You're irritated. You resent them for suggesting it. In your mind, you dismiss them as "having no idea what it's like to be where I am."

When the single person has made an idol of marriage, she pours quiet contempt on those who speak the consolations of the Gospel.

When the couple in a financial tight spot has made an idol of money, they feel entitled to complain about their situation while disregarding opportunities presented to them to learn how to budget or make additional side income. When an athlete or worker who has made an idol of achievement feels the sting of a loss or setback, he shuns the opportunity to learn, with Paul, "*in whatever situation I am to be content*" (Phil.4:11), preferring to let the pain drive him to intensify his efforts on the one hand or throw in the towel on the other. If you find yourself strangely preferring the bitterness of not having what you desire to the prospect of joy and contentment in Christ alone, that's a strong symptom of an idol of the heart.

So how is it with you? Is there something you find yourself thinking about when you have nothing else to think about? Have you contemplated taking, or have you already taken, unwise measures to attain it? And do you feel entitled to your bitterness about not having it? If so, dear friend, I would strongly encourage you to do three things.

First, be honest with the Lord about it. Trust that if you confess this idol to the Lord, He will forgive you and open His arms to you.

Second, ask Him to show you how this idol is deceiving you and stealing the contentment the Lord offers His children right where you are.

Third, ask Him to show you what this desire—for marriage, for achievement, for your family's well-being, for your country's well-being, for the advancement of your cause—would look like if it existed in a proper place beneath a supreme desire for Him and for His glory.

Realize that His goal is not to slay your heart but to sanctify and satisfy it (and in that order). Idols of the heart make us like “the man with the muck-rake” in the second book of *Pilgrim's Progress*. In this vision, a man “could look no ways but downwards, with a muck-rake in his hand.” While fixing his full attention on the worthless things below him, there stood above the man one holding forth a crown. The muck-rake for the crown, that was the ongoing offer—“but the man did neither look up nor regard, but raked to himself the straws, the small sticks, and the dust of the floor.”

What a tragedy! And what a picture of someone beholden to idols of the heart: obsessing, slaving away, refusing something far better. “*Little children,*” warns the Apostle John to us all, “*keep yourselves from idols*” (1 John 5:20, ESV).¹

Let me conclude with some words of application.

- **HEED**—Take heed of *what* we hear, *how* we hear, and *that* we hear. We must be careful what we do with the truth. When the head goes wrong, the heart soon follows.
- **WORSHIP**—Worship God when you think of God.
- **MORTIFY**—Be killing sin, or sin will be killing you. (John Owen)
- **URGENCY**—We cannot wait until people find it convenient to listen to the truth; we must take it to them.

¹ Matthew S. Miller, “*Three Tests for Diagnosing Idols of the Heart,*” *Tabletalk Magazine*, June 2023, accessed June 24, 2023, <https://tabletalkmagazine.com/posts/three-tests-for-diagnosing-idols-of-the-heart/>

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