

A VERSE-BY-VERSE EXPOSITION

ROMANS

GOD'S RIGHTEOUSNESS REVEALED



NO EXCUSES

Text: Romans 1:19-23

Main preaching point: Sinners have no excuse.

INTRODUCTION:

Dr. Gardiner C. Taylor was one of the leading expository preachers in the African American church for over fifty years. He is known as the “Dean of Expository Preachers,” and he once described preaching as “*the sweet torture of Sunday morning.*”

Preaching is sweet, no doubt about it—in the sense that we, as the messengers of God, are called to *bring the message of glad tidings of good things*. There are certain passages that preachers find joy in preaching. We anticipate setting before God’s people the bread and meat of the Word of God so that God’s people might be encouraged, fed, and blessed. There are certain passages that we love to preach because they are sweet.

Yet, Gardner also described preaching as *torture*. Torture—and this is especially true as we come to a text like this. This is one of the ugliest passages in all of the Bible. One commentator described this text as the grimmest passage that Paul ever wrote. And this is one of the ways we know the Bible is inspired. It does not tell us *what we want to hear* but *what we need to hear*. It speaks in adult language and is upfront, straightforward, direct, emphatic, and unapologetic. This passage is heavy and dark. It breaks the heart. It strips the sinner down to the bone and exposes us for who we are—*apart from the grace of God*. Paul condemns the entire human race and cinches that knot tightly because the good news of the Gospel is never really good until you know the bad news. This is Paul’s Magnum Opus, the sheer unvarnished truth from God, *the most extraordinary treatment of the Gospel of Christ*.

REVIEW:

The theme of this book has been set before us in verses 16 and 17. In case you have not made this note in your Bible, here it is—the theme of the book of Romans is: *the offer of the righteousness of God to man by faith in Jesus Christ.*

In the first three chapters of this book, Paul labors to explain why we need the righteousness of God. And so, he strips man of his self-righteousness through the law of God. What he does is he brings us low before he takes us high through the Gospel. He gives us the bad news before he gives us the good news. And Paul does so with grim detail and dark colors. Paul is operating like a demolition expert. He's demolishing everything we would build our lives upon so that he might construct a life built on Jesus Christ and Him alone.

And as we return to this text, we find ourselves standing before God, exposed. Romans 1:18 is the door that leads us into God's courtroom. In our last message, we learned the primary reason we need the righteousness of God is because of *the wrath of God*. Everyone you meet today, everyone you see in your neighborhood when you go home, at the restaurant where you eat after church, or on television, is in need of this Gospel because of the wrath of God. And by righteousness, we mean *conformity to a standard*. The standard is God Himself.

- Righteousness is something that *God alone possesses* (Ps.7:11; Ps.50:6; 1 John 2:1)
- Righteousness is something that God *demand*s. (Ps.1, 15; Mic.6:8)
- Righteousness is something that we *do not* possess. (Eccl.7:20; Is.64:6; Rom.3:10)
- Righteousness is something that *God has provided* for the justification of sinners in Christ. (Rom.3:21-22; 2 Cor.5:21)

We unpacked verse 18 and discovered five things about the wrath of God. *The quality, the timing, the source, the extent, and the cause of God's wrath.*

1. The quality of God's wrath—Paul says, "*for the wrath of God.*" It is not the wrath of man but *the wrath of God*. What is the wrath of God? *It is his settled, complete displeasure against all sin*. It is his utter opposition to sin. It is his holy vengeance. It is His intense, hot displeasure against all that does not conform to His perfect holiness. Stuart Briscoe once said,

- "*The wrath of God is as pure as the holiness of God. When angry, He is perfectly angry. When He is displeased, there is every reason He should be.*"¹

And may I say this while I'm walking this way, *God's wrath is not just against sin but against sinners*. We've been told by false teachers in our day that *God hates the sin, but He loves the sinner*—but you must understand that is unbiblical. For the Bible teaches that you cannot separate sin from sinners—*because sinners sin*. And the Bible clearly teaches that God has holy displeasure, not against *some* act, but against *sinners who commit the act*. So, it makes this passage so very sobering for us.

I would like you to imagine, if you will, a morally neutral person. They are not *for* good or *against* evil; they are not *against* righteousness, nor are they for unrighteousness. They are morally neutral.

¹ As quoted in John Blanchard, *The Complete Gathered Gold: A Treasury of Quotations for Christians* (Darlington, UK: Evangelical Press, 2006), 255.

Now imagine this morally neutral person watching a little child getting hurt; this little child is being beaten, molested, and abused, but this morally neutral being looks at it and says, "Well, that's interesting."

What would you think of that person? Would you think that that person was *balanced*? Would you think that that person was *okay*? Would you think that that person was *right in any way*? No! You would say that that person is a moral imbecile—you would be outraged at such an individual. God is God, and He is not neutral when it comes to sin. If a person would say that they can be morally neutral, we wouldn't be talking about God; we would be talking about the devil. But God is God, and his wrath is revealed.

2. **The timing of God's wrath**—"the wrath of God is revealed." Please note that this is present tense, or right now—meaning that there are displays of God's wrath presently being revealed. There is a future day with the full dam of God's unmitigated fury will be unleashed upon the world on all outside of Christ (*Rom.2:5; Rev.6:12-17*). In history, we read about cataclysmic wrath, like at the flood and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (*Gen.7; 19*), but at the present time, there are built-in consequences of sin and the direct intervention of God Himself.
3. **The source of it**—"For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven...." That is to say, it doesn't just fall out of the sky. It doesn't just kind of happen by happenstance, but *the wrath of God is unlimited*, it is *unavoidable*, it is *from heaven*, it is *purposeful*, and it is *according to God's will*.
4. We considered not only the quality of it, the timing of it, and the source of it but also **the extent of it**. Let your eyes drop to verse 18 and see it again.
 - "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness."

The extent is toward all ungodliness and unrighteousness, which is to say, wherever it is found on the face of the earth. The word "**ungodliness**" means irreverence or impiety towards God. It is a failure to take God seriously—a failure to commit yourself to God and live for His glory. The word "**unrighteousness**" means a failure to adhere to God's commands. It speaks of our behavior in the treatment of others—lawlessness, immorality, doing our own thing, going our own way. Ungodliness is vertical; unrighteousness is horizontal. Paul intentionally uses these two words as a one-two punch to show that we have broken the whole table of God's law (The first 4 commands are vertical, and the last 6 commands are relational). It covers the entire violation of the law, and it covers all men—Jew and Gentile, religious and non-religious, young and old.

5. **The cause of God's wrath**—Why is God angry? Why are sinners in such a perilous position before God? Because they "*suppress the truth in unrighteousness.*"

The word "**suppress**" means to try to hold something under. The illustration has been given in modern times of a beach ball at the pool, lake, or ocean. The ball is full of air, and you try to push it down underneath the water. The second you let go, it comes popping back up.

The idea here is that *people try to get rid of their accountability to God*. Fallen human beings seek to push away and push back the knowledge of God "*in unrighteousness*" or by the way they live. And this is where we left off last week.

Now in verses 19-23, Paul unpacks this all-encompassing statement in verse 18, and now, we will discover two more reasons for God's wrath and the result or consequences.

EXPOSITION:

Why is God angry? What are we as sinners in a perilous position? Our passage unveils three reasons for God's wrath.

- Reason 1: SUPPRESSION: *Because we suppress the truth in unrighteousness. (v.18—we saw this last week)*
- Reason 2: DISTORTION: *Because we are unwilling to honor God. (vv.19-20)*
- Reason 3: REJECTION: *Because we are unwilling to thank God. (vv.21-23)*

A. DISTORTION (vv.19-20)

We begin in verse 19 with a statement that *God is knowable*. When the agnostic says there is a God, but He cannot be known, verse 19 thumps them upside the head and says, "God is not only knowable, but He desires to make Himself known." The word "because" at the beginning of verse 19 introduces us to the reason.

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

This binds the accountability of the entire human race before a holy God—and there are none who are without excuse. Regardless of whether a person has heard the name of Christ or not, the entire human race has been found guilty, weighed in the balance, and found wanting. There is no excuse that any sinner can render to God to escape judgment before God, so much so that when this section closes in chapter 3:19, Paul will say, "that every mouth may be closed and all the world may become accountable to God."

This evidence is so compelling that no counter-argument will be raised on that final day—every mouth will be shut. Why Paul? Paul explains...

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

"That which is known about God is evident within them" can be translated as "among them," meaning *everywhere that man is*, this knowledge about God is known—"for God made it evident to them."

What Paul means by this is *general or natural revelation*. There are two kinds of revelation, and we need to be theologically precise here. There is **general revelation** and **special revelation**, and we must keep these categories distinct.

General revelation is *God's self-disclosure of Himself in a general, limited, non-saving way to the entire human race*. There is no one planet earth, in any generation, on any continent or island who has not received general revelation (*Ps.19:1-6*).

Special revelation is what we have *in the Word of God*. It is a saving revelation. It is a fuller, more comprehensive disclosure that God makes of Himself. General revelation reveals the existence of God and the certain attributes of God. But it does not reveal *the way to God*. It is sufficient to *condemn*, but it is not sufficient to *save*. Special revelation is sufficient to save, and it is found in the written Word (Holy Scripture) and the Living Word (the Person of Jesus Christ).

No one can be saved without special revelation.

- **Roman 10:17**—So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ.
- **Acts 4:12**—And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved.
- **John 14:6**—Jesus *said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me.”
- **2 Timothy 3:15**—and that from childhood you have known the sacred writings which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.

This is why we send missionaries. This is why we preach the Gospel. This is why we evangelize. People cannot be saved by general revelation. They must have the special revelation of God.

The question is, **how does one come to possess this general revelation of God?** At the beginning of verse 19, Paul says, “*because that which is known about God.*”

Paul intends to show us by the phrase “**known about God**” that this limited knowledge of God is *perceived through observing the created world*. He is not saying *everything* about God is revealed, but neither is Paul suggesting that *the knowledge of God's existence is the result of careful deduction and reasoning*. It is not simply for those who possess unusually logical minds. It does not take a long process of time to come to the conclusion of God's existence.

Professor Tom Schreiner says,

“God has stitched into the fabric of the human mind his existence and power, so that they are instinctively recognized when one views the created world.”²

Look again at verses 19-20:

- ¹⁹ *because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them.* ²⁰ For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse.

Three times in the space of two verses, Paul says that this general knowledge of God is “**evident,**” *obvious*, and *out in the open*. It is not a *hidden, obscure, or ambiguous* revelation. It is glaringly obvious. Not dimly seen or faintly seen, but clearly seen. With a font everyone can see, God has written across the skies, “I am God. I am here. I am Creator.” A blind man in a dark room looking for a black cat would see it. It's that clear. Who could argue with this? But someone says, “How do we know?” At the end of verse 19, Paul says, “*God made it evident to them.*” In other words, God has presented it before our eyes. Everyone sees it, although they do not draw the proper conclusion from it. Fallen men distort this general revelation. They speak of “Mother Earth,” “Father Time,” “Higher Power,” and “Cosmic Energy.” But God has taken the initiative.

Just like He has shown Himself to the world in His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus said, “*He who has seen Me has seen the Father*” (John 14:9). Yet many people saw Jesus but did not recognize Him.

² Thomas Schreiner, *Romans (Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament)* (Ada, MI: Baker Academic, 1998) , 86.

God must make Himself known to you. Francis Schaeffer wrote a book many years ago entitled: *"God Is There and He Is Not Silent."* God is a speaking God. God is a self-revealing God.

Now in verse 20, Paul enlarges upon his argument.

- ²⁰ For since the creation of the world..." tells us that it has been this way from the beginning of the world.

It did not start in New Testament times. It didn't start with the nation of Israel, the Tower of Babel, or the Flood. It goes all the way back to the beginning of the world.

What has God revealed about Himself in general revelation? Three revelations are given.

1. **His invisible attributes**—God's attributes are *His character qualities*. They are invisible because *God's essence is Spirit (John 4:24)*. Paul enumerates these attributes in the next three words.
2. **His eternal power**—By looking at creation, we know that God is *eternal*. The word for eternal (*aiōnios*) means He precedes creation. His power is derived from another age. God possesses "always-ness"—He is one without beginning or end. The word "**power**" signals to us that God is one who has *omnipotence*.

Anyone can look at creation and surmise that there was a Creator. Adrian Rogers said, "If you have things that are made, you must have a maker. If you have creation, it follows that there is a Creator." You don't have to have a Ph.D. to figure that out. You must go intellectually dishonest to create a scheme for the origin of the universe.

What do we know by looking at general revelation? We know that God is one who is very powerful to have created the oceans, mountains, continental masses, the sun, moon, and planets in outer space. This Creator is awesome in power, and this power far exceeds any person. He is the Uncreated Creator. He is the Uncaused Cause. You cannot create yourself, and the psalmist summons us in **Psalm 100:3**, "*Know that the LORD Himself is God; it is He who has made us, and not we ourselves; we are His people and the sheep of His pasture.*"

- **Psalm 95:6-7**—Come, let us worship and bow down,
Let us kneel before the LORD our Maker.
⁷ For He is our God,
And we are the people of His pasture and the sheep of His hand.

3. **His divine nature**—In distinction from power, which points to a single attribute, the word for divine nature is His divinity, His Godhead. It does not refer to all of God's attributes because they are not all manifested in creation. A hurricane does not tell us about the love of God or the mercy of God. But the general revelation of God in creation manifests God's deity. He is Creator, Preserver, Judge, Lawgiver, etc.

Here's Paul's point: seeing, people do not see. Perceiving, people do not perceive. They see creation, but because they suppress the truth in unrighteousness, they also distort that knowledge. The opportunity of knowing God generally through His works is sufficient, but man does not see what he is able to see clearly—"**so that they are without excuse.**" That is a divine decision based on the light given in creation. There is no self-defense.

No one will be able to stand before God on the last day and say, “God, you didn’t give me enough revelation.” The entire world is rendered accountable to God.

General revelation is not enough for salvation, but it is enough for condemnation because people reject this general revelation about God. They refuse to welcome this revelation. Man chooses to turn away from it.

First, there is suppression. Second, there is distortion. Third, there is...

B. REJECTION (vv.21-23)

- ²¹ For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks,

Again, **“they knew God”** does not mean in a saving relationship, but they knew about God’s existence. They had the right knowledge, but they reacted in the wrong way. They may have said polite things about God, but they did not ascribe to Him the glory that was His due. They did not act on the knowledge of God but preferred their own way. They did not honor Him as God or give thanks; that is, they did not bow before Him. They did not want to know God or honor Him as the Creator. Instead of thanking God for all He has given, man refused to thank God or give God the glory He deserves. They refused to humble themselves before Him.

Imagine a decent upright man or woman. They are a pillar of the community. They live on your street. They are good parents. They work hard and pay their taxes. They’ve never been in trouble with the law. They give to charity. They are what you would call a good neighbor. Yet, this text tells us that God is angry with them. Why? Because God created them for Himself, and they never thank God, never bow before Him, never praise Him and give thanks to Him, and never seek to obey His Word. They act as if He does not exist.

What is the result of this rejection? The result is that God does not just ignore man’s actions. He does something. Whenever you reject the truth about God, it puts you in a very precarious place, a risky, dangerous, insecure, unstable, dicey, problematic place. Let’s continue to read verse 21.

1. The first result of rejection is that it affects your thinking. (v.21b)

- but they became futile in their speculations,

The word for **“futile”** means pointless and worthless. You begin to conjure or make up speculations about who God is—vain imaginations about God. You begin to create images of what you perceive God to be—god of your own thinking, god you can get along with and control and be okay with. And so, when you reject the light, it puts you in the darkness, and that’s the second result.

2. The second result of rejection is that it affects your morals. (v.21c)

- and their foolish heart was darkened.

The word **“foolish”** here derives from a Greek word from which we get the word, moron. Incapable of having rational thoughts about God. Unintelligent. Sin makes you stupid. It has a devastating effect on your thinking process and your heart—God blows out the candle and leaves you in the dark, and then you start to “grope” in the dark about who God is and what He is like.

3. The third result of rejection is that it affects your perception of reality. (v.22)

- ²² Professing to be wise, they became fools,

This speaks of the inability to recognize the reality of their situation. They boast in wisdom, they pride themselves on the self-sufficiency of their knowledge, and in the process, they become fools.

The verb is used by Paul of God's making foolish the wisdom of this world (*1 Cor.1:20*). Its only other New Testament occurrence is of salt losing its savor (*Matt.5:13; Luke 14:34*). There is the notion of insipidity or dullness. Those who, in their "wisdom," reject God's revelation do not enter a wonderfully exciting new life but a life that is flat, tasteless, bland, dry, sterile, and drab. The attempt to be wise makes fools out of them (*Jer.9:25ff; John 10:10*).

4. Finally, in verse 23, Paul reaches the summit of folly. *Rejecting God's knowledge affects your mind, your morals, and your perception of reality, and rejection affects your worship.*

²³ and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures.

The Bible does not teach **evolution**—*that man started low and climbed high*, but **devolution**—*he started high, and because of sin, he sank lower than the beasts*.

Note the downward spiral. It starts with *the revelation of God*, verses 19-20, to *the rejection of God* (v.21), to *insanity before God* (v.22), and where this ends up is *idolatry*.

When you see idolatry, it is not man, communities, or nations *ascending up to higher thoughts about God*; idolatry is the spirally down, down, down, down to the bottom of the toilet.

And a bad deal is struck. They "*exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures.*"

"The glory of the incorruptible God" is striking. It brings out something about *the greatness and majesty of God*. The sum of His *personal perfections*. *The outshining radiance of His being*. His *immutability*. His *holiness*. His *impeccability*. His *faithfulness*. His *goodness*. His *sovereignty*. His *wisdom—never decaying, never corrupting* God, and when you reject the light of God in creation, you exchange *diamonds for dirt*. You exchange *glory for shame, incorruption for corruption, and truth for lies*.

CONCLUSION:

We must worship something. We are created to worship the Creator, so if we reject Him, we will worship something else. We are telic creatures, purposeful creatures. We must live for something. There has to be something that captures our imagination and our allegiance—which is the resting place for our deepest hopes and what we look to in order to calm our deepest fears.

Whatever that thing is, we *worship* it, and we *serve* it. It becomes the *bottom line for us*—things we cannot live without. When we do not worship what is *immortal*, we worship what is *made*. We make a good thing into a God thing.

Now, let's get real. We worship *people, families, things, and material possessions*—they occupy a place of allegiance in our heart that is far too great, far too great, and we all struggle with it—and if you act like you don't, *you're lying to yourself*.

We turn good things that God has given into *God things*. And we might acknowledge that "Yeah, there's a God," but we don't give the kind of allegiance to God that we do to those things that are around us—*family members, jobs, positions*. That's called *idolatry*, according to the Scripture.

Just so we're clear about **what idolatry is**—*idolatry is anything that occupies a place that is due only to God in our lives*. We cannot afford to be cloudy about idolatry. The Bible makes it very clear that *when we do not honor God as we ought to—whatever has occupied that place has become our God*.

Just how destructive is idolatry? According to the Word of God, it breaks the First Commandment. The First Commandment is to have no other gods before Him (*Ex.20:3*). According to the Word of God, idolatry is one of the things that marks the unsaved individual, and idolatry will keep you out of heaven.

In 1 Corinthians chapter 6, Paul is speaking to the Corinthian church about some issues—they were a church with many problems, just like most churches do. And in verses 9-10, notice Paul says,

- **1 Corinthians 6:9-10**—Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals,¹⁰ nor thieves, nor *the* covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God.

Idolatry is on that list of things that will keep you out of heaven. That's how serious it is.

I'd like you to write this down somewhere. **How do you identify idols in your life?**

Here's how: *the things we believe we must gain or keep from losing in order to be happy reveal an idol in our hearts*.

I am going to say that again, and I want to take my time with it because it's important. *The things we believe we must gain or keep from losing in order to be happy*—the job, the relationship, the possession, the position, etc.—that has become an idol in our lives.

Jim Eliot put it best—*"He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what He cannot lose."*

Jesus Christ said,

- **Luke 9:24-26**—For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake, he is the one who will save it.²⁵ For what is a man profited if he gains the whole world, and loses or forfeits himself? ²⁶ For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when He comes in His glory, and *the glory* of the Father and of the holy angels.

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